



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Security and Strategic Competition between the US and China in Southeast Asia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 22, 2024 Accepted: Jan 18, 2025	The growing competition between China and the United States has turned Southeast Asia into a strategic point of contention where economic values, security promises, and regional power overlap. This paper explores U.S.-China security rivalry in Southeast Asia, particularly concerning military presence, alliance construction, financial advantages, and soft power policies. As long as the United States still pursues freedom of navigation, security cooperation, and defense modernization through programs like the Indo-Pacific Strategy, China is attempting to tighten its grip through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), military modernization, and coercive diplomacy in the South China Sea. The dynamics of these rival policies pose essential questions on the stability of the region, its independence, and the structure of long-term security. The research article analyzes the most recent trends in regional security cooperation, maritime conflicts, and interdependence between Southeast Asian states and Washington and Beijing using hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning strategies. The results indicate that, although the U.S guarantees of security have become crucial, China's increasing economic presence and influence are upsetting regional balances that disrupt the established order. The article will add to the overall literature on great-power competition by offering a more subtle interpretation of the Southeast Asian involvement in the U.S.-China rivalry, focusing more on regional actors' agency and the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. In the final argument, the paper holds that Southeast Asia does not simply serve as a passive backdrop to the war on terror, but is an active war-maker in its own right, which has consequences on the peace in the region, international trade, and the future of the U.S.-China relationship.
Keywords	
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INTRODUCTION

Global geopolitics values Southeast Asia because it is strategically located with plentiful resources and an evolving economy. Over 680 million people share the region containing eleven countries where yearly maritime traffic through the Strait of Malacca reaches one-third of global commerce (Amirell, 2019). These trade routes support global energy transportation systems in addition to international commerce because major international economies depend on oil and liquefied natural gas routes that transit through this vital transportation corridor. The region's massive oil provinces, natural gas stores, and rare earth mineral deposits make its strategic value even more pronounced. Rare earth minerals power advanced technologies from semiconductors to renewable energy systems, making Southeast Asia an essential supplier in worldwide supply networks. The area experiences economic momentum due to its expanding middle class, while its industrial developments draw significant direct foreign investments.

The strategic and economic rivalry between the United States and China finds its largest stakes in Southeast Asia because of these combined elements. The United States promotes open trade through security promises. Yet, China strives to implement its Belt and Road Initiative to achieve economic interdependence and insert Southeast Asia into its sphere of influence. Multidimensional events evolve

the ongoing US-China struggle for dominance in Southeast Asia through political cooperation economic transactions and military activities. The United States maintains global supremacy by focusing on Southeast Asia and requires free maritime activities throughout international sea territory. China approaches Southeast Asian countries similarly to their own strategic fishermen zone while viewing them as points for pursuing regional dominion aims (R & Stromseth, 2020). This regional rivalry between the US and China produces serious consequences that endanger Southeast Asian stability which requires a deep understanding of historical origins and current elements.

In Southeast Asia, a geopolitical area of great economic significance and strategic importance because it is geographically close to vital maritime routes and serves as a diplomatic hub through ASEAN, US-China relations have turned into a bitter fight. The European Sea would soon have some discussion on how some Southeast Asian nations cope with these tensions, and how global powers like Washington and Beijing would further respond. These dynamics have enormous implications for U.S. policymakers, particularly for their regional strategies, including those aimed at diversifying supply chains and obtaining 'key positions' along the first island chain in the South China Sea (Parameswaran, Southeast Asia and US-China Competition: Contours, Realities, and Implications for the Indo-Pacific, 2023).

This Chapter analyzes the strategic competition between the US and China and also the behavior of Southeast Asian states in determining their responses to the US-China competition by examining the potential for enhancing their 'strategic autonomy' by external stakeholders. Based on extensive regional engagement, the brief draws specific arguments on three core themes that the country should address to promote effective initiatives to fight climate change and mitigate the effects of climate change in Southeast Asia. Second, the US-China competition—high on the list of concerns among Southeast Asia countries, but not the only one is a two-bit play that offers two very different sets of advantages from Washington and Beijing. Second, having already been taken over by these states, these states are exhibiting agency by engaging and shaping their environment in a balanced and strategic way. Third, third-party actors, including the U.S., and its allies may assist Southeast Asian countries in furthering their autonomy to build a regional order founded upon open competition and resistance to coercion.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1. US relations with Southeast Asia Nations during and after the Cold War

During the Cold War era, the United States directed its Southeast Asian operations from its principle doctrine of communist containment, guiding multiple international military and foreign policy actions globally. During the Vietnam War America dedicated considerable military resources to fighting on the battlefields of Vietnam Laos and Cambodia while waging their anti-communist ideological conflict. During the conflicts, the US sponsored local political forces to combat communist growth while sending major military assets which resulted in both massive monetary and human casualties (Hiep, 2023). As part of its broader strategy, the United States formed diplomatic alliances with the Philippines and Thailand to create strong defensive relationships throughout the region.

The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) established by the United States provided a collective defense structure aimed at stopping communist growth. Through SEATO member states worked together for better security alliances while expressing US dedication to preserve peace and security in Southeast Asia. As a part of this approach, the United States protected political systems and economic systems from executing anti-communist defense while omitting military intervention exclusively (Javed, Jiandang, & Khurshid, 2023). America's Cold War containment efforts in Southeast Asia served as foundations for sustaining US strategic commitment to the region after communism grew stale. Following the Cold War termination the United States adopted a new approach in Southeast Asia by prioritizing business dealings and institutional framework development. Under the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" policy the United States strengthened its regional engagement through military operations combined with economic initiatives including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Neironi, 2021).

2.2. China's Rise as a Regional Power since the 1980s

China began developing as a regional power during the 1980s when Deng Xiaoping launched broad economic changes and participated in global markets. Through broad economic reforms and global economic integration Beijing achieved historic growth which mobilized millions from poverty and established the nation's position as a leading economic force (Gilley, 2024). Through enhanced defense budgets and technological development, China transformed its People's Liberation Army (PLA) into an advanced and strategic fighting force during its rapid economic growth period. Entrepreneurial efforts by China have expanded its influence across Southeast Asia over the last half-decade through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which concentrates on developing infrastructure and economic integration in the region (Kumafan & Nguevese, 2024). The China-Laos railway together with Malaysian port expansion demonstrates Beijing's goal to position Southeast Asia as an integral part of its economic network. China has developed deep trade alliances with Southeast Asian nations to earn its position as their top trading market. In its push for economic preeminence as well as regional political control Beijing oversees both economic leadership and political space formation (Bharti & Kumari, 2022).

3. KEY EVENTS SHAPING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 marked a major development in encouraging regional cooperation while guaranteeing long-term peace for Southeast Asia. Through their initiatives, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) have established central diplomatic platforms that help foster engagement and conflict-resolution strategies (Purwanto, 2024). As a pillar of regional governance ASEAN advances towards neutrality by reigning between competing global powers across multiple decades. The power equilibrium in the area has suffered notable changes because of China's powerful position along the South China Sea through its aggressive territorial claims and ongoing militarization of island occupancies (Zeeshan, et al., 2025). These actions push against worldwide conventions while garnering reactions from ASEAN members who are joined by outside actors. The United States conducts military protection operations across the region through alliance-strengthening partnerships with the Philippines and Vietnam and their freedom of navigation operations. ASEAN needs to handle these emerging difficulties successfully. Consensus-building and maintaining regional unity sustain its imperative role in defusing tensions (Sambhi, 2024). ASEAN faces ongoing obstacles to functioning together as one voice in international diplomacy because of the internal conflict centered on vital issues like the South China Sea dispute.

3.1. Strategic Competition in Southeast Asia

The United States keeps Southeast Asia covered by strong military forces through existing strategic partnerships and military treaties with local. The Mutual Defense Treaty and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation between the United States and its Southeast Asian allies represent core instruments dedicated to securing regional stability. Joint military exercises, including "Balikatan" with the Philippines and rotational deployments of US troops in Singapore and Australia, increase regional military interoperability and keep aggressors away (Sumadinata, 2023). Through capacity-building programs, the US supplies Southeast Asian armed forces with sophisticated weaponry while organizing formal training sessions. Through its Foreign Military Financing program, the United States has empowered its regional allies including Indonesia and Vietnam.

3.2. China Military Modernization

China has well modernized its armed forces and intends to build a 'world-class' force by introducing reformed organization, equipment, and doctrine. The Information Support Force (ISF), which has been established to integrate information warfare, has further strengthened the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) joint operations. People's Liberation Armed Forces Group (PLAFG) has reorganized its structure into modular brigades with advanced mobile equipment in the form of modern armored vehicles and artillery. Commissioning advanced destroyers, submarines, and the aircraft carrier Fujian, with electromagnetic catapults for power projection, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is the world's

largest navy. Both stealth fighters, such as the J-20 and J-35 inducted by the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), improved aerial refueling and expanded strategic airlift capabilities have been taken onboard the PLAAF. Since hypersonic glide vehicles and intermediate-range ballistic missiles have updated the PLA Rocket Force’s missile arsenal in strategic deterrence, in this context, it is obvious why a hypersonic missile delivering a nuclear weapon could be analogous to a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) (Bommakanti & Singh, 2024). Also, the cyber, space, and electronic warfare capabilities of the Special Security Force (SSF) are consolidated to enhance information dominance. The advancements made here drastically affect regional security, especially in Taiwan and the South China Sea, and neighboring countries must reevaluate defense strategies to collaborate with China to ensure stability in the region.



Figure 1: China PLAA deployment near South China Sea (Defense, 2024).

In this map, the assembled air force and naval aviation infrastructure that the PLA has across China is noted described, and illustrated to show their military modernization efforts. Within China’s theatre command system, it shows the main buildings and bases, as well as the main divisions of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and the PLA Navy Air Force (PLANAF), located within the Western, Central, Northern, Eastern, and Southern theaters. The structures in the red are bomber brigades, transport divisions, and special mission units (strategic airpower deployment). Similar Navy aviation brigades and special mission units are shown in blue in PLANAF installations. A huge amount of air and naval aviation assets are concentrated in the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands, which are near Taiwan as well as the South China Sea, which indicates that China prioritizes regional deterrence and power projection. As the Central Theater Command, it is located around Beijing and is an essential command and control hub. This military distribution demonstrates that China aimed to build a modern, integrated warfare capability that enables conducting joint operations on land, in air, and in water. It also shows that China is focusing more on strategic deterrence, rapid force deployment and militarily dominating the region as it formulates a wider defense strategy (Defense, 2024).

3.3. Peoples Liberation Army Personals Strength from 1980 to 2022

China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has significantly transformed since it started modernization efforts in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the evolution of warfare has encompassed a long history of continuous improvements in doctrine, equipment, and organizational system change with the changing

aspects of warfare. As for the strategy, the PLA has begun to move away from the Mao Zedong principles, which were based on large-scale conflict, especially with the then-Soviet Union (Babar & Khan, 2022). Today, China’s military concentrates on improving its ability to take part in regional conflicts while adopting a more disruptive tactic towards modern warfare, technological integration, and military force readiness.

Year	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2022
PLA Army	3.6	3.16	2.3	2.2	1.7	1.6	1.6	1.6	0.965	0.965
PLA Navy	0.63	0.35	0.26	0.26	0.22	0.255	0.255	0.235	0.260	0.260
PLA Air Force	0.4	0.49	0.47	0.47	0.42	0.4	0.33	0.398	0.395	0.395
Strategic Forces/Coast Guard	0	0	0.09	0.09	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.145	0.145
Strategic missile forces									0.120	0.120
Reserves	0	5	4	1.2	0.55	0.8	0.51	0.51	0.51	0.51
Paramilitary	7	4.3	12	1.2	1.1	1.5	0.66	0.66	0.50	0.50
Others									0.15	0.15
Total number of PLA personnel	11.63	13.3	16.32	5.42	4.49	4.665	3.455	3.503	3.045	3.045

Figure 2: PLA Personnel strength from 1980–2022 in million (Amjad, 2025).

From 1980 to 2022, the transformation of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is highlighted by the transformation to a more modernized and efficient force. Inevitably, the PLA Army decreased from 3.6 million in 1980 to 0.965 million in 2022 indicating the shift from manpower-intensive warfare to low manpower warfare. The Navy and Air Force kept their personnel numbers abreast, reflecting a continuous emphasis on maritime and aerial matters. Beginning from the 1990s onwards, strategic forces and missile units expanded to indicate China’s emphasis on advanced warfare and deterrence. Sharply declining were reserves and paramilitary forces, which is a sign of moving the army toward professionalism and high tech. Comparatively, from 1980 (an overall PLA personnel total of 11.63 million) to 2022 (3.045 million), China has shifted its strategic trajectory from a large standing army to a smaller, more technologically advanced, more agile force forging a new approach to modern security threats, regional superiority, and expressions of global military power (Amjad, 2025).

3.4. China’s Military Expenditures from 1990 to 2023

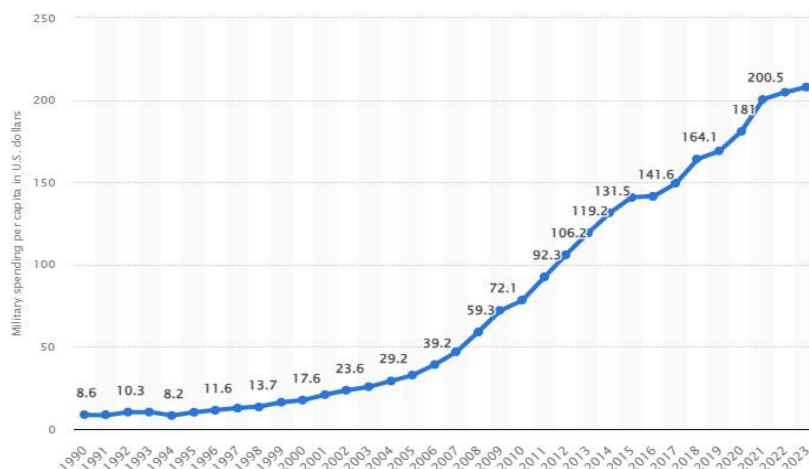


Figure 3: Figure show the Chinese Military Expenditures from 1990 to 2023 (Statista, 2023).

Since the last decades, China's military expenditure has grown both in absolute terms as well as per capita. The country's total military spending in 2023 was estimated at approx. USD 296.44 billion, of which approx. \$207.9 per capita. This represents a huge increase in China's efforts to modernize its military capabilities. However, as is often the case, the actual military spending is much higher than the official figure of a national defense budget of USD 229 billion, 1.3 percent of GDP in 2022. China's defense spending as a share of GDP has been relatively stable and remains so at around 1.3% over the years. But the rising spending, in absolute terms, indicates that the country is willing to add to its defense spending as a part of its economic expansion, however slowly. If you want a complete look at the trends of China's military expenditure, check our resources listed below for detailed statistics and historical data (Statista, 2023).

4. STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA FOR CHINA

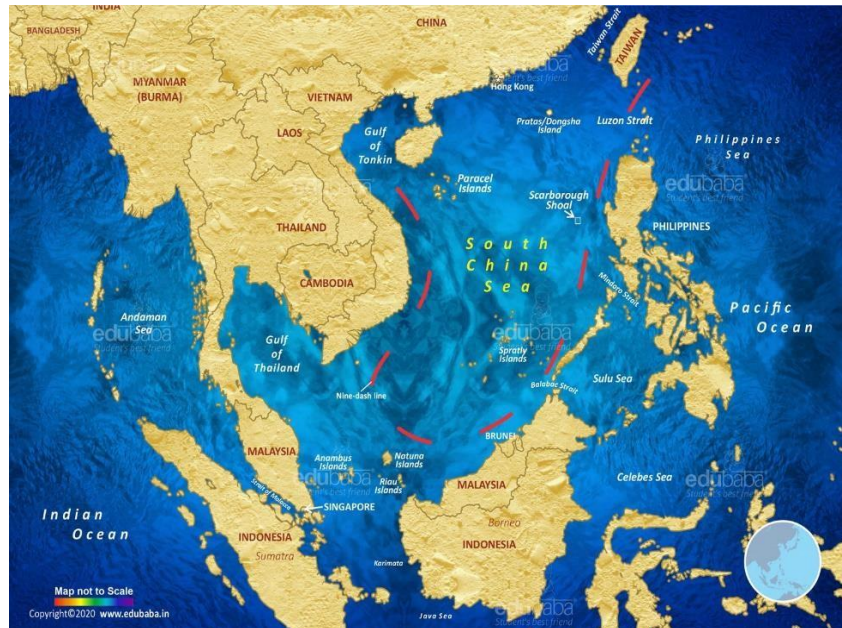


Figure 4: Map of the South China Sea showing the nine-dash line (Edubaba, 2020).

China, as the world's second-largest economy and a dominant force in Southeast Asia, regards the South China Sea as a region of historical and strategic significance. China has a lot of coastline that provides an important traffic route to the sea, which serves to trade and exploit resources. Its reserves of oil and natural gas in the South China Sea include seven billion barrels of oil and nine hundred trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Since China consumes so much energy (over 10 percent of global oil production and 20 percent of the world's overall energy consumption), the region offers a nice opportunity to get access to long-term energy needs. China's perspective is that it needs to control these waters to secure itself a resource base as well as a cheap way to deliver vital energy supplies to the country (Mohammed & Ahmed, 2023). The nine-dash line map, which China has also presented, is another way the country advances its historical claim to sovereignty over the sea. It covers numerous nations' exclusive economic zones and disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982 sets out what territorial waters are, but China has largely given this up for historical claims and has gone down this road to prove its dominance over this fundamental area.

In addition to its energy interests, China knows that the South China Sea has geostrategic importance, including as a strategic trade gateway (Daghboush & Al-Rushdi, 2022). The Strait of Malacca carries approximately one-third of global trade and 82 percent of China's imported oil. It does not sit well with the fact that U.S. naval forces are present in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, which may force a Chinese blockade the likes of which could harm the country's economy. China has therefore aggressively expanded its presence by building artificial islands, military bases, and surveillance facilities to combat

that risk. Between 2014 and 2015, more than three thousand acres of artificial islands were developed, and seven new islands were constructed adjacent to the Spratly Islands in 2015. But for China, these efforts show the willingness to increase its presence in the maritime and aerial realms to further consolidate its regional clout. To put itself in place as the foremost power in the Asia-Pacific, China wants to exercise control over these waters, weathering control over key maritime arteries. This strategic objective helps boost China’s regional ambitions while cementing its position as a major global power. China now makes its mark over the South China Sea through military expansion and economic leverage to resource a critical zone of influence in the future (Miller, 2019).

4.1 Importance of Nine-Dash-Line for China

The South China Sea is claimed by China, which uses the Nine Dashes Line to define that, covering the area of more than 90 percent of the sea. This claim is based on historical maps from the 1940s depicting China's territorial assertions through a U-shaped line. It is of great strategic importance because the South China Sea features rich fishing grounds, potential oil and gas reserves, and vital shipping lanes that serve as conduits of much of the world’s trade. China's trace line of the Nine Dash Line signifies China's assertive claim to disputed islands and maritime features to enhance its sovereign claim over these important resources and trade routes (Caruana, 2023). But this acquisition has come under tension with Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines, neighbors also claim territorial areas. Involving a higher degree of ambiguity in the exact ramifications of the Nine-Dash Line, the diplomatic relations have been further embroiled and the regional dispute further enriched.

This refers to when China justified its territorial claims over islands by expanding its military through naval patrols, artificial islands, and air defense zones, all backed by the use of the Nine-Dash Line (Yeoh & Bing, 2011). As well, as the various grey zone strategies that China uses to avoid direct war, namely: maritime militias, cyber operations, and economic coercion. These moves challenge the U.S. and regional actors, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines, and raise tensions. However, China's economic initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are strengthening Chinese power, but such to demographic shifts, corruption, and economic slowdowns, such Chinese challenges are constraining themselves. The paper concludes that the SCS conflict could only be resolved by way of diplomatic engagement, international legal framework adherence, and regional cooperation, which are undermined by growing power struggles between China and the U.S.

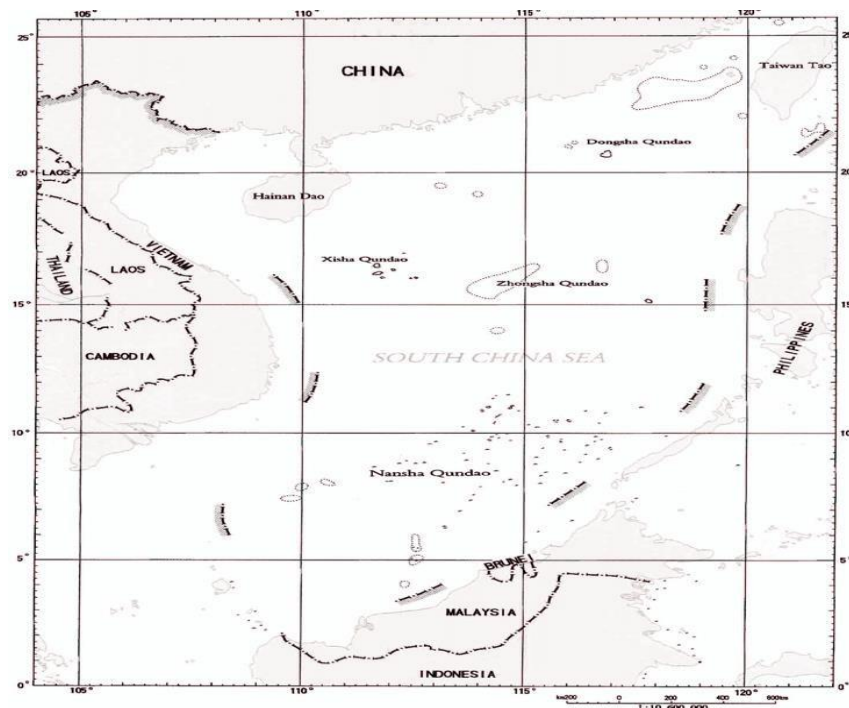


Figure 5: China’s Official Nine-Dash Line Map (Yeoh & Bing, 2011)

5. CHINESE MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

China's military modernization effort produced an accomplished People's Liberation Army (PLA) that now possesses enhanced powers across multiple combat domains. Through the development of aircraft carriers and advanced submarines and destroyers, the PLA Navy has extended China's military reach across greater distances. The growth of advanced missile systems and hypersonic weapons improves Chinese strategic deterrence abilities alongside continuous research in cyber warfare that preserves its role as a leading power in both technology and security methods. Space ambitions of China generate a complex surveillance infrastructure, together with communication capabilities that serve modern warfare requirements. China expresses its most aggressive foreign stance in the South China Sea through its total "Nine-Dash Line" territorial claim that covers approximately 90% of the region (Junior & Silva, 2020). Throughout its claim enforcement activities, Beijing undertook massive island expansion that led to the development of artificial land masses suitable to house missile batteries radar systems, and airstrips. The island reinforcement activities pursued by China have sparked fiercer conflicts with Southeast Asian allies Vietnam and the Philippines in addition to U.S. Navy naval operations that challenge Chinese maritime claims through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs).

China has intensified its military drills across the region to display military operations while demonstrating plans to lead regional security development. Through this strategic deployment, China works to establish the dominance of vital maritime pathways and vital resources alongside external forces. These actions encounter comprehensive international opposition because observers consider China's policies dangerously violate both the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and international law (Erickson, 2024). Through extensive island-building, China has built multiple artificial islands that now host defensive military installations, including runways, missile defense platforms, and surveillance systems. China faces sustained friction in Southeast Asia and with U.S. Navy FONOPs because it continues performing island expansion activities.

Despite the presence of geopolitical tensions regarding the South China Sea (SCS), China claims sovereignty based on its historical nine-dash line. Its strategic importance is based on the vital shipping routes, the abundant natural resources, and such military potential. However, China's way is to combine military expansion with diplomatic moves and economic incentives to accomplish its dominance in the region. The most important strategies are the development of the infrastructure, expanding patrols to sea and Northeast Asia, and the use of maritime militias and grey zone tactics to strengthen claims without military clashes. Strained diplomatic relations ensue with China's assertiveness, which China challenges the U.S. and Southeast Asian nations, with Vietnam and the Philippines being the most blatant. Freedom of navigation operations as part of the U.S. reaffirmation of their influence in the region is supported by the U.S. However, China uses its economic partnerships (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) with ASEAN nations to strengthen ties with its neighbors, as well as expand its military presence through artificial islands and air defense zones (Hussain, 2023).

The maritime paramilitaries are a civilian force linked to the military that is invaluable to enforcing Chinese claims, with regular confrontations with foreign vessels. Between the cyber and the bleed, there is a grey zone whereby China can employ economic coercion and other economic coercion strategies without the need for direct military combat. These strengths can lead China however, China still faces demography, economic slowness of the economy, and regional opposition. To achieve a resolution in the SCS, international legal frameworks must be obeyed and diplomatic engagement is important (Heriawan & Abiwawanti, 2021). That may lead to regional cooperation and economic collaboration to lessen the tensions. Yet, the ongoing power struggle between China and the U.S. complicates the resolution of the strategic landscape as a conflict.

5.1. Chinese Grey Zone Tactics in the South China Sea

Grey zone tactics actions, those that fall between traditional military conflict and peacetime operations, are a tactic China is using to assert its claims in the South China Sea. One of the tactics used is to deploy maritime militia, construct artificial islands, and use economic leverage to influence neighboring

countries. These strategies' primary aim is to very slowly change the status quo, making China look more to their benefit without provoking full-scale military responses from other countries. China's approach is also highlighted for raising regional implications for Southeast Asian nations to worry about sovereignty and maritime rights. Challenges of international bodies in their efforts to address these grey zone activities that stemmed from such ambiguous nature and complications involved in international law (Aris, 2024).

5.2. US Responses to China in the South China Sea

The United States has taken a strategic approach to combat China's aggressive moves in the South China Sea in protecting the state and peace of the region, defending international regulations, and ensuring freedom of navigation in the region of the South China Sea. That is one principle of this strategy, namely the performance of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), where U.S. naval vessels and aircraft deliberately sail in restricted waters to contest Chinese claims about the area. On the same principle that international waters must remain open and accessible, these operations counter China's efforts to claim control of vital sea lanes. Apart from FONOPs, the U.S. has made its military presence stronger in the region through increasing defense cooperation with allies, such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines (Budiana & Budiman, 2024). Enhancing regional deterrence and improving the defensive capabilities of partner nations are, in part, the purpose of the conducted joint military exercises and security agreements.

Furthermore, the United States has sold the region's allies with advanced military technology and their maritime defense capacities should there be potential threats. The U.S. however has also put a diplomatic hand on China's extensive territorial claims, calling for the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling dismissing China's broad rights over maritime areas. Washington still backs regional institutions like ASEAN in helping to create a rules-based order and solving maritime disputes through diplomatic means. Economic and strategic measures in the U.S. response include further strengthening the economic ties with Southeast Asian nations so that the latter are not dependent on China for too long. The U.S.'s use of diplomatic, military, and economic tools is intended to offset China's rising influence, deter unilaterally territorial expansion, as well as promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.

6. US MILITARY STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The US has radically increased its military presence in the South China Sea and has engaged in extensive operations that have brought the world's biggest countries into competition. The figure of some 1,000 sorties by U.S. forces in reconnaissance aircraft near Chinese airspace was revealed by the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI). U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups and amphibious ready groups entered the region eight times with extended duration and more active training. In addition, in the area, two nuclear-powered ballistic missile subs and 11 nuclear-powered attack subs indicated a deterrence intention. The U.S. Navy conducted six freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the neighborhood of Chinese-controlled islands and reefs and six times in the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. conducted 107 large-scale military exercises in the South China Sea and the surrounding region, including bilateral and multilateral exercises with ASEAN and other allies such as Japan, the UK, India, France, Canada, and Germany (Xuanzun & Yuandan, 2024). These military operations and activities in another country's waters in peacetime conflict with rights set out in international laws and escalate the likelihood of maritime and aerial conflicts. Although the government continues with global conflicts and domestic challenges, the report still foresees continued US military presence in the region in 2024. The U.S. backs the Philippines in disputes with China and would guard its rights, but is careful to avoid getting drawn directly into military action. Concerns of regional stability and the future state of China-U.S. relations grow as the U.S. military activities escalate.

7. REGIONAL NATIONS' RESPONSE TO CHINA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

United States military bases in the Asia Pacific region include Australia, Guam, Japan Singapore, and South Korea. China's military capabilities increase with a confrontation with the U.S. becoming increasingly balanced in this region, and Chinese assertiveness may prove easy for Washington to

counter. The Trump administration adopted a Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy to solidify alliances, secure maritime lines of communication and uphold law. Particularly, it has raised concerns among neighboring countries at the expanding military influence of China. Japan was involved in labeling China as its most significant security threat, which then led to Tokyo increasing defense spending, obtaining US sophisticated weapons, and even changing its constitutional blueprint to be ready with a more flexible military line. However, South Korea has focused more on diplomatic engagement with Beijing to address regional tensions in particular concerning North Korea. Under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines also tried to cozy up to China through trade and cooperation pacts as it is involved in maritime disputes in the South China Sea (Maizland, 2020). While other Southeast Asian nations like Vietnam are also engaging in territorial conflicts to a degree, they also lack the sorts of defense budgets that enable them to organize a coordinated response through ASEAN. Taiwan has boosted its purchases of American arms, including the advanced fighter jet F-16, but there is still uncertainty about how much U.S. military support Washington will deign to offer to Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack. Many of the nations in the region are already starting to grapple with China, and balancing economic links to it with the reality that the U.S. is the only one that can help with defense.

8. CHINA'S STRATEGIES TO BOX AMERICA OUT OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Chinese activities in the South China Sea have achieved the expansion of its dominance through military, diplomatic, and strategic measures to the minimum US operational influence in the region. The large-scale construction and militarization of artificial islands, particularly in the disputed Spratly Islands have been one of the key aspects of Beijing's strategy. At Mischief Reef, China also built a military outpost featuring airstrips, anti-ship and surface-to-air missile systems, and advanced radar installations, one of the most profound transformations elsewhere around the other reefs that comprise that feature of the Spratlys (Mandhana, 2023). With these developments, China's power projection powers have been greatly improved and Beijing has established a very good foothold in the region.

In turn, the United States has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to assert that the South China Sea is an international waterway and to challenge China on its hold on the sea. But China's fortified positions on these artificial islands have more and more made it nearly impossible for U.S. forces to operate without hindrance. By playing calculatedly military deployments, Beijing has built a virtual deterrent shield that gives the upper hand to balance of power by shielding itself from U.S. intervention. But China's success in boxing out the U.S. from the region also has to do with its able use of economic and diplomatic influence to lock up Southeast Asian nations. And China has nipped this in the bud by actively encouraging regional actors to lean on Beijing and discourage them from aligning too closely with Washington by using trade relationships and infrastructure investments (Lee H. , 2023). Consequently, Beijing has occupied the South China Sea and reshaped the regional security landscape, strengthening its position, and weakening American influence in the strategically important maritime zone.

9. SINO-US CONFLICT OVER THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

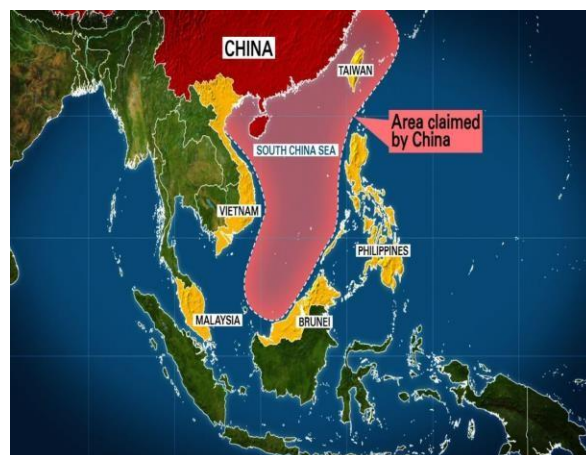


Figure 6: Map shows the Sino-US Conflict over South China Sea (Mahdy, 2019)

The U.S. and China claim their interests in the South China Sea. China claims it has almost total control of the South China Sea, which is claimed by nearly 90 percent of that maritime area within a 'Nine Dash Line' overlaying the economic zones (EEZs) of some six countries in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. Despite a 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in favor of a ruling against China's claims, Beijing continues to assert its authority through the construction of artificial islands, deployments of military assets, and naval patrols. China's expansion violates international law, protesting the U.S. refusal to accept, and threatens freedom of navigation, an essential for global trade, which the U.S. does not accept. So the United States Navy, which has Freedom of Navigation Operations, or FONOPs, regularly navigates warships through the contested waters just to challenge China's claims. The result of these operations has been several near collisions and diplomatic disputes, and these have raised tensions between the two powers to new heights (Nathan, 2023).

The strategic implications of the U.S.-China rivalry in the South China Sea go beyond military conflict. It is a region of key maritime trade routes that witnessed \$3.5 trillion in annual maritime trade through these waters. In the regional context, the US supports regional allies such as the Philippines and Vietnam to provide military aid and to enhance security partnerships to offset China's dominance (Studies, 2017). In addition, Washington works with Japan, Australia, and India within the Quad security arrangement, which is largely focused on ensuring regional stability. At the same time, China has worked to build contacts with Southeast Asian countries by using its economic weight and diplomatic propensities like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). That tension of expansion and confrontation has simply remained, as both nations step up their military presence in the region. Aggravated by the South China Sea dispute as a territorial dispute is also a manifestation of the larger geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China for regional and global power.

10. U.S. MILITARY RELATIONS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA

The military relations between the United States and Southeast Asian countries are so long is not merely because of the strategic interests in maintaining regional stability, freedom of navigation, and counteracting China's growing power. This engagement has been a work in progress for decades with changes to meet or respond to changes in the geopolitical landscape and security threats including terrorism, piracy, and cyber warfare. Security partnerships, joint military exercises, arms sales, and intelligence-sharing agreements have helped strengthen the presence of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region. It also delivers military diplomacy, capacity-building initiatives, and humanitarian assistance operations as means to further alliances with regional partners. These engagements have also grown as the role of technology and defense innovation has become more vital; the U. As the importance of naval power, UAV surveillance, and cyber defense strategy emerges, it is apparent that U.S. involvement in the region has evolved. The primary focus of this paper is the historical development, contemporary relevance, geopolitical implications, and broader impact on U.S.-China relations of the U.S. military's involvement in Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, treaty alliances, strategic partnerships, and rotational deployments keep the American military presence strong and enable it to counter China's rising influence and maintain regional stability. This effort is central and supported by the system of the Mutual Defence Treaty with the Philippines (1951), reinforced by the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which has expanded the access of the US to Philippine bases, including new posts in Luzon and Palawan, near disputed areas of the South China Sea (Binh, Thao, & Chinh, 2022). Balikatan Military exercise between the US and the Philippines in April 2023 around 17600 soldiers participated in this exercise is a loud and clear deterrence message in the South China Sea (Manila, 2023). The annual Cobra Gold exercise, which was held in 2023 involved humanitarian and cyber components also critically important to Thailand as an important partner of the US (Strangio, 2023). Singapore is home to U.S. littoral combat ships that are stationed at Changi Naval Base, and Vietnam has ramped up Coast Guard collaboration with the U.S. finalizing a maritime security deal in September 2023 with the U.S. to combat illegal fishing and coercion. In March 2023, the U.S. also conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's

excessive maritime claims with the USS Milius sailing near the Spratly Islands (Odom, 2019). Yet challenges remain, including that Southeast Asian states remain dependent on China's economy and changing domestic political bases, such as Philippines President Marcos Jr. said need to maintain balance in his country's interests with U.S. ties while taking Beijing's infrastructure incentives. Such dynamics illustrate the United States strategy of promoting an alliance-based and adaptive presence to maintain an order based on rules in the face of increasing military contestation.

Southeast Asia faces major complications because the United States competes with China. Southeast Asian nations improve security and economic conditions via greater regional interaction but face an elevated risk of intensifying tensions that may pull the area deeper into great-power militarization (Wirth, 2022). To maintain equilibrium between these strategic components ASEAN needs to unite stronger against confronting great power conflict in the region. The sustenance of strategic autonomy stands at the top of ASEAN countries' national priorities. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) represents Southeast Asian states' attempt to both defend their independence and foster collaborative frameworks across the region (Smith, 2024). Southeast Asian geopolitical dynamics represent today's advanced global power alignments between the United States and China. The Southeast Asian nations require prudent decision-making because China and the United States contest mutual influence inside their region yet they need to defend their national autonomy alongside domestic stability. The platform nature of ASEAN stands essential for creating an adaptable peaceful world in the future.

10.1. Bilateral and Multilateral Defense Cooperation

Numerous Southeast Asian countries have military relations with the U.S. The Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia are among them. The groups in these relationships are based on historical alliances, strategic defense partnerships, and the many common concerns around regional security threats. Confederation Joint military exercises, intelligence sharing arrangements, and arms trade have also strengthened regional deterrence capabilities in the South China Sea. As for strengthening maritime security by conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and supporting allies in modernizing their defense, the U.S. has also made such commitments (Thu, 2022). In addition, capacity-building initiatives, counterterrorism cooperation, and humanitarian assistance programs among others deepen security ties. With changing regional security dynamics, the U.S. continues to manage its approach toward countering new threats and stay committed to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

10.2. The US Military Relations with the Philippines

The Philippines share the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) 1951 with the U.S., the framework of extensive cooperation and various forms of military cooperation, joint training exercises, and strategic cooperation) the two nations carry out annual military drills like Balikatan that facilitate interoperability of their armed forces. In 2014 the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed in which U.S. troops were given rotational access to certain Philippine military bases, for the sake of their rapid deployment capabilities and the betterment of the country's defense infrastructure. The Philippines has, thus, been strengthened in its capacity to address both conventional and non-traditional securities threats through these agreements, such as disaster response and counterterrorism operations (Pidbereznykh, 2022). The U.S. has also supplied armed military aid, the latest equipment, and intelligence mechanisms to assist the Philippines in enhancing modernization in its defense capacity. This partnership has been extremely important in discouraging Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea with more US naval presence as well as joint maritime patrols. Despite this, the relationship has been met with periodic challenges because of shifting Philippine politics, and military cooperation continues to require sustained diplomatic engagement.

10.3. The US Military Relations with Thailand

Continuing a tradition that goes back to the first U.S. Marines in Bangkok in 1825, Thailand was and is a vital U.S. non-NATO ally in military strategy in Southeast Asia. Both of the nations historically have a strong defense relationship derived from the 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce, followed by the 1954

Manila Pact and the 1962 Rusk Thanat Agreement. Cobra Gold is a militarised exercise that takes place annually and is the largest of its kind in the region with thousands of troops from various countries. It helps with interoperability, gathers disaster response coordination, and strengthens regional security capability. The U.S. provides military aid, counterterrorism support, and maritime security assistance beyond a cooperative activity like Cobra Gold (CRS, 2024). In addition, intelligence sharing, cybersecurity collaboration, and defense technology transfers are included in the partnership. Strangely, however, political fluctuations and Thailand's growing closer to Beijing have made US-Thai military relations a challenge, necessitating continual diplomacy to keep defense cooperation in place.

10.4. The US Military Relations Vietnam

However, Vietnam has over the past two decades greatly developed its defense engagements with the United States. Both are greatly concerned with China's continued assertiveness in the SCS, and both are increasingly strengthening military-to-military relations with the U.S. Naval visits to Vietnam have become more frequent. One example of when Hanoi turned to the U.S. was when the U.S. unreservedly lifted its long and hardly followed arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016, allowing Hanoi to buy advanced U.S. arms, including maritime surveillance aircraft and patrol boats, to bolster its navy capability (Parameswaran, 2014). Both countries have also conducted joint maritime security training and intelligence sharing to defeat the regional threat. The U.S. also participates in such multilateral defense forums alongside Vietnam, which shows the commitment of Vietnam to regional security cooperation. Despite its reservation to be fully aligned with any major power, Vietnam has adopted a strategic balancing approach resulting in the empirical rise of collaboration with the U.S. in defense modernization, cybersecurity, and military education programs (Burgess, 2021). The rise in security concerns in the region has made way for U.S.-Vietnam military relations to increase further, helping Vietnam cement its role as a critical partner in promoting regional stability.

10.5. The US Military Relations with Indonesia and Malaysia

The U.S. has taken the lead in strengthening Indonesia and Malaysia's counterterrorism and maritime security as well as strategic deterrence against terrorism. The efforts of the United States to support military modernization in Indonesia include the transfer of defense technology and joint exercises like the Garuda Shield that improve the interoperability between the two armed forces. The U.S. has also offered counterterrorism assistance including in sharing of intelligence and training of paramilitary Special Forces in combatting extremist networks. As part of strengthening maritime security cooperation in Malaysia, the U.S. has improved naval capabilities and conducted joint patrols in the Strait of Malacca, an important and busy shipping lane (Service, Indonesia, 2022). Furthermore, Indonesia and Malaysia are involved in common defense forums with the U.S. both regionally and internationally. However because these countries still enjoy a strong economic relationship with China, they must carefully weigh the political friction of its security partnerships. Although these challenges remain, U.S. engagement with Indonesia and Malaysia is continuing to increase their defense capabilities and to keep Southeast Asia stable.

11. CHINA'S STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND ITS RESPONSE

For China, U.S. military participation in Southeast Asia presents a major obstacle to its ambitions in the region. U.S. forces' presence on the increase, along with the deepening of military ties with Southeast Asian countries, helps balance China's strategic reach in areas of contention like the South China Sea. The U.S. has a long-standing practice of conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and joint military exercises with regional allies, to ensure deterrence against China's expansive claims to territorial waters. Also, arms sales and security assistance programs strengthen the defense capacity of the Southeast Asian nation and complicate China's strategic calculus. Beijing has fortified artificial islands, stepped up naval patrols, and thrown new weaponry into beaches in response. China also puts economic and diplomatic actions, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to its use to solidify regional alliances and counter the US influence. This has come at a time of rising U.S.-China rivalry in Southeast Asia, and the region is now the fulcrum of global political dominance.

U.S. engagement with the region increases regional security by strengthening the defense capabilities of partners but also increases tension with China with increased militarization and geopolitical competition. China has also reinforced military outposts, installed missile systems, and beefed-up naval patrols while raising the risks that incorrect acts, not planned ones, trigger battles. Beijing also uses economic and diplomatic strategies to counterbalance U.S. influence such as trade agreements, infrastructure investments, and at the highest levels the high level of security dialogues to deepen its relationship with Southeast Asian states. China has also developed cyber and hybrid warfare strategies, intensifying cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and intelligence operations to get at the U.S. credibility in the region. With China growing more powerful, Southeast Asian nations must negotiate the continued flow of trade and economic affection between them and the country while also keeping defense partnerships with the U.S. With increasingly difficult railway, this intensifying rivalry creates a danger of miscalculation and conflict and demands that it be held in check through the reserve diplomatic efforts to avert more rising and keeping the regional stability.

12. POWER SHIFT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

China's deeper integration into the economic progress of Southeast Asia has also contributed to the rise of its influence. Unlike the United States, China has applied its geographic location and investment in infrastructure to foster closer relations with the region's states, an art that this country has frequently struggled to emulate. The Chinese infrastructure projects have helped boost Beijing's heel too, but only in countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Zha, 2023). Yet even some scholars say that the Biden administration's approach to Southeast Asia is 'catching up' after a period of foreign policy disengagement under the Trump administration. At the same time, China's enlargement is being resisted, in particular in maritime Southeast Asia. The US military alliances with regional partners including Australia, Japan, and the Philippines to counterbalance China's growing naval power. Some analysts contend that the U.S. role in the South China Sea is waning, while others suggest the South China Sea will stay secure through Washington's strategic alliances. Finally, China is constrained in turning its economic might into political or military hegemony. While growing an economic footprint to the opposing end of China, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has generated a backlash: from local governments and civil society groups for pushing back over debts. In addition, China's cultural and soft power presence is rather weak as compared to the U.S., which does not allow for it to influence regional narratives (Dunford, 2021). Though it is widely agreed China's influence in Southeast Asia is growing, most scholars disagree whether or not China's mining this influence will lead to long-term dominance, or once the U.S. is 'done' trying to forge alliances and stunting its military presence in the region, it will maintain U.S. strategic edge.

Given China's continuing military modernization in Southeast Asia, the United States has taken a multi-dimensional approach to counter China's growing presence and calm the region. This strategy is also based on strengthening partnerships with Southeast Asian nations to constrain China's ability to act against U.S. interests. The essence of this approach involves diplomatic, economic, and military engagement with the regional environment aimed at shaping it so that the power and influence of China are constrained. The U.S. encourages the creation of a collective front and potential deterrence, working to increase American and regional country friendships by proposing closer ties. The focus on China's advancements has also been extended to strengthening the U.S. military to deal with the challenges. It includes putting into an arsenal of anti-ship weapons that are more abundant and cheaper to help counter China's naval strength in the Indo-Pacific region. Efforts to enhance deterrents against potential Chinese aggression have included the development and testing of weapons such as the QUICKSINK bomb which can be adapted to existing munitions (Stone, 2024). The U.S. is also moving mobile missile batteries to key places and intends to vastly expand its stock of sophisticated missiles to undercut Beijing's control in such places as the South China Sea. Through these initiatives, the playing field is leveled so that conflicts do not arise because the U.S. and its allies maintain a credible and effective military stake in the region.

CONCLUSION

The dynamic security and strategic confrontation between the United States and China in Southeast Asia highlights how central this region is to the overall Indo-Pacific order. The U.S. is one of the major guarantors of security in terms of its military associations, defence programs, and promotion of freedom of navigation. China increasingly gains power through economic interdependence, sea power, and increasing political relations. This competition has placed opportunities and threats to the Southeast Asian states, which are forced to use subtle measures of hedging, balancing, and selective involvement to maintain autonomy and give rise to maximum benefits. It is shown through the analysis that Southeast Asia is not just a passive recipient of the great-power rivalry but an active player in forming the balance of power on the regional level. Using rivalry, the region's states have sought to enhance local capabilities, diversify their association, and gain higher bargaining power. Nevertheless, the fact that the maritime issues remain unresolved, the South China Sea is militarized, and the economic visions contradict each other increases the chances of miscalculation and uncertainty.

After all, the course of the U.S.-China relationship in Southeast Asia will not be determined solely by the policies of Washington and Beijing but also by the concerted action of ASEAN and the separate member states. The critical factor of their unity, strategic autonomy, and the institutionalization of conflict management mechanisms will determine their ability to promote regional stability. The future of the Southeast Asian security architecture will therefore depend on how to strike a balance between the great-power competition and regional resilience so that the Indo-Pacific will continue to be an open, inclusive, and rules-based order.

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