



People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research



National Higher School of Political sciences

(Zedour Mohammed Ibrahim El Kacem)

Department of: International Relations

Geopolitics of the South China Sea: energy competition and strategic rivalries

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master degree of political science

Candidate :

Merieme Derouiche

Supervisor:

Dr.Hichem Daoued El Ghandja

Examination Committee

<u>President</u>	Prof. Tassedite Massiheddine	ENSSP
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<u>Examiner</u>	Dr. Djareche Adel	ENSSP

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Dedication

To my parents,
For their endless support, patience, and
sacrifices throughout every stage of my
academic journey.

To those who believe that knowledge remains
the strongest path toward understanding the
world and shaping a more peaceful future.

And to everyone who inspired me to pursue
this research with curiosity, perseverance,
and ambition.

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Abstract

This study examines the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition in the South China Sea and analyses its role in shaping strategic rivalry in the contemporary international system. The significance of the topic stems from the region's strategic position as a major maritime route for global trade and energy transportation, as well as its considerable oil and natural gas resources.

The study addresses the following question: How has energy competition transformed the South China Sea into a central arena of geopolitical and strategic rivalry? To answer this question, the research adopts the geopolitical approach, supported by the descriptive-analytical method and the case study method.

The findings indicate that the geopolitical importance of the South China Sea is not based solely on its energy resources, but also on its strategic location and its vital role in global energy security and maritime trade. The study further demonstrates that energy competition has intensified rivalry among regional and international actors, particularly China and the United States, while opportunities for cooperation continue to exist through regional and international legal and institutional frameworks.

Keywords: South China Sea, Energy Competition, Geopolitics, Energy Security, Maritime Strategy, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Rivalry.

المخلص باللغة العربية

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الأبعاد الجيوسياسية للمنافسة على الطاقة في بحر الصين الجنوبي وبيان دورها في تشكيل أنماط التنافس الاستراتيجي في النظام الدولي المعاصر. وتتبع أهمية الموضوع من المكانة الاستراتيجية التي تحتلها المنطقة باعتبارها ممراً رئيسياً للتجارة العالمية ونقل الطاقة، إضافة إلى ما تحتويه من موارد نفطية وغازية مهمة.

انطلقت الدراسة من إشكالية رئيسية تتمثل في معرفة كيفية مساهمة المنافسة على الطاقة في تحويل بحر الصين الجنوبي إلى ساحة مركزية للتنافس الجيوسياسي والاستراتيجي. وللإجابة عن هذه الإشكالية، اعتمدت الدراسة على المقاربة الجيوسياسية، إلى جانب المنهج الوصفي التحليلي ومنهج دراسة الحالة.

وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن الأهمية الجيوسياسية لبحر الصين الجنوبي لا ترتبط فقط بموارد الطاقة المتوفرة فيه، بل أيضاً بموقعه الاستراتيجي ودوره الحيوي في أمن الطاقة العالمي والتجارة البحرية الدولية. كما بينت أن المنافسة على الطاقة أسهمت في تعزيز التنافس بين القوى الإقليمية والدولية، خاصة بين الصين والولايات المتحدة، مع استمرار وجود فرص للتعاون من خلال الأطر القانونية والمؤسسية الإقليمية والدولية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بحر الصين الجنوبي، المنافسة على الطاقة، الجيوبوليتيكا، أمن الطاقة،

الاستراتيجية البحرية، الإندو-باسيفيك، التنافس الاستراتيجي.

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Table of abbreviations and symbols

Abbreviation	The definition
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations Explanation
IEA	International Energy Agency
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
SLOCs	Sea Lines of Communication
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
NOCs	National Oil Companies
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States

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Introduction

I. General Background

In the contemporary international system, energy has become more than a mere economic resource; it has evolved into a strategic instrument shaping the hierarchy of power among states. The increasing global dependence on maritime energy transportation routes, combined with the growing competition over offshore hydrocarbon resources, has transformed maritime spaces into central arenas of geopolitical rivalry. Consequently, the relationship between geography, energy, and strategic power has acquired unprecedented significance within international relations studies.

Among the world's most strategically significant maritime regions, the South China Sea occupies a central position in contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Located at the crossroads of major international trade and energy routes, the region represents a vital maritime corridor through which a substantial portion of global trade and energy supplies transit. In addition to its geostrategic location, the South China Sea is believed to contain considerable reserves of oil and natural gas, further intensifying regional and international competition over its waters.

The growing strategic importance of the South China Sea has transformed the region into a complex theatre of geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry involving regional and extra-regional actors. China's expanding maritime ambitions, the United States' strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific, and the competing territorial claims of several Southeast Asian states have contributed to increasing tensions and security concerns in the region. As a result, the South China Sea has become a focal point where issues of maritime sovereignty, energy security, freedom of navigation, and balance of power intersect.

Moreover, contemporary geopolitical transformations, particularly the strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific region, have reinforced the centrality of maritime energy competition in shaping global power configurations. The emergence of new forms of geopolitical interaction based on infrastructure networks, maritime chokepoints, and energy supply chains demonstrates that competition in the South China Sea extends beyond territorial disputes to encompass broader struggles over regional influence and global strategic leadership.

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Accordingly, analysing the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition in the South China Sea has become essential for understanding the evolving nature of international rivalries in the twenty-first century. This study therefore seeks to examine how energy resources and maritime strategic considerations contribute to intensifying geopolitical competition and reshaping power relations in one of the most contested regions in the contemporary international system.

II. Problematic

Thus, this study is guided by the following central problem:

How has energy competition in the South China Sea transformed the region into a central arena of geopolitical and strategic rivalry in the contemporary international system?

III. Sub-Questions

1-What are the main conceptual and theoretical approaches that explain geopolitical energy competition in international relations?

2-What geopolitical and energy-related factors have contributed to the strategic importance of the South China Sea?

3-How do the strategies of the major actors involved in the South China Sea reflect the dynamics of energy competition in the region?

4-What are the implications of energy competition for regional security and the future management of conflict and cooperation in the South China Sea?

IV. Main Hypothesis

- Energy competition has significantly contributed to increasing the geopolitical importance of the South China Sea and intensifying strategic rivalry among the major actors involved in the region.

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- 1) The abundance of hydrocarbon resources and the strategic importance of maritime energy routes have enhanced the geopolitical value of the South China Sea.
- 2) China's growing involvement in the South China Sea is closely linked to its objective of securing long-term energy supplies and maritime trade routes.
- 3) The strategic presence of the United States in the region is reinforced by the need to preserve the regional balance of power and maintain freedom of navigation in a strategically important energy corridor.
- 4) Energy competition in the South China Sea has generated both dynamics of conflict and opportunities for regional cooperation.

V. Research Methodology

Given the geopolitical nature of the research problem and the complexity of the interaction between energy resources, maritime space, and strategic competition, this study relies primarily on a qualitative research design. The objective is not merely to describe the phenomenon, but also to explain the geopolitical dynamics that shape the behaviour of the principal actors involved in the South China Sea.

To achieve the objectives of the study and answer the research questions, the research adopts the following approaches and methods:

1- Geopolitical Approach

The Geopolitical Approach constitutes the principal analytical framework of this research. It was selected because it allows the examination of the relationship between geographical space, strategic resources, and power politics. Through this approach, the South China Sea is analysed as a strategic maritime space where energy resources, maritime routes, security concerns, and geopolitical interests intersect.

The geopolitical approach also facilitates the analysis of how regional and extra-regional actors seek to maximize their influence through the control of strategic maritime spaces and energy-related assets.

2- Qualitative Approach

Given the strategic, political, and geopolitical dimensions of the research topic, the study relies on a qualitative approach to understand the motives, interests, and strategies of the actors involved in the South China Sea dispute. This approach enables the interpretation of political behaviour, strategic decisions, and geopolitical interactions that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative indicators alone.

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To operationalize this approach, the study employs the following methods:

2.1- Descriptive Method

The descriptive method is used to present the geographical, geopolitical, and energy-related characteristics of the South China Sea. It also serves to describe the positions of the principal actors involved in the region, including China, the United States, and the Southeast Asian claimant states.

2.2- Analytical Method

The analytical method is employed to examine the causes and consequences of energy competition in the South China Sea. Through this method, the study analyses the relationship between energy resources, maritime strategy, security considerations, and geopolitical rivalry. It also allows the decomposition of the phenomenon into its principal dimensions, including energy security, maritime sovereignty, strategic competition, and regional stability.

2.3- Case Study Method

The Case Study Method is applied to the South China Sea as a representative case of contemporary geopolitical energy competition. The selection of this case is justified by several factors:

The strategic location of the South China Sea as one of the world's most important maritime corridors.

The presence of significant oil and natural gas resources.

The growing geopolitical rivalry between China, the United States, and regional actors.

The increasing importance of the Indo-Pacific region in contemporary international politics.

The case study method allows for an in-depth examination of how energy resources contribute to shaping geopolitical competition and strategic interactions among states.

2.4- Content Analysis Method

The study also employs content analysis to examine official statements, policy documents, strategic reports, international agreements, and academic literature related to the South China Sea. This method helps identify the dominant narratives, strategic priorities, and geopolitical objectives of the actors involved in the dispute.

2.5- Elite Interview Method

In order to enrich the qualitative dimension of the research, the study incorporates a semi-structured elite interview conducted with Professor Ismail Debbech on 2 May 2026. The interview provided expert insights into China's strategic vision regarding the South China Sea, the role of energy resources in

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regional competition, the impact of external actors, and the prospects for future cooperation. The interview findings are used as complementary qualitative evidence supporting the analytical discussion developed throughout the study.

The research ultimately relies on a wide range of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, official documents, and expert testimony in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition and strategic rivalry in the South China Sea.

VI. Justification for Choosing the Case Study

The South China Sea was selected as the case study of this research due to its exceptional geopolitical and geostrategic significance. The region constitutes one of the world's most important maritime corridors, through which a considerable share of global trade and energy supplies transit. In addition, the area is believed to contain significant reserves of oil and natural gas, making it a focal point of regional and international competition.

The choice of the South China Sea is also justified by the increasing involvement of major powers, particularly China and the United States, whose strategic interests have transformed the region into a major arena of geopolitical rivalry. Consequently, the South China Sea represents an appropriate and relevant case for examining the relationship between energy resources, maritime strategy, and contemporary geopolitical competition.

VII. Aim of the Study

This study aims to examine the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition in the South China Sea and to analyse how energy resources and maritime strategic considerations contribute to shaping regional and international power dynamics.

More specifically, the study seeks to:

Identify the main conceptual and theoretical foundations of geopolitical energy competition in international relations.

Analyse the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the South China Sea, particularly in relation to its energy resources and maritime trade routes.

Examine the strategies and interests of the principal actors involved in the region, especially China, the United States, and Southeast Asian claimant states.

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Assess the impact of energy competition on regional security, stability, and the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

Explore the prospects for conflict management and cooperation in the South China Sea despite the persistence of competing strategic interests.

VIII. Limitations of the Study

Like any academic research, this study is subject to certain limitations that define its scope and delimit its analytical focus.

First, the study is geographically limited to the South China Sea as a specific case of geopolitical energy competition. Although similar dynamics can be observed in other maritime regions, such as the East China Sea or the Arctic, these areas fall outside the scope of this research.

Second, the study focuses primarily on the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition, particularly the relationship between energy resources, maritime strategy, and power politics. Therefore, other dimensions, including environmental concerns, fisheries management, and detailed legal aspects of maritime disputes, are addressed only when they are directly relevant to the analysis.

Third, the research concentrates on the major actors involved in the region, namely China, the United States, and the principal Southeast Asian claimant states. Consequently, the role of other international actors is examined only to the extent that it influences the dynamics of energy competition in the South China Sea.

Finally, the study relies mainly on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, official documents, and specialized publications. The absence of direct field research and restricted access to certain strategic and governmental data may limit the availability of some information concerning the intentions and decision-making processes of the actors involved.

IX. Importance of the Study

The importance of this study stems from the growing significance of energy resources in shaping contemporary geopolitical relations and influencing the strategic behaviour of states. In an international environment increasingly characterized by competition

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over critical resources and maritime spaces, the South China Sea has emerged as one of the most strategically contested regions in the world.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the existing literature on geopolitics, energy security, and international relations by examining the interaction between energy resources and geopolitical competition within a strategically important maritime region. It also seeks to enrich scholarly understanding of how energy considerations influence regional dynamics, state behaviour, and contemporary power relations.

From a practical perspective, the study provides insights into the strategic implications of energy competition in the South China Sea and its impact on regional security and stability. Given the increasing involvement of major powers and the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region in global affairs, understanding the dynamics of energy competition is essential for analysing future geopolitical developments and potential sources of conflict or cooperation.

Furthermore, the study highlights the relevance of the South China Sea as a case that illustrates the broader relationship between natural resources, maritime strategy, and international power competition in the twenty-first century. As such, it offers a useful framework for understanding similar geopolitical challenges in other strategically significant regions.

X. Motivation

The choice of this research topic was motivated by the increasing prominence of energy-related issues in contemporary international relations and their growing influence on geopolitical competition among states. As energy resources continue to play a crucial role in economic development, national security, and strategic decision-making, understanding the relationship between energy and geopolitics has become increasingly relevant in the study of international affairs.

The South China Sea was selected as the focus of this research due to its exceptional strategic importance and its position at the intersection of major geopolitical, economic, and security interests. The region represents a unique case where maritime disputes, energy resources, international trade routes, and great-power competition converge, making it an important subject for geopolitical analysis.

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Another motivation for conducting this study lies in the growing strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region and its impact on contemporary global power dynamics. The increasing involvement of both regional and extra-regional actors in the South China Sea highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the factors driving competition and shaping the future of the region.

Furthermore, the topic offers an opportunity to explore the broader implications of energy competition for regional security, international stability, and the evolving balance of power in the twenty-first century, thereby contributing to a better understanding of one of the most important geopolitical issues in contemporary international relations.

XI. Literature Review

The issue of energy competition and geopolitical rivalry in the South China Sea has generated a substantial body of literature within the fields of geopolitics, international relations, maritime security, and energy studies. The abundance of available sources required a careful selection process in order to identify the most relevant academic references capable of providing objective and comprehensive insights into the relationship between energy resources, maritime strategy, and power politics.

The present study relied on a variety of sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and publications issued by international organizations and research centres. Among the numerous references consulted, the following works were particularly significant in shaping the theoretical and analytical foundations of this research:

1- The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia by Bill Hayton

This book provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of the historical, political, and strategic dimensions of the South China Sea dispute. Hayton examines the competing territorial claims of regional states, the evolution of China's maritime policy, and the role of major powers in shaping regional dynamics. He argues that the conflict is not solely about sovereignty but also involves strategic influence, resource competition, and geopolitical positioning.

This reference was particularly useful in understanding the historical development of the dispute and the strategic motivations of

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the actors involved. It also contributed to analysing the interaction between maritime claims and geopolitical competition in the region.

2- Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific by Robert D. Kaplan

Kaplan emphasises the enduring importance of geography in international politics and presents the South China Sea as one of the principal geopolitical fault lines of the twenty-first century. The book highlights the strategic significance of maritime routes, naval power, and regional rivalries, particularly between China and the United States.

This work contributed significantly to understanding the geopolitical importance of the South China Sea and provided valuable insights into the relationship between maritime geography and contemporary power competition.

3- Sea Power: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century by Geoffrey Till

Till analyses the changing nature of maritime power in the contemporary international system and explains how sea control, maritime trade routes, and naval capabilities influence state behaviour and international security. The book demonstrates the continuing relevance of maritime spaces in economic and strategic competition.

This reference was particularly useful for examining the strategic value of the South China Sea as a maritime corridor and for understanding the role of naval power in protecting energy transportation routes and national interests.

4- The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations by Daniel Yergin

Yergin explores the evolving relationship between energy resources, international politics, and global economic transformations. He demonstrates how energy security continues to influence geopolitical calculations despite changes in the global energy landscape.

This work provided important theoretical insights into the concept of energy security and helped explain how access to energy resources contributes to geopolitical competition among states.

5- Energy Politics by Brenda Shaffer

Shaffer examines the role of energy as a strategic instrument in international relations and analyses how states use energy resources to pursue political, economic, and security objectives. The book discusses energy dependence, supply security, and the geopolitical implications of resource competition.

This reference contributed to understanding the political dimensions of energy competition and the strategic significance of hydrocarbon resources in shaping state behaviour.

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6- Academic Articles and Policy Reports on the South China Sea

The study also relied on numerous academic articles and reports published by international research institutes and organizations addressing maritime disputes, offshore energy resources, China's maritime strategy, United States involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, and the legal framework established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

These publications were particularly useful in providing updated information, statistical data, and contemporary analyses regarding the geopolitical and energy-related developments occurring in the South China Sea.

Despite the richness of the existing literature, most previous studies tend to analyse either maritime disputes, energy security, or strategic competition separately. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by adopting an integrated geopolitical approach that examines the interaction between energy resources, maritime strategy, and geopolitical rivalry within a single analytical framework. Through this perspective, the research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of energy competition in shaping contemporary power dynamics in the South China Sea.

XII. Outline of the Study

To address the research problematic and achieve the objectives of the study, the research is organized into three chapters, each divided into two sections.

The first chapter, entitled “The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Geopolitical Energy Competition,” establishes the theoretical foundation of the study. The first section examines the relationship between geopolitics and energy in international relations through an analysis of the concept of geopolitics, maritime geopolitics, and the role of energy as a factor of power and influence. It also clarifies the key concepts used throughout the research, including energy security, maritime disputes, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), offshore resources, and geo-energy. The second section explores the principal theoretical approaches explaining energy competition, namely Realism, the Geo-economic Approach, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), and Liberal Institutionalism with particular attention to international institutions, governance mechanisms, and forms of cooperation.

Introduction

The second chapter, entitled “The Geopolitical and Energy Significance of the South China Sea,” focuses on the strategic importance of the region. The first section analyses the geographical location of the South China Sea, its navigational characteristics, its role as a major maritime trade corridor, and its military and security significance. The second section examines the energy dimension of the region by analysing oil and gas reserves, energy investments, the role of National Oil Companies (NOCs), and the impact of offshore energy resources on regional relations. It also addresses renewable energy developments, energy transition strategies, and the evolving strategic relevance of the region beyond conventional hydrocarbons.

The third chapter, entitled “Strategic Competition and Prospects for Cooperation in the South China Sea,” examines the dynamics of regional and international competition. The first section analyses the strategies and interests of the principal actors involved in the region, including China, Southeast Asian claimant states, and major external powers such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. The second section explores mechanisms for managing tensions and promoting cooperation through the role of ASEAN, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the proposed Code of Conduct, and joint energy cooperation initiatives. The chapter concludes by discussing potential future scenarios for energy competition and regional stability in the South China Sea.

Through this structure, the study progresses from conceptual and theoretical foundations to the analysis of the strategic characteristics of the South China Sea and finally to the examination of contemporary patterns of competition and cooperation, providing a comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition in the region.

Chapter One: The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Geopolitical Energy Competition

International competition over energy resources is one of the most important expressions of the structural transformation of the contemporary international system. It is not just a continuation of the old battle over bad resources. It is a deep restructuring of ideas about power, sovereignty and security. As the importance of energy sources in the world increases and as they are connected to cross-border trade routes and infrastructure, energy has become an important determinant of engineering international interactions and the hierarchy of power at regional and global levels.

Therefore, the dynamics of energy competition cannot be analysed without returning to its conceptual and theoretical basis, which is the explanatory framework for the behaviour of international actors.

This chapter, thus, aims to construct a robust analytical framework by exploring the historical development of geopolitical thought. This journey will take us from the origins of geopolitics, tied to the interpretation of the relationship between the state and geographic space, to the current transformations that have redefined geography as a network of flows (energy, trade, data) instead of merely fixed borders.

The chapter also aims to emphasise the strategic importance of the maritime domain as the most important space in the current energy competition, where global trade routes intersect with energy transit routes and where maritime chokepoints are crucial factors in international security equations. Energy is not only analysed here as an economic commodity but also as a tool of influence and coercion, which helps to redefine the sovereignty and give rise to new forms of interdependence and hegemony.

To that end, the chapter draws on a set of explanatory theoretical approaches. Leading the pack is Realism, the one that underlines the logic of power and conflict, the geo-economic approach that stresses the importance of networks

and infrastructure to generate influence and institutional approaches that aim to explain the possibilities of organising this competition within co-operative frameworks. This theoretical integration seeks to move the chapter from description to explanation, thereby allowing an understanding of energy competition as a complex structural phenomenon. This serves as a preamble to the application of these frameworks to the case study in the following chapters.

Section One: Geopolitics and Energy in International Relations

Understanding the relationship between geography and politics represents an indispensable theoretical entry point for analysing international competition over energy resources, as the behaviour of states in this field cannot be perceived in isolation from the spatial determinants that frame their actions.¹ Geopolitics, as an evolving field of knowledge, is not limited to studying the physical characteristics of domain; rather, it transcends this to examine how these characteristics are employed within power strategies to achieve national interests in an international environment characterised by anarchy and continuous competition².

This field has witnessed profound epistemological shifts, moving from traditional conception that views the state as an organic entity seeking expansion to ensure survival, toward contemporary approaches that redefine geography as a dynamic space for strategic flows, where energy pathways, trade networks, and

¹Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 12-15.

²Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 43.

cross-border infrastructure intersect¹. In this context, geography is no longer a mere static given; it has become an active tool in reproducing power and reshaping its balances at both regional and global levels.²

From this perspective, energy occupies a central position within geopolitical analysis, serving as a link between geographic space and a states strategic capacity. It does not only represent a vital economic resource but transforms into a decisive factor in determining patterns of interdependence and a tool for redrawing maps of influence, particularly in maritime spaces that have become the focal point of contemporary international competition³.

Accordingly, this action aims to construct an integrated conceptual framework by tracing the historical development of geopolitical thought, analysing the strategic importance of the maritime domain, and highlighting the rising role energy as a structuring factor in international relations. It also seeks to define the core concepts upon which this field is based, ensuring methodological precision analysis that can be utilised to understand the dynamics of energy competition in subsequent chapters.

Requirement 1: The Concept of Geopolitics and its Historical Development.

The concept of geopolitics constitutes one of the most dynamic notions in the field of political sciences and international relations, it is not a static and rigid concept, but rather an evolving one that has undergone continuous reformulation in

¹ Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 28-30.

² Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 56.

³ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 154-160.

line with major transformations in the international system¹. Since its emergence as a tool to explain the survival of the organic state at the end of the nineteenth century, to its transformation into a fundamental framework for analysing global conflicts over energy and resources in the twenty-first century, geopolitics has consistently reflected the dialectical and interactive relationship between the permanence of geography and the dynamism of politics².

From a methodological perspective, distinguishing between geopolitics and political geography is of paramount importance in defining the scope of analysis. While political geography tends toward description and static analysis of the state as existing geographical entity (that is, studying the influence of the environment on politics from a past and present perspective), the concept of geopolitics is oriented toward foresight prescriptions³. It represents a will to power that seeks to utilise geographical factors as instruments to achieve dominance and secure national interest in the future⁴. In other words, if political geography is the science that examines the geographical needs of the state, then geopolitics is the art that uses geography as a tool to manage international conflicts⁵.

This historical and conceptual evolution is what we will attempt to trace through the following main stages, begging with the organic scientific foundations and moving toward the contemporary revival of the concept in the context of global energy competition.

¹ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 11.

² Dodds, *Geopolitics*, 45.

³ Geoffrey Parker, *Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 18.

⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), 82.

⁵ Derwent Whittlesey, "The Impress of Effective Central Authority upon the Landscape," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 25, no. 2 (1935): 85-97.

First: The Organic and Scientific Origins (The Late 19th Century)

The emergence of geopolitics during this period was not an isolated intellectual development, but rather a direct response to the structural transformations that reshaped the international system in the late nineteenth century¹. This was particularly evident with the rise of the New Imperialism and the intensification of competition among European powers over resources and spheres of influence². In this context geography was no longer seen as a static framework instead, it became a decisive factor in determining political power and an analytical tool for understanding state behaviour.

The period between 1870 and 1900 witnessed profound transformations, most notably the unification of Germany in 1871 under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck. This event reconfigured the balance of power in Europe³. Germany emerged as a rising power, yet it was surrounded by major colonial empires such as as Britain and France, generating what can be described as sense of geographical encirclement.

At the same time, the acceleration of the Second Industrial Revolution created an increasing demand for raw materials and external markets, making colonial expansion an economic necessity⁴ rather than merely a political option.

¹ Dodds, *Geopolitics*, 42.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 56-60.

³ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), 187.

⁴ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 12-15.

This logic was clearly reflected in the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), a pivotal moment during which the partition of Africa among European powers was formalised. This illustrates how geography became an organised field of strategic competition¹, where boundaries were drawn according to power dynamics rather than cultural or humanitarian considerations.

Friedrich Ratzel: A Response to Germany's need for expansion

Within this context, Friedrich Ratzel made a crucial theoretical contribution through his work *Politische Geographie*, in which he redefined the state not as a fixed legal entity, but as a living organism subject to the laws of growth and evolution².

Influenced by the ideas of Charles Darwin, Ratzel developed the concept of the organic state, which requires territorial expansion to ensure its survival. He argued that territorial stagnation represents an existential threat. Observing the westward expansion of the United States (*The Frontier*), he concluded that American power stemmed from its continuous geographical expansion³. From this, he formulated the concept of *Lebensraum* (living space), suggesting that a state's growth is directly linked to its ability to expand new geographical areas not merely as a theoretical idea⁴, but as a call for Germany to recognise that stagnant borders mean death.

¹ Stig Förster, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, and Ronald Robinson, eds., *Bismarck, Europe and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

² Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1897).

³ Geoffrey Parker, *Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 11.

⁴ Friedrich Ratzel, "Die Gesetze des räumlichen Wachstums der Staaten," *Petermanns Mitteilungen* 42 (1896): 97–107.

However, this perspective was far from neutral. It carried a justificatory dimension for colonial expansion, particularly by linking expansion to civilisational superiority. This is evident in his seven laws of the growth of the state (1896), which explain how Lebensraum evolved from geographical concept into expansionist strategy:

- The size of state increases with the growth of its civilisation: The state is not a fixed territory but container of culture and civilisation. As it advances technologically and culturally (as seen during the Industrial Revolution), it requires more space.
- The growth of the state follows other forms of growth: Territorial expansion is consequence of population growth, intellectual development, and economic activity.
- States grow through annexation: Expansion occurs by absorbing smaller political units, legitimising territorial absorption typical of the colonial era.
- Borders are the peripheral organs of the state: Borders are not rigid legal lines but dynamic zones reflecting the states vitality. Strong states expand; weak states contract.
- States seek strategically valuable territories: Expansion targets fertile lands, waterways, and resource-rich areas (such as oil and gas in contemporary analysis).
- The primary impulse for growth comes from external pressure: competition with neighbouring states drives expansion to secure ones living space.
- The tendency toward expansion is transmitted across generations: Once expansion begins, it becomes embedded in national policy and persists over time.

These laws provided a quasi-scientific justification for European domination over other peoples, legitimising the exploitation of resources under the pretext of civilisational superiority.¹

Rudolf Kjellén: Geopolitics as a Tool for Small State Survival

In contrast to Ratzel, who reflected the ambition of rising power, Rudolf Kjellén has thought expressed the concern of small states operating in a highly competitive international environment. Within the system of European alliances and growing tensions among great powers, Kjellén sought to develop a theoretical framework that would help states understand their strategic position and ensure their survival.

He argued that Sweden and other small states were vulnerable to being absorbed by the Great Powers. Kjellén coined the term Geopolitics to describe a field of study that analyses the state as an integrated entity combining geography, economy, population, and society², building on this Kjellén deepened his analysis of the states structure by conceptualising it as an integrated system composed of five interrelated components:

- Geopolitics: the study of the state as territory and geographical position.
- Economopolitics: the study of the state as an economic power, highlighting the central role of resources.
- Demopolitics: the study of population dynamics.
- Sociopolitics: the study of society and its internal cohesion.

¹ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 19.

² Rudolf Kjellén, *The State as a Living Form* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1917).

- kratopolitics: the study of governance, political authority, and military power.¹

Kjellén argued that geopolitics constitutes the material foundation upon which all other components are built. Without a defined territory and a strategic location, a state cannot effectively exercise power, regardless of its economic strength, population size, or political system.

In 1899, motivated by fears of Russian expansion from the east and German pressure from the south, Kjellén proposed that geopolitics should serve as a practical science enabling states to understand and defend their strategic position.

He also emphasised the importance of economic self-sufficiency (autarky), arguing that control over resources is essential for sovereignty, particularly in a context where maritime powers especially Britain used economic blockades as instruments of pressure. Thus, geopolitics, in Kjellén view, evolved from a purely analytical discipline into a strategic tool for managing power and securing national independence².

Second: The Classical Period of Grand Strategy (1900-1945)

This period represents what can be considered the classical age of geopolitics, during which thinking evolved from explaining the dynamics of state growth—as seen in the work of Friedrich Ratzel—to the construction of strategic theories aimed at achieving global dominance. This shift was closely tied to tense international context marked by imperial rivalries, rapid technological progress, and the outbreak of the two World Wars, making geopolitics a direct instrument in shaping grand strategy.

¹ Ola Tunander, "Swedish Geopolitics: From Rudolf Kjellén to a Critique of Geopolitics," *Geopolitics* 10, no. 3 (2005): 546-566.

² Parker, *Western Geopolitical Thought*, 55.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the international system entered a new phase often described as the closure of the geographical frontier¹. There were no longer territories available for discovery or acquisition without direct conflict with other powers. This led to a fundamental transformation in the nature of international competition from outward expansion to the redistribution of power within a closed global space.

In this context, the second Industrial Revolution accelerated technological development, particularly in transportation and communication. The expansion of transcontinental railways significantly enhanced the capabilities of land powers such as Russia and Germany, which was perceived as a direct challenge to British maritime supremacy.

This rivalry was further reflected in the naval arms race, especially between Britain and Germany, where control over strategic straits and sea-lanes became a vital component of national security. These tensions ultimately contributed to the outbreak of World War 1, which served as the first real-world test of geopolitical theories.

Alfred Thayer Mahan: The centrality of Sea Power

Within this framework, Alfred Thayer Mahan made a pivotal contribution in his work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*², in which he redefined power by linking it to control over the seas.

¹ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421-437.

² Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1890).

Through historical analysis, Mahan argued that states achieving global dominance—such as Britain—relied fundamentally on naval strength. Control of maritime trade routes and strategic chokepoints was, in his view, the key to global supremacy¹. He identified six essential elements for building effective sea power:

- Geographical position: States with access to open seas and limited land threats can concentrate on naval strength.
- Physical configuration: Natural harbours and river outlets facilitate maritime activity.
- Extent of coastline: A long but manageable Coastline enhances both defence and projection capabilities.
- Population size: Not just numbers, but a population engaged in maritime professions.
- National character: A societal inclination toward trade, exploration, and overseas investment.
- Government policy: A political will that prioritises naval supremacy and supports fleet development.

Mahan's ideas were not merely theoretical—they directly influenced expansionist policies, particularly in the United States, which adopted a maritime strategy centered on controlling strategic points such as the Panama Canal. His analysis remains highly relevant today, especially in understanding ongoing competition over vital maritime corridors like the South China Sea, which are essential arteries for global trade and energy flows.

Halford Mackinder: Reasserting Land Power

In contrast to Mahan's maritime perspective, Halford Mackinder offered a counter-vision in his famous 1904 article *The Geographical Pivot of History*. He

¹ Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power*, 28-35.

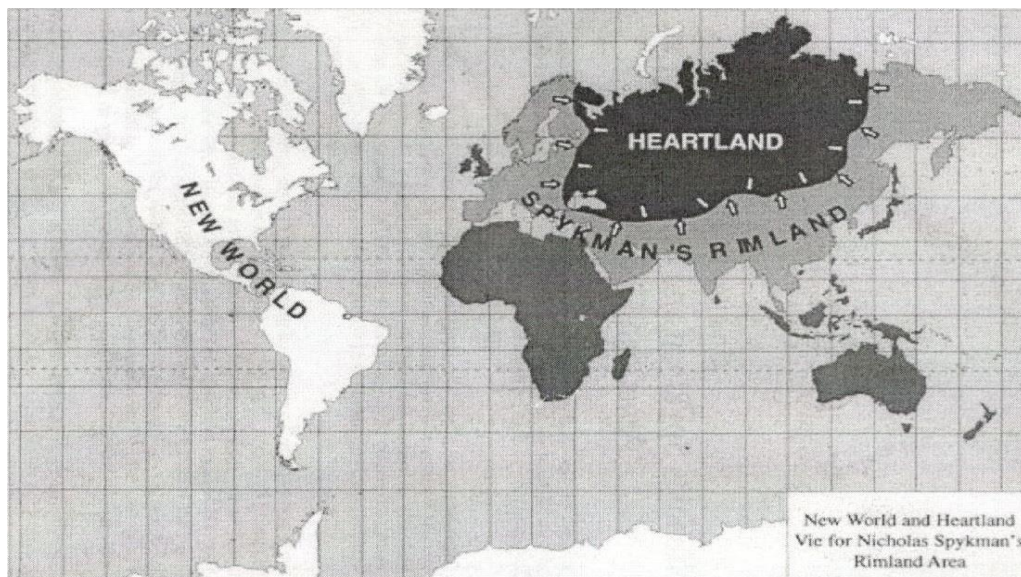
introduced the Heartland Theory, arguing that control over the Eurasian landmass constitutes the true foundation of global dominance¹.

Mackinder formulated his well-known triadic principle:

- Who rules Eastern Europe controls the Heartland.
- Who rules the Heartland Controls the World-Island (Eurasia and Africa).
- Who rules the World-Island controls the world².

This framework linked the control of Eastern Europe to the Heartland, then to the World-Island, and ultimately to global supremacy. His theory emerged from British concerns over the rise of Russia, which, thanks to railway expansion, could overcome traditional geographical constraints and project power deep into the continent. Mackinder warned that such a land power could become virtually invulnerable to naval forces due to its strategic depth.

Map Number 01: Halford Mackinder Heartland theory map



¹ Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," 431.

² Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (London: Constable and Co., 1919), 150.

Licchavi Lyceum. "Heartland and Rimland Theories." Licchavi Lyceum. Accessed May 25, 2026. <https://licchavilyceum.com/heartland-and-rimland-theories/>

His major contribution lies in redefining strategic geography—not from a maritime perspective, but through continental depth— thus introducing a new dimension to geopolitical thinking based on the balance between land and sea power.

Nicholas Spykman: Rimland Theory and Strategic Balance

Seeking reconcile the maritime and continental approaches, Nicholas Spykman, during the World War 2, proposed a significant revision of Mackinders theory through the concept of the Rimland¹.

Rather than focusing on the Heartland, Spykman argued that the coastal fringes surrounding Eurasia are the most strategically important regions. These areas represent land and sea powers. Control over the Rimland allows for either the containment of continental powers or the projection of maritime influence².

Map Number 02: Nicholas Spykman Rimland theory map



¹ Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1944).

² Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, 43.

Paul Dibb, "Australia and the Struggle for Mastery in Eurasia," *The ASPI Strategist*, May 25, 2026, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-and-the-struggle-for-mastery-in-eurasia/>.

This theory had a profound impact on U.S. strategy during the Cold War, particularly through the adoption of the containment policy aimed at limiting Soviet expansion by securing these peripheral regions¹. Spykmans framework remains highly relevant for analysing contemporary conflicts, especially in East and Southeast Asia, where the struggle over strategic coastal zones continues to shape global geopolitics.

Third: Cold War Geopolitics (1945-1990)

The Cold War marked a qualitative transformation in the evolution of geopolitics the logic of direct territorial expansion was replaced by strategies of containment and the management of influence within a bipolar international system². In this context, Geography was no longer merely a space to be controlled, but a strategic tool for maintaining balance between two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union³. This period also witnessed the emergence of the energy dimension,—particularly oil and gas— as a central factor in geopolitical calculations.

The end of World War II produced a new international system structured around bipolarity, where traditional European powers declined in favour of two superpowers promoting opposing ideological models: capitalism and socialism.

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 25.

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 26-28.

³ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 102.

Within this framework, geography became an instrument for managing conflict rather than resolving it, especially under the condition of Mutually Assured Destruction, which made direct confrontation prohibitively costly. As a result, Strategies shifted toward indirect competition through intermediary regions, particularly those identified by Nicholas Spykman as the Rimland.

This was reflected in the formation of military alliances such as NATO, aimed at containing Soviet influence alongside Soviet efforts to expand its reach across Eastern Europe in the global South.

George F. Kennan: From Theory to Practice (Containment Policy)

George F. Kennan played a decisive role in translating geopolitical theory into practical strategy. In his influential 1947 article *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, he laid the foundation for the Containment Strategy¹, which sought to limit Soviet expansion rather than confront it directly through war. Kennan thinking implicitly drew on the ideas of Halford Mackinder and Nicolas Spykman. He viewed the Soviet Union as a continental power rooted in the Heartland, requiring a strategic encirclement through alliances along its periphery².

This approach transformed many regions—especially in Asia—into arenas of indirect conflict, where control over maritime and trade routes became crucial. Strategic spaces such as Southeast Asia and the South China Sea emerged as key zones for managing global flows of trade and energy.

Saul B. Cohen: Geopolitical Systems and Shatterbelts

¹ X [George F. Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (1947): 566-582.

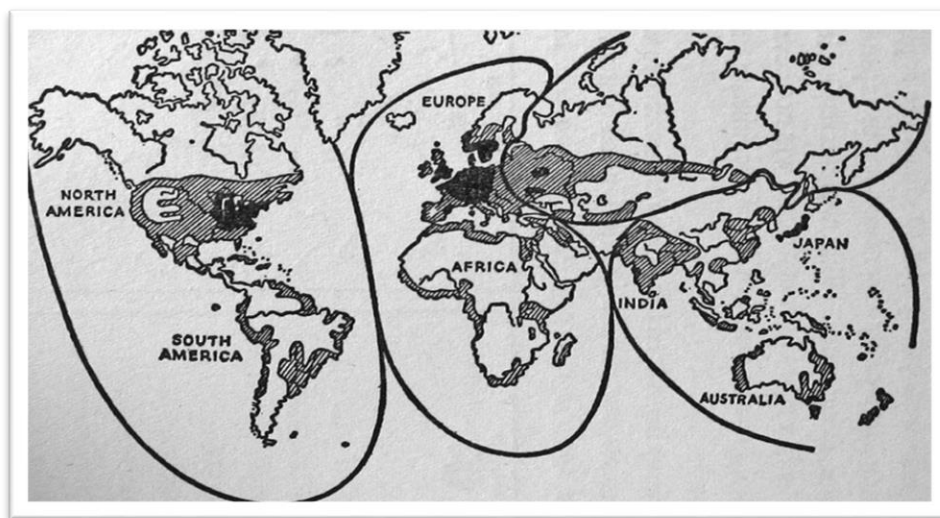
² John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30-34.

In the 1960s, Cohen advanced geopolitical thought by introducing the concept of geopolitical systems, dividing the world into major maritime and continental regions interacting within a complex equilibrium.

His most significant contribution was the concept of Shatterbelts regions located at the intersection of great power competition, Characterised by persistent instability and conflict¹. Key examples include the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

These regions functioned as arenas of indirect confrontation², where major powers competed for influence without engaging in direct war. Many Cold War conflicts can thus be understood as manifestations of this geopolitical rivalry.

Map Number 03: Saul Cohen Shatterbelts geopolitical map



Federico Bordonaro, "The Global Century," *LinkedIn*, November 3, 2024, accessed May 25, 2026, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/global-century-federico-bordonaro-ph-d--dfalf/>.

The rise of energy geopolitics: from military to economic geography

¹ Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 45-50.

² Cohen, *Geopolitics*, 52.

From the 1970s onward, geopolitics underwent a major shift with the rise of the energy dimension as a decisive factor in international relations. The 1973 oil crisis marked a turning point, demonstrating that control over natural resources—especially oil—could serve as a powerful strategic weapon¹.

Maritime routes were no longer evaluated solely in military terms, but as vital arteries for global energy transport. Strategic checkpoints gained prominence, while advances in offshore extraction technologies increased competition over maritime resources.

At the same time, National Oil Companies (NOCs) emerged as sovereign instruments for managing resources, reinforcing the link between geography and economics sovereignty. This transformation also led to the development of legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which sought to regulate maritime competition but also generated new disputes over boundaries and resource control².

This phase reveals that geopolitics shifted from direct territorial control to the management of global balance through alliances, military bases, control of strategic routes, and Securing vital resources. Power was no longer measured by occupied territory, but by influencing the ability to shape key regions.

Fourth: Contemporary geopolitics (1990-present)

contemporary geopolitics represents a structural turning point in the field. the collapse of the Soviet Union did not mark the end of geopolitics—as some post-

¹ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 588-592.

² United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (Montego Bay: UN, 1982).

Cold War theorists suggested—But rather its transformation into what can be described as the geopolitics of flows and networks¹.

Under globalisation, geography is no longer reduced to fixed borders or direct territorial control. Instead, it is understood as a dynamic system of flows—energy, trade, and data—redefining power is the ability to control these flows rather than merely territory.

A key feature of this transformation is the strategic shift from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific, driven by the rise of China². This shift reflects not only a redistribution of power, but also a revival of Nicholas Spyckmans Rimland logic in a modern maritime form, where seas—not continents—have become the central arena of global competition. The South China Sea stands out as a strategic hub where trade routes and energy flows intersect.

Edward Luttwak: The Rise of Geoeconomics

Edward argued that after the Cold War, conflict did not disappear but shifted form. He coined the concept of Geo-economic³, where geopolitical competition continues through economic tools such as investments, infrastructure, and supply chains.

Klaus Dodds: Critical Geopolitics and the Power of Discourse

¹ Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 112.

² Christopher J. Pehrson, *String of Pearls: Exploring the Strategic Significance of the Indian Ocean* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 3-5.

³ Edward N. Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce," *The National Interest*, no. 20 (1990): 17-23.

Klaus Dodds emphasised the role of narratives, maps, and discourse in shaping geopolitical realities sovereignty, in this view is not only enforced militarily but also constructed through legitimacy and representation¹.

Robert D. Kaplan: The Revenge of Geography

Robert D. Kaplan challenged the idea that globalisation raises geography. He argued that physical features—such as seas, mountains, and chokepoints—remain decisive². He notably described the South China Sea as a future cauldron of conflict³.

Wang Jisi: Chinese Geopolitics and the Security of Flows

Wang Jeezy represents a contemporary Chinese perspective, emphasising the need to secure energy in trade flows. His concept of marching westward and seaward reflects Chinas strategy to overcome vulnerabilities, such as the Malacca dilemma⁴, ensuring uninterrupted access to resources.

Energy and Chokepoint Geopolitics:

The energy dimension remains central in contemporary geopolitics. According to the International energy agency, the value of geography today lies in its capacity to secure global energy flows⁵. This has led to the rise of chokepoint geopolitics, where strategic maritime passages—such as the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea—serve as critical nodes of global influence⁶.

¹ Klaus Dodds, *Global Geopolitics: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2005), 35-38.

² Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts* (New York: Random House, 2012), 28.

³ Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014), 9-12.

⁴ Wang Jisi, "Marching Westwards: The Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy," *International and Strategic Studies Report*, no. 73 (2012).

⁵ International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook 2023* (Paris: IEA, 2023), 142.

⁶ Jean-Paul Rodrigue, *The Geography of Transport Systems*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 44-46.

Advances in offshore extraction have further intensified competition over continental shelves and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), particularly between China and ASEAN states like Vietnam and Philippines.

Contemporary geopolitics does not represent a rupture with earlier phases, but rather their evolution. The logic has shifted from territorial control to the management of strategic spaces that organise global flows. Power is no longer defined, solely by land or military capability by the ability to integrate geography into global networks, control energy and trade routes, and produce legitimising narratives.

In this sense, the South China Sea emerges as a real laboratory of contemporary geopolitics, where strategic economic and symbolic dimensions intersect in shaping the future of international system.

Requirement 2: Maritime Geopolitics and its Strategic Importance

Maritime geopolitics has become one of the most significant analytical fields in contemporary strategic studies, given the central role that seas and oceans play in shaping global power balances¹. These spaces, which cover more than two-thirds of the Earth's surface, are no longer merely natural boundaries separating states; rather, they have evolved into dynamic arenas for the production of power, where economic, military, and energy interests intersect. This transformation builds on the foundations laid by Alfred Thayer Mahan in the influence of seapower upon history, where he linked Maritime control to global dominance. However, contemporary scholarship—particularly the work of Geoffrey Till in *Seapower: A Guide for the*

¹ Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 25-27.

Twenty-First Century—has expanded this understanding to encompass what can be described as a comprehensive Maritime system¹, integrating economic, environmental, and strategic dimensions beyond purely military.

Within this framework, the sea is no longer understood as a single analytical unit, but as a multifunctional space. Until identifies four core functions that define the essence of maritime geopolitics:

- **First, The Sea as a Strategic Resource Space**
the sea as a resource domain. The Maritime space has become a

strategic reservoir of energy and natural resources, especially with advances in offshore oil and gas extraction technology. This evolution has redefined maritime conflicts: they are no longer limited to control of the surface and extend beneath it.

As a result, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZs) have become key arenas of international competition². In this context, disputes in regions such as the South China Sea can be understood as struggles over a latent energy geography, where sovereignty claims intersect with resource competition.

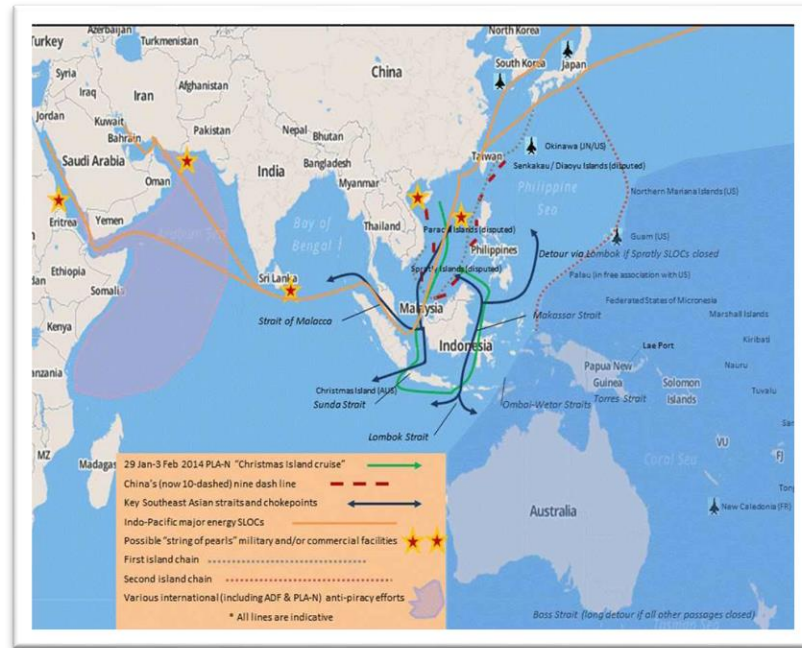
- **Second, The Sea as a Global Trade and Communication Network**
the sea is a medium of transportation and exchange. The sea constitutes the backbone of the global economy, with the majority of international trade passing through maritime routes. Mahan emphasised that control over Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) is essential for maintaining state power³, as the inability to secure them leads to strategic vulnerability. Contemporary perspectives go further, viewing these routes not merely as transit path but as complex networks embedded within global supply chains, thereby amplifying their geopolitical significance.

Map Number 04: South China Sea SLOCs Map

¹ Till, *Seapower*, 32.

² Martin Murphy, *Contemporary Piracy and Maritime Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 12-15.

³ Till, *Seapower*, 94.



Anthony Bergin, "China's Sea Lines of Communication: Implications for the South Pacific," *The ASPI Strategist*, March 22, 2019, accessed May 25, 2026, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-sea-lines-of-communication-implications-for-the-south-pacific/>.

Third, The Sea as an Instrument of Strategic Power Projection
the sea as a platform for power projection¹. Maritime space enables states to project power into distant regions without requiring direct territorial presence. This function provides high strategic flexibility, allowing states to influence regional and global balances. Technological advancements have reinforced this role, with aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines becoming central instruments of naval power in deterrence.

Fourth, The Sea as a Maritime Security and Defence Space
the sea as a defensive barrier². Traditionally viewed as a natural line of defence, the sea as a passive barrier, as an active domain of surveillance, control, and security management. Ensuring maritime security now requires advanced technological infrastructures, particularly in the face of non-traditional threats.

¹ Ibid., 156.

² Ibid., 210.

Within this functional framework, the importance of strategic maritime passages becomes evident. These are what James Stavridis describes in *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the world's Oceans* as chokepoints—narrow geographical corridors that regulate the flow of global trade and energy. Their significance lies in their role as critical nodes within the international system, where any disruption can trigger wide-ranging economic consequences¹, the Strait of Malacca, for instance, is not merely a waterway but a strategic artery upon which major Asian economies depend for securing energy supplies².

These chokepoints are closely linked to energy security. According to the International Energy Agency, a substantial share of global oil and gas trade passes through such narrow maritime routes, making their control or protection a matter of strategic necessity. Thus, contemporary maritime geopolitics cannot be separated from geo-economics and geo-energy, as military and economic considerations increasingly converge.

Alongside these dynamics, the legal dimension has emerged as a fundamental component in structuring maritime space. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea provides a normative framework for defining states sovereign rights at sea³. The introduction of Exclusive Economic Zones has significantly reshaped maritime geopolitics, as states seek to expand their maritime influence within legal boundaries. At the same time, this has intensified disputes over maritime delimitation, particularly in resource-rich areas. In this sense, legal norms themselves have become instruments of geopolitical competition, used by states to legitimise in advance their territorial claims.

¹ James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 5-8.

² Stavridis, *Sea Power*, 172.

³ United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (Montego Bay: UN, 1982), Part V.

In light of the above, maritime geopolitics can no longer be reduced to the analysis of naval power alone. It has evolved into a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates resources, trade, energy, and law within a unified perspective on international conflict. The sea is no longer just a geographical space—it has become one of the primary determinants of power in the contemporary international system, especially as global dependence on maritime flows continues to deepen.

Requirement 3: Energy as a Geopolitical Factor and a Tool of Influence

the dynamics of the contemporary international system cannot be understood without placing energy at the heart of geopolitical analysis, as the latter has undergone a qualitative transformation over time from a mere economic resource to a decisive element in determining the balance of power¹.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the power of states has been linked to their ability to secure energy sources; coal formed the basis of the industrial superiority of European empires before oil replaced it in the twentieth century as the fuel of military power, especially during the two World Wars. However, the pivotal moment in recognising the geopolitical dimension of energy came with the 1973 oil crisis, where energy was used for the first time clearly as a tool of political pressure², revealing the fragility of industrial countries and their structural dependence on external resources.

In the contemporary context, with increasing global economic interdependence, energy has come to represent what can be called the hidden infrastructure of power, where the status of states is determined not only by

¹ United Nations, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Montego Bay: UN, 1982), Part V.

² Yergin, *The Prize*, 588.

possessing resources but by the ability to control their flow through complex networks of production, transportation, and distribution.

In this framework, Daniel Yergin emphasises in his book *The New Map* that modern geopolitics is being reshaped through energy maps, where geography intersects with economics and technology to produce new patterns of international influence¹.

First: Geo-energy and Redefining Sovereignty in the Age of Flows

The transition toward what is known as Geo-energy has led to a redefinition of the concept of sovereignty; it is no longer linked solely to control over territory but has become linked to the ability to control energy flows². In an interconnected world, a state that does not possess stable energy security becomes vulnerable to what can be described as geopolitical strangulation, even if it possesses other resources of power.

In this context, the concept of mutual interdependence merges as one of the most prominent characteristics of the global energy system. Consuming countries, especially rising power like China, depend heavily on energy imports to fuel their economic growth, making the securing of these supplies a top strategic priority. Conversely, producing countries depend on export revenues, creating a relationship of mutual dependence—through not necessarily a symmetrical one. States that control transportation routes or possess the ability to diversify their partners are in a stronger negotiating position.

¹ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 11.

² Felix Ciuta, "Conceptual Notes on Energy Security: Total or Specific?," *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 2 (2010): 123-144.

Hence, energy transforms into a multi-dimensional diplomatic weapon¹, where it can be used to consolidate influence or exert pressure. Exporting countries are capable of employing their energy exports to reshape international alliances, whether by providing privileges to their allies or imposing restrictions on their adversaries. Furthermore, state membership in blocs such as OPEC enhances their ability to influence global markets, granting them political weight that transcends their geographical borders.

Consequently, energy in the contemporary context is no longer just an economic resource; it has become a defining element of sovereignty, where a state's power is measured by its ability to secure and control its energy flows.

Second: Structural Geopolitics in Energy Dependency: Infrastructure as a Tool of Influence

If resources represent the foundation of energy power, then infrastructure represents the mechanism for converting this power into actual influence. Here, the contribution of Thane Gustafson stands out, focusing on the role of physical energy networks in producing what is known as structural dependency². Pipelines, liquefaction plants, and oil ports are not merely technical tools; they represent strategic structures that reshape international relations.

In this framework, what is known as pipeline geopolitics constitutes one of the most prominent manifestations of this transformation as transport lines turn into political pressure tools³. The exporting state possesses the power of the supplier, the transit state possesses the power of geographical location, while the consuming state remains in a position of dependency. This intersection creates a complex web of

¹ Brenda Shaffer, *Energy Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 34-37.

² Thane Gustafson, *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 18-22.

³ Gustafson, *The Bridge*, 45.

mutual interests, where energy becomes an axis for reshaping alliances away from ideological considerations.

Additionally, investments in the energy sector play a pivotal role in producing geo-economic influence. When a major power invests in the energy infrastructure of another country, it does not only seek economic profit but works to build long-term influence that enables it to affect that countrys decisions. This is evident in projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative where energy investments are employed as a means to enhance geopolitical presence.

The development of liquefied natural gas LNG technology has complicated this picture; it has allowed importing countries greater flexibility in diversifying their sources, but at the same time, it has increased the importance of maritime infrastructure, thereby strengthening the link between energy geopolitics and maritime geopolitics¹.

Third: Maritime Geopolitics of Energy: Passages, Chokepoints, and the Offshore Conflict

With the increasing reliance on transporting energy via seas, maritime geopolitics has become the primary framework for understanding the conflict over energy in the modern era. In this context, Robert D. Kaplan reaffirms the centrality of geography, considering that the seas have become a major theatre for competition between great powers².

The importance of what are known as chokepoints emerges is vital joints of the global energy system, through which a large percentage of oil and gas trade passes. Control over these points, or even the ability to threaten them, grants states strategic influence, as they can directly affect the global economy. From this

¹ Yergin, *The New Map*, 162.

² Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014), 9.

perspective, naval power is no longer just a military tool but has become a means to ensure global energy security.

Besides this, technological progress in the field of offshore exploration has led to the emergence of what can be called offshore geopolitics, where the seabed has turned into an arena for resource competition. In regions like the South China Sea, sovereign claims overlap with energy interests, making exploration operations political act par excellence. Sending a drilling rig to a disputed area does not just represent an economic activity; it is considered an implicit declaration of sovereignty¹.

This conflict also intersects with the legal framework organised by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which granted states sovereign rights over their maritime resources but simultaneously created areas of legal overlap that contributed to escalating disputes². Thus, legal rules themselves transform into tools within the geopolitical conflict.

In light of the above, it is clear that energy has become one of the most important determinants of contemporary geopolitics. It is no longer just an economic resource but has transformed into a central tool for producing international influence. It reshaped the concept of sovereignty, creates new patterns of dependency, and redirects conflicts toward maritime spaces that represent the link between resources and markets.

Accordingly, understanding energy as a geopolitical factor requires a holistic approach that integrates geography, infrastructure, technology, and law into a single framework that explains how energy flows transform into the core of conflict in the contemporary international system.

Requirement 4: Key Concepts and Operational Definitions

¹ Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 115-118.

² United Nations, UNCLOS, Part VI (Continental Shelf).

The stage of defining concepts and operational definitions is an essential step in building any rigorous academic study, especially in a complex and overlapping field like energy geopolitics. The absence of conceptual precision leads to the overlap of variables and weakens the explanatory power of the analysis. Consequently, this requirement aims to establish the central concepts upon which the research is based, by distinguishing between general lexical definitions and the specific operational definitions that will be adopted in the context of the study¹.

This framework has been based on normative references such as the Oxford Companion to Politics of the World, in addition to international legal frameworks, primarily the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the definitions².

First: Energy Security

Energy security is one of the most dynamic and evolving concepts in strategic studies, due to its direct link to international system transformations and technological progress³.

Lexically, the concept-according to western literature-refers to ensuring the continuous availability of energy supplies at reasonable prices, in a way that prevents economic or political disturbances. However, this definition, despite its importance, remains general and does not reflect the geopolitical complexity of the concept in the contemporary context⁴.

¹ Dodds, Klaus. *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

² Ibid

³ Agnew, John. *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*. London: Routledge, 2003

⁴ Klare, Michael T. *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008.

Operationally energy security is defined in the study as the states ability to secure its needs for energy resources (oil and gas) through diverse sources, and to ensure the safety of its transport routes from geopolitical and military threats, in order to achieve continuity of economic growth and political stability.

This definition is based on for interrelated dimensions¹:

- Availability: The existence of sufficient resources in the international market.
- Accessibility: The geographical and political ability to reach these resources.
- Affordability: The possibility of bearing energy costs without harming the national economy.
- Acceptability (environmental sustainability): The compatibility of energy sources with modern environmental standards.

The importance of this concept lies in the fact that it constitutes the primary driver of the geopolitical behaviour of states, especially rising powers like China, which views energy security as a matter of extended national security the transcends national borders to include maritime spaces and international passages.

Second: Maritime Disputes

Maritime disputes are defined in legal and political literature as disagreements arising between two or more states over sovereignty or sovereign rights in maritime spaces, including islands, territorial waters, and the continental shelf.²

¹ Chevalier, Jean-Marie. *The New Geopolitics of Energy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

² Hayton, Bill. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

However, this legal definition does not fully reflect the complex nature of these disputes in the contemporary geopolitical context.

Therefore, they are defined operationally in this study as:¹

- Sovereign-functional disputes that go beyond more border demarcation to include competition for resources control over strategic passages, and the achievement of geopolitical superiority.

In the case of the South China Sea, these disputes take on a special character, where historical claims overlap with modern legal rules, creating a state of legitimacy duality. The contending states do not only seek to establish their borders but to secure their position within regional and international power balances.²

Accordingly, maritime disputes in this context cannot be reduced to their legal dimension; they must be understood as part of a border struggle of influence and resources, where maritime geography becomes a tool for the redistribution of power.

Third: Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)

Exclusive Economic Zones are among the most important legal concepts that have reshaped maritime geopolitics in the modern era.

According to the article 55 of the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Exclusive Economic Zone is defined as maritime area located beyond the territorial sea and extending up to 200 nautical miles from the baselines,

¹ Ibid

² Kaplan, Robert D. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. New York: Random House, 2014.

granting the coastal state sovereign rights in exploring and exploiting natural resources¹.

However, the true importance of this concept manifests in its geopolitical dimension.

Operationally, the EEZ is defined in the study as²:

- A geo-economic space that grants the state near-exclusive control over maritime resources, transforming the sea from a common domain into a sovereign domain subject to competition and conflict.

This concept has led to what can be called the nationalisation of the seas, as states have sought to expand the scope of their maritime control to maximise their economic and strategic gains. It has also contributed to the escalation of disputes, especially in areas where claims overlap, such as the South China Sea, where the EEZ transforms into a tool for redrawing geopolitical boundaries³.

Fourth: Offshore Resources

Offshore resources, in their linguistic sense; refer to resources located in the sea away from the coasts. However, this simple definition hides complex strategic dimensions.

Operationally, these resources are defined in the context of the study as:⁴

¹ Churchill, Robin R., A. Vaughan Lowe, and Amy Sander. *The Law of the Sea*. 4th ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

² Kwiatkowska, Barbara. *The 200-Mile Exclusive Economic Zone in the New Law of the Sea*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1989.

³ Attard, David Joseph. *The Exclusive Economic Zone in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

⁴ Yergin, Daniel. *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations*. New York: Penguin Press, 2020.

- the energy wealth (oil and gas) latent in the seabed and the continental shelf, which, thanks to technological progress, has become economically exploitable, turning it into a major axis of geopolitical competition.

The development of deep-water drilling technologies has transformed these resources from theoretical possibilities into high-value strategic assets, which has redirected conflicts from land to maritime space.

In this context, prospecting for these resources is not just an economic activity; it represents a sovereign act, as states use it to prove their presence and impose their control over disputed areas.

Consequently, offshore resources become the material catalyst that feeds maritime disputes and grants them a deep strategic dimension.

Fifth: Geo-energy

The concept of geo-energy is relatively new in the field of international relations, combining the analysis of energy and geopolitics into one framework. This concept emerged clearly in the works of Daniel Yergin, which emphasised the close link between energy resources and global power balances¹.

Operationally, geo-energy is defined in this study as²:

- An analytical field that studies how the distribution of energy resources, their consumption patterns, and their transport

¹ Beckman, Robert, Ian Townsend-Gault, and Clive Schofield, eds. *Beyond Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Legal Frameworks for the Joint Development of Hydrocarbon Resources*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013.

² Klare, Michael T. *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008.

networks affect the strategic behaviour of states in the reshaping of the international system.

In this framework, energy is not considered a mere dependent variable; it transforms into a factor guiding foreign policies, as states seek to secure their sources, control their roots, and use them as a tool of influence.

Geo-energy also reflects a shift in the nature of geopolitics itself, where geography is no longer the only thing determining policy; rather, resources especially energy have become what redirects geography. States move strategically toward contain energy resources or through which they pass, making energy and axis for reshaping the global geopolitical space¹.

In light of the above, it can be said that the five defined concepts constitute the analytical framework upon which the study is based. If energy security represents the strategic goals sought by states, then Exclusive Economic Zones represent the legal and geographical space in which this pursuit occurs. In contrast, offshore resources constitute the material incentive that feeds competition, while maritime disputes reflect the visible form of this conflict.²

As for the concept of geo-energy, it represents the overarching theoretical framework that explains how these elements combine transform into geopolitical dynamics that reshape the balance of power in the contemporary international system³.

Consequently, establishing these concepts aims not only to achieve methodological accuracy but constitutes an essential step toward understanding the

¹ Collins, Gabriel B., and Andrew S. Erickson. *China's Energy Strategy: The Impact on Beijing's Maritime Policies*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008.

² Ibid

³ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). *Review of Maritime Transport 2022*. Geneva: United Nations, 2022.

complex nature of conflict in maritime spaces, especially in regions like the South China Sea, where energy intersects with sovereignty, and law with power, in a complex and constantly changing geopolitical scene.

Section Two: Theoretical Approaches Explaining Energy Competition

Energy competition constitutes one of the most complex phenomena in contemporary international relations, not only because it involves high-value economic resources but also because it reflects profound shifts in the very structure of power within the international system.

Since the 20th century, and more clearly after the end of the Cold War, power is no longer measured solely by traditional military capabilities; it has become linked to a states ability to control strategic resources—foremost among them energy—and to manage their flows across global networks¹.

This shift has led to a redefinition of the concepts of sovereignty, security, and national interest, such that energy is no longer a mere input for economic production but a structural element in the engineering of global power². States no longer compete only overland, but over the resources latent beneath it, the passages that transport these resources and the infrastructure that makes this flow possible.

¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 5.

² Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 14-16.

From this standpoint, the analysis of energy competition cannot be reduced to a single approach; rather, it requires a theoretical pluralism that allow for understanding the phenomenon from different angles.

Requirement 1: The Realist Approach and the Struggle for Power

The realist school, in its various classical, structural, and offensive branches, is the oldest and most dominant analytical framework for explaining international competition over strategic resources, primarily energy. Realism stems from a pessimistic view of human nature in the international system, where international politics is seen as a continuous struggle for power in the absence of a central world authority (Anarchy)¹. In this context, energy is not considered a mere economic commodity; it is a sovereign tool and a fundamental determinant of a states position in the international hierarchy.

First: The Philosophy of Power and Energy in Classical Realists Thought

In the literature of Hans Morgenthau, national interest is always defined in terms of power². For geo-politicians, energy is the vital nerve of this power.

- **Energy as a Source of Hard Capabilities:**

Realists believe that national power consists of tangible material elements; energy represents the foundation upon which industrial and military capacity is built. A state lacking energy resources remains strategically deficient in sovereignty³ because its political decisionmaking remains hostage to supplying powers.

- **Power Accumulation:**

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 30.

² Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 11.

³ Michael T. Klare, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 21-25.

Competition for energy is not just a desire for economic welfare but also a continuous process of accumulating capabilities. A state seeks to acquire resources to ensure its superiority over rivals, making the possession of energy security synonymous with possessing national security.

Second: Structural Realism and the Logic of Relative Gains

Kenneth Waltz moves us to the level of structural analysis, arguing that the anarchic structure of the international system is what forces states to compete for energy regardless of the intentions of their leaders¹.

- **Relative Gains vs. Absolute Gains:**

This is the most prominent point in the realist analysis of energy competition. While liberals focus on mutual benefit (Absolute Gains), realists focus on who will benefit more? (Relative Gains)². If a competing state gains energy superiority, it represents an existential threat to the other state, as this superiority will later translate into military and technological dominance.

- **Zero-Sum Game:**

Realists see that energy resources are geographically limited; therefore, one state's control over a field or a waterway necessarily means depriving others of it³. This zero-sum logic prevents sustainable cooperation and makes energy regions arenas of permanent conflict.

Third: The Security Dilemma in the Energy Context

The Security Dilemma, formulated by John Herz and expanded by Robert Jervis is a cornerstone for understanding international tensions related to energy.

¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 102.

² Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 485-507.

³ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 118.

- Action and Reaction:

When a state takes measures to secure its energy sources (such as building fleets to protect tankers or establishing alliances with producing countries), these defensive actions are interpreted by other states as offensive measures aimed at hegemony¹.

- Energy Armament Spiral:

This misinterpretation (or strategic caution) drives rival states to take countermeasures, leading to escalated tension in the militarisation of resource regions². Thus, the pursuit of energy security becomes a cause of geopolitical instability.

Fourth: Offensive Realism in the Search for Regional Hegemony

According to John Mearsheimer, great powers are not satisfied with being strong; they seek to be the Hegemon in their region to prevent the rise of any rivals³.

- Preventing the Rise of Rivals:

In the framework of energy competition, to control global energy sources not just for use, but also to possess a veto right over the growth of other powers. Controlling energy flows gives a state the ability to strangle the economic engine of any potential competitor.

- Energy as a Tool for Deterrence and Pressure:

Realist states realise that energy dependence is a weakness that can be exploited. Supply lines and maritime passages grant the state a non-military deterrence tool⁴, where it can hint at cutting supplies to achieve political gains.

Fifth: Realist Critique of the Idealism of Interdependence

¹ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214.

² John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (1950): 157-180.

³ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 140-145.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

Realism rejects the thesis economic interdependence in the energy sector will lead to peace. Rather, it views this dependence as a dangerous vulnerability (Arthan)¹.

- Sensitivity of Dependence:

Realism argues that relying on external energy sources makes the state vulnerable to political blackmail. Thus, geopolitical competition in resource-rich areas is a constant attempt to reduce this dependence and transform it into strategic independence².

- The Geopolitics of Resources:

Realism emphasises that the distribution of resources is not fair, and this unequal distribution is the primary driver of history and geopolitics. strong states will always move toward gray or disputed areas is to secure their needs, making a clash a matter of time and nothing more.

In conclusion, the Realist approach provides a structural explanation for energy competition is a struggle for survival and power in an anarchic international environment. Energy, in this perspective, is not just a resource; it is a determinant of status and a tool for hegemony. The dominance of the logic of relative gains in the security dilemma makes international cooperation in energy a temporary and fragile matter, always governed by the balance of power and the relentless pursuit of states to maximise their material capabilities to ensure their national security in a world that does not forgive the weak.

Requirement 2: the Geo-economic Approach and Energy Competition

¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Myth of National Interdependence," in *The International Corporation*, ed. Charles P. Kindleberger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 205-223.

² Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 27.

The Geo-economic approach is one of the most important analytical tools that emerged to explain power dynamics in the post-Cold War era¹. If traditional geopolitics focuses on military geography, then geo-economics focuses on commercial and financial geography. Based on the thesis of Edward Luttwak, states have not stopped struggling; they have shifted the struggle from the logic of warfare to the logic of economic competition². In the context of energy, resources and networks turn into strategic tools for achieving national superiority.

First: Competition through Networks and Infrastructures:

In geo-economic philosophy, power is no longer measured only by geographical area, but by the ability to control cross-border flows³.

- **Control over Strategic Nodes:** Luttwak argues that states to build energy networks (gas pipelines, liquefaction plants, oil ports) that act as sovereign tools. A state that controls the distribution point or a major transport route possesses immense geo-economic power, as it can direct or block flows to serve its political agenda⁴.

- **Re-engineering the Geographical Space:** Energy infrastructure is not just technical facilities it is a process of redrawing maps. Extending a gas pipeline between two countries creates a new geographical reality that binds them for decades, turning geography from an obstacle into a channel for spreading influence⁵. Competition here is over who plants their infrastructure first within the space of others.

¹ Edward N. Luttwak, *Turbo-Capitalism: Winners and Losers in the Global Economy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 125-127.

² Edward N. Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce," *The National Interest*, no. 20 (1990): 17-23.

³ Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics," 19.

⁴ Pascal Lorot, "Introduction à la géoéconomie," *Économie internationale* 70, no. 2 (1997): 3-10.

⁵ Jean-Paul Rodrigue, *The Geography of Transport Systems*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 44.

Second: Energy as a Geo-economic Influence Tool:

In this framework, energy moves from being fuel for industry to becoming a weapon of structural diplomacy.

- **Creating Structural Dependency:** Energy is used to create unequal relationships of dependence. When a major power provides technology or financing for energy projects in other countries, it exercises structural influence that links the political and economic systems of those countries to the supplying center of power¹. This type of influence is stronger than military occupation because it is silent influence and sustainable.

- **Calculated Mutual Interdependence:** Geo-economic states realise that mutual dependence is not always a guarantee of peace; it can be used as a tool for blackmail. Controlling the pipeline valve or maintenance and technology contracts gives the supplying state an informal veto right over the sovereign policies of importing states².

Third: From Geopolitics to Geo-economics:

This reflects the structural shift in the nature of the international system, where economic tools have become the primary driver of high politics.

- **Change in the Nature of Ammunition:**

In traditional geopolitical conflict, ammunition was missiles; in geo-economic conflict, ammunition is capital, technology³, and exploration rights. Energy competition in this context is a race toward technological leadership (such as deep sea drilling technologies), because whoever possesses the technology possesses the ability to impose their conditions angiography.

- **Comprehensive National Power:**

¹ Sanam S. Haghighi, *Energy Security: The External Legal Relations of the European Union with Major Oil and Gas Supplying Countries* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2007), 18-22.

² Luttwak, *Turbo-Capitalism*, 130.

³ Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics," 18.

Geo-economics links a states survival to its economic success. Energy is the primary driver of growth, and growth is the source of funding for military power. Therefore, energy competition is essentially a competition for status in the coming international system. A state that emerges from the energy race as an economic loser will necessarily emerge from the great power club politically and militarily¹.

In conclusion, the geo-economic approach offers an advanced analytical lens suited to the complexities of the 21st-century. It illustrates how energy has transformed from resource into a network of influence, and how pipelines and ports have become the new fronts of international conflict. In this perspective, influence is measured not only by warships but also by the ability to link the world to energy supply chains whose joints the state controls.

Requirement 3: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

The Regional Security Complex theory, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, represents a qualitative addition to strategic studies, providing a middle ground between the global comprehensive perspective and a narrow national perspective. This theory stems from a basic premise that security cannot be understood in isolation from the geographical context, and that most security threats travel short distances, making the region the most accurate analytical unit for understanding international conflicts, especially competition for vital resources like energy².

First: Security Interdependence and Negative Interdependence

¹ Ibid., 21.

² Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40-45.

At the heart of RSCT lies the concept of security interdependence, which indicates that the security concerns of a group of states are linked to each other to such an extent that the security of any state cannot be analysed independently¹.

- Organic Linkage in a Resource Environment:

Buzan argues that states within a single complex live in a state of security interdependence. In the context of energy competition, this means that any move state makes to secure its needs or explore new fields is immediately seen as a security act affecting the regional balance of power². This overlap makes it difficult to neutralise energy from sovereign conflicts.

- Patterns of Amity and Enmity:

The Theory emphasises that history and old enmities shape how states perceive energy threats³. In tense security complexes, energy cooperation is not seen as an economic opportunity but as a potential existential threat, where each party fears that mutual energy dependence will turn into a tool for blackmail or regional hegemony.

Second: The Primacy of Geography and Proximity

Unlike proponents of the end of geography, RSCT adherents insist that geographical distance remains the filter through which security interactions pass⁴.

- Threats as a spatial Phenomenon:

The theory holds that states are affected by their immediate environment more than by distant powers. Energy, being a resource linked to fixed geography (fields, straits, ports), creates permanent friction points⁵. Spatial proximity makes it

¹ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd ed. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 190.

² Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-72.

⁵ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 49-52.

difficult for states to ignore the energy movements of their neighbors, turning resource-rich regions into the heart of the regional security complex.

- Effects of External Powers on the Complex:

The theory explains how Global Powers can interfere with a regional security complex, but it emphasises that regional interaction remains governed by neighborhood dynamics. Energy competition attracts external powers, but the regional complex determines whether this interference will lead to stability or increased regional conflict.

Third: Multi-Sectoral Security and Securitisation

One of the most prominent contributions of the Copenhagen School is the expansion of the security concept from the purely military dimensions (political, economic, social, and environmental)¹.

- Energy as a Vital Security Sector:

In RSCT, energy security is treated as an independent security sector that intersects with other sectors. When a state classifies energy as a security issue, it moves it from the level of normal politics to the level of extraordinary politics². This process is called securitisation; energy competition is presented as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures, including the threat of military force to protect resources.

- Regional Stability and Economic Security:

The theory holds that energy competition touches the identity and welfare security of states. A state that loses its ability to secure energy in its region fears the collapse of its economic and social system. Therefore, the struggle for resources within the security complex becomes a struggle for the structural survival of the state.

¹ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, 23-26.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

Fourth: The Structure of the Regional Security Complex and the Balance of Power

The theory analyses the distribution of capabilities within the region and how that affects resource competition.

- **Regional Powers and Hegemons:**

In any security complex, there are polar powers seeking to impose their energy agenda. Energy competition is used here to reshape the regional balance of power; a state that succeeds in becoming an Energy Hub for the region acquires political influence the grants it the ability to lead the security complex¹.

- **Cross-Sectoral Linkages:**

The theory illustrates how competition in the energy sector feeds conflicts in other sectors. Failure to reach regional energy agreements leads to military and political tensions², keeping the security complex in a state of permanent mobilisation.

We conclude from the propositions of Barry Busan and Ole Wæveer that energy competition is not just an economic dispute, but also a regional security dynamic par excellence. RSCT provides us with the keys to understanding why energy regions remain chronic hotspots of tension; security interdependence, geographical proximity, and the process of Securitisation transform resources into existential, non-negotiable issues.

Requirement 4: Liberal Institutionalism and Energy Governance

While realism focuses on the inevitability of conflict, Liberal institutionalism emerges as an optimistic theoretical framework that sees the possibility of transforming energy competition from a zero-sum game into institutional

¹ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 55.

² *Ibid.*, 62.

cooperation¹. Based on the thesis of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, this school stems from the premise that interdependence and the need to reduce Transaction Costs push states toward building international regulatory frameworks to govern the behaviour of actors in the global energy market².

**First: Role of International Institutions in Mitigating Energy
Anarchy:**

Institutional liberalism holds that international institutions are not just bureaucratic structures, but contribute to changing the cost-benefit Calculations of states³.

- Reducing Transaction Costs: In the absence of institutions, negotiating energy contracts and pipeline routes is costly, complex, and risky. International institutions provide permanent platforms for negotiation and set unified standards for technical and legal arbitration, facilitating cooperation and reducing chances of clash.
- Providing Information and Transparency: One of the biggest problems in energy competition is the information deficit that feeds the security dilemma⁴. Institutions (such as the International Energy Agency - IEA) provide accurate data on stocks and demands, reducing strategic suspicion between states and turning energy from the national secrets into a technical file open for discussion⁵.

**Second: International Energy Regimes as a Framework for Governing
Behaviour:**

¹ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 51-55.

² Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Boston: Longman, 2012), 20-23.

³ Keohane, *After Hegemony*, 85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵ Richard Scott, *The History of the International Energy Agency: The First 20 Years* (Paris: OECD/IEA, 1994), 35-40.

This focuses on the concept of the International Regime as formulated by Stephen Krasner, as a set of principles, rules and procedures around which actors expectations converge¹.

- Legalising Competition: International energy regimes (such as the International Energy Charter or the Convention on the Law of the Sea - UNCLOS) seek to create peaceful rules of engagement. Instead of resorting to force to secure a gas field, these regimes direct states toward legal paths for border demarcation and dispute resolution, transforming conflict from the struggle of power to a struggle of law.
- Creating Stable Expectations: International regimes insure states that the commitments of other parties will be sustainable. In a sector requiring massive long-term investments (such as laying transcontinental pipelines)², states cannot invest without an international regime that guarantees energy will not be politicised or supplies cut off abruptly.

Third: Mechanisms of Cooperation and Transforming Competition into Integration:

Liberalism examines functional mechanisms that may cooperation a rational choice for states even amidst competition.

- Complex Interdependence: Keohane and Nye argue that the intertwining of economic interests makes the cost of military conflict higher than any gains achieved from seizing resources³. In the energy sector, importing, exporting, and transit states become hostages to each other in a network of interests that makes cooperation a technical necessity for economic survival.
- Global Energy Governance: Liberalism moves beyond the concept of absolute sovereignty toward Joint Governance. This mechanism assumes that major

¹ Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 2.

² Krasner, *International Regimes*, 15.

³ Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 24.

issues (such as energy transition or securing maritime passages) are global issues that a single state cannot solve, imposing the building of collective management of resources that insures the interests of producers and consumers alike¹.

In conclusion, Liberal Institutionalism does not deny the existence of competition, but it believes in placing it within an institutional framework that tames the conflictual tendencies of states. The power of rules, international regimes and cooperation mechanisms is what prevents energy from turning into fuel for permanent wars. For our thesis, this approach represents the legal and diplomatic horizon through which states seek to legitimise their claims or resolve their disputes, proving that institutional rationality remains the safety valve in a highly complex and volatile international energy environment.

Conclusion of Chapter One:

It can be concluded from the conceptual and theoretical analysis within this chapter that geopolitical competition over energy cannot be reduced to a mere economic or technical race to secure resources. Rather, it fundamentally embodies an ongoing process of reshaping the structure of the international system.

The historical approach to geopolitical thought has demonstrated a qualitative shift in the relationship between the state and geographic space; moving from a traditional conception of land as a static, organic space for sovereignty, to a contemporary Vision that views it as a dynamic space flows², where energy networks intersect with trade routes and strategic corridors.

In this context, a profound transformation in the concept of power has emerged. Power is no longer limited to the possession of hard military capabilities;

¹ Thijs Van de Graaf and Jeff Colgan, "Global Energy Governance: A Review and Research Agenda," *Palgrave Communications* 2, no. 1 (2016): 1-12.

² Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 112.

it has expanded to include the capacity to build and manage energy networks and their associated infrastructure.

These shifts reflect the rise of what can be termed Structural Power, which enables states to exercise indirect and sustainable influence beyond their geographic borders by controlling the flow of resources rather than merely controlling their locations¹².

On the other hand, the analysis of energy competition reveals its complex nature, which simultaneously combines the logic of conflict and the logic of cooperation. While realist considerations impose competitive behaviour based on resource protection and the maximisation of relative gains³, the nature of the globalised international system necessitates institutional and legal frameworks to regulate this competition—as seen in the rules governing maritime domain. This overlap between conflict and cooperation reflects a pattern of Complex Interdependence, requiring states to maintain a delicate balance between national security requirements and the exigencies of international stability.

Furthermore, it is evident that geography continues to play a decisive role in guiding international behaviour, albeit in new and more intricate forms. According to the Regional Security Complex perspective, security is no longer tied solely to immediate geographic proximity; it has become linked to all actors who intersect within energy networks and their pathways. In this sense, energy security transforms into a primary determinant in reshaping regional alliances and producing new patterns of security interactions that transcend traditional borders.

Accordingly, the conceptual and theoretical framework constructed in this chapter does not constitute a mere theoretical background. Instead, it represents a fundamental analytical tool for understanding the dynamics of energy competition in international reality. From this standpoint, these concepts—such as energy

¹Susan Strange, *States and Markets*, 2nd ed. (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 25-28.

²

³ Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 248.

security, structural dependency, and the security dilemma—will be employed in analysing the case study in subsequent chapters, allowing for the interpretation of geo-strategic interactions in sensitive maritime regions, particularly those areas where major interests intersect with the significance of global energy corridors.

Chapter Two South China Sea: Geopolitical and Energy Importance

The South China Sea is where global trade, energy security and great power competition intersect. It is not just a body of water connecting the shorelines of Southeast Asia; it is one of the most strategically charged maritime spaces in the contemporary international system. Few parts of the world have so many dimensions of geopolitical importance in so small an area: critical shipping lanes, enormous hydrocarbon reserves, overlapping territorial claims, increasing military competition, and the forward stationing of competing great powers.

To understand the geopolitical and energy importance of the South China Sea, one must look beyond a strictly descriptive geographical account. It requires an analytical approach that links physical geography to strategic calculus, energy economics to national security doctrine, and international law to the realities of power politics. The sea reflects much of the broader tensions of the twenty-first century international order: the rise of China, the strategic rebalancing of the United States, the limits of regional institutions, and the increasing intersection of energy competition and military strategy.

The chapter is divided into two closely related parts. The first part analyses the geographic and strategic importance of the South China Sea with regard to its navigational characteristics, the South China Sea as a global trade and energy route and the military importance that makes it one of the most contested maritime spaces on earth. In the second part, the analysis turns towards energy resources, taking into account the hydrocarbon reserves that have intensified regional rivalries, the national oil companies as sovereign tools of state power, the effect of offshore energy competition on bilateral and multilateral relations, and the new facets of the energy transition that are adding new layers of competition to the already complex geopolitical landscape of the sea.

Together, these two sections provide the empirical and analytical foundation for the thesis central argument, that the South China Sea is a geopolitical arena in which energy interests, maritime strategy and great power competition converge in ways that make it one of the defining flashpoints of contemporary international relations.

Section One : The South China Sea: Strategic and Geographic Significance

Requirement 1: Geographic location and navigability

Forward

The South China Sea is one of the most sensitive and consequential waters in the contemporary international system. No longer simply a body of water separating countries, it has become a major axis of geopolitical, economic and military competition among regional and international powers. Besides being a vital corridor for global energy and trade, this sea is of importance for its strategic location which makes it a vital link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Map Number 05: South China Sea



DW (Deutsche Welle), "China's Nine-Dashed Line 'Has No Basis' Under International Law," *DW*, July 27, 2015, accessed May 25, 2026, <https://www.dw.com/en/chinas-nine-dashed-line-has-no-basis-under-international-law/a-18609290>.

It has In view of the changes in modern geopolitics, the importance of seas is not measured by their surface or geographical location but by their ability to control the global flows of energy, trade and communication. The South China Sea thus provides an obvious example of what scholars have termed the geopolitics of flows—a region where economic interests are interwoven with military and strategic interests, and where the ambitions of great powers intersect with the national security interests of smaller coastal states.¹

First: The Geographical and Marine Nature of the South China Sea

The South China Sea is situated in the western Pacific Ocean and covers an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometres, making it one of the largest semi-enclosed seas in the world. It is bordered to the north by the southern coast of China, including Hainan Island; to the west by the Indochinese Peninsula, encompassing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand; to the east by the Philippines and Taiwan; and to the south by Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Singapore.²

This geographical position has granted the sea exceptional strategic importance, as it forms the primary link between East Asia and the Indian Ocean, and consequently between the major industrial and manufacturing centers in Asia and the energy-producing regions of the Arabian Gulf and Africa. It is thus

¹ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982, Article 122.

² Valencia, Mark J., Jon M. Van Dyke, and Noel A. Ludwig. *Sharing the Resources of the South China Sea*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1997.

considered as one of the most consequential maritime domains for the movement of the global economy and international supply chains in the South China Sea.¹

From a legal perspective, the sea is a semi-enclosed sea under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. However, this legal identity hides a great geographical and maritime complexity, manifested in the dispersion of hundreds of small islands, coral reefs, maritime rocks, sandbanks and narrow passages on the surface of the sea. This geographical diversity has also made the South China Sea a permanent zone of disputes over maritime sovereignty, the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and the interpretation of UNCLOS provisions to the advantage of different state interests.²

The South China Sea is very variable in depth from the bathymetric point of view. The northern and southern parts contain relatively shallow areas connected to the continental shelf, which are particularly important for hydrocarbon exploration. By contrast, depths in the central portions of the sea exceed 4,000 meters. This variation has direct military and economic consequences: deep areas allow nuclear submarines to operate more safely and less detectably, and so major naval powers – especially China and the United States – have strong incentives to control these maritime passages. Meanwhile, most proven oil and gas reserves are concentrated precisely in the shallower continental shelf areas, directly explaining the intensity of disputes over EEZ delimitation³.

The seas major maritime features are divided into four main island groups and reef systems, with their own strategic, legal and geopolitical importance.

¹ Ibid

² Schofield, Clive. "What's a Rock? The Legal Characterisation of Maritime Features in the South China Sea." *Leiden Journal of International Law* 27, no. 1 (2014): 201–218.

³ Fravel, M. Taylor. *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008

The Paracel Islands, known in Chinese as Xisha, are located in the northwestern part of the sea. They have been under Chinese military control since 1974, when they came into the fold after a naval clash with South Vietnam. Nevertheless, Vietnam maintains its sovereign claim over the islands to this day, as does Taiwan. The Paracels strategic significance lies in their proximity to major international shipping lanes, their use as bases for radar installations and maritime surveillance systems, and their role in projecting Chinese naval power northward toward the Taiwan Strait and southward toward the Spratlys¹.

The Spratly Islands represent the most complex and geopolitically dangerous area of the South China Sea. Comprising more than 100 scattered islands, submerged rocks, and coral reefs in the southern section of the sea, the Spratlys are subject to overlapping sovereignty claims from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan².

Their proximity to significant oil and gas reserves, their location along the most vital international shipping routes, and their military utility as forward operating positions. Since approximately 2014, China has carried out large-scale island-building operations on several reefs including Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef constructing airstrips, military harbors, radar installations, and anti-aircraft systems. This unprecedented militarisation has alarmed neighboring states and the United States, fundamentally changing the regional military balance³.

¹ Ibid

² Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). *The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)*. Case No. 2013-19, Arbitral Award (July 12, 2016).

³ Ibid

Scarborough Shoal is about 230 kilometres from the Philippine coast and much farther from Chinese shores, but has become one of the more visible flashpoints in Sino-Philippine relations. Since a 2012 standoff in which China effectively seized control of the shoal from the Philippines, Beijing has maintained a steady presence of coast guard and maritime militia there. The shoal is a constant flashpoint, because it lies so close to Philippine military bases and on major shipping lanes. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled that China's historic rights claims in the South China Sea had no legal basis under UNCLOS a decision Beijing has refused to recognise¹.

Less often, the focus of direct confrontation is the Pratas Islands in the northern part of the sea, administered by Taiwan. Nevertheless, their proximity to shipping lanes into the East China Sea gives them a silent strategic value and any change in their status would have big implications for Sino-Taiwanese tensions.

Second: South China Sea as Navigation Hub and Global Strategic Corridor

While classical geopolitics linked power to the control over territory, contemporary strategic thinking increasingly links power to control over the maritime passages, trade networks and energy routes. In this respect, the South China Sea has become much more than a regional body of water but, rather, a key node in the architecture of the global economy².

The sea is the shortest and most efficient maritime route between East Asia and the Indian Ocean, Middle East and Europe. Economies such as China, Japan and South Korea are structurally dependent on this corridor to secure their oil, gas

¹ UNCTAD, *Review of Maritime Transport 2022*, 45

² U.S. EIA, *South China Sea*, 1.

and raw material imports and to export their manufactured goods to world markets. This reliance means that maritime security in the South China Sea is a matter of national economic survival, not simply a question of territorial prestige¹.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that around one-third of global maritime trade passes through the South China Sea every year, with values estimated to be between 3.4 and 5.3 trillion dollars . This trade involves crude oil, liquefied natural gas. (LNG), minerals, consumer goods, industrial machinery and commercial containers to markets in Asia, Europe and the Americas².

The energetic dimension of these flows has a special meaning. This corridor is important for China, which uses it to ship about 60 percent of its oil imports, and for Japan and South Korea, which use it to import more than 80 percent of their energy needs from the Arabian Gulf³. More than 100,000 commercial ships and tankers transit these waters annually, making the sea one of the worlds most active maritime corridors. A prolonged security disruption — whether it is a military conflict, a naval blockade or sabotage of infrastructure will have immediate and severe consequences for energy prices, global shipping rates and insurance costs, and will reverberate through the world economy⁴.

Beyond trade and energy, the sea is also a vital part of global food security. It is home to one of the most productive marine fisheries in the world accounting for about 10 percent of the global fish catch and providing the major source of protein

¹ Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 15–17.

² Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, 34–36.

³ UNCTAD, *Review of Maritime Transport 2022*, 46.

⁴ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) China Power Project, *How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2020; updated 2022).

and livelihood for tens of millions of people throughout Southeast Asia . Fishing rights have become a recurring source of confrontation, especially between Chinese maritime militia vessels and the fishing fleets of Vietnam and the Philippines¹.

Third: The Geopolitics of Straits and Strategic Choke Points

The South China Sea is connected to some of the world strategic maritime straits, which greatly increases its strategic importance. These chokepoints are bottlenecks in global trade and energy flows, and the prospect of their disruption or control by a hostile power is an issue of extreme strategic concern for all major economies².

Of these chokepoints, the most critical is the Strait of Malacca. The strait stretches for about 800 kilometres between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra and is less than three kilometres wide at its narrowest point the Phillips Channel near Singapore. It is the world second most important oil transit corridor after the Strait of Hormuz, with more than 16 million barrels of oil passing through it each day, most of it bound for China, Japan, and South Korea³ .

The Strait of Malacca is a significant strategic danger. Any sustained disruption – from conflict, piracy or deliberate blockade would cripple the energy supply chains of the completely East Asian industrial complex. This vulnerability has led to what Chinese strategists have openly called the Malacca Dilemma: the acute realisation in Beijing that the United States, through its alliances with Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, has the capacity to impose a chokepoint blockade that could cripple Chinas economy in the event of a major conflict. This

¹ U.S. EIA, *South China Sea*, 3.

² CSIS China Power Project, *How Much Trade Transits*.

³ Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 19.

strategic anxiety has also driven Chinas military investment in the South China Sea, including the development of artificial island bases, the creation of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, and the exploration of overland pipeline options through Myanmar and Pakistan¹.

Should the Malacca Strait be shut down, the Sunda Strait and the Lombok Strait are the alternatives most often mentioned. The Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra is shallow enough that its not suitable for supertankers and large warships. There is the Lombok Strait, between the islands of Bali and Lombok, which is deeper and can accept bigger vessels, but adds several days to maritime journeys and hugely raises transport costs undermining the economic efficiency that makes the Malacca route so attractive².

The main passage between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean is the Luzon strait, and its depth is especially useful for the passage of nuclear submarines. Its strategic importance has grown alongside Chinas growing submarine fleet, which relies on the South China Sea as a bastion for nuclear-armed submarines that must pass through this strait to reach open Pacific waters for deterrence patrols³.

The Taiwan Strait, separating mainland China and Taiwan, is probably the single most dangerous geopolitical chokepoint connected to the South China Sea system. It controls shipping routes vital to Japan and South Korea and is the site of the most consequential unresolved territorial dispute in East Asia. Any military

¹ Greg Poling, *The South China Sea in Focus: Clarifying the Limits of Maritime Claims* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2013), 18–21.

² Michael Leifer, *International Straits of the World: Malacca, Singapore, and Indonesia* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Sijthoff & Noordhoff, 1978), 51–54.

³ Till, *Seapower*, 203.

conflict over Taiwan would directly threaten freedom of navigation through this strait and would be a catastrophic disruption to the global economy¹.

Fourth: Geopolitical Analysis – Strategic Perspective on Location

The geography and navigational elements of the South China Sea suggest a region that is much more than the sum of its physical parts. A number of analytical frameworks help explain why this maritime space has become a focal point of contemporary geopolitical competition².

Nicholas Spykmans concept of the Rimland – the coastal areas around the Eurasian heartland – still carries a great deal of explanatory power in this respect. Control of the South China Sea and its littoral states means control of the maritime flanks of Chinas rise, which is why Washington has invested so heavily in maintaining alliance relationships with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Australia. For Beijing, in contrast, projecting power into the South China Sea represents a means of breaking out of what Chinese strategists consider a strategic encirclement by U.S.-aligned states along its maritime periphery³.

Saul Cohens idea of geopolitical shatterbelts – areas where the interests of competing great powers overlap and create chronic instability – also fits well with the South China Sea. The sea is such a contested space, where Chinas quest for regional hegemony meets the American strategy of maintaining a rules-based regional order, and where smaller states such as Vietnam and the Philippines have to

¹ Leifer, *International Straits*, 56.

² Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), 38–41.

³ Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics of the World System* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 39–43.

navigate between these competing pressures while trying to protect their own national interests¹.

Perhaps most importantly for our contemporary moment, the South China Sea is an example of what scholars have called the expansion of sovereignty beyond land borders to include maritime routes, energy supply chains, and undersea infrastructure. Chinas behaviour in the sea-building islands, sending coastguard ships, creating Air Defence Identification Zones-reflects a doctrine that regards maritime space not as open commons but as a strategic extension of the countrys territory to be defended and controlled².

The above analysis makes it clear that the South China Sea is much more than a maritime space defined by geographic coordinates. It is a strategic axis where global trade, energy security, military competition and the ambitions of major and regional powers meet. It is special and special in contention because of its geographical configuration – semi-enclosed, with contested island groups, connected to critical straits and at the nexus of the world most energy-hungry economies. To comprehend the nature of the conflict in this sea, one must look at geography, economics, law and military affairs, and recognise that the region has become one of the defining arenas of geopolitical competition in the twenty-first century³.

Requirement 2: South China Sea A Crucial Passage for World Commerce

The geographic features of the South China Sea account for its physical connectivity, but its function as a conduit for global trade has turned it from a

¹ Cohen, *Geopolitics*, 44.

² Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives: China and the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 4 (2011): 42–45.

³ Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives," 46.

regional maritime space into a pillar of the global economic order. The sea sits at the intersection of Asian industrialism, Middle Eastern energy exports, and European consumer markets, making it structurally irreplaceable in the contemporary world economy. This requirement provides an in-depth examination of the commercial significance of the sea through an analysis of the volume and composition of trade flows, the economic dependence of major states on the seas shipping lanes, and the strategic implications of that dependence for issues of freedom of navigation, military posture, and great power competition¹.

First: Economic Interdependence and Trade Flows 2.

The South China Sea is one of the worlds busiest and economically most important maritime corridors. The South China Sea represents about 21 per cent of total world trade in value per year, increasing to about one third by cargo volume This is an estimated commercial value of between \$3.4 trillion and \$5.3 trillion per year, making the seas shipping lanes some of the most economically productive in the world².

The composition of this trade reflects the structure of the modern global economy. The Arabian Gulf and Africa depend on the sea as the main route for crude and LNG shipments to the energy-hungry economies of East Asia. It is the main route for manufactured goods shipped from Chinese, Vietnamese and South Korean factories to markets in Europe and the Americas. It transports agricultural commodities, mineral resources, semiconductors and consumer electronics – that is, the physical flows that support the global supply chains on which modern industrial civilisation depends³.

¹ Hayton, *The South China Sea*, 239.

² Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 5.

³ Poling, *On Dangerous Ground*, 14–17.

For China, the world biggest trading country, the South China Sea is not just important, it is economically essential. More than 60 percent of Chinas energy imports are shipped by sea and a great deal of its export trade transits the Malacca Strait at the southwestern entrance to the sea. Closing those lanes, even for a short time, would inflict serious damage on the Chinese economy, which is why Beijing considers the security of the sea to be a core national interest and why it has invested so heavily in military capabilities to deter any attempt to restrict its maritime access¹.

Japan and South Korea are even more heavily dependent. Both countries lack almost any domestic energy resources and depend on maritime imports to supply more than 80 percent of their oil and gas requirements, with most of that traffic passing through the South China Sea. Disruption of any of those routes would lead to an energy emergency in both countries within weeks. This structural vulnerability has been a major driver of Japans deepening security ties with the United States and growing strategic interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, even though Japan is not a direct claimant state².

Second: Freedom of Navigation as a Legal Battleground of Strategy

Freedom of navigation in the South China Sea has become one of the most contentious issues in contemporary international law and great power relations. For decades, the United States has held that the waters of the sea beyond the 12-nautical-mile territorial sea around any lawful island are governed by the principles of freedom of the high seas under UNCLOS. Under this interpretation, all states have the right to sail, fly and operate in these waters without having to seek prior permission from any coastal state.

¹ James Kraska and Raul Pedrozo, *International Maritime Security Law* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013), 311–14.

² Kraska and Pedrozo, *International Maritime Security Law* , 315.

China disagrees with this position on several key issues. While Beijing declared an ADIZ in the East China Sea in 2013, it has not done so in the South China Sea. Chinese officials and legal experts have argued that military operations in China's EEZ need to be notified in advance, a position at odds with standard interpretations of international maritime law¹. China's island-building program has further complicated matters, building artificial structures from which Beijing asserts territorial seas and associated rights, assertions explicitly rejected by the 2016 PCA arbitral tribunal².

To counter these Chinese assertions, the U.S. has undertaken a persistent program of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) whereby U.S. naval ships deliberately pass within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-held features to challenge what Washington regards as illegitimate claims to the maritime domain. The United States, between 2015 and 2023 Navy has carried out dozens of such operations, each triggering sharp diplomatic protests from Beijing and contributing to an ongoing cycle of maritime tension. The FONOPs debate is a microcosm of a wider struggle between two irreconcilable visions of maritime order: one that sees the sea slowly being brought under Chinese sovereign control, and another that sees the sea remaining a global commons based on universal rules³.

Third: The Sea Lanes of Communication and Their Strategic Context

The South China Sea lanes have not only economic but also deep military-strategic importance. Control of these lanes—or the credible capability to deny them

¹ David A. Welch, "What's an ADIZ?," *Foreign Affairs*, December 9, 2013.

² Gao and Jia, "The Nine-Dash Line," 127.

³ Congressional Research Service (CRS), *U.S. Freedom of Navigation (FON) Program* (Washington, DC: CRS, 2023), 2.

to an adversary—features prominently in Chinese and American strategic planning in the Indo-Pacific¹.

The other side of the Malacca Dilemma for China is the need to protect the sea-lanes through which energy and raw materials flow to its industry. Beijing has addressed this vulnerability with a multi-pronged approach: developing alternative energy corridors overland through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), developing anti-access/area-denial capabilities designed to prevent U.S. naval forces from operating freely within the first island chain, and building fortified island bases in the Sprat².

For the United States, protecting freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is not only about protecting commercial shipping — it is a prerequisite to maintaining the forward military presence that underwrites American alliance commitments across the Indo-Pacific. The freedom to transit the sea enables U.S. forces to reinforce Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan in a crisis, to project power into the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, and to maintain the credibility of American security guarantees. Any Chinese ability to constrain U.S. military operations in the sea, therefore, would have implications far beyond the South China Sea itself³.

The South China Seas unique geopolitical character arises from the convergence of commercial and military interests: a space where the logic of economic interdependence and the logic of military competition work in tandem,

¹ CRS, *U.S. Freedom of Navigation*, 3.

² Kraska and Pedrozo, *International Maritime Security Law*, 322.

³ Andrew S. Erickson and Arthur S. Ding, eds., *Continental Nations and Maritime Sovereignty: China and the United States in the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2014), 84–87.

strengthening rather than dampening each states incentive to maintain and grow its presence in the region¹.

The South China Seas role as a gateway for global trade is inseparable from its status as a strategic battleground. The scale of trade and energy flows transiting its waters produces structural dependencies that convert it from a regional maritime space into a global public good – one whose stability is critical for the functioning of the world economy. But at the same time, this very importance makes it a prize worth fighting for; states want to protect or increase their ability to control the movements of goods, energy and military forces through this vital corridor. The result is a maritime space in which commercial and strategic logics are in a permanent, productive tension, producing both the incentives for conflict and the costs that contain it².

Requirement 3: Strategic and Security Importance of the South China Sea

The military and security significance of the South China Sea is at an all-time high. In the last two decades, the sea has transformed from an area of latent potential conflict to one of the worlds most militarised maritime environments. This transformation results from a number of converging dynamics: Chinese naval modernisation and its strategy of asserting control over contested features; the American strategic rebalance to the Indo-Pacific; the military anxieties of smaller regional states caught between these competing great powers; and the inherent military value of a sea that controls access to critical choke points, provides bastion space for nuclear submarines, and sits astride the principal maritime avenues of approach for any power seeking to project force into East Asia³.

¹ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), 18–22.

² Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, 210.

³ UNCTAD, *Review of Maritime Transport 2022*, 48.

First, Chinese Military Strategy in the South China Sea

Since the early 2000s, the military posture of China in the South China Sea has changed fundamentally. From a position largely based on asserting territorial claims through diplomatic and legal channels, Beijing has gradually shifted to one of physical control – building up military installations, deploying naval and coast guard forces at scale, and acquiring the capacity to deny access to competing powers within what Chinese military doctrine calls the first island chain¹.

The heart of this strategy has been the island-building program in the Spratly archipelago. China launched the worlds largest land reclamation project in the history of maritime territorial disputes since about 2014, creating some 3,200 acres of new land on seven reefs — Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, Johnson South Reef, Cuarteron Reef, Gaven Reef and Hughes Reef. On the three largest—Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief—China built full-length military airstrips capable of hosting fighter aircraft, bombers, and surveillance planes; deep-water harbours capable of docking warships and submarines; radar and sensor installations; anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile batteries; and support facilities for long-duration military operations².

This building program has significantly extended the range of Chinas military in the South China Sea. Before 2014, Chinese military forces in the southern sea relied on far-flung bases in Hainan Province. Following the construction, Chinas fighter aircraft based at Fiery Cross Reef could reach almost all of the South China Sea, with Manila, Hanoi and the Strait of Malacca well within their combat radius. Chinese surface ships and submarines can now remain in the area for long periods, fundamentally changing the military balance. In 2015, The

¹ M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 221–24.

² O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization*, 44.

RAND Corporation assessed that China had effectively achieved *fait accompli* in the Spratly islands, making any attempt to reverse the situation militarily extremely costly¹.

China has also developed a sophisticated maritime militia boats crewed by ostensibly civilian fishermen who operate under military control to harass foreign ships, conduct surveillance and assert *de facto* Chinese presence at contested features. This gray zone approach lets Beijing exercise control without going far enough to draw a formal military response from the United States or its allies. The maritime militia played a prominent role during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff and has been regularly stationed around the Spratlys to keep the pressure on Philippine and Vietnamese vessels².

Second: The United States Military Posture and Alliance Architecture

The United States has responded to China's military buildup in the South China Sea through a combination of direct naval and air operations, alliance strengthening, and capacity-building assistance to regional partners. The strategic rationale for this response is rooted in an American principle long held: that no one power should be allowed to dominate the Western Pacific and that freedom of navigation in international waters must be maintained as a universal right³.

The U.S. military maintains a significant forward presence in the region with permanent bases in Japan (Okinawa), South Korea, and Guam and has periodically rotated forces through bases in the Philippines, Australia, and Singapore. The 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines, which

¹ David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016), 23–26.

² Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China's Maritime Militia: What It Is and How to Deal with It," *Foreign Affairs*, September 21, 2015.

³ Poling, Cooper, and Prétat, *The Emerging Gray Zone*, 17.

was expanded under the Marcos administration in 2023, granted the U.S. military access to a number of new Philippine base sites, some of which are strategically situated to cover the Luzon Strait and the northern Spratly islands¹.

The Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) program has become the most visible part of American military engagement in the South China Sea. The U.S. has intentionally sailed within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-occupied features and carried out what the U.S. The Navy calls challenges to Chinas excessive maritime claims innocent passage. The FONOPs have a dual purpose: to show U.S. resolve to allies and partner states, and to preserve the legal and practical precedent that these waters are international maritime space, not Chinese sovereign territory. Between 2015 and 2023, the United States conducted more than 40 FONOP missions in the South China Sea, each of which was documented and protested formally by China².

In addition to FONOPs, the United States has conducted numerous dual carrier exercises, joint naval patrols with allies, and long-range bomber overflights aimed at showcasing American capability and resolve. The routine overflights of B-2 and B-52 bombers from Guam over the South China Sea are both a message of deterrence and a demonstration that American strategic assets are not deterred by Chinese anti-access systems³.

Third: The Nuclear Dimension – Strategic Stability and the Submarine Bastions

¹ Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2019), 23–25.

² CRS, *The Philippines: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023), 5.

³ CRS, *U.S. Freedom of Navigation*, 4.

One often-overlooked dimension of the South China Seas military significance is its role in Chinas nuclear deterrence strategy. The Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of China operates Jin-class nuclear-armed submarines (Type 094), based out of Yulin Naval Base on Hainan Island, the northern edge of the South China Sea. These submarines must transit the South China Sea to reach the open Pacific Ocean where they can patrol in positions from which their JL-2 ballistic missiles can strike targets on the U.S. mainland¹.

The South China Sea, then, becomes a bastion — a protected space in which Chinese nuclear submarines can operate with some degree of safety from American anti-submarine warfare (ASW) forces that they would not enjoy in more exposed open-ocean environments. That in turn makes the Spratlys a bastion, with Chinas fortified island bases, radar installations and maritime patrol aircraft extending its surveillance coverage over the approaches to the area where the submarine is operating².

The nuclear dimension of the South China Sea adds a crucial strategic layer that is often absent from analyses focused only on territorial or energy disputes. Any American military action that threatened Chinas submarine bastion would carry risks of escalation to nuclear levels, invoking deterrence dynamics that constrain American freedom of action in ways that purely conventional scenarios do not. This is probably one reason why the United States, despite its rhetoric about Chinese island building, has not taken direct military action to challenge Chinese installations in the Spratlys³.

Fourth: Military Concerns of the Regional States

¹ Wu Riqiang, "Survivability, Deterrence, and China's Nuclear Modernization," *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014): 152–54.

² Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, 166.

³ Gompert, Cevallos, and Garafola, *War with China*, 45.

The growing Sino-American military competition in the South China Sea has created serious security concerns among smaller regional states that have to navigate their way between two competing powers. All of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia face a common strategic dilemma. None has the capacity to counter-balance Chinese military power alone, but none is fully prepared to align itself with the United States in a way that risks Chinese economic or military retaliation¹.

Vietnam has responded by pursuing a strategy of diversified security partnerships, developing its coast guard and naval capabilities, engaging the United States through increased defence cooperation agreements, and cultivating a wide range of diplomatic relationships to internationalise the South China Sea dispute and prevent it from becoming a purely bilateral Sino-Vietnamese confrontation. Vietnam has also invested heavily in anti-ship missile capabilities – particularly Russian-supplied Kh-35 missiles and their locally produced equivalents designed to raise the cost of any Chinese naval action against Vietnamese offshore installations².

The Philippines has vacillated between accommodation of China under the Duterte administration and a more explicit return to reliance on the alliance under Marcos Jr. since 2016. This oscillation speaks to the deep structural dilemma facing Manila: an economic dependency on China and a vulnerability to Chinese pressure, coupled with a formal defence treaty with the United States and an exposure to Chinese coercion at Scarborough Shoal, the Spratlys, and increasingly at Second Thomas Shoal, where Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels have engaged in recurring confrontations involving water cannons, laser dazzlers, and collision manoeuvres³.

¹ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam and Rising Tensions in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, no. 3 (2010): 432–34.

² Heydarian, *The Indo-Pacific*, 142.

³ Donald E. Weatherbee, *Indonesia in ASEAN: Foreign Policy and Regional Order* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2019), 112–15.

Although not a formal claimant in the South China Sea, Indonesia has suffered repeated Chinese incursions into its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around the Natuna Islands, which have been entered by Chinese coast guard and fishing vessels as well as claims to historic fishing rights. In response, Jakarta has deployed naval forces, lodged diplomatic protests, and formally renamed the relevant maritime zone the North Natuna Sea — a symbolic assertion of Indonesian sovereignty that Beijing has refused to recognise¹.

Fifth: Militarisation, Risk of Escalation, and Regional Security Architecture

The ongoing militarisation of the South China Sea poses serious questions about the stability of the regional security architecture and risk of unintended escalation. The interplay of Chinese island-based military capabilities, American freedom of navigation operations, and the routine deployment of coast guard and maritime militia ships by multiple actors creates a complex environment where accidents, miscalculations, and misinterpretations of intent are possible with potentially serious consequences².

The most dangerous escalation scenarios are direct Sino-American military incidents a collision between naval vessels, an aerial confrontation or an exchange of fire between coast guard ships that could trigger a spiral of retaliation. There are no effective mechanisms for crisis communication between China and the United States in the South China Sea, and no agreed code of conduct for naval encounters. The current 2014 Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, or CUES, only applies to

¹ Buszynski and Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute*, 198.

² Llewelyn Hughes, "Crisis Management Mechanisms in the South China Sea," *Asia Policy* 21, no. 1 (2016): 89–91.

military vessels, and excludes coast guard vessels. This means the management of such incidents depends on the judgement and restraint of individual commanders rather than systematic protocols¹.

ASEANs structural shortcomings as a regional security mechanism – the requirement for consensus decision-making, the norm of non-interference in the sovereign disputes of members, and the divisions between claimant and non-claimant states – have meant that the organization has been largely unable to constrain Chinese behaviour or to provide an effective multilateral framework for managing the South China Sea dispute. Negotiations on the South China Sea Code of Conduct have dragged on for thirty years, but so far, no legally binding instrument has been concluded, nor is there any guarantee that the framework under negotiation will cover the completely contested area and include an enforcement mechanism².

The military and security dimensions of the South China Sea are not incidental to its economic or energy importance – they are intertwined. Chinas island-building program, its maritime militia deployments, and its submarine bastion strategy are a concerted effort to translate territorial claims into permanent military realities. Equally comprehensive, the American response – via FONOPs, alliance reinforcement and capability demonstrations – is an effort to sustain the regional balance of power and prevent Chinese hegemony over the sea. The smaller regional states caught in the middle of these two powers face deep strategic dilemmas that neither purely accommodationist nor confrontational strategies can satisfactorily resolve. The result is a regional security environment that is managed but not resolved, with chronic instability and persistent risks of escalation that

¹ Document of the 14th Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), *Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)*, Qingdao, China (April 22, 2014).

² Alice D. Ba, "ASEAN's South China Sea Dilemma: Institutional Limits and Regional Order," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 3 (2020): 341–44.

make the South China Sea one of the world most dangerous geopolitical flashpoints¹.

Section Two: Energy Resources and the Escalation of Geopolitical Rivalry

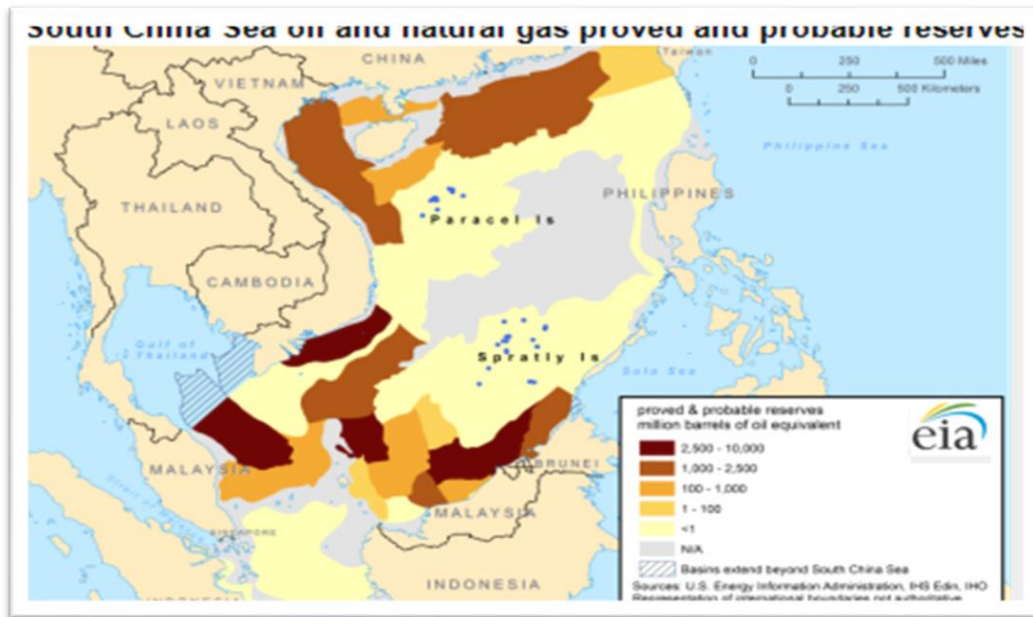
Requirement 1: Oil and Gas Reserves in the South China Sea

Contemporary geological and geophysical assessments concur that the South China Sea contains significant strategic hydrocarbon resources – but the scale of those resources remains disputed between Western agencies and Chinese officials in a manner reminiscent of the politicisation of energy data during geopolitical rivalry. What cannot be argued is that the energy resources of the sea lie at the crossroads of the world fastest growing energy demand and Asias most important unresolved territorial dispute. The combination makes the hydrocarbons in the South China Sea far more strategically significant than their absolute volume would suggest².

Map Number 06: South China Sea oil and gas reserves map

¹ U.S. EIA, *South China Sea*, 4.

² Mark J. Valencia, "The South China Sea Hydrocarbon Potential: History, Possibilities, and Geopolitics," *Energy Policy* 81 (2015): 211–13.



U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), "The South China Sea Is a Broad, Half-Enclosed Sea with Many Shipping Lanes," *Today in Energy*, April 4, 2013, accessed May 25, 2026, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=10651>.

First: Estimates and the politics of quantifying resources

The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates that the South China Sea has about 11 billion barrels of proven and probable oil and some 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (U.S. EIA, 2013). These figures put the hydrocarbon endowment of the seaway behind reserves in the established major producing regions like the Arabian Gulf, the Caspian Basin or the West African Deepwater. However, the EIAs figures are deliberately conservative, counting only technically recoverable reserves in areas where there is sufficient geological data – and that excludes much of the disputed central sea area that has been geologically surveyed but not fully assessed¹.

Chinese official estimates differ dramatically from EIA figures. Some reports by the Geological Survey of China and affiliated institutions have suggested

¹ Fravel, "China's Strategy," 303.

that the sea could hold as much as up to 213 billion barrels of oil equivalent, a figure that would make it one of the largest hydrocarbon provinces in the world¹. The discrepancy is methodological: Chinese estimates are usually based on geological inference of prognosticated resources and not confirmed drilling results, and they cover the whole disputed region, including the contested deep-sea center.

This discrepancy has a political side as well which should not be overlooked. The sheer size of Chinas reserves engenders a narrative that the South China Sea is a national energy patrimony of existential importance—a narrative that warrants extraordinary measures to protect Chinese claims and delegitimises foreign exploration activity in the region. This framing has been consistently embedded in Chinese domestic political discourse since the early 2000s linking the nine-dash line claims to the concept of national rejuvenation and energy sovereignty².

Second: Geographical Distribution of Major Basins and Overlapping Problem

The most commercially productive and geologically verified hydrocarbon basins in the South China Sea are in the near-shore continental shelf areas of the coastal states - exactly the areas over which multiple states claim overlapping EEZ rights under UNCLOS. It is this fact of geography, which is at the heart of the energy dispute in the sea. The most valuable resources are not in the uncontested middle of the sea but along the disputed margins³.

In the northern part of the sea, the Pearl River Mouth Basin and the Beibu Gulf Basin are mainly developed by China, and have producing oil fields that have been in commercial production since the 1990s. The Yinggehai Basin, off the western coast of Hainan, is one of the countrys most important domestic gas fields,

¹ Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism," 72; Fravel, "China's Strategy," 305

² U.S. EIA, *South China Sea*, 5.

³ Buszynski and Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute*, 111.

and is an example of Beijings insistence on developing marine resources within what it claims as its own sovereign waters¹.

In the south, Petronas has developed Malaysias Sarawak and Sabah basins largely, making the country one of Asias major LNG exporters. One of the largest offshore development commitments in Southeast Asia is the Kasawari gas project with a production capacity of over 900 million cubic feet per day, which was announced in 2021². Vietnams Nam Con Son and Cuu Long basins are the backbone of Vietnamese offshore production, supplying gas for power generation and supporting Vietnams wider industrial development strategy. Indonesias Natuna gas field is one of the regions largest natural gas reserves but also overlaps an area in which Chinese fishing and coast guard vessels have repeatedly entered waters claimed by Indonesia — a case study of how energy geography can be directly linked to sovereignty disputes³.

The most acute overlap crisis is in the Spratly Islands area. Geological surveys have indicated the possibility of hydrocarbon deposits in the area of the Spratly features. However, there has been no systematic drilling, so the extent and commercial viability of the deposits are not known. The strategic importance of controlling Spratly features is therefore also prospective – states that secure control today are positioning themselves to enjoy the fruits of future discovery and development, and to deny that benefit to rivals⁴.

Third: Methane Hydrates and the Struggle for Future Energy Resources

¹ Thayer, "Vietnam and Rising Tensions," 438.

² Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 124.

³ Alexei V. Milkov, "Global Estimates of Hydrate-Bound Gas in Marine Sediments: How Much Is Really Out There?," *Earth-Science Reviews* 66, no. 3-4 (2004): 185–87.

⁴ Milkov, "Global Estimates," 192.

The South China Sea is also developed as a major methane hydrate province in the world besides conventional hydrocarbons. Methane hydrates are crystalline ice-like compounds that trap large amounts of natural gas within the seafloor sediments under conditions of high pressure and low temperature. Methane hydrates are believed to contain more energy than all the proven conventional fossil fuel reserves combined on a global basis, although the commercial extraction of methane hydrates is still in an early stage¹.

China announced in May 2017 a successful extraction test from methane hydrates in the South China Sea at a depth of more than 1,200 meters — the world's first successful sustained extraction from marine methane hydrates. In 2020, China followed up with more stable and higher-volume tests, dramatically moving forward the timeline for potential commercial exploitation. China estimates the South China Seas methane hydrate reserves could hold energy equivalent to twice China's total domestic conventional oil and gas reserves, a figure which, if proven, would change the long-term energy importance of the region².

This development has important strategic implications. Should the extraction of methane hydrate become economically viable, something most energy experts believe will occur in the 2030–2040 timeframe, then the state that has established physical control over the seabed of the South China Sea will enjoy a structural advantage in accessing these resources. China's island building and continued assertion of control over the maritime space of the sea must therefore be understood

¹ State Oceanic Administration (SOA) of China, *Official Report on the First Successful Methane Hydrate Extraction in the Shenhu Area* (Beijing: Ministry of Natural Resources, 2017).

² Ministry of Natural Resources of China, *Second Successful Trial Production of Methane Hydrate in the South China Sea Announced* (Beijing: GPO, 2020).

not only in terms of current hydrocarbon production but as a long-term positioning strategy for the energy resources of the future¹.

Japan is also heavily invested in methane hydrate research and has conducted its own extraction tests in the Nankai Trough since 2013, making Chinas technological advances a particular concern. Tokyos concern about the South China Sea—through regular naval patrols and diplomatic backing for the rule of law—stems partly from fears that a Chinese monopoly over South China Sea methane hydrates would give Beijing an energy advantage that would structurally weaken Japans strategic position².

The hydrocarbon resources of the South China Sea are a highly complex and deeply politicised element of the regional geopolitical landscape. Although the seas conventional oil and gas reserves are modest in comparison to some other major producing regions, their strategic importance is disproportionate due to their geographical proximity to Asias energy-hungry economies and their presence within contested maritime zones. The discrepancy between Chinese and Western reserve figures is itself a political artefact — a byproduct of the use of energy data as a tool to assert sovereignty. And the emerging race for methane hydrates adds a forward-looking element to the mix, ensuring that energy resources will be a powerful driver of South China Sea geopolitics for decades to come³.

Requirement 2: Energy Investments and National Oil Companies (NOCs)

National oil companies have stopped being just commercial entities in the geopolitical environment of the South China Sea. They have become instruments of

¹ Zou Caineng et al., "Natural Gas in China: Development Trends and Strategic Proposals," *Natural Gas Industry B* 6, no. 4 (2019): 315–18.

² Hayashi, "Methane Hydrates," 108.

³ Ibid

state strategy -- tools through which governments project sovereign claims, establish physical presence in disputed areas and translate diplomatic assertions into economic facts on the water. CNOOC, Petro Vietnam, Petronas and their equivalents are not just making corporate investment decisions; they are using energy infrastructure as a deliberate form of geopolitical advantage¹.

First: Chinese National Oil Companies and the Sovereign Energy Imperative

The China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) is the most direct expression of Chinese maritime energy strategy. CNOOC was created with a specific mandate to develop Chinas offshore hydrocarbon resources, and operates in close coordination with the Chinese state and the Peoples Liberation Army. CNOOCs activities in the South China Sea cannot be divorced from Beijings broader strategic objectives².

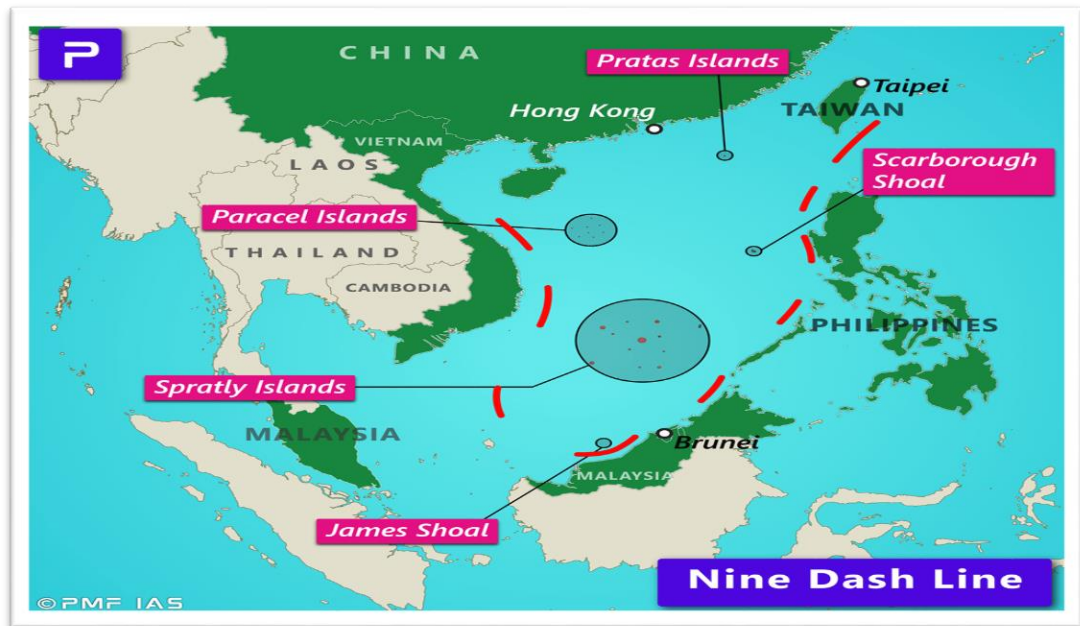
CNOOCs June 2012 leap from commercial energy development to naked geopolitical assertion came with the unilateral announcement of the opening of nine offshore blocks for international bidding, all of them wholly or partly within the EEZ of Vietnam as recognised under UNCLOS. Hanoi swiftly condemned the announcement as a breach of international law and of Vietnamese sovereignty. The episode revealed Chinas readiness to use its national oil company as a sovereign tool — to enforce economic claims in contested waters by commercial means instead of diplomacy or military force alone³.

Map Number 07: South China Sea Nine-Dash Line map

¹ Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism," 81.

² Llewelyn Hughes and Austin Long, "Is There an 'Oil Weapon' in the South China Sea? National Oil Companies as Strategic Instruments," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 143–45.

³ Storey, *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China*, 81.



PMF IAS Team, "South China Sea Dispute: Nine-Dash Line," *PMF IAS*, accessed May 25, 2026, <https://www.pmfias.com/south-china-sea-dispute-nine-dash-line/>.

The 2014 crisis involving the HD-981 drilling rig was the most dramatic deployment of a Chinese energy company in a sovereignty dispute. In May 2014, CNOOC relocated the Haiyang Shiyou 981 drilling platform, then the world's most advanced Deepwater drilling rig, to an area near the Paracel Islands that Vietnam claimed was within its EEZ. CNOOC surrounded the rig with a flotilla of more than 80 ships, including coast guard vessels, naval vessels, and maritime militia boats. Vietnamese vessels trying to approach the rig were driven off with water cannon and in some cases direct ramming. The standoff continued until July 2014, causing the worst Sino-Vietnamese maritime crisis since their 1988 naval battle in the Spratlys. The episode illustrated how Chinese NOCs had effectively become forward instruments of Chinese hard power, their assets protected by military force and used in service of territorial claims¹.

¹ Hayton, *The South China Sea*, 155.

China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Sinopecs efforts in the South China Sea have largely focused on developing the infrastructure that connects offshore resources to Chinas domestic economy, including refineries, LNG terminals, storage facilities and pipeline networks around Hainan Island. This infrastructure investment is part of a long-term strategy to incorporate contested maritime resources into the Chinese national energy system so that the development of currently disputed reserves can be rapidly integrated into Chinas supply chain in the future¹.

Second: NOCs of Other Claimant States

PetroVietnam (PetroVietnam Oil and Gas Group), the national oil company of Vietnam, has emerged as the main vehicle for Hanoi to project and defend its maritime energy sovereignty. Vietnams offshore gas fields, especially in the Nam Con Son, Cuu Long and Malay-Tho Chu basins, are of great importance to the economy, but also are symbols of the Vietnamese sovereign rights amid Chinas pressure².

PetroVietnam has long been looking to bring in international partners such as ExxonMobil, Rosneft, Repsol and others to work on its offshore projects. These partnerships are driven by the need for technical and financial resources, but are also a deliberate internationalisation strategy. By bringing in strong external actors to Vietnamese offshore development, PetroVietnam puts indirect pressure on China to temper its coercive behaviour. The logic is that if the major Western or Russian energy companies have investments in Vietnamese offshore blocks then Beijing will face broader international consequences if it disrupts those operations³.

¹ CNOOC, *Annual Report 2012*, 25.

² Buszynski and Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute*, 129.

³ Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's South China Sea Strategy since the 2014 Oil Rig Crisis," *Journal of Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2020): 183–85.

The results of this approach have been mixed. The 2019 Vanguard Bank episode, when China sent the survey vessel Haiyang Dizhi 8 to conduct seismic surveys in an area where PetroVietnam was conducting drilling operations with Rosneft, showed the limits of the internationalisation approach. Worried about its wider ties with China, Rosneft eventually reduced its involvement, leaving Vietnam to manage a prolonged standoff by itself. In 2017 and 2018, under intense Chinese diplomatic and implicit military pressure, Spanish company Repsol withdrew from two deepwater exploration projects in Vietnamese waters, with Vietnam reportedly paying significant financial compensation to exit the contracts. These episodes show how China can isolate regional states through threatening their international partners¹.

The slightly different model is offered by Malaysias Petronas. Working primarily in the relatively less disputed waters off Sabah and Sarawak—although Chinas nine-dash line technically overlaps with Petronass most productive fields—the company has managed to build world-class LNG export facilities while keeping a lower diplomatic profile than Vietnam. Malaysias approach to the South China Sea dispute has generally been one of quiet bilateral management rather than confrontation and Petronas has been a beneficiary of this relative stability. But the 2019 dispute over Chinese coast guard presence near Malaysian drilling operations in the Luconia Shoals showed that even Malaysias quieter approach has not fully insulated its energy assets from Chinese pressure².

Third: The Coercive Joint Development Strategy

China has always promoted the idea of common development in resolving the management of disputed offshore energy resources. Under this framework,

¹ Le, "Vietnam's South China Sea Strategy," 192.

² Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), *The Vanguard Bank Standoff: Coercion and Resilience* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019).

China and its neighbours would cooperate to develop the hydrocarbons of disputed areas, sharing costs, technology and revenues, while postponing the underlying sovereignty dispute for a future resolution. Joint development is in principle a sensible mechanism to manage disputes over resources when a political solution is not readily available. It is explicitly recognised as an appropriate interim arrangement in UNCLOS Article 74(3)¹.

But in practice, Beijings version of joint development has been consistently organised such that partner states are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) required to accept the practical validity of Chinese sovereignty claims as a precondition for cooperation. China has insisted that any joint development should be within a legal framework that recognises its historic rights in the sea, a requirement that directly contradicts the 2016 PCA ruling and the constitutional requirements of several ASEAN claimant states².

The Sino-Philippine negotiation on joint development in the Reed Bank (Recto Bank) area between 2018 and 2022 is a clear example. Manila, attracted by the prospect of Chinese investment and by Dutertes preference for bilateral accommodation rather than confrontational multilateralism, entered into a series of negotiations on joint exploration following President Dutertes strategic pivot toward China. But negotiations were repeatedly gridlocked over the issue of sovereignty. The Reed Bank is indisputably within the EEZ of the Philippines. If any development framework were to bestow co-equal or supervisory rights on China, then a treaty and Senate ratification would be necessary – per the Philippine constitution – with regard to the restrictions on foreign exploitation of national natural resources. Manila formally announced the negotiations as failed in June

¹ Bill Bower, "China's Oil Rig Diplomacy in Vietnam's EEZ," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 31, no. 10 (2019): 14–16.

² Storey, *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China*, 168.

2022, and the Marcos administration has since returned to a stronger reliance on the U.S. alliance¹.

The joint development episode exposes the fundamental tension in China's energy diplomacy: Beijing uses commercial cooperation to consolidate sovereignty, but the sovereignty cost it exacts makes genuine cooperation impossible for states whose domestic legal systems or public opinion cannot accept implicit recognition of Chinese claims. The outcome has been a systematic failure of joint development as a conflict management tool, contributing to the perpetuation rather than the resolution of the energy dimension of the South China Sea dispute².

Requirement 3: Offshore Energy and Its Effect on Regional Relations

The South China Seas oil and gas wealth has not only produced economic competition, but has also altered the politics and security of the region itself. The search for offshore energy has changed the regional relations from patterns of cautious coexistence and tentative economic cooperation to a more confrontational environment defined by maritime incidents, the militarisation of energy infrastructure and the systematic undermining of ASEAN's ability to manage intra-regional disputes. To grasp how energy competition shapes regional relations, one must study specific crises and confrontations, analyse their strategic logic and assess their cumulative impact on the regional security architecture³.

First: Crises of the Drilling Rig and the Grey Zone Operations

The 2014 HD-981 crisis remains the most significant single episode of offshore energy confrontation in the recent history of the South China Sea.

¹ CSIS AMTI, *China and Malaysia*.

² Valencia, Van Dyke, and Ludwig, *Sharing the Resources*, 173.

³ Kraska and Pedrozo, *International Maritime Security Law*, 338.

CNOOCs decision to bring its deepwater platform into waters contested by China and Vietnam was not a hasty or improvised move; it was a calculated act of sovereignty, timed to occur at a moment of Chinese self-assurance after the first phase of island construction on Johnson South Reef was completed. The rig was, essentially, a floating assertion of sovereignty, an economic outpost supported by military force, intended to set a precedent for Chinese resource exploitation in the disputed zone¹.

Vietnam's response was the most assertive it had taken in the post-Cold War era. Dozens of Vietnamese coast guard vessels were sent to confront the rig, and the clashes – which included direct collisions, water cannon exchanges and the sinking of at least one Vietnamese fishing boat – attracted international media attention. The crisis also sparked a wider nationalist mobilisation within Vietnam, when anti-Chinese demonstrations in several cities developed into riots against foreign-owned factories, including some owned by the Chinese. The episode highlighted the domestic political dimension of offshore energy disputes: in Vietnam, energy sovereignty is not an abstract geopolitical idea, but a matter of direct public concern, with the potential to provoke powerful popular reactions that constrain the flexibility of governments².

The 2019 incident involving the Vanguard Bank showcased China's evolving offshore energy coercion strategy. Instead of sending a drilling rig as a sovereign assertion, as happened in 2014, Beijing sent the survey vessel Haiyang Dizhi 8 to conduct seismic surveys in areas where Vietnam was engaged in active drilling operations with Rosneft. The strategy blended economic disruption — disruption of Vietnamese production — with a legal and political message: that China would not allow energy development in contested areas without its involvement. The months-

¹ Richard Javad Heydarian, "The Duterte Pivot to China: Strategic Illusion or Pragmatic Rebalance?," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 44, no. 2 (2022): 211–14.

² CRS, *The Philippines*, 12.

long extended standoff showed Beijings readiness to sustain coercive presence even at the expense of diplomatic friction and international censure¹.

Second: The Repsol Precedent and the Isolation Strategy

The most sophisticated way China manages offshore oil and gas development in the South China Sea is not through direct military confrontation, but by strategically excluding smaller states from their overseas commercial partners. Beijing can pressure foreign oil companies to pull out of projects with Vietnam, the Philippines or Malaysia, undermining energy development without the diplomatic fallout of direct military action.

The Repsol episodes of 2017 and 2018 proved the viability of this approach. Spanish energy firm Repsol held exploration rights in two deepwater blocks off the coast of Vietnam — Blocks 07/03 and 135/136 — that were within Chinas nine-dash line claims. When Repsol began drilling in the blocks, Beijing made strong diplomatic protests and, according to Vietnamese and international media reports, made implicit military threats that could lead to actual confrontation. Under this pressure, unwilling to jeopardise its commercial interests in China, a far bigger market than its activities in Vietnam, Repsol pulled out of both projects. The contract cancellations were reported to have cost Vietnam 250 to 300 million dollars in compensation to the Spanish company².

The Repsol precedent has cast a chill on international oil companies willingness to invest in Vietnamese offshore blocks that fall within disputed areas. ExxonMobil, which has been developing the Blue Whale gas field off the coast of central Vietnam, one of the largest offshore gas discoveries in Southeast Asia, has also faced similar pressures and has been engaged in long-running negotiations on

¹ Kraska and Pedrozo, *International Maritime Security Law*, 344.

² Hughes and Long, "Is There an 'Oil Weapon'?", 172.

the projects future. The major IOCs are reluctant to risk the commercial and political hazards of working in Chinese-claimed waters, so Vietnam and other claimants are increasingly forced to develop with less technologically sophisticated or well-heeled partners, or to restrict development to blocks well inside their undisputed continental shelves¹.

Third: Cumulative Effect on ASEAN Cohesion and Regional Order

The cumulative effect of offshore energy confrontations has been a substantial erosion of ASEANs internal coherence and its ability to collectively handle the South China Sea dispute. ASEANs strength as a regional institution depends on its ability to reach consensus among ten member states with very different relations with China – from the strong claimant states such as Vietnam and the Philippines, to non-claimants with close economic ties to Beijing such as Cambodia and Laos, to states seeking to balance their relations such as Malaysia and Indonesia².

China has always exploited this diversity, using its economic power over Cambodia, Laos and other economically dependent members to block consensus statements by ASEAN on the South China Sea. The most striking example of this dynamic was the 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh, where Cambodia—then the ASEAN chair—blocked the adoption of a joint communique that would have referenced the Scarborough Shoal standoff. This was the first time in ASEANs 45-years history that the grouping failed to issue a joint communique - a failure widely attributed to Chinese influence over the Cambodian presidency³.

¹ Heydarian, "The Duterte Pivot," 231.

² Ba, "ASEAN's South China Sea Dilemma," 354.

³ Hughes and Long, "Is There an 'Oil Weapon'?" 179.

More generally, the energy disputes in the South China Sea have fostered a dynamic in which each claimant state is increasingly managing its relationship with China bilaterally rather than through multilateral ASEAN frameworks. This fragmentation serves a strategic purpose for Beijing, which has more power in bilateral negotiations than in multilateral negotiations, where the voices of multiple claimant states reinforce each other. The effect is a progressive hollowing-out of the ASEAN framework for South China Sea management and a drift toward a bilateral, great-power managed approach to the seas disputes¹.

Territorial competition over offshore energy has long been a key driver of the South China Seas status as a site of constant geopolitical tensions. The crises of drilling rigs, the maritime standoffs, the isolation of international energy partners and the exploitation of divisions within ASEAN have all combined to create a regional environment in which energy sovereignty is inextricably linked with broader questions of territorial sovereignty, national dignity and the balance of power. These crises set the stage for patterns of coercive presence, grey zone activity, commercial isolation, and diplomatic fragmentation that mark Chinese behaviour in the energy domain of the sea and will continue to shape the political landscape of the region for the foreseeable future².

Requirement 4: Offshore Renewable Energy, Energy Transition and Future of Competition

The energy-related geopolitical significance of the South China Sea is not static at the level of conventional hydrocarbons. The global energy system is structurally moving away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy and this is opening up new dimensions of competition in and around the sea: offshore wind energy, rare earth mineral resources, submarine energy infrastructure and the

¹ Bower, "China's Oil Rig Diplomacy," 22.

² Le, "Vietnam's South China Sea Strategy," 219.

strategic implications of clean energy supply chains. These new vectors of competition are adding new layers of geopolitical complexity to an already contested maritime space, and they guarantee that the South China Sea will continue to be a hot spot of energy geopolitics well into the second half of the twenty-first century¹.

First, offshore wind energy as a new frontier of sovereign competition

The South China Sea has very good natural conditions for offshore wind energy development. The same monsoon patterns that create the area's unique weather also produce consistent, powerful winds, making the region one of the most promising in the world for offshore wind power. The business case for harnessing wind resources in the South China Sea has gained significant momentum as the cost of offshore wind technology has seen a steep decline – over 50 percent between 2010 and 2022 (IRENA, 2022).

China is the world leader in offshore wind capacity, with more offshore wind power installed than the rest of the world combined as of 2022. Ming Yang Smart Energy and CSSC Haizhuang are developing more advanced floating wind turbine technology – platforms that can operate in deep water far from shore, precisely the type of environment that dominates much of the South China Sea. Indeed, Beijing has tied offshore wind development explicitly to its strategy for maritime sovereignty: Chinese companies have carried out wind resource assessments in contested areas, and there are signs that China plans to develop offshore wind capacity on and around its artificial islands in the Spratlys, building energy infrastructure that would increase its physical presence in the contested zone².

¹ Le, "Vietnam's South China Sea Strategy," 222.

² Buszynski and Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute*, 162.

Offshore wind presents an opportunity and a sovereignty challenge for other claimant states. Vietnam, which has an ambitious offshore wind program that seeks to develop 7 gigawatts of capacity by 2030 and potentially much more after that, has encountered the familiar problem of Chinese coercion when its offshore wind development projects have encroached on disputed areas. In this context, the energy transition may not, as is often assumed, reduce the geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea. On the contrary, it may in some ways increase them by introducing new vectors of sovereign assertion and economic competition¹.

Second: Dimension of Rare Earth Minerals and the Green Economy

Oceanographic surveys in recent years have discovered large deposits of rare earth elements and critical minerals on the seabed of the South China Sea. They include cobalt, nickel, manganese and heavy rare earth elements that are found in polymetallic nodules and sediments on the seafloor, as well as lithium and other elements needed for the critical minerals requirements of the clean energy transition — batteries, electric vehicles, solar panels and wind turbines².

Their strategic importance is determined by the intersection of these submarine mineral resources with the larger geopolitics of the energy transition. China has a stranglehold on the supply chains of many critical minerals, with the bulk of the world refining capacity for rare earths, cobalt and lithium. Control over additional submarine mineral deposits in the South China Sea would further cement Chinas structural advantage in the supply chains critical to the global transition to clean energy – a form of geo-economic leverage that would reach far beyond the region itself³.

¹ a, "ASEAN's South China Sea Dilemma," 358.

² Donald K. Emmerson, "ASEAN Stumbles in Phnom Penh," *Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2012.

³ Ba, "ASEAN's South China Sea Dilemma," 365.

Because of fears over Chinese domination, the United States, Japan, Australia and the European Union have made resilience of critical mineral supply chains a major strategic priority. Some American efforts, such as the Minerals Security Partnership that launched in 2022, aim in part at developing alternative sources of critical minerals in partner countries to reduce reliance on Chinese-controlled supply chains. Any increase in Chinese control over submarine mineral resources in the South China Sea will be viewed in Washington and its allies not only as a regional territorial issue, but as a direct threat to the broader transition to clean energy and the economic security of the West's allies¹.

Third: Energy infrastructure Submarine and structural power

In addition to wind and minerals, the South China Sea is crisscrossed by a vast network of submarine cables and proposed transnational energy infrastructure projects. Much of the world's submarine data cables are in the sea, so the maritime environment is important not only for energy but also for the digital communications infrastructure of the world. China has also invested in submarine cable projects across the region, and the prospect of Chinese dominance over both the physical routes of the cables and the digital infrastructure they carry has raised similar concerns in Washington, Tokyo and Canberra to those associated with Huawei's role in terrestrial telecommunications networks².

The ASEAN Power Grid project, a long-discussed idea to connect the electrical grids of Southeast Asian countries, including via submarine power cables, is another piece of the energy infrastructure competition. Whoever builds and controls the regional power grid interconnections will have a form of structural economic power over the region's energy security. China, with its Belt and Road Initiative and the investments of its state energy companies, has emerged as a front-

¹ Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 192.

² Global Wind Energy Council (GWEC), *Global Wind Report 2022* (Brussels: GWEC, 2022), 44–47.

runner to fund and build much of this infrastructure. But the United States and its allies are working to provide alternative partners for energy infrastructure development in the region, through efforts such as the Lobito Atlantic Railway, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and bilateral infrastructure financing¹.

Fourth: The Role of the United States and Its Allies in the Clean Energy Race

The United States, Japan and Australia have signaled that the clean energy transition is a dimension of the strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. The QUAD grouping – the United States, Japan, Australia and India – has set up a Clean Energy Supply Chain Initiative as one of its working groups, realising that the geopolitics of the energy transition will be partly determined by which powers control the critical mineral and technology supply chains that are needed for decarbonisation.

Washingtons strategy combines different elements: financial support for critical mineral projects in partner countries via the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC); diplomatic efforts to prevent Chinese companies from gaining control of mineral assets in third countries; technological cooperation with allies to accelerate the development of alternative battery chemistries and clean energy technologies that reduce dependence on Chinese-controlled materials; and regulatory measures like the Inflation Reduction Act (2022), which provided incentives for clean energy manufacturing in the United States and allies².

In the context of the South China Sea, these macro-level initiatives intersect with the specific competition for offshore wind, submarine minerals and energy infrastructure. The United States is supporting offshore wind development in the Philippines and Vietnam through public development banks, in part as a means to

¹ International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), *Global Status of Offshore Renewable Energy* (Abu Dhabi: IRENA, 2022), 14–16.

² GWEC, *Global Wind Report 2022*, 49.

build American-aligned energy infrastructure in countries China is simultaneously pressuring through its maritime coercion. Japan, with its own world-class offshore wind technology industry, is seeking similar partnerships in Southeast Asia. As Australia deepens its security relationship with the U.S. under AUKUS, it is also building the ability to contribute to maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea that is directly relevant to monitoring military activity and offshore energy assets¹.

The energy transition is not simplifying the geopolitics of the South China Sea; its adding new dimensions of competition to an already complex landscape. Offshore wind, submarine mineral resources and transnational energy infrastructure are becoming contested domains where the strategic logic of the conventional hydrocarbon competition is being reproduced and magnified. Chinas dominance of clean energy manufacturing and supply chains gives it structural leverage that extends beyond the sea itself. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies are devoting considerable resources to building alternative supply chains and energy partnerships that would reduce the geopolitical leverage that can be derived from such dominance. For the Southeast Asian states, the energy transition is both an opportunity, to develop world-class renewable energy resources; and a risk, that competition between great powers over clean energy supply chains will replicate in the renewable energy space the coercive dynamics that have characterised conventional energy competition in the South China Sea².

Conclusion of the Chapter two

¹ Chinese Wind Energy Association (CWEA), *Floating Offshore Wind Turbine Technology Progress Report* (Beijing: China Net, 2022).

² James R. Hein, Tracy A. Kirchner, and Kira Mizell, "Deep-Ocean Mineral Resources as the Emerging Frontier of Green Technology," *Nature Geoscience* 6, no. 4 (2013): 265–68.

The analysis that has taken place across the two sections of this chapter has delineated the dual nature of the South China Sea as a geographical and geopolitical entity. As a geographic space, it is remarkable for its navigational significance, its association with critical maritime chokepoints, and its concentration of strategic resources—from conventional hydrocarbons to emerging clean energy assets. It is a geopolitical arena, a space where the key tensions of the contemporary international order – between rising and established powers, between state sovereignty and international rule of law, and between energy interdependence and energy competition – are played out with particular intensity and consequence.

This chapter contains a number of analytical threads that will be continued in the analysis of the rest of the thesis. First, the South China Sea is characterised by the ongoing use of energy assets – whether drilling rigs, survey vessels, offshore installations or NOC operations – as tools of sovereign assertion rather than simply commercial activity. This instrumentalisation of energy for geopolitical ends is symptomatic of the deep integration of energy security into national security doctrine in China and increasingly into the responses of regional states and extra-regional powers.

Second, the sea shows the limits of international law as a tool to manage conflicts when the most powerful actor in the dispute – China – refuses to accept binding legal rulings and has enough material power to ignore the legal findings of multilateral tribunals. The 2016 PCA award, the most detailed legal analysis of the South China Sea dispute, has been embraced by the international community and rejected by Beijing – a pattern that is emblematic of the larger crisis of international legal authority amid great power competition.

Third, the emergence of the energy transition as a new dimension of South China Sea competition suggests that the geopolitical importance of the sea will not

diminish as the global economy decarbonises. If anything, the sea is more, not less, important as a strategic prize in a decarbonising world, given the confluence of offshore wind potential, submarine critical mineral resources, and submarine energy infrastructure.

These analytical themes provide the framework for the third chapter of the thesis that will consider the specific strategies of the key actors in the South China Sea competition: China, the United States, the ASEAN claimant states and extra-regional powers. It will also examine the prospects for conflict management and regional stability in a maritime space where the intersection of energy, strategy and sovereignty makes resolution both urgently necessary and profoundly difficult.

Chapter Three: Strategic Competition and Prospects for Cooperation in the South China Sea

The South China Sea has slowly evolved from a regional maritime dispute into one of the most important arenas of contemporary great power competition. A combination of unresolved territorial claims, strategic energy resources and the forward deployment of military forces by multiple actors has resulted in a geopolitical environment that is both competitive and interdependent . The risk of conflict is real but the costs of open confrontation are also severe enough to encourage a form of managed tension rather than outright war .

This chapter considers two related dimensions of this reality. The first section looks at the strategic behaviour of the key actors – China, the claimants in Southeast Asia, and the extra-regional great powers. It explains not only what each actor does, but why, and what the interaction between these strategies produces in terms of regional stability and instability. The second section examines the mechanisms through which the parties have sought to manage this competition – ASEAN diplomacy, UNCLOS, the Code of Conduct negotiations, and joint development arrangements – and evaluates their effectiveness, limitations and what future trajectories they suggest for the regions geopolitical landscape.

The analysis in both sections is based on one clear analytical premise: that the South China Sea dispute is not primarily a legal or a technical question, but a political and strategic one – determined by the interests, capabilities and calculations of states operating in a competitive international environment in which no overarching authority can impose order. To understand the dispute, then, we need to take these strategic logics seriously, rather than assuming that either legal clarity or institutional mechanisms will generate resolution per se.

Section One: Regional and International Actors and Patterns of Competition

Requirement 1: Chinas Strategy in the South China Sea Area

First: The Ideational Foundations and Strategic Imperative: The Nine-Dash Line Decoded

Chinas grand strategy in the South China Sea (SCS) is the confluence of a complex mix of historical revisionism, economic necessity, and geopolitical imperative. Central to Beijings ideational and legal edifice is the highly contentious Nine-Dash Line (Jiǔduàn Xiàn), a sweeping cartographic claim that encompasses about 80 to 90 percent of the total maritime space of the SCS¹.

The eleven-dash line was first present on Chinese maps in the late 1940s, altered to nine dashes by the Communist government, and more recently to ten dashes in official cartography, to include Taiwan, to demarcate Beijings claim over all land features and surrounding waters within its perimeter².

From an academic and analytical perspective, the meaning and legal status of the Nine-Dash Line remains purposefully vague in Beijings official doctrine, which serves a dual purpose:

- The Doctrine of Historic Rights: China sees the line not only as a boundary of island sovereignty but also as a demarcation of historical jurisdiction. China argues that Chinese fishermen and naval expeditions discovered, named, and exploited the resources of the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos for centuries, giving China historic rights over the waters, seabed, and subsoil long before the codification of modern international maritime law.

- The Erasing of the Century of Humiliation: The establishment of control over the territory within the Nine-Dash Line is intrinsically linked to the Chinese

¹ Hayton, Bill. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

² Kaplan, Robert D. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. New York: Random House, 2014.

Communist Partys (CCP) central narrative of National Rejuvenation (Guojia Fuxing) within domestic political discourse. The reclamation of these waters is presented as the ultimate historical redress of the Century of Humiliation (Bainian Guochi), when Western and Japanese imperial powers violated Chinas maritime sovereignty. As such, Beijing regards the space within the Nine-Dash Line as a Core Interest (Hexin Liyi), on par with Taiwan and Tibet, which makes diplomatic compromise structurally difficult¹.

Second: The Security Dilemma: Offensive-Defensive & Militarisation

Strategically, the SCS is Chinas critical maritime bastion. Within the framework of Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) operational doctrines, Beijing considers the full control of these waters an imperative need to defend its industrial, economic and political core along the eastern seaboard from military intervention from outside powers, mainly the United States. Control of the SCS allows China to establish a strategic buffer zone to push its defensive perimeter out toward the First Island Chain. It also offers a protected bastion (sanctuary) for Chinas nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) based in Hainan Island to project strategic deterrence².

This defensive imperative, however, is enacted through highly offensive, revisionist mechanisms that create a regional security dilemma. China has carried out unprecedented engineering to fashion large-scale land reclamation, turning low-tide elevations, reefs and rocks into heavily fortified artificial islands. The militarisation of the Big Three outposts in the Spratly Islands Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief Reefs, has led to unsinkable aircraft carriers deep in the maritime heart of Southeast Asia. With long-range anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) like the YJ-12

¹ RAND Corporation. *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015.

² Gao, Zhiguo, and Bing Bing Jia. "The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications." *American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2013): 98–124.

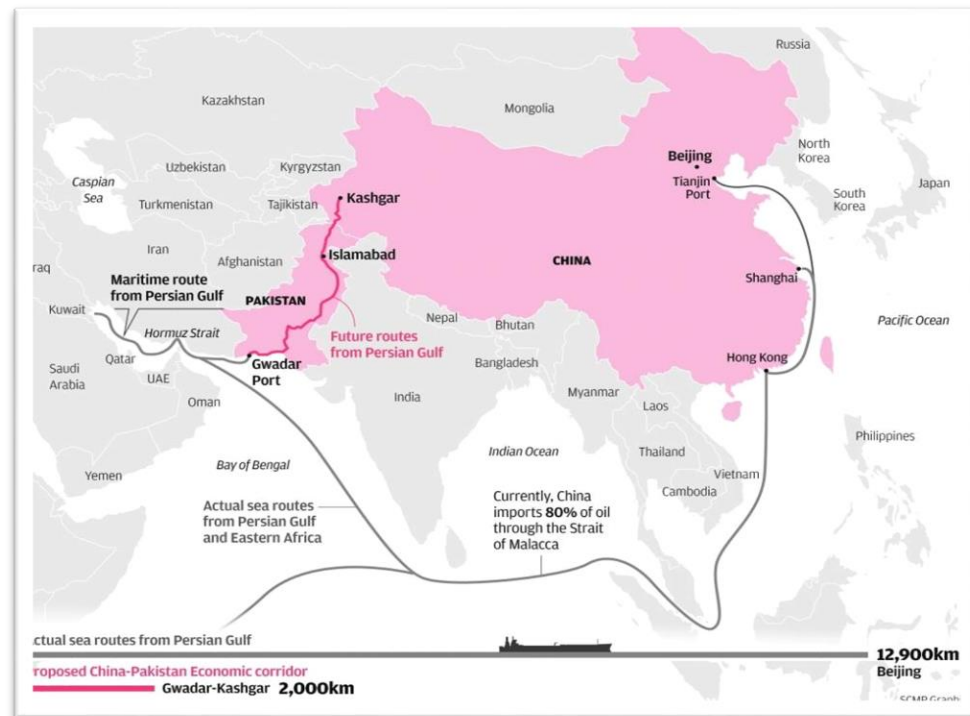
and YJ-18, surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries, high-frequency radar installations, underground ammunition depots, and extended runways capable of hosting heavy bombers, these forward bases allow China to project continuous military power, intercept foreign aircraft, and structurally shift the regional balance of power without initiating open kinetic warfare¹.

Third: The Malacca Dilemma, Energy Security and the Geo-economic Anchor of the BRI

The geo-economic dimension of Chinas maritime strategy is essentially based on its acute vulnerability to sea-borne energy supply routes, a structural anxiety famously conceptualised as the Malacca Dilemma by former President Hu Jintao. Some 80 percent of Chinas crude oil imports pass through the narrow, congested choke point of the Malacca Strait, and Beijing sees a critical vulnerability: in a geopolitical crisis or conflict with the United States, a naval blockade at the Malacca Strait could topple the Chinese economy by cutting off its energy supplies.

Map Number 08: The Malacca Dilemma map

¹ .S. Department of Defense. *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2019.



Vidya Sagar Reddy, "Reinforcing China's Malacca Dilemma," Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), 12 août 2024, <https://cimsec.org/reinforcing-chinas-malacca-dilemma/>.

Thus, dominating the SCS is a two-pronged energy and economic strategy:

- **Internal Resource Monopolisation:** Exerting sovereign control over the extensive but untapped oil and natural gas resources within the Nine-Dash Line to diversify its domestic energy portfolio and lessen dependence on volatile foreign sources.

- **The Geo-economic Anchor:** The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) China's position in the SCS cannot be divorced from its broader global infrastructure manifesto, the BRI, and more specifically its maritime component, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Geopolitically, the South China Sea is the literal gateway and baseline of this global network. For Beijing, full jurisdictional control over these waters is an existential prerequisite for the success of the BRI. Without hegemonic control of the SCS, China's major commercial and energy arteries linking its

southern ports to the Indian Ocean, the Middle East and European markets remain structurally vulnerable to interdiction by hostile naval powers¹.

Moreover, the economic statecraft embedded in the BRI serves as a strategic lever to counter regional opposition. Through massive infrastructure investments and joint ventures under the BRI framework, Beijing has been able to create asymmetric economic dependencies in some ASEAN littoral states. This economic power directly erodes regional solidarity, leaving a unified ASEAN counter-strategy nearly impossible, while facilitating a dual-use logistics network that extends the operational reach of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) across vital maritime chokepoints².

Fourth: Modus Operandi: Grey-Zone Tactics and Lawfare

To achieve these broad strategic goals without provoking a direct military confrontation with the United States or a collective military response from neighboring states, China has relied heavily on Grey-Zone tactics. It is based on asymmetric, incremental moves that are below the threshold of conventional military conflict (i.e. avoiding the triggering of mutual defence treaties) but that serve to alter the status quo on the ground through a process of salami-slicing.

The main instruments of this policy are the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China Coast Guard (CCG) and the Peoples Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). The PAFMM, which comprises commercial fishing vessels outfitted with military-grade communications and reinforced hulls, operates under the cover

¹ Poling, Greg. *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

² Ibid

of civilian activity to harass foreign energy exploration vessels, blockade disputed features, and crowd out Southeast Asian fishermen¹.

This is compounded by assertive Lawfare (the strategic use and manipulation of legal frameworks to claim legitimacy), with Beijing systematically rejecting international judicial rulings – such as the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) award – and interpreting the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) through a revisionist lens that prioritises historic rights over clearly defined maritime zones, attempting to normalise its domestic maritime laws in international waters².

Fifth: Analytical Insights from the Interview with Professor Ismail Debbech

As part of the analytical framework of this study, an academic interview was conducted with Professor Ismail Debbech in order to obtain expert insights into the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition and strategic rivalry in the South China Sea. The interview focused on the relationship between energy security, sovereignty, maritime strategy, great-power competition, and the prospects for regional cooperation within the contemporary international system.

The interviewee argued that the South China Sea issue should not be interpreted solely as a competition over energy resources or maritime influence. According to his perspective, the region is primarily a matter of sovereignty and historical legitimacy from the Chinese point of view. He emphasized that China considers the South China Sea historically linked to Chinese territory and maritime activity for centuries, arguing that Chinese populations have navigated through the region and utilized its resources over a long historical period. Therefore, the

¹ Department of Defense (USA). Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2023.

² Ibid

interviewee suggested that the issue should not necessarily be framed as a geopolitical conflict, but rather as a dispute resulting from competing territorial claims and external interference.

In this context, Professor Ismail Debbech argued that tensions in the South China Sea have been significantly intensified by the involvement of external powers, particularly the United States and some Western countries. According to this interpretation, U.S. support for countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam has contributed to escalating disputes with China. The interview further highlighted that China believes regional issues should be resolved through direct dialogue and bilateral negotiations between the countries concerned, without the intervention of outside actors that are neither geographically nor historically connected to the region.

Regarding energy resources, the interviewee explained that oil and gas reserves remain an important factor in the strategic significance of the South China Sea. However, he argued that the geopolitical value of the region cannot be reduced solely to hydrocarbons. Instead, the strategic importance of the South China Sea results from the interaction between energy security, maritime trade routes, military considerations, and geopolitical influence in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The interview also emphasized that China's behavior in the South China Sea is closely linked to its objective of protecting what it considers its territorial sovereignty, securing maritime trade routes, and preserving long-term strategic interests. From this perspective, the interviewee considered that China does not seek expansion for the purpose of domination, but rather seeks to prevent foreign interference in areas it considers part of its national territory.

At the same time, Professor Ismail Debbech described the United States as the principal external actor shaping geopolitical developments in the region. According to his analysis, the United States seeks to preserve its strategic influence in Asia and contain China's growing power through military presence, alliances, and partnerships with regional states. He further linked the South China Sea issue to the

Taiwan question, arguing that both issues form part of the broader geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States.

Concerning theoretical interpretations, the interview reflected several assumptions associated with the Realist approach in international relations, particularly regarding power politics, sovereignty, balance of power, and strategic rivalry among major states. The interview also reflected geo-economic dimensions through its emphasis on energy security, economic partnerships, maritime trade routes, and the role of economic interests in shaping regional relations.

The interview additionally addressed the role of regional actors such as Vietnam and the Philippines. According to the interviewee, these states are motivated primarily by economic and strategic interests and may ultimately prioritize stable economic relations with China due to China's position as a major global economic power. In this regard, the interview suggested that future relations between China and neighboring states may increasingly develop through pragmatic cooperation and mutual economic interests rather than through direct confrontation.

Regarding the legal dimension, the interviewee referred to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and argued that China perceives its claims in the South China Sea as historically justified. At the same time, he maintained that China may accept economic cooperation and foreign investment in offshore resources, provided that such arrangements occur within frameworks that do not challenge what China considers its sovereign rights.

Finally, the interview explored the future prospects for cooperation and renewable energy development in the South China Sea. The interviewee suggested that offshore renewable energy could represent an area of future cooperation rather than solely a new source of geopolitical rivalry. He also emphasized that despite existing tensions, opportunities for cooperation remain possible through bilateral agreements, economic partnerships, and joint energy projects between China and neighboring countries.

Overall, the interview provided important analytical insights into the relationship between energy competition, maritime geopolitics, sovereignty, and strategic rivalry in the South China Sea. It also reinforced several arguments developed throughout this study concerning the interaction between energy security, great-power competition, and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific region¹.

Requirement 2: Southeast Asian Countries (Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei) Positions

Southeast Asian littoral states are not all on the same page against Chinese revisionism. Instead, their policies are influenced by a complex combination of geographical proximity, economic dependency on Beijing under the BRI, domestic political dynamics and different levels of military capacity.

First: Vietnam: The Strategy of Asymmetric Resistance and the Four Nos

Vietnam is among the most assertive and institutionally resilient claimants in the SCS. Hanoi's relationship with Beijing is steeped in contradiction, with shared ideological ties as ruling communist parties, but also with deep geopolitical tensions over overlapping claims in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Vietnam's strategic posture is an intricate blend of hedging, diplomatic internationalisation, and believable asymmetric military deterrence².

Hanoi has invested heavily in modernising its military, purchasing advanced Russian-made Kilo-class submarines, Su-30MK2 fighter jets, and shore-based anti-ship missile batteries to create its own local mini-A2/AD envelope that could impose a heavy cost on any potential PLAN aggression. Economically, Vietnam

¹ Ismail Debbech (President of the Algeria–China Friendship Association), interview by author, Algiers, May 2, 2026.

² De Castro, Renato Cruz. "The Duterte Administration's Foreign Policy: From Balancing to Hedging." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 45, no. 1 (2018): 1–28.

vigorously asserts its right to explore hydrocarbon blocks within its EEZ, frequently clashing with CCG ships over drilling activities carried out in collaboration with foreign energy conglomerates¹.

Vietnam retains its strategic independence by adhering to its strict Four Noes defence policy (no military alliances, no joining with one country to offset another, no foreign military bases, and no use or threat of use of force). Hanoi, however, adroitly sidesteps these limitations by elevating its diplomatic ties to Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with major external powers like the United States, Japan, and India, thereby for²ging a robust web of international backing to counter overt Chinese coercion³.

Second: The Philippines: From Appeasement to Bold Transparency

The Philippines approach to the SCS has seen dramatic, cyclical shifts largely prompted by presidential transitions, demonstrating the countrys vulnerability as a frontline littoral state. Manilas policy toward Beijing under Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022) was one of strategic accommodation, downplaying the landmark 2016 PCA ruling in the hope of reaping massive Chinese investments and infrastructure loans under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This strategy has delivered few economic benefits but has enabled China to consolidate its presence in the Philippine EEZ (West Philippine Sea)⁴.

¹ Thayer, Carlyle A. "Vietnam's Strategy of 'Cooperating and Struggling' with China on the South China Sea." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2016): 200–220.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Hyer, Eric. "The South China Sea Disputes: ASEAN Method of Conflict Management." *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1997): 118–142.

With Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as President, the Philippines has effectively recalibrated its approach to assertive resistance and alliance revitalisation. Manila has launched an innovative Assertive Transparency campaign, deploying journalists on coast guard resupply missions to Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal. The Philippines has successfully imposed a high reputational cost on Beijings grey-zone tactics by broadcasting raw video of CCG water-cannon attacks, dangerous manoeuvres and the use of military-grade lasers around the world¹.

Simultaneously, Manila has significantly strengthened its security architecture with Washington, expanding the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) to allow U.S. forces access to strategic military bases facing the SCS and Taiwan, while actively pursuing reciprocal access agreements (RAAs) with regional powers such as Japan and Australia².

Third: Malaysia: Low-Key Diplomacy and Economic Realism

Malaysia, however, has adopted a much more low-key, pragmatic and non-confrontational approach to its SCS disputes, despite persistent incursions by the CCG in the vicinity of energy-rich features such as the Luconia Shoals and the Kasawari gas field. Kuala Lumpurs stance is shaped by the all-important need to preserve its very lucrative economic and trade relations with China, its biggest trading partner and a major source of infrastructure projects³.

Malaysia has a systematic policy of not publicising maritime standoffs or engaging in public rhetorical spats with Beijing. Instead, it favours quiet diplomacy and backchannel communication between countries to handle tensions. This policy enables state energy giant Petronas to continue pursuing huge natural gas projects

¹ aviera, Aileen S. P. "The Philippines and the South China Sea Dispute: Security Interests and Perspectives." *Asian Politics & Policy* 5, no. 3 (2013): 341–357.

² Ibid

³ Noor, Elina. "Malaysia and the South China Sea: Balancing Economic Interdependence and National Sovereignty." *Asian Security* 15, no. 2 (2019): 178–195.

deep in its EEZ without triggering a major diplomatic break with China. But Malaysias quiet diplomacy should not be confused with capitulation. Kuala Lumpur has been consistently reasserting its sovereign rights under UNCLOS, engaging constructively in ASEAN-led diplomatic endeavours, and discreetly but steadily enhancing its maritime surveillance capabilities, demonstrating a sophisticated form of silent hedging¹.

Fourth: Brunei: The Silent Contender

Brunei is the most passive and quiet claimant in the SCS conflict. Within its EEZ, Bandar Seri Begawan has claimed a small maritime zone around Louisa Reef. Historically, Bandar Seri Begawan has not actively asserted its territorial claims or pushed back rhetorically or militarily against China. Bruneis economy is still heavily reliant on oil and gas exports and in recent years has become more and more dependent on Chinese foreign direct investment to diversify its economic base through joint ventures such as the Hengyi Industries refinery under the BRI umbrella. Therefore, Bruneis economic viability and bilateral stability are prioritised over great-power competition. In short, Brunei is out of the great-power competition loop².

Requirement 3: The Role of Great Powers in Complicating Regional Competition (United States, Japan, Australia, India)

The strategic matrix of the South China Sea is no longer confined to disputes between China and regional littoral states. The water body has become the main stage for a wider structural competition involving a network of external great powers. These powers are seeking to prevent the creation of a Chinese sphere of influence that would threaten the liberal international maritime order.

¹ *Ibdi*

² Anwar, Dewi Fortuna. "ASEAN and the Great Power Rivalry in the South China Sea." *Strategic Analysis* 44, no. 6 (2020): 555–569.

First: United States: Freedom of Navigation and Network Deterrence

The SCS is considered by the United States as a key maritime highway and a crucial litmus test of its continuing strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific. The United States does not take an official position on the ultimate sovereignty of specific land features, but remains steadfast in its commitment to the international rules-based order, including the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight, as codified in UNCLOS¹.

The operational core of the U.S. strategy relies on two main pillars:

- Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs): The US conducts them frequently. Navy guided-missile destroyers in the 12-nautical-mile territorial seas China claims around disputed features. These operations are a deliberate challenge to what Washington calls excessive maritime claims and a message that the U.S. will fly, sail and operate wherever international law permits².

- Networked Deterrence: Moving away from the traditional bilateral hub-and-spoke alliance model to an integrated minilateral security architecture. At the heart of this approach is the modernisation of its mutual defence treaty with the Philippines, clarifying that an armed attack against Philippine public vessels, aircraft, or coast guard forces anywhere in the SCS would invoke U.S. mutual defence commitments under Article IV of the 1951 treaty³.

Second: Japan: Maritime Security and Capacity Enhancement

¹ Talmon, Stefan. "The South China Sea Arbitration: Is There a Case to Answer?" *The Hague Justice Portal* 11 (2016): 1–25.

² Schofield, Clive. "The Delimitation of Maritime Boundaries in the South China Sea." *Ocean Yearbook* 31 (2017): 145–182.

³ Buszynski, Leszek. "The Development of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea." *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 33, no. 4 (2018): 675–698.

Japans interest in the SCS is derived from economic vulnerability of existential proportions, and a sharp anxiety about precedent. More than 80 percent of Japans crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports transit through the SCS SLOCs, on which the resource-poor island nation depends. A Chinese militarisation of the SCS would give Beijing a chokehold on Tokyos economic lifelines. In addition, the Tokyo government considers the Chinese moves in the SCS as being directly connected to its moves in the East China Sea, where Beijing claims sovereignty over the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands¹.

Japan has abandoned its historical passivity and has emerged as a key provider of maritime security in Southeast Asia under its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. So Japan is big on capacity building, especially for frontline littoral states, in the maritime domain, rather than doing FONOPs itself. Japan has supplied advanced multi-mission response vessels, radar systems and maritime surveillance equipment to the coast guards of the Philippines and Vietnam through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and formal security assistance channels. This strategic empowerment enhances the resilience of these nations against Chinese grey zone coercion².

Third: Australia: The Southern Anchor and the Trilateral AUKUS Partnership

For Australia, the strategic stability of the SCS is critical for economic security and alliance commitments. Canberra views any one hostile power controlling Southeast Asia and its maritime approaches as an intolerable threat to Australias continental defence, knowing that over two-thirds of its national exports go through these disputed waters.

¹ Abe, Shinzo. "Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan." *Strategic Review* 35, no. 1 (2007): 12–25.

² Sahashi, Ryo. "The Indo-Pacific Concept in Japan's Foreign Policy: Strategic Adaptation and Consensus Building." *Contemporary Politics* 27, no. 4 (2021): 420–438.

To operationalise this defensive doctrine and create a hard-power deterrent, Australia on September 15, 2021, formally announced AUKUS, its trilateral security partnership with the United Kingdom and the United States¹.

The main strategic rationales for AUKUS creation in 2021 are:

- **Hard Deterrence through Technological Leap:** The focus of AUKUS is to deliver the Royal Australian Navy with conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs). Nuclear-powered submarines have the long-range endurance, high speed and stealth needed to conduct sustained, deep undersea operations in the South China Sea, unlike diesel-electric fleets, and act as a direct counterweight to the PLANs growing underwater fleet².
- **Advanced Capability Integration (Pillar II):** The 2021 agreement also promotes the joint development of artificial intelligence, quantum computing, hypersonic capabilities, and cyber warfare systems to counter Chinas technological edge in the maritime theatre beyond submarines. Australias embedding of its military doctrine within this trilateral construct positions the country as the southern lynchpin of a Western containment strategy that has a significant effect on the military balance of power in the region³.

Fourth: India: The Act East Policy and Strategic Counter-balancing

¹ Gyngell, Allan. *Fear of Abandonment: Australia's Fear of the World since 1901*. Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2021.

² Medcalf, Rory. *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World's Pivotal Region*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020.

³ Australian Department of Defence. *Defence Strategic Review 2023*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2023.

India's foray into the South China Sea signifies a major geopolitical shift from a conventional continental approach to an active maritime player under its Act East Policy. New Delhi understands its economic future is closely tied to maritime trade, with over 55 percent of its commercial transit passing through the Malacca Strait and the SCS¹.

India's stance, beyond economic interests, is overtly counter-strategic. China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean region within India's traditional sphere of influence via its String of Pearls strategy and naval bases in Djibouti and Pakistan has led New Delhi to pursue a counter-balancing strategy in China's backyard—the SCS².

India has stepped up its defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia, especially by selling the sophisticated BrahMos supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles to the Philippines, which directly improves Manila's shore-based coastal defence against possible PLAN intrusions. India also maintains a continuous presence in the SCS, engaging in joint combat drills with Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore, working diligently to gain access to strategic deep water ports such as Cam Ranh Bay, signalling that India is prepared to be a willing net security provider throughout the combined Indo-Pacific theatre³.

Fifth: Minilateral Interoperability The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad)

The institutionalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (The Quad) formally manifested as the structural consolidation of external balancing against China's maritime expansion. The forum was first launched in 2007 by then-Japanese

¹ Pant, Harsh V. *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016.

² Hall, Ian. *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019.

³ Saint-Mézard, Isabelle. "India's Act East Policy: Strategic Implications for Southeast Asia." *Asie.Visions*, no. 84 (2016): 1–32.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, but it was initially broken down due to regional diplomatic caution. But the alliance got a structural rejuvenation in November 2017, driven by the rapid escalation of Chinas militarisation of artificial islands and its assertive gray-zone activities in the South China Sea¹.

There are several strategic reasons that underlie the collective alignment these:

- Sustain a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP): To establish a unified diplomatic and maritime front against Beijings revisionist interpretation of UNCLOS and historic claims.

- Maritime Security: Protecting Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) – Ensuring that vital chokepoints, especially the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, are not blocked by any hegemonic power, thus protecting the energy lifelines of Japan, South Korea, and international trade².

- Asymmetric Maritime Surveillance: Operationalised at the Tokyo Summit in May 2022 through the launch of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). This initiative provides real-time satellite tracking technology to Southeast Asian littoral states, exposing the operations of Chinas Maritime Militia and directly negating the anonymity required for Beijings gray-zone strategy to succeed³.

This information sharing is facilitated by increasingly complex multilateral naval manoeuvres and joint sails in contested waters, creating a dense,

¹ Tow, William T. "Minilateral Security's Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific." *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2019): 5–24.

² Envall, H. D. P. "The Latticework Architecture: Designing Interoperability in US-Led Alliances." *Security Challenges* 19, no. 2 (2023): 45–62.

³ Buchan, Alastair, and Rimli Basu. "The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Genesis, Evolution, and Future Trajectory." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2021): 189–211.

interconnected web of comprehensive deterrence that effectively internationalises the security architecture of the South China Sea¹.

Section Two: Conflict Management Mechanisms and Future Scenarios

Requirement 1: The Role of ASEAN and UNCLOS (UN Convention of the Law of the Sea)

First: The Consensus Dilemma and ASEANs
Institutional Limitations

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has historically been the primary diplomatic mechanism for managing security and promoting stability in the South China Sea. The bloc has sought to mitigate tensions through multilateral talks, in line with the ASEAN Way—a diplomatic approach that has been institutionalised through the principles of non-interference in domestic affairs, peaceful resolution of disputes and, crucially, decision-making by consensus. But these same institutional norms have become structural vulnerabilities to Chinas asymmetric power statecraft and aggressive revisionism.

The requirement for complete consensus (Mufakat) means any one of the member states can veto collective ASEAN statements or projects. China has skilfully taken advantage of this structural weakness through forceful economic statecraft and bilateral leverage under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on non-claimant, economically dependent member states, most notably Cambodia and Laos.

Beijing has also fractured ASEAN solidarity time and again by making these states its diplomatic proxies within the bloc. This was shown in the past at the 2012

¹ Smith, Jeff M. "The Quad 2.0: A Strategic Roadmap for the Next Decade." *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, no. 3612 (2021): 1–18.

ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh, where for the first time in the history of the organization, the bloc did not release a joint communiqué because Cambodia refused to include any reference to maritime standoffs between China and the Philippines. Thus ASEAN is structurally incapable of formulating a unified, legally binding counter-strategy and is a forum for normative rhetoric rather than effective conflict resolution.

Second: A Legal Battle over UNCLOS, Disputed

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), signed in 1982 and often referred to as the Constitution of the Oceans, is the main international legal regime for maritime claims, EEZs and freedom of navigation. Although all SCS littoral states, including China, are parties to UNCLOS, the convention has become more of a contested ideological and legal battleground than an instrument of consensus.

The legal friction is rooted in China's dualistic and revisionist reading of the convention. UNCLOS states explicitly that rights to the sea are derived from terrestrial sovereignty (land rules the sea); a state cannot claim an EEZ or continental shelf unless it has a land feature that can sustain human habitation or economic life.

China, conversely, turns this logic on its head, asserting that its historic rights structurally codified by the Nine-Dash Line – take precedence over the clear spatial demarcations defined by UNCLOS. Beijing also believes the convention allows coastal states to control foreign military activities in their 200-nautical-mile EEZs — a legal position that directly contradicts the United States interpretation of UNCLOS, which holds that EEZs remain international waters, where freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and military surveillance are fully protected under international law.

Third: The structural effect of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) award

The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in *The Republic of the Philippines vs The Peoples Republic of China* laid bare the limitations of international law in the age of great power politics. Manila filed the case unilaterally in 2013 after the Scarborough Shoal standoff, and the tribunal handed down a historic, sweeping legal defeat to Beijing. It unanimously ruled that Chinas assertion of historic rights within the Nine-Dash Line had no legal basis in international law, and was expressly displaced by the codification of UNCLOS. The tribunal also found that the features in the Spratly Islands did not satisfy the requirements of islands capable of generating a 200-mile EEZ. Instead, they were merely rocks or low-tide elevations, so Chinas construction of artificial islands was a violation of the Philippines sovereign rights within its own EEZ.

The structural effects of the 2016 award are deeply paradoxical:

- Legally, it set a clear, irrefutable legal standard that delegitimised Beijings cartographic aggression, giving frontline states such as the Philippines and Vietnam a powerful narrative tool to internationalise the dispute.
- Geopolitically: It exposed the impotence of international judicial bodies vis-à-vis revisionist great powers. China formally boycotted the proceedings, calling the ruling null and void and without binding force, and increased its militarisation of the Big Three reefs. The ruling did not change Chinese conduct on the water, but it did intensify Beijings dependence on grey-zone coercion to make a fait accompli that undercut the legal reality on the ground.

Requirement 2: Code of Conduct and Joint Energy Cooperation

First: The Code of Conduct Negotiations – Background and Status

The most sustained diplomatic effort to establish a legally binding or at least politically authoritative framework for managing state behaviour in the contested waters is the ongoing negotiations for a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. The process began in 2002 when ASEAN and China agreed on a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC), a non-binding political statement that reaffirmed their common commitments to peaceful resolution, restraint and confidence-building measures. The DOC was meant as a step towards a binding code but it took more than a decade for actual negotiations on the code to get underway, held up by Chinese resistance¹.

Formal negotiations on the COC only started in earnest in 2017, after a period of Chinese diplomatic engagement with ASEAN following the 2016 PCA ruling, an engagement widely interpreted as Chinese damage control after the rulings impact on its international image. ASEAN and China adopted a Framework for the Code of Conduct in August 2017 and began discussions on a single draft negotiating text in 2018. In 2025 three readings of the draft text had been completed and a fourth round of negotiations was ongoing but no final agreement had been reached².

This is not just a matter of technical drafting differences but reflects the deeper political conflict that has made the COC talks complicated by a number of basic differences.

¹ Thao, Nguyen Hong. "The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea: A Note." *Ocean Development & International Law* 34, no. 2 (2003): 279–285.

² Buszynski, Leszek. "ASEAN's Managing of ASEAN-China Relations: The Case of the South China Sea." *The 编 Journal of Strategic Studies* 26, no. 1 (2003): 102–118.

One important question is the geographic scope of the code, whether it will cover the entire South China Sea or only particular features. While the ASEAN claimant states have called for full coverage, China has opposed full coverage on the grounds that greater coverage would more directly constrain its activities in the Nine-Dash Line area. There is also a debate about the legal status of the code, i.e. whether it will be legally binding or only politically binding. Vietnam, the Philippines and other claimants have consistently called for a binding instrument with enforcement mechanisms, while China has preferred a politically binding code and left compliance to the discretion of individual states¹.

Another major sticking point is the question of third-party activities in the South China Sea, namely whether the code will limit joint military exercises and energy development partnerships with countries outside the region. China has pushed for language requiring ASEAN states to get Chinese permission before engaging in joint military activities with non-ASEAN parties at sea, a demand that would give Beijing a de facto veto over US and other extra-regional military presence. The ASEAN states have largely dismissed this demand as being in conflict with their right to select their own security partners².

The COC negotiations have neither produced the breakthrough hoped for by the optimists nor the total failure predicted by the pessimists. The process has established a formal diplomatic channel for ASEAN-China engagement on the management of the sea. The negotiations have yielded some technical detail on the governance challenges of the sea that was previously unavailable. However, the fundamental asymmetry in the negotiating positions – China seeking a code that

¹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). Phnom Penh: ASEAN Secretariat, November 4, 2002.

² Syed, Jawad. "The Road to Phnom Penh: ASEAN's Diplomatic Trudge toward a South China Sea Code of Conduct." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 3 (2002): 455–478.

legitimises its current presence and limits extra-regional engagement, ASEAN claimants seeking a code that limits Chinese behaviour and preserves their external security relationships – has prevented agreement on the most important provisions¹.

Most analysts judge that a COC will be a political compromise, not a real legal constraint on Chinese behaviour, even if one is eventually reached. A non-binding code, or one that excludes large parts of the disputed area or that includes provisions on third party activities favoured by China, would do more to legitimise than to constrain the status quo of Chinese dominance. Ultimately, the value of the COC will depend on whether China is willing to accept meaningful constraints on its behaviour — a willingness that its record in the sea since 2012 does not strongly suggest².

Second: Theory, Practice and Political Limitation of Joint Development Agreements

The joint development of offshore energy resources in disputed areas is, in principle, one of the most pragmatic mechanisms for managing resource disputes while underlying questions of sovereignty remain in limbo. UNCLOS Article 74(3) and Article 83(3) explicitly encourage the establishment of provisional arrangements for joint development in disputed EEZ and continental shelf areas. There are precedents from other regions – the Timor Sea between Australia and East Timor, and the joint development zone between Japan and South Korea in the East China Sea – that suggest the model can work under appropriate conditions³.

¹ ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting. *Joint Statement on the Application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in the South China Sea*. Vientiane: ASEAN-China Summit, 2016.

² Beckman, Robert, and Tara Davenport. "The Legal Status and Binding Nature of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea." *Marine Policy* 110 (2019): 103522.

³ Beckman, Robert. "Reasonable Foundations for Compromise: Provisional Arrangements Pending Delimitation Under UNCLOS." *Marine Policy* 44 (2014): 315–323.

China has been consistent in advancing joint development as the preferred mechanism to manage resource disputes in the South China Sea context. Beijings standard position has been that sovereignty questions should be set aside while resource development proceeds jointly—a formulation that seems pragmatic but that in practice has been structured in ways that serve Chinese interests. China has generally maintained that joint development must occur in a context that at least tacitly recognises Chinese sovereignty or historic rights, and that the Chinese state or state companies must have a controlling or at least equal stake in any joint enterprise¹.

Most claimant states have regarded these conditions as politically and legally unacceptable. The best known failure of this model is the Sino-Philippine joint development negotiations under the Duterte presidency (2018–2022). The negotiations were largely over the Reed Bank (Recto Bank), a feature that is well within the Philippines EEZ. Philippine legal advisors rejected Chinese proposals that would have given CNOOC a 60 percent stake in any joint development arrangement as inconsistent with the Philippine constitutions requirement that the exploitation of natural resources by foreign parties be limited to minority stakes. The talks fell apart in June 2022 with no deal and Philippine policy then shifted dramatically away from the joint development framework altogether².

Limited progress has been made by Vietnam and China on joint fisheries management in the Gulf of Tonkin – technically outside the disputed South China Sea but sharing many of its political dynamics – offering a partial precedent for cooperation in disputed waters. Petronas remains active in the area, but Malaysia

¹ Zou, Keyuan. "Seeking Joint Development in the South China Sea: Legal Issues and Policy Options." *Singapore Journal of International & Comparative Law* 7 (2003): 122–141.

² Lagoni, Rainer. "Report on Joint Development of Non-Living Resources in the Exclusive Economic Zone." *International Law Association Report* 63 (1988): 509–558.

and China have maintained a lower profile, with a somewhat functional arrangement that does not depend on a formal agreement but on deliberate ambiguity about the legal framework¹.

The political barrier to comprehensive joint development in the South China Sea, not the technical one, is that real joint development requires both parties to treat the disputed area as genuinely contested and to agree on provisional arrangements that neither prejudice nor determine the underlying sovereignty question. Chinas long-standing practice of treating the whole sea as essentially Chinese, which implicitly requires any joint development to accept that, turns the idea of the whole sea as a sovereignty-neutral cooperative arrangement into a sovereignty-assertion device. Unless and until China changes this approach, there will be no comprehensive joint development of South China Sea energy resources².

Third: Competition for Energy and Regional Stability in Future Scenarios

Any attempt to assess the future of the South China Sea faces profound uncertainty: the direction of the region depends on the interplay of multiple variables – Chinese strategic choices, American policy priorities, the resilience of resistance by smaller states, the evolution of international legal norms, and the development of the global energy system – none of which can be predicted with confidence on their own, and whose interaction generates a particularly wide range of possible outcomes. Yet a structured scenario analysis can identify the key drivers, thresholds and directions of change that will shape the geopolitical future of the sea.

¹ Xue, Song. "Joint Development in the South China Sea: China's Incentives and Policy Choices." *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 8, no. 2 (2019): 195–214.

² Nguyen, Hong Thao. "Joint Development Agreements in the South China Sea: Lessons from the Gulf of Thailand." *Ocean Development & International Law* 42, no. 4 (2011): 310–328.

Requirement 3: Future Scenarios for Energy Competition and Regional Stability.

First: Status Quo Continued — Managed Competition

The most likely near-term scenario is a status quo continuation: Chinese assertiveness and grey zone tactics including coast guard operations; American FONOPs and alliance reinforcement; sporadic bilateral tensions between China and Vietnam or the Philippines; inconclusive COC negotiations; and an uncomfortable but stable regional balance that avoids open military conflict. This is likely true because all of the major parties have strong incentives to avoid escalation to open warfare at this point. China would risk U.S. military intervention and damage to its economic relationships; the United States cannot guarantee a quick or clean victory in a military conflict close to Chinas shores; and Southeast Asian states lack the military capability to challenge China effectively without risking devastating retaliation.

In this scenario, the seas energy resources will continue to be developed on a piecemeal basis – Chinese companies developing resources within Chinas claimed areas, ASEAN state-owned companies developing resources in their undisputed continental shelf areas, and a wide band of contested territory remaining underdeveloped due to the security and investment risks posed by Chinese coercive behaviour. What the energy transition will bring is competition from renewable energy . But it will not fundamentally change the political dynamics . The COC will, at some point, produce a document, but one of limited binding force.

The primary danger of this scenario is that managed competition can slowly transform into unmanaged competition: as military deployments increase, as grey zone incidents multiply and as the risk of miscalculation grows, the likelihood of

accidental escalation increases even if no party is deliberately seeking war. The near-collision of Chinese and American naval vessels near Gaven Reef in 2018, and the multiple Chinese laser and water cannon attacks on Philippine vessels near Second Thomas Shoal in 2023 and 2024, suggest that the threshold of escalation is being tested with increasing frequency.

Second: Chinese Strategic Consolidation – A Closed Sea

Scenario two is a gradual Chinese consolidation of effective control of the South China Sea—not through a dramatic single act of military seizure, but through the cumulative effect of grey zone operations, the isolation of claimant states from international energy partners, the entrenchment of Chinese military infrastructure, and the gradual erosion of American presence, whether through domestic political constraint or strategic overextension elsewhere.

In such a scenario, China would have de facto control over the resources and shipping lanes of the sea in much the same way it has on paper control over the Nine-Dash Line area. Vietnam and the Philippines would see increasing restrictions on offshore energy development, with international energy companies largely withdrawing from contested blocks under continued Chinese pressure. ASEAN would be less able to make collective statements against Chinese behaviour and the COC – if concluded – would effectively legitimise Chinese presence rather than constrain it.

The strategic implications of this situation would reach far beyond the South China Sea itself. If China controlled the seas shipping lanes, Beijing would have a powerful lever over the energy security of Japan and South Korea and would be able to decouple those states from the American security system. Chinas dominion over the seas energy and mineral resources – including methane hydrates and rare earth deposits – would enhance Chinas structural position in the global clean energy

supply chains. And the precedent of successful rejection of UNCLOS determinations would undermine the broader architecture of international maritime law.

The chances of this happening depend critically on American strategic commitments and domestic political will. The continued U.S. military presence and reinforcement of alliances create a strong incentive for China to stay within the grey zone rather than make direct seizures that would trigger the Mutual Defence Treaty commitments to the Philippines. But the American political focus is divided among various global crises, and there is no certainty that South China Sea deterrence will be a persistent priority for different administrations.

Third: A multilateral diplomatic settlement the hopeful
scenario

The best that can be hoped for is a real multilateral diplomatic process, which will lead to a binding Code of Conduct, agreed frameworks for joint energy development and the effective incorporation of UNCLOS principles into the management of the seas resources and of navigation. This is not a utopian scenario – it contains elements already present in current negotiations which, under favourable conditions, might be developed into a comprehensive framework.

For this scenario to play out, several conditions would need to be met: China would need to agree to a binding COC that applies to the entire sea and contains significant limits on island-building and the deployment of offensive military capabilities; ASEAN claimant states would need to maintain unity and resist bilateral inducements to break ranks; the United States and other great powers would need to provide sustained deterrence support to give smaller states confidence to negotiate from a position of security rather than vulnerability; and the global energy transition would need to reduce the economic premium placed on South China Sea hydrocarbons to a point that lowers the stakes of resource competition.

Though the full set of these conditions do not exist today, the increasing costs of the status quo, regional instability, uncertainty for energy investment, and the possibility of military miscalculation, do create incentives for all parties to pursue a more stable framework. International relations are full of examples of seemingly intractable conflicts that were eventually resolved through sustained diplomatic effort, creative legal arrangements and the development of mutual interests in stability. The South China Sea might not necessarily be immune to this dynamic even if the current trajectory does not favour it.

Fourth: Military Escalation – The Crisis Scenario

The fourth scenario is a more specific military incident—a collision, an exchange of fire, an attack on energy infrastructure, or a Chinese military action against a Philippine or Vietnamese installation—that triggers a wider confrontation involving the United States. In absolute terms this event is the least probable, but its probability is non-trivial and increases with the speed of events in the sea.

The most likely flashpoint is the Philippines, where active clashes at Second Thomas Shoal, the clear American deterrence commitment, and domestic political dynamics that make Philippine governments unwilling to tolerate continued Chinese coercion silently all converge. If China were to try to physically remove the BRP Sierra Madre from Second Thomas Shoal in effect, evicting the Philippine garrison that would be a direct test of the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defence Treaty commitment that no incident before has been. One would be needed for American credibility; Chinese deterrence calculus would resist one. The result would be a confrontation without a way out.

How this scenario is handled will depend on the strength of the crisis communication mechanisms between the United States and China mechanisms that

exist but have never been tested at high intensity in the context of the South China Sea. The establishment of a direct military-to-military communication link between the U.S. and Chinese defence establishments in 2023 is a step toward crisis management capability, but its effectiveness in real crisis conditions has yet to be proven.

Current trends suggest that the most likely path for South China Sea geopolitics over the next decade will be a continuation of managed competition with gradually increasing tension. In this scenario, no party achieves a decisive breakthrough and no party suffers a decisive defeat, but the cumulative effect of Chinese grey zone operations, the strengthening of American and allied deterrence, and the progressive fragmentation of ASEAN solidarity creates a regional environment of chronic instability punctuated by periodic crises.

The energy dimension will be at the heart of the path. As Asian economies move towards cleaner energy, the relative importance of South China Sea hydrocarbons will gradually diminish – but this will be countered by the growing importance of submarine mineral resources, offshore wind and submarine energy infrastructure, all of which create new vectors of competition. And in any scenario that seems plausible, the sea will remain a major arena of geopolitical contest for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion of chapter three

This chapter's analysis has aimed to demonstrate that the South China Sea dispute is best understood not as a static territorial conflict, but rather as a dynamic geopolitical competition involving multiple actors with distinct strategies, instruments, and interests—a competition that is simultaneously managed by institutional mechanisms and driven by structural forces that these mechanisms cannot fully contain.

Chinas strategy has produced the most significant change to the strategic landscape of the sea in its modern history through a combination of legal assertion, physical construction, grey zone coercion, and selective diplomatic engagement. The smaller Southeast Asian claimants have reacted with different mixes of resistance, accommodation, and strategic hedging, reflecting the specific constraints and opportunities of their national situations. The great powers, especially the United States, but also Japan, Australia and India, have played a role that raises up the costs of Chinese assertiveness and adds to the deterrent resources available to smaller states, and complicates the prospect of resolution purely within the region.

The institutional mechanisms available to manage the conflict—ASEAN diplomacy, UNCLOS, the Code of Conduct negotiations, and joint development proposals—have demonstrated real value in preventing the dispute from degenerating into open war, but not in resolving the underlying contradictions. The 2016 PCA ruling is the clearest legal ruling we have but it has not changed Chinese behaviour. The COC talks are the longest running diplomatic process on offer, but the result is uncertain and may not be enough. The result is a zone where conflict is diminished but not eliminated, discouraged but not stopped.

In sum, the future scenarios discussed in this chapter suggest that the South China Seas trajectory will depend primarily on two variables: the degree of American strategic consistency in terms of deterrence and alliance maintenance; and the evolution of Chinese strategic calculations concerning the costs and benefits of continued assertiveness. Successful American deterrence and rising Chinese costs could lead to a gradual accommodation and a more stable regional framework. If the American commitment falters or the costs to China remain manageable, the drift toward Chinese hegemony – and the regional instability that would accompany it – becomes the more likely outcome. In this sense, the South China Sea is a test not

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only of regional security but of the international systems ability to cope with the rise of a revisionist great power in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The growing importance of energy resources in contemporary international relations has transformed many maritime regions into strategic spaces where economic interests, security concerns, and geopolitical ambitions intersect. Within this context, the South China Sea has emerged as one of the most significant areas of geopolitical competition in the twenty-first century. Its strategic location at the heart of major maritime trade routes, combined with the presence of offshore energy resources and the increasing involvement of regional and international powers, has made the region a central arena of strategic rivalry.

This study sought to analyse the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition in the South China Sea and to examine how energy resources and maritime strategic considerations have contributed to shaping contemporary power relations. Through the adoption of the geopolitical approach, the descriptive-analytical method, and the case study method, the research examined the conceptual foundations of geopolitical energy competition, the strategic importance of the South China Sea, and the behaviour of the principal actors involved in the region.

The analysis demonstrated that energy competition constitutes a major factor in explaining the increasing geopolitical importance of the South China Sea. However, the strategic relevance of the region cannot be attributed solely to the existence of oil and natural gas reserves. Rather, it results from the interaction between energy resources, maritime trade routes, geostrategic location, and broader geopolitical considerations associated with the evolving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, the South China Sea represents a multidimensional geopolitical space in which economic, strategic, and security interests converge.

The study also showed that the abundance of hydrocarbon resources and the importance of maritime energy transportation routes have significantly enhanced the geopolitical value of the region. Energy security considerations have become closely linked to state behaviour, particularly in the case of China, whose growing dependence on external energy supplies has reinforced its interest in securing maritime routes and expanding its presence in the South China Sea. At the same time, the strategic involvement of the United States reflects broader objectives related to maintaining freedom of navigation, preserving regional stability, and preventing the emergence of a single dominant power capable of controlling a vital maritime corridor.

Furthermore, the research revealed that energy competition has intensified strategic rivalry among regional and international actors. While territorial disputes

Conclusion

remain an important source of tension, the competition extends beyond questions of sovereignty to include access to resources, maritime influence, and regional leadership. This confirms that the South China Sea has become one of the principal theatres through which broader geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region is expressed.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that energy competition does not necessarily lead to direct confrontation. Alongside dynamics of conflict, the region also presents opportunities for cooperation. Mechanisms such as dialogue within ASEAN, the legal framework provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), negotiations concerning the Code of Conduct, and joint energy development initiatives demonstrate that cooperation remains possible despite persistent disagreements. The future stability of the region will therefore depend largely on the ability of the actors involved to balance strategic competition with institutional and diplomatic mechanisms for conflict management.

In light of the findings of this study, the main hypothesis has been largely confirmed. Energy competition has played a significant role in increasing the geopolitical importance of the South China Sea and in intensifying strategic rivalry among the principal actors involved in the region. The secondary hypotheses have likewise been validated, as the research confirmed the importance of hydrocarbon resources and maritime energy routes, highlighted the relationship between China's regional strategy and its energy security concerns, demonstrated the strategic motivations underlying the United States' presence in the region, and showed that energy competition generates both conflictual and cooperative dynamics.

Ultimately, the South China Sea illustrates how energy has become an essential component of contemporary geopolitics. The region represents not only a contested maritime space but also a strategic crossroads where energy security, maritime power, economic interests, and geopolitical influence interact. As global power competition increasingly shifts toward the Indo-Pacific, the South China Sea is likely to remain a key indicator of future transformations in regional and international power relations. The study therefore concludes that understanding the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition is indispensable for analysing both the present dynamics and the future evolution of the international system.

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Appendices

Expert Interview with Professor Ismail Debbekh

Research Topic: Geopolitics of the South China Sea: Energy Competition and Strategic Rivalries

Researcher: Merieme Derouiche

Institution: National Higher School of Political Sciences, Algiers

Interviewee: Professor Ismail Debbekh

Date of Interview: 2 May 2026

Duration: Approximately 15 minutes

Interview Type: Semistructured expert interview

Purpose of the Interview

The purpose of this interview was to obtain expert academic and diplomatic insights regarding the geopolitical dimensions of the South China Sea dispute, particularly the relationship between energy security, strategic competition, Chinese foreign policy, and prospects for regional cooperation.

Question 1

How can the competition in the South China Sea be explained through the lens of energy geopolitics, rather than just as a sovereignty dispute?

Answer

The answer to this question may not be entirely accurate because the question itself assumes that the South China Sea is an area of competition, whereas from the Chinese perspective it historically belongs to China. Therefore, it should not necessarily be framed as a competition.

According to this perspective, there is no real competition in the South China Sea. Rather, there are disputes and claims encouraged by external actors, particularly the United States and, more broadly, Western countries. These actors have contributed to tensions by supporting the Philippines and Vietnam in claiming parts of the maritime territories of the South China Sea.

Thus, the issue is not primarily about competition but about territorial claims made by Vietnam and the Philippines, claims that are considered illegitimate from this viewpoint. If these countries seek peaceful solutions, they should negotiate directly with China instead of relying on external powers that may intensify tensions.

Historically, the South China Sea has been associated with China for centuries. Chinese populations have lived around it, navigated through it, and exploited its resources over a long period. At the same time, China does not prevent other countries from using the South China Sea

for navigation or international passage, provided that such activities respect what China considers its sovereignty over the area.

Question 2

What are the main factors governing China's behavior in the South China Sea, especially regarding energy security?

Answer

From this perspective, there is no actual conflict in the South China Sea. Rather, there is a question of sovereignty. China considers the South China Sea to be under Chinese sovereignty, while other countries, supported by external powers, attempt to interfere in what China views as its internal affairs.

Therefore, the situation should not necessarily be described as a conflict, but rather as foreign interference in issues related to China, including the South China Sea. China's position, according to this interpretation, is that disputes can be resolved through dialogue, cooperation, and mutual interests between the countries directly concerned, such as China, the Philippines, and Vietnam. However, external actors like the United States and some Western countries should not intervene, since they are not geographically or historically connected to the region.

Within this framework, China has already managed to improve and stabilize relations with Vietnam regarding maritime issues, and it is believed that the issue with the Philippines may also be settled peacefully in the future.

Regarding oil and gas resources in the South China Sea, if the sea is considered Chinese territory, then its natural resources, including oil and gas, are also viewed as belonging to China. Nevertheless, China can still cooperate with neighboring countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines in the exploration and exploitation of these resources, provided that such cooperation is based on mutual interests and bilateral relations.

Question 3

To what extent do energy resources (oil and gas) play a genuine role in this conflict compared to strategic and military factors?

Answer

According to this perspective, oil and gas resources are important because they are located within what China considers its sovereign territory. Therefore, the issue of energy cannot be separated from the issue of sovereignty.

At the same time, strategic and geopolitical considerations remain highly significant. The South China Sea is viewed as part of a broader regional environment in which China seeks to protect its territorial integrity and strategic interests. Consequently, energy resources represent one dimension of the issue, but they are closely connected to questions of sovereignty, security, and regional influence.

Question 4

Can this competition be explained through theories such as Realism or Geoeconomics?
Which theoretical framework do you find most capable of explaining the behavior of these actors?

Answer

According to this interpretation, the South China Sea issue and the Taiwan issue are interconnected within the broader geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States.

The United States has maintained a strong presence in East Asia since the end of the Second World War through alliances and partnerships with countries such as the Philippines and others in the region. It is argued that Washington seeks to preserve and expand its influence while attempting to contain China's rise.

From this perspective, U.S. support for Taiwan and its involvement in the South China Sea are part of a broader strategy aimed at limiting China's growing power and influence. Therefore, the behavior of the major actors can largely be understood through a geopolitical and powerpolitical framework that emphasizes strategic competition between great powers.

Question 5

Speaking of actors, how can we define which ones have the most impact here, and what criteria are used to make that assessment?

Answer

Regarding the question of which actor has the greatest impact in the South China Sea region, this perspective considers the United States to be the principal external power influencing developments in the area.

According to this view, the United States seeks to exert influence on China's maritime frontiers indirectly through its relations with countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines. However, it is believed that the United States will ultimately fail in changing China's position because China has consistently maintained a historical principle: it does not seek to invade or dominate other countries, but it will not accept foreign interference or challenges to what it considers its territorial sovereignty.

From this interpretation, China will never concede even a small part of what it considers its national territory. Therefore, U.S. pressure in the South China Sea is viewed not as a genuine effort to protect regional countries but rather as a strategy to gain leverage over China in broader economic and geopolitical relations.

In this sense, the objective of the United States is perceived as attempting to limit China's growing power and influence, while China seeks to preserve its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and position as a major global actor.

Question 6

Do you believe there is a genuine possibility for developing joint energy cooperation models in the South China Sea, or will the logic of conflict remain dominant?

Answer

From this perspective, China is unlikely to accept other countries claiming ownership or sovereign shares of the oil and gas resources located in the South China Sea.

However, China may allow foreign participation through investment agreements conducted under Chinese regulations and according to bilateral arrangements between China and the countries concerned. In this sense, cooperation would be based on economic partnership and mutual benefit rather than on the recognition of foreign sovereign rights in the area.

China's position is that disputes can be managed through dialogue, cooperation, and mutually beneficial arrangements between the directly concerned states.

Question 7

Can offshore renewable energy be considered a new frontier for geopolitical competition in the South China Sea, or does it offer an opportunity to enhance cooperation between actors, including China and other regional states?

Answer

Regarding the future of offshore renewable energy and its geopolitical implications in the South China Sea, it is believed that China will increasingly seek longterm cooperative solutions with neighboring countries.

China has already improved its relations and maritime cooperation with Vietnam, and similar understandings may eventually emerge with the Philippines.

Ultimately, countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines are driven primarily by economic interests. Since China represents one of the world's largest economic powers and markets, regional countries are likely to prioritize stable relations and economic cooperation with Beijing. At the same time, China also benefits from maintaining strong regional partnerships and access to neighboring markets.

Therefore, future relations between China, Vietnam, and the Philippines are expected to develop through pragmatic cooperation based on shared economic interests rather than open confrontation.

Research Note

The views presented in this interview reflect the personal interpretations and assessments of Professor Ismail Debbech and are included as qualitative expert testimony to enrich the analysis of the geopolitical dimensions of energy competition and strategic rivalry in the South China Sea. They do not necessarily represent the position of the researcher.