



Strategic Transformation of China's Maritime Strategy in South-East Asia with Respect to us Regional Policies

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ABSTRACT

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The US-China maritime competition has exacerbated the regional political power politics. The US is at the helm of affairs and being the sole superpower after the disintegration of Russia, it has exerted its influence in all the regional geo-strategic affairs. The maritime domain is one of the crucial factors in the US hegemonic power and China is trying to compete it specially in the South East Asian region. China is growing its influence in all the regional countries and its claim over the maritime resources are one of the alarming features for the US counterpart. The changing geopolitical landscape of the Indo pacific also presents strategic uncertainty to China. It is also becoming a more militarized region as states have taken up submarines, anti-ship missiles as well as improved systems of surveillance. Military diffusion such as this makes it hard to control the maritime world by China and it is more likely to unintentionally escalate. This article highlights the strategic recalibration of the Chinese maritime strategy with respect to US in order to increase its influence in the South East Asian region.

Introduction

The maritime strategy of the China in South-East Asia is impossible to comprehend without referring to the profound historical context which influenced the development of the strategic imagination of the country, its political view of the world and its altering vision of the sea. Throughout most of its imperial history, China had imagined itself to be a continental civilization, whose security dilemmas were rooted in the size of the giant northern and western land frontier. The menace of nomadic invasions, as opposed to maritime competitors had prevailed in the focus of Chinese courts all through the Qin dynasty to the Qing. This geographical and political orientation resulted in a strategic culture whereby marine issues took back seat to the land power and whereby, the development of the navy was still affordable compared to what China had achieved in terms of bureaucracy, military and administrative systems on land (Alfarizi, Bainus, & Sudirman, 2026). However, the interaction of China with the sea in the past was more multifaceted as historical accounts would want one to believe, and the intellectual basis of contemporary maritime practices had their origins in the centuries of changing relationship with foreign trade, naval expeditions, tributary relationships, and the maritime neglect. The times of the Tang and Song dynasties saw the prosperity of the maritime trade system in China introduced by the progressive technology of shipbuilding and the development of commercial ports along the southern coast. The Song dynasty, specifically, superintended the notable developments of advancement in navigation, such as the common use of the magnetic compass and a major development in the structure of the oceangoing vessels (Abraham, 2020).

These inventions allowed Chinese traders to navigate the routes of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean adding to an advanced maritime economy. However, according to this development, maritime activities were never incorporated into the Chinese strategic doctrine. The sea was instead considered more a tool of trade than a field where military forces had to fight or territory was to be condensed. The threats of the sea were minimal, and the main interests of the state were the organization of the internal system and repelling attacks by land opponents (Lu & Moorthy, 2026).

The change in maritime thinking of China in the 20th century was initiated with the fall of the imperial system and formation of the Republic of China. A drive was made to modernize the navy, but the political unrest, economic frailty and civil war slowed any significant development (Lhakard, 2025). The new maritime strategy framework did not emerge until the Communist Party created the People Republic of China in 1949. The strategic priorities in China during the rule of Mao Zedong were still too continental. The major threats were felt to be originating out of the Soviet Union and the United States as this was both on the land and air as opposed to the sea. Consequently, the initial concept of the People Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was to be a coastal defence force with minimal offensive forces. Its role was based on the defence of Chinese territories, the amphibious operations, and the prevention or the making complex the possibility of the technologically advanced enemies to act along the Chinese coasts. Nonetheless, even Mao in his works about war and the tactics of war had kept at the back some germs of ideas which were to influence the future development of maritime China. His focus on the strategic depth, asymmetric warfare, and mobilization of the national resources presented the conceptual tools that would ultimately be utilized in the approach of China to the modernization of the navy. (Ismail, Douglas, & Mosli, 2024). Furthermore, Mao was consumed with the idea of foreign intrusion into the coastal states, such as Taiwan and East China Sea, this served to create the maritime periphery as a region of national weakness that would eventually need to be enlarged in defensive forces.

This paradigm shift in the maritime thinking of the Chinese began during the rule of Deng Xiaoping who opened up China to international trade and ushered in the era of fast integration to international trade circles through his economic reforms. Following the rise of China as an export country, the security of the sea-borne trade routes was a national concern. The dependence of the country on imported energy, raw materials and high-tech devices implied that the weakness in the marine sphere could have a direct negative effect on the economic development. This acknowledgment became the basis of the strategic principle according to which China had to safeguard its maritime rights and interests, which started to be often discussed in official sources in the 1980s and 1990s. The reforms of Deng also heightened the level of awareness of China on maritime territories in the South China Sea where the rivalry over oil, gas, fisheries and strategic locations rose. As the economy of China kept growing more and more ambitious maritime strategies were expressed by the successive leaders. During the tenure of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, there was a transformation of maritime thinking of China to that of securing the near seas which means the waters near the Chinese mainland- the Bohai Gulf, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea (Richey, 2024). The theory of near seas defence constituted the doctrinal foundation of modernization of the PLAN into the more serious force which can also act outside the immediate coastline. This change stemmed out of the increased prominence of maritime conflicts, the necessity to prevent the development of Taiwan independence and the understanding that the United States was retaining a great naval dominance in the area.

The greatest change in the Chinese worldview of the sea took place during the reign of Xi Jinping who made the oceans not a fringe area but a focal one of the national revival. Xi announced that China should be made a maritime great power, making the maritime strategy a part of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. This vision goes beyond the topic of naval modernization and includes maritime legal activism, expansion of a fishing fleet internationally, empowerment of the coast guard and the creation of maritime militia forces. The policies of Xi contain a profound historical account: China, which was ever humiliated by the foreign maritime forces, has to recover its due place and make sure no one can challenge its right to sovereignty on the sea. The further aggravated attention of China to maritime rights has roots in the complex history of historic wrongs, ideological discourses, and the strategic needs. The official discourse of China often evokes historical maps, ancient naval expeditions and past injustices to support its present-day maritime claims. Through connecting contemporary strategy with historical continuity, China establishes a political account that can be used to present its maritime expansion as being legitimate, restorative, and defensive as opposed to being aggressive. Such combination of history and strategy makes the maritime actions of China especially sophisticated: it is motivated not only by the material interests but also by symbolical and psychological ones which are based on the long-term quest to eliminate the weaknesses of the past (Marie, Samhudi, & Prawita, 2024). The historical background of the Chinese maritime thinking is therefore multi-layered (USCC, 2025). They include intervals of sea success and failure, changes in ideology between continental and maritime interests, changes in response to national shame, and changes in adapting to the modern world due to economic integration around the world. The maritime identity of China today is a manifestation of a rediscovery of past maritime desires, as well as an adaptation to the geopolitical realities in the present. This

historical background preconditions the development of Chinese maritime policies, which are shifted towards the near-sea defense to the far seas operations, and the formation of the strategy towards the South China Sea, military modernization, grey-zone strategies, and development of blue-water navy which is able to project its power far off of Asia.

The Nine-Dash Line and its Strategic Implications

The nine-dash line is one of the most disputable and symbolically overloaded aspects of the Chinese approach to the maritime policy in South-East Asia. It is much more than a cartographical demarcation; it is one expression of the changing Chinese historical awareness, strategic aspiration, regional self-understanding, and political power. The Nine-Dash Line, which, although not officially defined in the language of the law, is often referred to in the context of diplomacy and power politics, finds itself in an uncertain position. Its ambiguities give China some flexibility in making claims regarding maritime and complicate the responses of other countries in the region and the effectiveness of international maritime law. In a bid to comprehend the modern actions of China in the South China Sea, it is imperative to examine the causes, changing meanings and strategic consequences of the Nine-Dash Line in the larger context of Chinese maritime transformation. The Nine-Dash Line dates back to the early 20th century nationalistic cartography, as it indicates a time in which China was attempting to enforce its sovereignty over its territory following several decades of territorial fragmentation and foreign influence. In 1947 the Republic of China included an eleven-dash line enclosed on its map of the South China Sea that encircled an area of majority of the waters and land features of the sea. This map which was subsequently used and revised by the Peoples Republic of China in the 1950s and reduced to nine dashes following the deletion of two sections in the Gulf of Tonkin was not originally a intended legal demarcation. Rather, it represented the historical presence of China in the region citing the historic fishing grounds, maritime trade routes and infrequent imperial actions (Rahman & Wani, 2024). The historical basis of these assertions has been considerably disputed, but Chinese accounts of history have placed an emphasis on the continuity of the past and the present to generate a feeling of cultural entitlement on the concept that China possesses historical rights in the South China Sea.

With the course of time, the Nine-Dash Line became one of the foundations of maritime Chinese identity, despite its lack of a clear legal definition. The line has been featured in official Chinese maps, passports, diplomatic statements, and internal educational publications, and it strengthens its importance to the Chinese political consciousness. China has, however, seldom ever given a clear and consistent explanation of what the line purports to contain: whether it is sovereignty over all enclosed waters, historic rights to resources, jurisdiction over the maritime zones, or simply an imaginary demonstration of presence in the region. This grey area has played to their advantage. This is because by not defining it explicitly, China is still able to modify its interpretation to fit into the varying political situations whilst avoiding any legal difficulties that would weaken its stance. Simultaneously, ambiguity complicates the process of diplomatic negotiations and contributes to the uncertainty in the region, as no other parties or international organizations recognize the validity of the line (Htwe, 2025). The emergence of the Chinese maritime power altered the Nine-Dash Line into a symbolic representation of the historical continuity to a strategic expansion instrument. With the modernization of the navy, coast guards, and maritime militia, the capacity to assert its claims doubled, and it became more powerful. The Nine-Dash Line started to be put into operation in military and paramilitary patrols, island-building activities, and the confrontation with the Southeast Asian states in a manner that changed the geopolitical environment. The most noticeable manifestation of this change was the land reclamation program of China that formed the artificial islands, which had the runways, missile systems, radar facilities, and naval stations. These artificial islands fill the features that can be found in the Spratly and Paracels archipelagos and act as the points of projecting power across the South China Sea. The actual change of the maritime environment became a new stage of the Chinese decision to make claims: the Nine-Dash Line was no longer a mere map symbol, but an element of territorial and military infrastructure spread over one of the most important waterways in the world in this regard. (Chang-Liao, 2025). Another tie the Nine-Dash Line has had with the domestic politics of China is that it has been interacting with it in a manner that strengthens its strategic significance. The feelings of nationalism regarding the South China Sea are high, and the leaders of China tend to present the problem as the question of sovereignty, dignity and historical justice.

The legitimacy of the Communist Party is partly based on the fact that it was able to protect the interests of the country and avenge the humiliations of the past, which is highly entrenched in the political culture of China. Revoking maritime claims would be seen as a sign of weakness or national disgrace. Therefore, despite the pressure exerted by the international community, China is adamant to establish the Nine-Dash Line since the locals view compromise as the loss to the influence of the foreigners. Legally, the Nine-Dash Line has some major challenges to the international order. There are clear provisions of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on maritime entitlements depending on baselines, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), continental shelves and territorial seas. Nonetheless, the Nine-Dash Line is not in line with the standards of UNCLOS but has been in place before. In 2013, the Philippines filed arbitration proceedings on the legality of the maritime claims by China (Nguyen V. , 2024).

The decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration of 2016 was categorical: the Nine-Dash Line was not rallied on any legal basis under UNCLOS, that China was not entitled to historic rights in accordance with the treaty, and none of the features on the islands of the Spratly Islands had created EEZs. Although China protested against the decision, the legal impact of the decision remains influential in the international discourse, and it allows the claimants in Southeast Asia a solid normative basis in protesting against Chinese claims.

The fact that China has not accepted the ruling is indicative of its larger discontent with the international legal systems that to it, inhibit the sovereignty and historical rights of non-Western states. China frequently criticizes that international law should be understood in a manner that will not overstep regional histories and cultural legacies. This is based on the wider Chinese interest in influencing world system of governance, and even to challenge Western versions of maritime law. The Nine-Dash Line then represents not merely a matter of a territorial dispute but more an ideological clash regarding the character of the world order and the definition of sovereignty. The Nine-Dash Line is strategically important in the Chinese ambition of making the South China Sea one of its zones of influence and strategic depth. China cannot live without the South China Sea which is a buffer zone as it provides safety of the mainland and a route to deploy the navy to the Western Pacific and Indian ocean. The power of these waters reinforces the potential of China to keep off enemies especially the United States of America who operate close to its shores in case of any crisis in relation to Taiwan or other interest points. Moreover, South China Sea is rich in natural resources, such as oil, gas, and fisheries which are considered to be important to China in the long-term economic security. By establishing control over the Nine-Dash Line, China aims at decreasing its reliance on the imported energy, safeguarding the lives of the fishermen, and getting a permanent access to the vital resources (Quyet , 2025).

Military Modernization and Projection of Naval Power

The process of modernization of Chinese military and the subsequent grow of its naval strength is one of the most radical changes in the modern marine geopolitical sphere. The transformation of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) over the last thirty years has been almost unbelievable, starting as a small coastal defense service with no modern capabilities, it has been transformed into a high-tech navy that can project power far beyond the direct periphery of China. This change cannot be separated with general rise of China as an economic and political power, the change in the strategic balance in the indo-pacific and the desire of Beijing to change the regional and global maritime orders. The naval modernization has emerged as one of the core tools by which China tries to safeguard its interests, establish its sovereignty, and reach as far as to the waters. This modernization has a lot of scope, drivers, and implications that are vital to the analysis of maritime behavior of China in South-East Asia as well as the emergence of the country as a global naval power. Modernization of the PLAN started slowly in late 1980s and early 1990s, however, following the 1995/1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which exposed the military weaknesses of China as compared to the United States, it picked up speed. The crisis revealed that China was not able to prevent or intercept American carrier strike groups and this realization triggered a change in the Chinese defence thinking. During the terms of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, China started to have the focus on the development of the naval forces and put much money in new technologies, shipbuilding capacity, training reforms, and doctrinal innovative. This was further enhanced during the reign of Xi Jinping who made a call to have a world-class military by mid-century which placed naval power as one of the pillars of strategic identity of China (Summers, 2023). Modernization has since become methodical, centrally directed and backed by massive state financing and biggest shipbuilding sector in the globe.

The restructuring of the surface fleet and its growth has been a crucial aspect of the modernization of the Chinese Navy. Aged, outmoded ships have been scrapped and succeeded by modern guided-missile destroyers, frigates, corvettes and amphibious assault ships. Both the Type 052D and Type 055 destroyers are great advancements in the air defence, anti-ship and anti-submarine capabilities of China. These destroyers have phased-array radars, vertical launch systems and advanced combat management systems that put them on par with the capabilities of the advanced Western navies. At the cost of their deployment, China can act with greater confidence in the disputed waters and organize multi-layered defensive or offensive groups with the ability to execute missions over a long term (Rida, 2025). Likewise, the Type 054A frigates are also able to be used as a flexible playground of escort missions, patrols, and fleet air defence, which increases the flexibility of operations in China in different maritime theatres. The Chinese shipbuilding has been an irreplaceable factor in the quick growth of the PLAN. China now boasts of the most efficient naval shipyards in the world, which is in a position to build several sophisticated ships at the same time. This industrial capacity also enables China to modernize at a rate that cannot be compared to other countries. Notably, shipbuilding is part of the overall planning of the Chinese strategy in terms of the presence of the state-owned enterprises, technological innovations projects, and civil-military fusion initiatives. This makes the modernization of the Chinese navy not just the creation

of the military decision-making process, but the harmonized nationwide movement based on the use of the economic, technological, and industrial forces.

The modernization of the navy has also dominated the transformation of the Chinese navy via submarines. The PLAN has diesel-electric and nuclear-powered submarines most of which are fitted with state-of-the-art stealth systems, cruise missiles and extended operation capabilities. Submarines with nuclear power will increase the second-strike nuclear capability of China, which is crucial in ensuring credible deterrence. In the meantime, diesel-electric submarines particularly those with air-independent propulsion offer viable platforms of anti-access, area-denials missions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The submarines enhance the capacity of China to confront the naval forces of adversaries, safeguard sea routes and make intelligence and surveillance missions. They also complicate the strategic calculation of other navies, especially the United States and Japan as they pose a formidable threat in the sea, especially in key maritime bottlenecks (Zhao, 2025). The aircraft carrier development is also the point of naval modernization that has got the largest share of international attention in China. In 2012, the Liaoning, a pioneer Chinese aircraft carrier, was commissioned; it was mainly a training and experiment carrier. The debut of the domestically built Shandong, which was the second carrier in China, in 2017 was both a technological and symbolic breakthrough that China can now build large, complex maritime ships without international support. The most recent announcement of the third carrier the Fujian of China with electromagnetic launch capability that is similar to the most advanced of the American systems, indicated that China is preparing to establish the capability of creating the true blue-water power carrier strike. PLAN Aircraft carriers enable the PLAN to project airpower to the distant areas, shape maritime security crises, carry out humanitarian operations and offer a visible manifestation of national power. They improve the capacity of China to exert control in the disputed regions as well as complement the far seas operations in the Indian Ocean and beyond due to their presence in the South China Sea (Ali, 2025).

The modernizing of China is not only limited to combat ships but also other important logistical and support equipment. The use of large replacement ships has enhanced China operation capability immensely where sustained operation can proceed much far beyond home ports. The carrier groups, destroyer groups, and anti-piracy operations are all supported by these ships and this enables China to have a permanent presence in the Gulf of Aden and other strategic waters. The ability of amphibious assault ships like Type 075 scale enhances the ability of China to conduct expeditionary operations, humanitarian relief, and any other future interventions with regard to Taiwan or the disputed islands. All these, along with enhanced practice in collective amphibious operations on shore, indicate increasing Chinese attention to the development of capabilities to conduct more and more complex operations, far beyond historic coastal defence. Modernization of the navy has not only changed maritime aviation. The navy and airforce of China have advanced patrol planes, anti-sea warfare platforms, drones, and fighter ship boats. The J-15 fighter stationed in Chinese carriers is an important move towards the incorporation of airpower with the naval operations, even though it is still limited in terms of the range, payload, and reliability. However, China is still working on the next generation carrier-capable aircrafts that will strengthen its navy air wing (Şöhret & Başer, 2026).

Maritime Militia, Coast Guard, and Grey-Zone Operations

The maritime strategy of China in South-East Asia is characterized by the not only the build-up of naval strength but also by the advanced employment of non-naval forces which are maritime militia and China Coast Guard to gain control and influence over disputable waters. The actors engage in what analysts refer to as the grey zone, the ambiguous realm between peace and open war, where states are seeking strategic interests by coercive means, but which are not carried to the point of conventional warfare. China has perfected the application of grey-zone operations to support its positions in the South China Sea where layered and coordinated operations that integrate civilian, paramilitary, law enforcement, and military tools are employed. This policy enables China to obtain incremental profits, overwhelm other claimants, merge foreign actions, and evade an open military conflict with the local states or foreign nations like the United States. The maritime militia and coast guard of China are hence crucial in explaining the logic of operation of the Nine-Dash Line and the overall change in the maritime posture of china. The maritime militia of China also known as Little Blue Men, the name given to the group due to its grayzone status akin to the Little Green Men of Russia, is a special force constituting fishermen, commercial ships and maritime labourers that are organized, trained and managed by the People Liberation Army (PLA) and local governments (Huang , 2025). Though apparently civilian in form, most militia ships have reinforced hulls, communications gear, and even rudimentary firepower, which helps them engage in confrontation without it being too apparent to the Chinese state. Maritime militia has its roots in the mass mobilization structure of the Mao period, although the current version is extremely specialized and it is ingrained in the Chinese system of maritime governance. It has a dual command hierarchy that incorporates local level planning with military control to ensure that the militia responds quickly to commands, yet the outside perception is one of civilian spontaneity.

Strategic Drivers and Limitations of China's Maritime Strategy

The maritime policy by China as in South-East Asia has been an expression of the overlaps of various strategic motivations that are underpinned by national security, economic needs, history, and long-term geopolitical desire. Although the elevation of China to become a maritime power is hailed as a new phenomenon, it is actually a result of decades of strategic redefinition that saw the traditionally continental power evolve into a more and more assertive participant in the seas. The current maritime strategy of China is defined by the need to assure the territorial sovereignty, protection of sea routes that are of great importance to the nation, geostrategic influence over the Indo-Pacific, and the development of the naval force that will help it to protect the growing global interests. Still, there are limitations to this strategy, structural constraints, regional resistance, diplomatic issues and institutional barriers complicate the efforts of China to attain maritime dominance. To determine the future trajectory of the situation with the regional security and the development patterns of the balance of power in South-East Asia, it is important to understand the motives and constraints of the maritime strategy that China pursues. The necessity to protect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity is one of the most fundamental motivating factors of the maritime strategy of China (Kuik, 2024). Chinese policymakers and people view the South China Sea as an inseparable constituent of the Chinese historical territory. The islands, reefs and the waters in the nine-dash line are incorporated into a national discourse, which stresses on historical possession, national renewal and opposition to foreign incursion. Secrecy of these claims is not only a strategic security measure, but also a domestic political legitimacy measure. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) heavily relies on nationalism to maintain its power and any sign of inability to protect its maritime sovereignty would destroy its support. Consequently, the maritime policy adopted by China is informed by the necessity of adopting a non-negotiable stance on matters of territoriality and at the same time portraying confidence in its local maritime stance (MacMurray, 2025).

Another key strategic force behind the maritime behavior of China is economic security. Being the manufacturing centre and biggest trading country in the world, China heavily relies on sea routes in exporting and importation. China has a trade that is about 60 percent through the South China Sea and its oil imports are almost 80 percent through the Strait of Malacca. This geographical weakness commonly known as the Malacca Dilemma forms a strategic incentive to make China more influential in important sea routes and diversify the logistical routes. The creation of alternative paths by the use of Maritime Silk Road, acquisition of ports, and energy corridors makes China less reliant on chokepoints that can be manipulated or impacted by other dominant players in the game. The security of maritime trade routes, therefore, is an element of long-term economic modernization of China and becoming a global economic power. Economic security and maritime security are closely intertwined, which presents a great motivation to increase China to develop its naval force in areas that are of significance to its business activities. Another factor that influences the maritime strategy of China is the need to change the status quo in terms of power distribution across the region and the world. The United States and its allies have long enjoyed maritime hegemony at the Indo-Pacific, establishing maritime norms and security architecture (USCC, 2025). The emergence of China is a threat to this status quo. The maritime power is considered by Chinese leaders as a requirement to reach the status of a great power and the People Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will be instrumental in closing the power gap between the United States and China. Modernization of the Chinese navy which has seen a fast growth of surface fighting ships, aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and modern missile systems is an indicator of strategic determination towards opposing the U.S. maritime superiority. By enhancing its capacity to dominate the near seas and to be able to act in the far seas, China is seeking to diminish the deterrence value of the U.S. alliances, make it difficult to intervene with American forces in situations like Taiwan, and establish itself as a competitor center of the sea power.

On top of military strength, China aims to influence maritime standards and regional regulations. By engaging in activities like the Maritime Silk Road, China encourages other modes of development that make it have more political influence over the partner nations. By joining international regimes, reforming its laws, and engaging in diplomacy, China is confronting the maritime rules and traditions of the West and trying to reinvent values of freedom of navigation, dispute resolution, and territorial jurisdiction of the sea. The normative element of the China maritime strategy is usually ignored but contributes a lot to the perception of the region and the way states view the intentions of China. Using the combination of economic incentives and diplomatic relationships, China is steadily expanding its control on the maritime rule without imposing coercion, but with the implementation of coercive measures when they are needed. The long-term national rejuvenation vision is also one of the strategic drivers of China. In the era of Xi Jinping, the maritime power has become an essential part of the Chinese Dream. The historical account of China is marked by the events in history whereby China was rendered weak and foreign naval powers took advantage of the maritime weaknesses of China. This recollection contributes to a need to enhance the Chinese dominance in its maritime periphery and avoid exerting foreign control. The artificial islands, the growth of maritime law-enforcement services, and the creation of overseas logistics are all indicative of a strategic policy of not experiencing another episode of the historical

humiliation. Therefore, the maritime policy of China is entrenched in the pursuit of the aim of psychological safety and historical recuperation, rather than material benefits (Kornprobst, 2025). Nevertheless, regardless of the ambitious goals, the maritime strategy of China has many limitations which restrict its possibilities to reach the full dominance over the region. The most prominent of these shortcomings is the opposition of the neighbouring states.

South China sea is among the most disputed maritime areas in the world with several states having overlapping claims. Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, among others, do not accept the nine-dash line of China and have reacted to it by diplomatic protests, legal appeals, modernization in their armies, and boosting alliances with other countries. An example is Vietnam which has considerably increased its naval capabilities, strengthened its occupied features and improved security ties with the United States, Japan, and India. It is after years of volatile policy under different governments that the Philippines has become more aggressive and has strengthened its alliance with the United States. Such local forces restrict the freedom of actions of China and make it more difficult to gain unilateral control over the controversial waters. Another major limitation is the external balance (Kardon, 2023). Other dominant nations view China as a threat to the stability and freedom of navigation with its increasing maritime aggressiveness. The United States has upgraded its military presence in the Indo-Pacific through regular Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and by strengthening security relationships with the allies in the region. Japan has been playing a greater role in maritime capacity-building initiatives of ASEAN states whereas India has enhanced naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean. The countries that have also participated in multilateral naval drills and are concerned about the maritime actions of the Chinese include Australia, the United Kingdom, and France. This new coalescence of external powers puts pressure on strategic issues in China and weakens the capacity of the latter to control the major maritime spaces. New security arrangements like AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) also add to the geopolitical rivalry in a manner that complicates the Chinese maritime interests. (Pham & Le, 2026)

The maritime strategy of China is also limited by diplomatic and reputational issues. The vast territorial claims and aggression of China i.e. harassment of fishermen, ramming, naval intimidation and maritime militia are destructive to the image of China as responsible rising power. When they rely on Chinese investment, the regional states also start regarding China as a disruptive entity instead of a collaborative counterpart. The denial of the 2016 PCA ruling by China weakens its image at international law courts and supports the view that it is interested in altering the rules-based order (Raza, 2025). These reputational expenses undermine the capacity of China to influence the regional rules and constrain the power of its soft-power approaches. They also play a role in the regional hedging behaviour where states do not take sides, but enhance security collaboration with those powers that can balance China. There are also internal constraints in China. Although modernizing its navy at an alarming pace, the PLAN remains in the process of leaving the coast-defence role as a blue-water navy. Aid in remote water operations includes supplies, trained staff, and effective command-and-control of the operation. The overseas bases of China are still limited and maritime logistics network in China is still undeveloped in comparison with the United States. Moreover, maintaining naval activities on the other side of the ocean is economically expensive and consumes military resources. The domestic economic issues such as declining economic growth, population pressures, and financial threats can ultimately limit the prospects of China spending large amounts of money on the military budget.

Another limitation is that the institution is too complex. The maritime policy of China has many bureaucratic players that include the PLAN, China Coast Guard, maritime militia, the Ministry of Natural Resources, provincial governments, and state-owned enterprises. The interaction of these actors is not always smooth and duplicate jurisdictions can cause inefficiency or signal distortions. As an illustration, the steps of the maritime militia can lead to tension in an unwanted manner or break the diplomatic discourse. The wish of China to keep the policies strategically ambiguous only complicates the policy coherence since various agencies have parallel but not necessarily coordinated goals. This institutional disintegration restricts the capacity of China to adopt a cohesive maritime strategy in all of the domains. Another weakness is the contradictions between the strategic narratives of China. China aims to present itself as a non-aggressive rising power and at the same time it has expansive maritime claims that it is demanding by coercing. It advances a vision of maritime co-operation by the Belt and Road Initiative and militarizes the contested features. These paradoxes undermine the diplomatic stance of China and cause distrust in the states of the region. Furthermore, China has a challenge of balancing its demands on historical rights, and current international law, which creates a normative conflict with states following a literal interpretation of the UNCLOS principles (Singh, 2019).

Meanwhile, the constraints, such as regional resistance, external balancing, diplomatic issues, economic and institutional complexity, and normative contradictions will not allow China to acquire uncontested maritime dominance in the nearest future. The maritime policy of China is thus in a dynamic tension between aspiration and limitation which determines the changing

security landscape of the Indo-Pacific and predetermines further strategic rivalry between China and both local and international actors (Shahir & Noor, 2025).

Conclusion

China has to work within a tight operational environment, where wrong moves can result in a military confrontation that will cause derailment of its economic and strategic strategies. The fact that there are numerous players with conflicting interests, both domestic and international, implies that the maritime strategy of China cannot be implemented in a vacuum and, instead, needs to be continuously changed due to the appearance of new threats and opportunities. In spite of these shortcomings, the maritime policy by China has greatly changed the balance of power in the region. The South China Sea has seen the dominant presence of China in terms of and artificial islands, increased military forces and continued maritime surveillance. It has come up with a strong navy that can rival U.S. domination in the Western Pacific. It has established a system of strategic ports that cover strategic maritime routes. But the price of such success is growing, and China has now had to deal with the results of local blowback, global investigations, and the increased competition. Lastly, the national interests that have motivated China to pursue maritime ambitions such as national sovereignty, economic security, the great-power ambition, the historical narrative, and domestic legitimacy guarantee that China will pursue its interests in South-East Asia.

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