



The Dynamics of U.S. China Security Rivalry in the South China Sea through a Neo-Realist Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dynamics of U.S.–China security rivalry in the South China Sea through a neo-realist perspective using a systematic literature review of recent scholarly work. The findings show that strategic competition between Washington and Beijing is driven primarily by structural pressures of the international system rather than ideological disputes or policy miscalculations. China’s naval modernization, A2/AD capabilities, and island militarization reflect long-term hegemonic aspirations to dominate the regional maritime order, while the United States maintains its Indo-Pacific military posture and expands alliance networks to preserve maritime primacy. International institutions and diplomatic mechanisms have failed to mitigate tensions because both powers prioritize national interests above legal norms and cooperative regimes. The rivalry has widened military coalitions, weakened ASEAN strategic autonomy, and entrenched bipolarity across the Indo-Pacific, indicating that conflict escalation is linked to the distribution of power under anarchy rather than contingent diplomacy. This review concludes that without a fundamental shift in structural power, the South China Sea will remain a focal arena of long-term security competition between the United States and China.

INTRODUCTION

The rivalry between the United States and China in the South China Sea has become one of the most defining and escalating security issues in contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics. The South China Sea holds vital geostrategic significance due to its function as a maritime trade artery that facilitates nearly one third of global commerce, making the region a focal point of strategic competition and military posturing between major powers. Within this evolving rivalry, neo-realism provides a coherent analytical framework for understanding how material power distribution and structural anarchy drive security behaviour rather than diplomatic posturing or ideological intentions. According to recent studies, both China and the United States increasingly perceive the maritime domain as a test of regional influence, symbolized by expansion of military capabilities, naval presence, and coercive diplomacy (Omar, 2024). As the international system lacks an overarching authority to enforce order, the South China Sea has



become an arena where both states act to maximize security while inadvertently intensifying the security dilemma.

China's expanding maritime strategy highlights these neo-realist dynamics. Beijing's naval modernization, artificial island construction, and the deployment of anti-access area-denial (A2/AD) systems reflect a material power strategy to deny U.S. military presence and secure regional leadership. Recent assessments show that China increasingly views the South China Sea as a core national interest that reinforces sovereignty claims and long-term hegemonic ambitions (Omar, 2022). Simultaneously, the United States enhances its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), forward military presence, and alliance commitments to prevent any single actor from dominating the maritime order, strengthening a traditional balance-of-power logic (Askari, 2023). Such escalation confirms neo-realist assumptions that power accumulation, even when framed as defensive, triggers counterbalancing and mistrust among adversaries.

The intensification of great power competition cannot be separated from broader structural shifts in the international system. Research shows that since 2001 the relative distribution of economic and military capabilities has shifted from a U.S.-centric unipolarity toward an emergent bipolarity between Washington and Beijing, reshaping strategic calculations and increasing the stakes of regional rivalry (Aurangzeb et al., 2025). Offensively oriented neo-realists further argue that China is not merely attempting to secure itself defensively but is pursuing long-term hegemonic dominance in order to reshape the regional order in its favour (Tanrikut, 2024). Meanwhile, U.S. strategy exhibits traits of maintaining pre-existing hegemony through alliance expansion and maritime power projection to prevent structural decline. These dynamics collectively exacerbate instability because both powers treat security as a zero-sum outcome.

The South China Sea dispute also reflects the limitations of international regimes in mitigating structural rivalry. Institutional approaches, including the 2016 arbitration ruling and the Code of Conduct negotiations, have failed to constrain power politics because states continue to evaluate compliance based on national interest rather than legal norms (Shu, 2023). China's rejection of the arbitral ruling demonstrates how powerful states resist institutional constraints when legal outcomes clash with territorial ambitions. Meanwhile, the United States selectively employs international maritime law to justify interventions that serve its strategic advantage, illustrating that under anarchy states adhere to rules only when compliance enhances security. From a neo-realist standpoint, this confirms that institutions cannot substitute for military power when structural competition intensifies.

Regional actors are increasingly affected by this rivalry, yet they possess limited agency to shape outcomes. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states remain divided between economic dependence on China and security dependence on the United States, producing strategic ambiguity rather than unified responses (Hörhager, 2016). Regionalism, once expected to foster collective security, has been overshadowed by material asymmetry and the logic of self-help (Gariup, 2016). Alliance patterns beyond Southeast Asia indicate broader systemic effects: the rise of the Quad, strategic hedging by Japan, and renewed defence postures in East Asia reinforce the reality of an emerging bipolar security configuration (Wibowo, 2024; Bhisa et al., 2024). The ripple effects of the U.S.-China rivalry have extended to military modernization across the Indo-Pacific, including escalations in the Indian

Ocean that signify a widening arms race linked to broader strategic stability (Hayat et al., 2025).

Despite extensive research on maritime disputes, significant gaps remain. First, Omar (2024) examines power variants in the South China Sea but does not focus specifically on how U.S.–China security interaction reinforces the security dilemma in a structural sense. Second, Askari (2023) analyzes Sino–U.S. rivalry through space competition and regional security but does not situate findings within a neo-realist theoretical explanation. Third, Aurangzeb et al. (2025) provide a global assessment of U.S.–China rivalry since 2001 but do not empirically connect shifting polarity to South China Sea military escalation. Thus, previous studies have not fully synthesized neo-realism with empirical observation of security patterns in the South China Sea in an integrated analysis. This article fills that gap by applying a neo-realist lens to explain how structural anarchy, power distribution, and security dilemma mechanisms drive U.S.–China rivalry and shape military and geopolitical behaviour in the South China Sea. The goal of this study is to produce a systematic and theory-driven understanding of the strategic logic behind the escalation of rivalry.

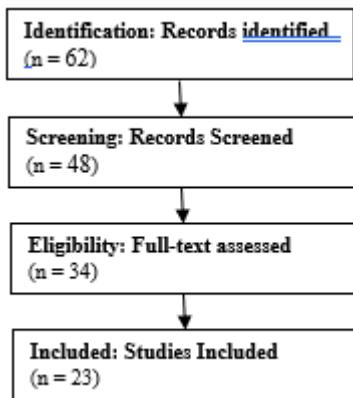
METHODOLOGY

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize empirical and theoretical developments related to U.S.–China rivalry in the South China Sea. The SLR approach enables structured identification, evaluation, and interpretation of scientific literature through transparent criteria grounded in replicable procedures. This method was selected because it aligns with the requirement to integrate theoretical neo-realist perspectives with empirical observations from geopolitical and security studies, ensuring academic rigor and reliability (Puspitarini, 2020). Searches included peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and dissertations from the past ten years, with a focus on geostrategic rivalries, maritime security, power transition, and neo-realism.

The screening process followed PRISMA-based filtering, beginning with database identification, removal of duplicates, title and abstract screening, full-text eligibility review, and inclusion of final articles. The eligibility criteria emphasized studies directly examining security rivalry, U.S.–China strategic competition, or regional military escalation. The PRISMA flow of the reviewed literature is presented below in text form without bullet points:

Identification (n = 62) → Screening (n = 48) → Eligibility (n = 34) → Included (n = 23)

The final dataset was analyzed qualitatively through thematic coding focused on neo-realist theoretical constructs: structural anarchy, balance of power, security dilemma, and military capability maximization. Themes were cross-referenced with evidence from maritime developments, alliance behaviour, and geostrategic decision-making.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Security Dilemma and Power Accumulation in the South China Sea Through a Neo-Realist Lens

The dynamics of U.S.–China rivalry in the South China Sea cannot be detached from neo-realistic interpretations of international relations in which the security dilemma becomes the foundational logic of great-power interaction. China’s rapid naval modernization, deployment of long-range anti-ship missile systems, and militarization of artificial islands are not merely tactical developments; they are strategic expressions of structural competition in an anarchic international system. Neo-realism suggests that states must depend on self-help to ensure survival when no overarching global authority can enforce security. China perceives growing maritime assertiveness as essential for maintaining sovereignty and shaping regional order amid shifting polarity (Omar, 2024). Yet these measures, even if framed as defensive, prompt counterstrategic responses from the United States, validating the neo-realistic view that defensive intentions create aggressive perceptions.

The United States responds with persistent freedom of navigation operations, intensification of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, and reinforcement of alliances with Japan, Australia, and the Philippines as mechanisms of balancing in response to China’s increasing maritime footprint. According to Askari (2023), the United States views China’s A2/AD systems as a direct threat to global sea-lane access and thus interprets the dispute not only in regional but also systemic terms. Neo-realism posits that great powers evaluate threats based on relative capabilities rather than stated intentions, and this explains why Washington escalates involvement even when Beijing asserts defensive motives. The chain reaction of mutual power enhancement reflects a classical security dilemma in which every action taken to increase security results in a proportional increase in insecurity.

China’s strategic behaviour also shows traits of offensive realism in which power maximization is perceived not as a desire but a requirement to achieve long-term security in an anarchic order. China’s pursuit of maritime supremacy extends beyond territorial claims toward reshaping global power distribution, supported by strong economic growth and an expanding technological base. Tanrikut (2024) emphasizes that China’s hegemonic ambition is driven by a structural necessity to prevent dependency on the United States in matters of security, technology, and maritime access. In turn, Washington maintains a strong naval posture to avoid structural decline and military disadvantage that would alter the global hierarchy of power. This confrontation supports

Aurangzeb et al. (2025), who argue that since 2001 the world system has progressively shifted from unipolar to bipolar, enhancing the potential for hegemonic contestation.

Structural insecurity is reinforced by the failure of liberal institutional arrangements to constrain great-power competition. The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, which delegitimized China's expansive maritime claims, has had no impact on Beijing's activities. Instead, China dismissed the ruling as biased and intensified island militarization in the aftermath. Shu (2023) highlights that institutions collapse under conditions where compliance undermines national interest or strategic advantage. China's response also demonstrates that legal frameworks are interpreted pragmatically, not normatively, confirming the neo-realist assertion that rules matter only when they align with power. At the same time, the United States selectively positions itself as the defender of maritime law while increasing forward deployment of naval assets, revealing that great powers utilize institutions to justify, not restrain, geostrategic action.

Regional states are caught in a zone of structural insecurity created by great-power rivalry. ASEAN's inability to reach a unified stance arises from divergent dependency structures: some states rely on China for economic development while others depend on the United States for military deterrence (Hörhager, 2016). Under neo-realist logic, small states maximize autonomy by hedging rather than bandwagoning or balancing consistently. Even regional security governance has failed to temper escalation because regionalism weakens when power asymmetry is too large to be mediated institutionally (Gariup, 2016). Japan's strategic recalibration and formation of the Quad shows the spread of bipolarity beyond Southeast Asia into the wider Indo-Pacific security architecture, indicating that the South China Sea is no longer a maritime dispute but the centre of systemic polarity (Wibowo, 2024; Bhisa et al., 2024).

Overall, neo-realism explains the U.S.-China security rivalry as a structural rather than psychological phenomenon. Each state is locked into a perpetual competition to preserve strategic advantage within a system that offers no guarantee of security. Consequently, rivalry intensifies not because of miscommunication or misunderstanding but because structural pressure compels each side to prioritize power optimization even at the cost of escalation. Thus military competition in the South China Sea is not temporary but a logical expression of systemic distribution of capabilities and the pursuit of survival under anarchy.

Strategic Responses, Military Escalation, and Alliance Patterns: Measuring the Neo-Realist Competition

Strategic interaction between the United States and China in the South China Sea manifests through explicit demonstrations of military power, alliance formation, arms racing, and deterrence signalling. China's deployment of surface-to-air missile systems, combat aircraft, and long-range radar installations in Spratly and Paracel Islands illustrates a shift to maritime fortress building and sea-denial strategies aimed at neutralizing U.S. force projection. Omar (2022) argues that China sees these developments as essential to securing economic lifelines and defending sovereignty from foreign encroachment. From a neo-realist standpoint, material power expansion is therefore not merely instrumental but integral to legitimacy and regime survival. The United States interprets these actions as coercive militarization and escalates naval

patrols, deepens nuclear submarine cooperation with Australia, and reinforces security guarantees to allies.

The escalation can be illustrated using comparative indicators of strategic behaviour.

Strategic Component	China Actions	United States Actions	Neo-Realist Interpretation
Military posture	A2/AD systems, naval modernization, island militarization	Carrier strike groups, FONOPs, Indo-Pacific force projection	Maximization of security drives counterbalancing
Alliance architecture	Regional economic integration, BRI-linked defence diplomacy	Strengthening Quad, AUKUS, Japan–Philippines–US cooperation	Bipolar alliance formation reflects emerging polarity
Dominant goal	Regional hegemonic stability	Preservation of U.S. maritime primacy	Zero-sum logic of survival and dominance
View of institutions	Arbitration ruling rejected; selective compliance	Selective invocation of UNCLOS to justify FONOPs	Institutions are secondary to power
External regional impact	Pressure on ASEAN autonomy	Revitalization of U.S. alliance system	Security dilemma radiates to surrounding states

The table analysis shows that the actions of both countries reinforce the neo-realist argument. Military intensification is not the result of ideological aggression, but a rational consequence of an international system without supreme authority. According to Askari (2023), China's efforts to limit US military access through A2/AD have prompted Washington to respond with aggressive maritime operations to maintain global sea access. Aurangzeb et al. (2025) add that this rivalry is a symptom of the changing distribution of global capabilities towards bipolarity. Thus, the table reinforces the conclusion that every component of strategy military, alliances, diplomacy, and institutions follows the logic of survival.

Alliance competition complicates the strategic calculations of small countries and adds to security contestation. Bhisa et al. (2024) show that The Quad policy is an explicit response to contain China's maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Japan is strengthening its defense policy in anticipation of a potential revision of the East Asian security order (Wibowo, 2024). The strengthening of this alliance network expands the field of competition and increases the possibility of miscalculation. According to Zulfahmi (2023), multipolar friction, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, also increases global sensitivity to security issues, strengthening the urge of each power to maintain military superiority so as not to lose its strategic position.

Furthermore, increased defense budgets and joint exercise maneuvers create a spiral of action and reaction, verifying the neo-realist thesis of structural instability under anarchy. China interprets the multilateralization of US military influence as a strategic encirclement, while Washington sees China's increased maritime power as a direct threat to the rules-based liberal order. This situation, according to Omar (2024), makes the South China Sea not just a territorial dispute but a marker of systemic competition to determine the global power hierarchy. Thus, the militarization of the region is a product of structural necessity, not strategic preference.

Thus, neo-realist logic asserts that US-China competition will continue as long as both countries operate within an anarchic international system where material power is the primary determinant of security. There are no short-term signals that diplomatic

mechanisms can neutralize the survival calculus that drives both powers to raise the military stakes.

Long-Term Strategic Implications and Future Trajectories of the U.S.–China Security Rivalry in the South China Sea

The long-term trajectory of the U.S.–China rivalry in the South China Sea suggests an increasingly entrenched bipolar maritime order driven by structural imperatives rather than diplomatic failures or misinterpretations. Neo-realism argues that when two great powers reach comparable levels of economic and military capability, the global system tends to evolve toward strategic bifurcation and heightened risk of confrontation. This theoretical projection aligns with current empirical developments in Indo-Pacific security, where both Washington and Beijing view maritime dominance as indispensable for broader geopolitical primacy. Omar (2024) stresses that China considers the South China Sea a non-negotiable arena of national rejuvenation, while the United States perceives the region as essential to preserving its status as the principal maritime power. Neither actor demonstrates willingness to accommodate the other in a way that reduces relative advantages, indicating that rivalry will deepen as long as both states remain structurally committed to power maximization.

China's long-term strategic plans reinforce the durability of the conflict. The People's Liberation Army Navy continues accelerated modernization to transform China into a blue-water naval force capable of sustained global operations. The steady enhancement of carrier groups, missile systems, and cyber-surveillance indicates preparation for maritime contestation not only in Southeast Asia but across critical trade routes extending into the Indian and Pacific Oceans, signifying a broad strategic aspiration rather than a defensive posture (Tanrikut, 2024). From the perspective of neo-realism, this sustained pursuit of maritime superiority signals a structural ambition to shape the regional order and limit U.S. influence over Asia rather than pursue coexistence. Aurangzeb et al. (2025) similarly underline that China seeks to construct a long-term world order in which Asia's regional hierarchy is no longer defined by American power.

The United States responds to this structural challenge with long-term deterrence measures designed to preserve the existing distribution of power. The Indo-Pacific Strategy, reinforcement of the Quad, development of AUKUS nuclear-submarine cooperation, and expansion of joint military exercises are all manifestations of a persistent balancing strategy rather than temporary tactical deployments. Askari (2023) notes that Washington sees the South China Sea not in isolation but as a central maritime domain where global freedom of navigation, alliance credibility, and American strategic legitimacy converge. Therefore, the United States is unlikely to de-escalate, because disengagement would signal weakening hegemony to both rivals and allies. Neo-realism predicts exactly this behaviour: dominant powers actively resist structural decline and invest in hard-power commitments to maintain their leadership position.

The systemic nature of the rivalry intensifies destabilizing effects on surrounding states. Southeast Asian countries face growing pressure to align economically with China while relying on the United States for military protection, creating prolonged strategic ambiguity that weakens ASEAN decision-making autonomy (Hörhager, 2016). Vietnam and the Philippines remain the most vulnerable

frontline states, seeking U.S. security guarantees while fearing economic repercussions from Beijing. Meanwhile, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia adopt hedging strategies to avoid choosing sides. Gariup (2016) notes that regionalism collapses where power asymmetry and security interdependence paralyze collective decision-making, which explains ASEAN's inability to issue a unified position on the South China Sea. As long as economic and security dependencies keep ASEAN divided, neither major power will face coordinated regional resistance.

The effects of the rivalry radiate beyond Southeast Asia and reshape Indo-Pacific strategic architecture. The revival of Japan's defence posture in response to growing Chinese pressure aligns with the logic that rising threats accelerate military normalization and strategic readiness among major regional economies (Wibowo, 2024). Meanwhile, the United States uses the Quad as an external balancing platform to counteract China's growing influence, confirming Bhisa et al. (2024) who argue that the grouping functions to deter domination of the Indo-Pacific region. The South China Sea dispute therefore acts as a catalytic hub for realignments of strategic coalitions stretching from East Asia to South Asia and Oceania. Neo-realism predicts that alliance systems will widen as threat perceptions intensify, raising the risk of misjudgement, inadvertent escalation, and securitization across multiple theatres.

One critical long-term implication is the normalization of military competition. China appears to be preparing for a future in which its dominant maritime position is a core pillar of national power projection, while the United States is preparing for an indefinite military commitment to prevent a systemic shift in the balance of power. Omar (2022) emphasizes that great powers treat maritime conflicts not as episodic crises but as structural battlegrounds where long-term dominance is negotiated. This confirms that rivalry in the South China Sea represents a durable struggle for shaping world order rather than an isolated territorial conflict. Under these conditions, the stability-restoring effect of diplomacy is limited because neither actor can reduce tension without decreasing security.

Given the logic of neo-realism, de-escalation is unlikely without one of three structural transformations: a significant internal crisis in one great power, a redistribution of global power that removes incentives for competition, or the emergence of a hegemon capable of unchallenged control. At present, none of these conditions exist. Both China and the United States remain committed to hard-power expansion and geopolitical primacy. As a result, the rivalry is expected to remain durable, and the South China Sea will continue functioning as the principal arena in which changing power distribution is negotiated.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the U.S.–China rivalry in the South China Sea is not driven by misunderstandings, territorial disputes, or competing narratives alone; rather, it is the structural outcome of an anarchic international system in which great powers maximize security through material military capabilities. The persistent escalation of naval modernization, military deployments, and alliance formation reflects the core logic of neo-realism: as long as parity in power continues to grow, competition becomes inevitable. Both states treat the South China Sea as a critical indicator of regional and global primacy, which explains why neither has shown willingness to compromise on sovereignty, maritime rights, or strategic influence.

The findings indicate that the rivalry will endure and intensify because structural pressures force both states to pursue measures that they perceive as necessary for survival, even when such measures provoke instability. Neither institutional arrangements nor diplomatic negotiations have altered strategic incentives. As long as China continues its maritime assertiveness and the United States continues its counter-balancing strategy, the security dilemma will deepen and the region will remain vulnerable to militarization, alliance polarization, and strategic miscalculation. The South China Sea is therefore not merely a maritime dispute but the frontline of an evolving global bipolar order.

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