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## US-China Geostrategic Rivalry in the South China Sea: Effects on Maritime Security and Diplomatic Stability in 2025

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### Abstract

This paper examines the growing strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the South China Sea, a region valued for its shipping routes, fisheries, and potential energy deposits. The study describes how intensified naval, coast guard, and militia activities near disputed islands have increased the frequency of confrontations and raised the risk of accidental clashes. These developments challenge the principle of open navigation and threaten regional trade networks. The analysis also considers the complicated positions of claimant states Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, and China and their efforts to balance relations with both major powers. ASEAN's attempts to manage disputes and limit external pressures are reviewed as part of the broader diplomatic landscape. The paper argues that reducing tensions requires steady communication, transparency at sea, and stronger multilateral dialogue. It concludes that only a balanced blend of military restraint, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagement can prevent further instability in the Indo-Pacific.

**Key words:** South China Sea, Maritime Security, Diplomatic Stability, US-China Rivalry, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

### Introduction

The South China Sea is a place of high strategic value because of its intricate system of overlapping claims, important maritime trade routes, rich fishing opportunities and large reserves of oil and natural gas. As an emerging hub of competition between the United States and China, it has become a focus by 2025. This competition is usually in form of gray zone tactics where there is no direct warfare but participation in aggressive behaviors such as regular naval antagonisms, military posturing, and the build-up of diplomatic tensions. All these activities create the atmosphere of growing insecurity and possible instability in the region. This paper examines different cases of incidents, changes in national policies in 2024-2025 to understand their actual effect on the security in the region and on the relationships between the countries. The claim that China has made more extended maritime claims and the efforts that it has undertaken to build and arm artificial islands, as well as the use of the maritime militia forces have strongly increased tension with the countries in the region. As a reaction, the United States has increased freedom of navigation activities in order to contest the vast territorial claims that the Chinese have and defend the international sea lanes. On the other hand, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is challenged to stay unified with its line of response because of the contradicting national interests among the members and the global powers pressure. This disintegration weakens the capacity of ASEAN to be a feasible mediator of disputes and to stabilize the region. The paper also examines the ways these growing security pressures complicate settled legal and diplomatic expectations, particularly

as grey zone strategies blur the line between peace and conflict, and conflict prevention and conflict management become increasingly difficult. It stresses the necessity of better conflict management processes, increased transparency and a more serious adherence to international law. This is important in reducing the strain and possible conflicts, which will maintain peace in this strategically important seaport.

### **Research Questions**

- How the US China rivalry in the SCS effecting the maritime security?
- Which diplomatic challenges faced by regional claimant states and ASEAN in resolving the South China Sea disputes?
- Which effective policies can resolves the tensions and maintain stability in the South China Sea region?

### **Research methodology**

In this study the qualitative research methodology is used to analyze the ongoing tensions between the United States and China in the South China Sea. The primary and secondary sources, including official incident reports, government statements, naval patrol records, and diplomatic communications from relevant states and international organizations is used for intensive data collection. Secondary sources comprised academic journals, news articles, policy papers, and expert analyses focusing on maritime security and international relations in the indo-pacific region. This study facilitated a detailed understanding of the operational and diplomatic dimensions of the rivalry. The research also incorporated with themes related to security risks, freedom of navigation operations, and multilateral diplomatic efforts such as ASEAN's role in managing tensions. The triangulation of data from diverse credible sources ensured reliability and validity of the findings. Overall, this qualitative approach enabled a comprehensive assessment of how military developments, economic interests, and diplomatic engagements interact to shape security and stability in the South China Sea.

### **Objectives**

- To analyze the impact of United States and China strategic rivalry on maritime security dynamics in the South China Sea.
- To examine the diplomatic challenges and responses of claimant states and ASEAN amid escalating tensions in the South China Sea.
- To propose effective policy approaches amid at reducing conflict risks and enhancing maritime and diplomatic stability in the region.

### **Background: Legal claims, strategic assets, and actors**

The conflict over the South China Sea can be characterized by intricate legal and geopolitical environment in which a number of countries with overlapping interests in the region have multiple conflicting claims. At the center of the legal element is Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which ruled in 2016 invalidating the sweeping territorial claims of China characterized by the nine-dash line. The tribunal concluded that the claims by China are not legally grounded under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in particular, that historical rights could override maritime rights. Nevertheless, the ruling of the PCA does not concern the sovereignty of land features and does not provide a mechanism of enforcement where the claims of the competing countries of China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, etc. remain still without a resolution. Although the ruling has a wide recognition within the international domain in regards to its binding power, China has not accepted or enforced it, and it is still conducting maritime operations in the disputed waters. This case brings out the shortcomings of the international law in the face of interests and actions of a mighty nation. China is strategically making its claims by combining naval force, China Coast Guard and maritime

militia. These actors not only impose maritime claims but also practice aggressive actions in gray zone tactics that do not amount to open conflict, but have the goal of gradually changing the situation on the ground and proving the existence of the competitors. Administrative action is another element used by China i.e. declaration of maritime zones, and areas of protection. (Institutional author (Perry World House, 2025) On the other hand, the United States also has a powerful naval presence in the area, with Freedom of Navigation Operations aimed at challenging excessive maritime claims and enforcing the international maritime norms in the area. Besides, the US takes care of its regional partners by improving their abilities to secure the sea environment, and through diplomatic means, to underline the idea of a rules-based order. Southeast Asian claimant states, especially, the Philippines and Vietnam, are in a difficult balance between rejecting pressure at the hands of Chinas and accommodating to prevent an escalation and defensive deterrence or diplomatic engagement. In general, the combination of unclear legal requirements, mighty military instruments, and domestic diplomatic considerations pushes the current South China Sea tensions. The lack of a clear solution to the sovereignty issues, plus the playing games of great powers and the different interests of littoral states, adds to the threat of a constant risk of maritime incidents and makes the process of conflict resolution in the context of diplomacy complicated. (Bilal, 2025)

### **Theoretical Framework**

Hypothetical analyses of the South China Sea conflict in 2025 underscore a complicated blend of geopolitical gambit and regional efforts of de-escalating the current tensions. According to the realist approach, China is progressively gaining territorial claims with military measures, including reclamation of its land, and deployment of the maritime militia to reinforce its sovereignty in disputed waters that are rich in natural resources and significant shipping lines. As a counter to this, the United States undertakes Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge such overreaching claims, and to ensure compliance with international law in the region, which helps sustain a balance of power in the region. At the same time, gray zone conflict theory is used to understand why China employs ambiguous but non-lethal methods, such as maritime militias, and coast guard patrols to slowly establish control without initiating a full-scale war. Such strategies provide ambiguities making military actions and foreign policies difficult and risking of miscalculation that may escalate the tensions. Also, the notion of intricate interdependence shows the importance of economic and diplomatic ties as one of the factors contributing to state behavior. South China Sea is a critical trade, fishery, and energy resource route, and an area of interest to the stability of regional and international markets. The role and activities of dialogues at the multilateral level by ASEAN strive to encourage collaboration and conflict management although differences between claimants and competing strategic interests remain an issue. The theory is based on realism, the dynamics of gray zone conflicts, and interdependence to provide a holistic approach to the complex nature of the 2025 conflict. It highlights the fact that enduring peace resides in the ability to manage conflicts in concert, which is of a transparent nature and continues to engage in diplomacy, in a sophisticated environment of power competition and regional dependence.

### **Increased Symbolic and Declaratory Assertions**

In 2025, to strengthen its controls, China strengthened its presence in several of the most major hotspots in the South China Sea which included the declaration of Scarborough Shoal as a marine nature reserve. This move was accompanied by the ceremonies in the presence of the China Coast Guard, which means an increase in the administrative and law enforcement level. Such actions caused both concern in the Philippines and within the international community that China is trying to solidify its stance both by legal and bureaucratic means that may culminate in additional militarization. This policy of rhetorical claims is to legitimize the claims of Beijing and claim

sovereignty without military conflict, which increases the tension in the disputed region (Khan, 2025).

### **Collisions, Close Encounters, and Gray-Zone Coercion**

The years 2024 and 2025 saw a series of maritime confrontations involving vessels from the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the China Coast Guard, maritime militias, and the Philippines. These incidents included collisions and near collisions, as well as confrontational maneuvers like the use of water cannons and blockade attempts by Chinese vessels against Philippine boats. In August 2025, a notable collision occurred between Chinese coast guard ships during an attempt to blockade a Philippine vessel, underscoring the significant risks posed by increasing maritime coercion. These encounters illustrate the ongoing gray-zone operations tactics that remain below the threshold of armed conflict but are aggressive enough to challenge norms and test rivals' resolve. (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2025)

### **Changing Operational Tempo of U.S. Presence**

U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea have taken a new pattern which is characterized by a subtle balancing between strategic signaling and conflict risk management. Although the frequency and nature of such operations off contested islands have been inconsistent, the U.S. has risen in regard to joint exercises with allies and partner states, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions and fostered interoperability between ships in the area. (Chen, 2025) Such movements are to demonstrate the dedication of the project towards the maritime security and the international maritime law without the direct escalation. The U.S. Department of Defense is publicly contending with maritime claims that are beyond accepted legal standards, and this supports its position of maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Higher Kinetic and Accidental Risk**

The rising maritime action, a growing number of law enforcement and paramilitary ships traversing the area like the China Coast Guard and maritime militia ships, have increased the danger of accidental contacts in the South China Sea. Close plays, crashes and antagonistic moves have become more common in this congested and contentious region. (Pressenza International Press Agency, 2025) The threat of having another armed clash, which is to be more extensive than witnessed in 2025, is also high because of confrontations between Chinese and Philippine vessels in the area of the disputed areas such as Scarborough Shoal. These confrontations are usually non-lethal, but forceful, including the use of water cannons and an attempt to block or restrict the movements of ships. As an example, Chinese coast guard ships fired water cannons at Philippine ships attempting to re-supply fishing fleets, and this led to injuries and damages without any direct fighting. These activities result in a tense sea scenario where there is a lot of tension and a risk of operations and where miscalculations may cause severe conflicts. The fact that such confrontations are usually repeated, as well as the Chinese maneuvering, such as the intended designations of some maritime features as nature reserves, further complicates the matter and puts all the involved parties on their toes and endangers the stability of shipping lanes and fisheries in the region. (BBC News, 2025)

### **Erosion of Freedom of Navigation and Commercial Certainty**

The current activities of China in terms of its coast guard ships and the administrative control of the maritime features in the South China Sea have made the commercial shipping as well as the fishing industries complicated. Despite the fact that key shipping routes are not closed, the tactics of the gray zone in China, including the blockage of some areas of the sea and the increased number of patrols, create operational risks, bringing uncertainty and making activities of business entities and fishing communities more expensive. Such strategies also compel the maritime insurers to

charge more and disrupt standard maritime trade as a result of new regulatory compliance standards. Scholars warn that civilian fishing vessels used by China as a maritime militia is a weaponization of fisheries which challenges the security and the financial sustainability of the coastal states that depend on the sea as their sources of livelihood. The fishing fleets operate under the supervision or coordination of the Chinese navy and are often involved in activities that do not require the direct presence of military forces. Their actions function as state-directed incursions into disputed waters, making them an effective tool in China's strategy to strengthen its control over contested maritime areas. These types of militarization of fishing fleets are a threat to marine resources and an intensifying problem because these relationships confuse civilian and military actors, increasing the risks of coastal populations and regional stability. The cumulative impact is that it has led to disruption of the economic sustainability of the maritime trade and fisheries not only in local economies but also globally in the various supply chains that use the South China Sea and relied heavily on the much needed waterways. The higher risks in operation and uncertainty discourages investment and also increases costs thus undermining the economic basis of coastal states and their capacity to sustain maritime security on their own. (Canada, 2024)

### **Threats to Fisheries and Coastal Livelihoods**

The use of militarized fishing fleets, which are backed by maritime militias, reduces fish stocks, compromising the sustainability in the long run of fisheries in the area. These practices do not just put food security of the local communities at risk but make competition of resources a political issue, which heightens tensions among states which claim it. Such strategies have humanitarian impacts on the local level, including the threat of the safety of fishers and the worsening of the governance issue in seas. With the conflict over access to resources increasingly becoming controversial, there can be an increase in domestic pressures in the affected states, contributing to wider bilateral or regional conflicts. (Storey, 2025)

### **Complicating Allied Operational Planning**

To the United States and its regional allies, it is becoming more complicated as to how to have a presence in the South China Sea and prevent Chinese aggression. The standard of employing non-lethal instruments of coercion such as coast guard boats and sea militias makes the decision making process challenging, as it creates doubts concerning the guidelines of engagement and the point of escalation. Striking a balance between showing the deterrence effect and ensuring forces are not caught in the crossfire implies that the allied navies and armies are forced to act with a more careful approach and adjust to the murkier gray-zone operations. (Mishra, 2025) This environment demands sophisticated risk management and coordination among partners to maintain stability without triggering conflict (Zaheer M. A., US Foreign Policy and the Risks of War with China, 2025).

### **Strained Relations among Claimants and External Powers**

The increasing attempts of China to establish the administrative control in the regions of dispute, such as designating marine protected areas around Scarborough Shoal and conducting official ceremonies via the China Coast Guard, have ignited strong diplomatic protests, principally from the Philippines. These offensive moves have unnerved several other ASEAN countries, reflecting different levels of threat perception and strategic preferences within the association. These disparities obstruct the formation of a coherent approach to dealing with the conflicts, with claimant countries divided between their own territorial assertiveness and avoiding a shooting war. This lack of agreement also puts issue ASEAN's equipment to operate as an effective mediator, weakening its role in maintaining regional stability amid competing external influences.

### **ASEAN Cohesion and Challenges to the Code of Conduct**

In 2025 diplomacy, ASEAN is still working hard to maintain peace and respect the freedom of navigation as well as comply with established international rules. The wide range of national interests among its members also makes it hard to reach fast and forceful decisions on proliferating regional tensions. The often debated Code of Conduct (COC) with China as a tool for managing disputes and reducing risks, continues to be stymied between both sides without strong provisions for enforcing them. Chinese coercion continues and there are further incidents at sea that reinforce scepticism of the COC's future utility. As a result, scepticism remains with respect to whether this deal can turn into a creditable instrument to lower tension and foster cooperation in the South China Sea.

### **Strengthening U.S.–Philippines and Regional Partnerships**

The Philippines has embarked on a more assertive course as part of its response to China's growing assertiveness. It has done so by actively expanding its military and security ties with the United States, and with other regional partners like Japan, Australia, among others. This is captured in the deepening cooperation that is meant to strengthen deterrence capabilities and containing China's new found influence. Nevertheless, Beijing perceives these alliance expansions made against it as being provocative and a threat to its own interests in the region. As a result, China deploys asymmetric strategies including economic and diplomatic pressures in order to dissuade foreign stronger military powers participation. What results is a sensitive strategic environment where attempts at deterrence must be delicately handled to avoid any offensive action whilst ensuring the regional security system.

### **Risk of Geopolitical Spillover**

The South China Sea dispute's prominence as a stage for U.S.–China rivalry has broader diplomatic consequences, complicating negotiations on trade, investment, climate policy, and maritime environmental protection. (Michael J. Green, 2014)The high tension absorbs considerable diplomatic energy and attention, reducing the bandwidth available for cooperation on transnational challenges. The multifaceted disputes risk entangling wider Indo-Pacific economic and security agendas, making diplomatic stability fragile and multi-dimensionally vulnerable to geopolitical escalation pressures (Zaheer M. A., AUKUS alliance and China, 2023).

### **Russia**

While Russia harbours no territorial aspirations in the South China Sea, it has made substantial strides to deepen strategic and naval ties with its neighbour China including joint naval exercises and patrols through the Indo-Pacific. This deepening alignment illustrates Russia's support for Beijing's strategy to challenge U.S. naval supremacy in the region. But Moscow treads a fine line with this partnership, aware of its global military commitments, working to sidestep direct confrontation whilst consolidating the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Such an alliance would muddy U.S. and its allies attempts to counter the Joe's belligerent behavior in the sea. (ALJAZEERA, 2025)

### **India**

From an Indian perspective, the South China Sea is critical because of strategic interests in ASEAN countries, underpinned by recent "Look East" policies; the freedom of navigation issue and a commitment to rules-based order – especially in reference to UNCLOS. India often takes part in naval drills with regional countries and stresses peaceful resolution of conflicts and multi-lateral talks. Recognising the South China Sea as a priority energy and trade route, India walks the diplomatic tightrope with China even as it strengthens defence ties with Indo-Pacific allies to help them secure regional stability. (Magsumbol, 2025)

## **Japan**

Japan's got its eye on keeping trade through the South China Sea running smoothly. The country backs both ASEAN and U.S. pushes for a rules-based order in the region. You'll see Japanese forces teaming up with the U.S., Australia, and other neighbors for regular military drills—mostly to push back against China's growing military clout. On top of that, Japan helps Southeast Asian navies step up their game with better surveillance and training, so everyone works together more easily. It's all driven by worries about China's actions and a real need to protect Japan's own economic interests. (China, Russia End 5-Day Naval Exercises In Sea Of Japan, 2025)

## **Australia**

Australia really pushes for a free and open Indo-Pacific. You'll see them teaming up with the U.S. and other regional partners for Freedom of Navigation Operations. Canberra also backs ASEAN-led talks and programs that help lower tensions and encourage peaceful solutions. With groups like AUKUS and the Quad, Australia keeps the focus on maritime security and stands up against any single country trying to force its will in the South China Sea. (Diplomat, 2025)

## **European Union**

The EU might be far from the South China Sea, but it still steps in diplomatically—pushing for respect for international law, freedom of navigation, and peaceful ways to settle disputes. The EU backs ASEAN as it works out a Code of Conduct with China, and it teams up with regional countries to improve how they manage their seas and protect the environment. Europe's interest here is not just about good intentions; leaders know that what happens in the South China Sea can shake the global economy and the rules everyone plays by. (Spokesperson, 2021). When you look at the big picture, all these major powers—each with their own agenda—are shaping the region through military moves, diplomacy, and partnerships. So, it's not just a U.S.-China standoff anymore. It's turned into a much bigger geopolitical contest. Sure, all some players make the security situation more tangled, but they also open the door for countries to work together, manage conflict, and maybe even keep the peace.

## **China's Calculus**

China's playbook in the South China Sea isn't just about flexing military muscle—it's a careful, layered strategy meant to tighten its grip without sparking an all-out fight. Instead of sending in warships, Beijing leans hard on its coast guard and a network of maritime militia, always present, always watching. They use tactics like declaring nature reserves or drawing new administrative lines, slowly turning their claims into reality on the water. It's a game of steady pressure, never quite crossing the line into open conflict, but always moving the goalposts. Other countries get squeezed, often left with little choice but to go along, since undoing these changes gets harder over time. By keeping the military in the background and letting civilians and paramilitaries take the lead, China keeps things murky—plausible deniability is built in. Behind it all, there's a bigger plan in motion: combine these maritime maneuvers with legal tactics and strategic nudges, and you start to see how Beijing is working to tip the regional balance and cement its lead in the Indo-Pacific. (Zaheer M. A., 2024) (Kumari, 2025)

## **U.S. Calculus**

The United States is zeroing in on a few key things: making sure maritime rules actually matter, keeping sea lanes open, and pushing back when anyone tries to change the balance in the region on their own. You see this in Freedom of Navigation Operations, in efforts to boost the maritime security skills of partner countries, and in some pretty clear diplomatic signals that the U.S. stands

by a rules-based order. But here's the tough part—Washington has to show it's serious about deterring China's more aggressive moves without letting things spiral into a shooting war (Zaheer M. A., 2024). So, the U.S. keeps tweaking its presence and operations, always trying to strike that balance. Building alliances, making sure everyone can work together, and staying alert to the risk of escalation—those are all front and center (Green, 2020).

### **Gray-Zone Dynamics**

Gray-zone tactics—those murky, non-lethal moves—make life tough for diplomats and the military alike. It's hard to pin down who's really behind these actions, or even decide where to draw the line between posturing and actual aggression. China gets to shrug off blame, while the U.S. and its partners end up second-guessing every response. This whole setup raises the odds of someone making a bad call, or reading a minor move as a major threat, and suddenly things can spiral out of control. You end up with a tense, unpredictable situation that calls for careful, coordinated action everyone's trying to avoid a real fight, even as the competition underneath keeps heating up. (Terpstra, 2018)

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **Recommit to Conflict-Avoidance Mechanisms at Sea**

Improvement of the existing measures in preventing inadvertent maritime disputes is necessary in keeping peace in the major sea passageways such as the South China Sea. This necessitates the reinvigoration and guarantee to the proper running of both bilateral and multilateral communication links including the naval and coast guard hotlines that allow direct and instant communication between concerned authorities in emergency situations. Also, ensuring that there is a clear and reliable communication procedure during any incident at the sea and speedy notification systems enable all the parties to communicate swiftly and reduce the chances of misunderstanding that may cause conflicts. In the past, this type of communication structure has played a very important role in alleviating tensions by facilitating immediate communication and clarification in any case of incident. The increased number of near-misses and collisions in the South China Sea recently emphasises the importance of strengthening these confidence-building initiatives because they are essential in mitigating the chances of unintended confrontation and promoting maritime security among all the interested parties.

#### **Accelerate and Strengthen a Rules-Based Code of Conduct**

The development and full enforcement of a specific Code of Conduct (COC) of the South China Sea is one of the main priorities of the ASEAN member states, as well as, China. Such codes must provide a clear understanding of the behaviors that can be accepted, the way to resolve disputes and the actual enforcement systems to handle the tensions and conflicts. Instead of only being a declaration of intentions, the COC should include performance features like monitoring structures, validation procedures and transparent reporting process, to make sure that they are accountable to all parties involved. As a way of enhancing, the ability of ASEAN to implement the COC, international donors and technical experts may provide a worthwhile contribution in terms of training, resources, and technology to support the development of regional capacity to implement and monitor. Having a realistic and enforceable COC is vital in deterring escalations, minimizing unclear or coercive behavior commonly referred to as gray-zone tactics, and advancing an order of predictability and rules in this strategically significant area. This mode creates a sense of confidence in the claimant states and leads to a long-term peace and security in the South China Sea.

#### **Expand Cooperative Maritime Domain Awareness**

An effective way of improving clarity on maritime operations is to form a collaborative maritime domain awareness (MDA) program among the nations that have stakes in the South China Sea,

with external partners so as to increase transparency on maritime operations. This would include the dissemination of information regarding the activities of the research vessels, the fishing operations, and the coast guard patrols, which would help decrease the level of uncertainty and the possibility of facing unintended conflicts due to the misunderstandings. Besides reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings, enhanced MDA is also important in protecting the important marine resources like fishery; it contributes to economic and environmental sustainability in the area. In order to make sure that all coastal states may participate in these efforts and enjoy all benefits, capacity-building assistance is necessary. This aid may be in form of training, technology transfer and development of infrastructure so that littoral countries can play an effective role and coordinate in common maritime surveillance and protection of resources. By these collaborative efforts, the program would help ensure stability, resource saving and more reliable regional cooperation.

### **Protect Commercial and Fisheries Channels through Civil Measures**

The business impacts of the South China Sea conflicts on the economic activities of the commercial shipping and fishery are immense, and this leads to the importance of collaborative mechanisms that involve the involvement of the private sectors as well. Critical communities such as insurers of the ocean, shipping alliances, and fishery communities need to share data on hazards and collaborate to create best practices. This type of cooperation will be useful in maintaining important trade routes open and in keeping the fishing industries sustainable, despite geopolitical tensions. Through unification, these individual organizations will be able to develop efficient protection mechanisms that make economies more resilient and reduce any disruptions that may arise due to security-related uncertainties. This civilsector collaboration becomes a vital stabilizing factor, which helps to maintain a stable economic activity and protect the lives of local communities, which depend on maritime trade and fisheries in this strategically important region.

### **Adopt Dual-Track Diplomacy: Balance Deterrence with engagement**

The external powers need to seek out a middle ground that incorporates strong military deterrence and aggressive diplomatic efforts to work together in controlling tensions in the region. These include having a convincing military presence in the form of frequent patrols, combined training and alliances that will show willingness to resist any coercive measures. Simultaneously, these powers are supposed to constantly be involved in the process of diplomacy, i.e., summits of high profile and technical cooperation working groups aimed at preventing conflicts. This strategy offers an adaptable reaction system that is firm to discourage aggression but is ready to talk and peaceful settlement. Among other measures, the external actors can help create a stable and predictable environment by considering security measures and diplomacy as complementary, not opposing, and this approach will allow the region to cope with the complex and changing issues without fuelling the tensions in an unnecessarily aggressive manner.

### **Conclusion**

The tensions in the South China Sea by 2025 reflect the current dynamics of geopolitical conflicts whereby they do not manifest themselves in direct-armed conflict but through some insidious forms such as thinly veiled coercion, symbolic activity, and escalating operational risks. The growing use of administrative means and the use of coast guard patrols to enforce its claims by China, combined with the continued presence of the U.S. Navy power, and alliances has increased the likelihood of accidental incidents and disruptions affecting fisheries and maritime trade. Such tensions also put the diplomatic relationships in the region to test and disunify ASEAN making it hard to resolve the disputes. In order to avoid a rise to a high level of conflict, it is important that all the parties involved address the need to take practical measures to contain risks. This entails improving the communication and incident management systems to expeditiously quell

misunderstanding and prevent unwanted confrontations. It is also critically important how fast a clear, rules-based Code of Conduct can be negotiated and properly implemented as it can help set unambiguous rules of behavior and minimize the application of unclear coercive methods, which can be called gray-zone activities. The best opportunity to keep peace and stability is to have a mixed strategy of credible deterrence based on military readiness, and inclusive diplomacy based on open dialogue. This approach is neither harsh nor strict but aims at avoiding confrontation without leaving any points of cooperation and negotiation. Stakeholders can control the competing interests and freedom of navigation better by fostering mutual restraint and international law compliance to ensure freedom of navigation. Moreover, such endeavors are necessary to safeguard economic operations that depend on the maritime resources in the region and the survival of the entire security framework in the face of aggressive great power rivalry in the South China Sea.

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