



RESEARCH PAPER

Great Power Competition: Shifting Maritime Power Dynamics between China and the US in the Pacific Ocean

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how China's naval expansion and modernization have altered the maritime balance of power in the Western Pacific due to China's blue-water naval capabilities including anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD), advanced surface combatants, aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines supplemented by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), aiming to secure energy supplies and extend China's zone of influence. The US Navy deems China's activities to contest the US-oriented 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) Strategy and seeks to maintain freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to maintain a free, open and rules-based order. Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative content analysis of strategic documents, including China's Defense White Paper, US Indo-Pacific Strategy and academic literature. In conclusion, the US-led alignments, the Quad and AUKUS, underscore the need to shelter a balanced maritime order and offset China's rising influence. RIMPAC, Malabar and Sea Dragon are naval drills enhancing interoperability and reconnaissance, simultaneously provoking countermeasures from China. This study recommends that the security of the Pacific centers on the ability of both powers to maintain stability, free navigation and adherence to international law. China and the US should conduct regular negotiations to prevent escalations.

KEYWORDS US, China, Pacific Ocean, FONOPs, RIMPAC, Quad, AUKUS, A2/AD

Introduction

In the 21st century, the Pacific Ocean has reemerged as a strategic arena of great naval power competition between China and the US. China's aspiration to transition from continental to maritime power is evident in China's maritime modernization and expansion, propelled by a doctrinal shift from near-seas defense and far-seas protection. PLAN has undergone unprecedented transformation both quantitatively and qualitatively through the acquisition of advanced surface combatants, aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and the development of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities supplemented by its multi-billion-dollars BRI and MSR. PLAN's naval advancement and construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea (SCS) pose a systemic contest to established US maritime supremacy in the Pacific. China seeks to expand further the First and Second Island Chains, secure Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and shelter its interests. The evolving dynamics of China's ascent, contending the traditional US naval influence reinforced by the liberal world order since WWII (Shah, et. al., 2020).

Traditionally, since the post-WWII period, the Pacific Ocean was dominated by the US. The transition came with China's ascension to regional power dynamics. The US maintained its maritime supremacy; ensured access to key sea routes, island chains and chokepoints through a network of alliances and forward-deployed forces underpinned by the liberal international order (Yaseen, et. al., 2023).

While in the past, the USN maintained superior naval capabilities and dominated the Pacific Ocean, reinforcing its status through naval alliances, increased presence and strategic naval bases. In the 1990s, China's naval modernization and expansion diminished this advantage. China seeks to neutralize the US forward-deployed bases and project blue water naval capabilities (Ghani, et. al., 2017; Green, 2022).

China's unparalleled rise in just one generation is driving it to overtake the US as a sole power, which has raised alarms for significant players such as the US and India. China's ascent is not merely economic but also ideological, which challenges the liberal international order in the post-WWII. China is deemed by the US as a revisionist power and has employed a mix of hard power and economic diplomacy (Allison, 2017; Muzaffar, et. al., 2017). PLAN's modernization allows China to assert maritime claims, SLOCs and contest the US naval domination in the region. China has followed an ambitious maritime modernization strategy, amplifying its presence, technological sophistication and operational outreach (O'Rourke, 2025). China's maritime approach in the Pacific Ocean merges military coercion, legal warfare (or "lawfare"), and gray zone tactics (Sarjito, 2024).

In 2000, China's economic ascent facilitated its development of naval capabilities, assert expansive territorial claims in the SCS and ECS and establish a strategic port in the region, reflecting a contest to US supremacy. The increasing balance has transformed the Pacific into a strategic arena of competition where traditional US domination is increasingly challenged by China's deliberate push for maritime and geostrategic influence.

Currently, the Pacific Ocean has emerged as a great-power competition between China and the US as they vie for strategic, military and economic influence in the region. Currently, the US seeks to maintain its traditional domination in the Pacific through alignments such as Quad and AUKUS to promote 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. China asserts its influence through maritime expansion and economic investments through BRI and militarizing the South and East China Seas. As per China, the US alliances and freedom of navigation operations are containing China's rise. However, the US is no longer a geographical space but a strategic theatre of geopolitical contest structuring the maritime order, governance and security.

Literature Review

As per UNCTAD, 80 per cent of world trade transits through SCS. The Asia-Pacific region contains two major SLOCs, one passing through the SCS to the IO and the Middle East and the other transiting through ECS and the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean and then the Pacific coast of the US and Canada. These SLOCs are one of the busiest in terms of sea transport. The US deems China is a hegemon in the region and the US steered its attention towards the region again in 2011 during the Barack Obama administration. The US focused on multidimensional alliances such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the forging of the Quad to conduct surveillance drills such as FONOPs to contain China's rise in the contested maritime spaces in the region, where China is building and militarizing the Islands, reefs and shoals (Mir, 2021).

This research investigated the significant factors that have amplified the altering dynamics of China-US great power competition in the multipolar world order 2.0. The interests of both China and the US are colliding in the region where they implement their competing regional maritime visions and maritime strategies, redefining the security architecture, dominance and geopolitical priorities in the region. The US FOIP and India's role in Quad aim to curtail China's zone of influence. China's maritime expansion and its global outreach into India's backyard are through BRI, 21st Century MSR, and Open Seas Protection. The research underscored that the US-India cooperation and China-Pakistan collaboration provide a multi-polarity of security architecture. The research concluded by

recommending that China and the US may come forward to a negotiated settlement to maintain regional stability and peace (Jamali, Hussain & Liu, 2024).

During the second decade of the 21st century, the SCS has emerged as a hub of hostility between China and the US, with China's militarization of the contested regions and the US accusing "playing the SCS card" and attempting to constrain China's maritime ascent. The US dominated the region for the past half-century; currently, China is contesting this dominance. China's stated objectives of peaceful coexistence are in conflict with its assertive activities in the SCS and aspires to push the US out of the Asian region. Confrontation between China and the US is a "battle of legal regimes". It is a contest between the US free and open seas vs. China's disputed maritime sovereignty claims and activities based on different history, political culture and geography and varied interpretations of UNCLOS and other international laws between China and the US. Both China and the US agree with the principle of innocent passage in territorial waters. However, China maintains that the coastal state requires prior permission or notification when a foreign vessel transits through innocent passage in its territorial seas. The US says otherwise. For China, the political significance of SCS is not that the sovereignty over islands and reefs can be neglected because it is not about rocks but whether states in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region will either align the US or China. The US maintains that China's expansive maritime claims in the SCS based on the historical nine-dash line are unlawful and have no historic, legal, or geographic merit. The third-party factor is a significant variable in China-US friction. Mostly, China-US competition is owing to the activities of the Philippines and Vietnam (Hu, 2021).

The launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Partnership (IPEF) (an alternative to China's BRI) reinforces the US participation in the economic progress of Pacific states. However, President Trump withdrew from the TPP in 2017. However, Japan and the US allies in Asia wanted the US revive the economic engagement. Apart from economic alignments, the US-led alliances, such as Quad, labeled as 'Asian NATO' keep a check on China's assertive stance in the region. The US and India are inclined to offset China's strategic ambitions (Tahir, 2024; Yaseen, et. al., 2016).

Since the 1990s, China has begun to intensify its Asia policy. China's fastest-growing economy forced it to search for vital resources in its immediate neighborhood. Responding to China's rising influence, President Obama administration announced the 'Pivot to Asia' policy in 2011 that has made it a hub of the US foreign policy, national security and economic interests. Since then, China and the US have been engaged in power politics in multi-domains such as diplomatic, economic and military (Tausif & Ejaz, 2024).

Material and Methods

This research employs a qualitative research design combining content analysis. The case study approach investigates how China and the US frame, interpret and operationalize strategic competition in the Pacific Ocean. This research design offers systematic contextualization and interpretation of textual data. This research employs strategic documents, including China's Defense White Paper, US Indo-Pacific Strategy and academic literature, including reputable think tank reports, journals' articles, books, newspapers and analyses of both China's and the US outlets.

Results and Discussion

China's Maritime Rise in the Pacific

In 2010, China overtook Japan as the second-largest economy in the world. China's economic ascent has long been projected. After realizing economic sway, the naval power dynamics underwent a key transformation. China is flexing its economic and military

muscle, particularly in the Pacific, which is complemented by the mounting concerns in both the US and Japan. The growing militarization of key sea routes and China's assertive activities in the SCS have the potential for strategic divergence with vying powers.

China-ASEAN ties, particularly trade, are owing to China's mounting economic clout. China's ties with Pacific middle powers pose a grueling contest to the US supremacy (Doshi, 2021). The hostility has emerged into a broader ideological contest between the US-led free and open Indo-Pacific and China's governance model (Blackwill & Campbell, 2016).

China has deepened its economic foothold in the Island states such as Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Papua New Guinea and benefited from China's investment through trade and infrastructural development, including roads, ports and telecommunication under BRI and MSR. PLAN is among the world's largest fleets, enabling sustained presence and operations in various oceans as a blue-water navy. This shows that China aims to protect its maritime interests, including the security of SLOCs and assert influence over strategically vital and resource-rich waters. Moreover, China is modernizing its naval assets such as nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, and long-range missile systems.

Major Strategic Flashpoints in the Western Pacific: South China Sea, East China Sea and Taiwan

The SCS, Taiwan and ECS are the connected arc of maritime tensions defining the current phase of great power rivalry. The SCS is a contested region with overlapping territorial and maritime claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, marked by China's Nine-Dash Line asserting 'historic rights' on approximately 90 per cent of the SCS. The Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, Vietnam and China's contested claims in the SCS. The region is vital for the world's economy due to its oil and hydrocarbon deposits and fisheries resources. Approximately one-third of global shipping passes through it (Nowak, 2024).



Figure 1: China's Nine-Dash Line Source: <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/line-07162015121333.html>

Due to the economic significance, this has transformed the region into a militarized zone through artificial islands, airstrips and missile deployment that have enabled China to

assertiveness, challenging Freedom of Navigation and international law, such as the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling rejected the nine-dash line and Taiwan claims as well and offers to resolve the dispute legally but with no implementation mechanism (Guo, 2024). The US wants to ensure the free navigation of maritime traffic that should have the right to innocent passage in the 'maritime commons'. China has violated these rulings by constructing and militarizing the artificial islands and engaging in fishing activities.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict (small and uninhabited islands) in the East China Sea is another volatile flashpoint between China and Japan framed by national identity, economic interests (fisheries, oil, gas and seabed resources) and domestic circumstances. Both states are deploying air and naval assets with competing claims. In 2010, the Japanese authorities detained the Chinese vessels after two collisions with Japanese Coast Guard vessels. The internationalization of the issue, followed by the US-Japan Security Treaty, makes it a potential trigger. Control over ECS provides strategic access to the Japanese significant sea lines of communication (Drifte, 2013).

Taiwan issue lies at the heart of China-US strategic maritime competition and is among the most volatile flashpoints in the region due to its strategic location in the First Island Chain. China views Taiwan as a breakaway province seeking reunification even by force under its 'One China Policy' (Lai, 2025). People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and PLAN regularly conduct air and naval incursions around Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). On the other, Taiwan functions with de facto sovereignty and democracy, managing its government, defence and economy (Fong, 2022).

Taiwan remains the central point of China-US geopolitics in the region. PLAN's growing activities including blockade rehearsals, amphibious assault simulations, and carrier group operations aimed at dissuading US intervention in Taiwan's sovereignty (Jash, 2024, Oct. 2). Moreover, Taiwan's strategic location, its proximity to US forward-deployed bases in Guam and Okinawa, subverts the regional balance of power, impacting the freedom of navigation, sheltering SLOCs and deterring against China's naval expansion. The US adheres to the One-China Policy. The US, under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, fortifies Taiwan's self-defense through arms sales and training (Mahoney, 2025). The Taiwan procured advanced defensive systems, including F-16 fighter jets, from the US. Furthermore, the US is mounting investments, technological cooperation and shared trade, viewing Taiwan as a vital partner in global supply chains, particularly advanced electronics and semiconductors (Sasaki, 2025).

Evolution of China's naval strategy: From coastal defense to "far seas protection"

Over the past few decades, China's maritime strategy underwent profound evolution. The PLAN's strategy is centered on the defense of coastal seas, aiming to shelter its near-seas, including the South and East China Seas, to constrain potential intrusion and impediments. China followed a defensive and sea-denial strategy.

China's naval modernization reinforces its broader maritime strategy outlined in its Defence White Paper. It focuses on active offshore defense and shifts towards "far-seas protection." From the 1990s onward, China's maritime strategy of "far-seas protection" (yuǎn hǎi bǎohù) is driven by economic development, sea-borne trade, and technological innovation (State Council Information Office, 2015). China's blue water naval capability enables China to safeguard key maritime SLOCs and overseas energy supplies beyond the First Island Chain. China's naval modernization includes nuclear and diesel submarines, amphibious vessels, aircraft carriers and long-range precision missiles. Moreover, China is expanding its presence in the IO, the Gulf of Aden and the Western Pacific.

China's modernization from near-seas defense to far-seas protection shows its objective to recur as a great maritime power and able to project power by contesting the US

zone of influence in the region. This strategic change has made the PLAN to realize China's objectives to increase its zone of influence. Moreover, China has been constructing artificial islands on reefs and shoals and equipping them with runways, ports, radar systems, and missile batteries.

China's naval power modernization is evident in the Western Pacific. PLAN's vessels pass through the First Island Chain and operate near the Philippines and Guam and even penetrate into the Central Pacific. China incorporates its strategic interests with economic connectivity through BRI, aiming to control vital maritime infrastructure and logistics in the Pacific Ocean.

China's naval expansion is demonstrated in its development of blue water naval fleet commissioned with aircraft carriers, including Liaoning, Shandong and Fujian and the growth of cutting-edge anti-ship ballistic missile (DF-21D, DF-26) that has altered the maritime balance in its favour. China has sustained its presence through forward bases in the Western Pacific and the IO. China's A2/AD capabilities, relying on DF-21D and DF-26 and nuclear-powered submarines, aspire to deter the US from intervening and operating in the regional conflicts. China's deployment of DF-21D and DF-26 ASBMs represents a game-changer in naval warfare, "carrier killer" missiles, capable of striking the US aircraft carriers from thousands of kilometers away (Tangredi, 2020). Their ability to target moving warships at extended ranges contests the adversaries in their naval strategies and operational postures in the Indo-Pacific. The DF-21D and DF-26 limit the US operational freedom in the Western Pacific and create a high-risk zone for the US naval forces, particularly in the Taiwan Strait or SCS conflict. DF-21D and DF-26 ASBMs, Air defense systems (S-400, HQ-9), YJ-21 (land-based cruise missiles), likely deployed on J-20 stealth fighters, along with integrated satellite and radar surveillance, challenge the US Navy operating in the First Island Chains. In the Second Island Chain, DF-26 missiles (dubbed "Guam killers"), along with carrier strike groups, long-range bombers, and SSBNs, have been deployed.

The effectiveness of these weapons, however, depends on real-time targeting, reconnaissance, and data fusion capabilities, which China continues to enhance through satellite networks, airborne early warning (AEW) systems, and electronic warfare advancements. A FOBS-based (Fractional Orbital Bombardment System) tested in 2021 could circle the Earth before conducting a strike, making it difficult to detect and intercept. DF-41 ICBM with hypersonic capabilities (potential future development) ranges between 12000 and 15000 km (intercontinental range) and can be modified to carry hypersonic glide vehicles and is capable of striking the mainland from within China. DOD says "it is designed to rapidly swap conventional and nuclear warheads and is capable of conducting precision land-attack and anti-ship strikes in the Western Pacific, the IO, and the SCS from mainland China." (Congressional Research Service, 2023)

China has tested electromagnetic railguns capable of launching projectiles at hypersonic speeds, enhancing long-range strike capabilities. PLAN developed hypersonic anti-ship missiles like the DF-17, first publicly displayed in 2019, that used a hypersonic glide vehicle for increased maneuverability and operate within an estimated range of 1,800-2,500 km. It is equipped with a DF-ZF hypersonic glide vehicle (Labbe, Ghanmi & Abdelazez, 2022).

The DF-27 Hypersonic Missile reported in 2023 is a long-range successor of DF-17 with a potential range exceeding 5,000-8000 km. posing a direct threat to the US in the Indo-Pacific. AI-powered data analytics, autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs), and unmanned surface vessels (USVs) are being integrated for surveillance and combat roles (Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, 2023).

China has demonstrated sea denial via the artificial islands, airstrips, and patrols by employing its Type 055 destroyers in the SCS (O'Rourke, 2021). Along with the commissioning of its aircraft carriers, Liaoning, Shandong and the Fujian, China extends its blue water naval capabilities through the development of Type 055 stealth-guided missile destroyers and Type 093 and Type 095 nuclear and diesel-electric submarines to enhance power projection in the IO. Moreover, China's shipbuilding industry saw a boost with the production of shipyards like Dalian, Huangpu Wenchong, Jiangnan and Hudong-Zhonghua at an unprecedented pace (Panella, 2024, September 21). Type 075 amphibious assault ships to enhance expeditionary warfare. The Type 075 LHDs and global logistics capability (e.g., replenishment ships) are able to project power in the Far Seas (O'Rourke, 2021). Its naval modernization initiative is fortified by advanced C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) systems, space-based sensors, and precision-guided munitions, enabling the PLAN to operate in multiple domains. This multidimensional defense approach stretches from China's mainland to the Second Island Chain and the ECS.

The USN is the world's technologically advanced navy operating 296 vessels, 50 nuclear attack submarines, 04 nuclear cruise missile submarines, 14 nuclear ballistic missile submarines, 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, destroyers and unmanned vessels. The Nimitz class is gradually being replaced by the Ford class (advanced technologies including the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System, EMALS) aircraft carriers. The US carrier strike groups confront risks in the Western Pacific, forcing the US to develop countermeasures such as distributed maritime operations (DMO) and long-range precision strike capabilities (Ibrahim, 2024).

China's naval expansion is a direct threat to US aircraft carrier strike groups USS Carl Vinson UN under CENTCOM-led maritime security operations and USS Nimitz transited in 2025. This dual-carrier overlapping strategy ensures deterrence and strategic readiness in the IO. US carrier strike group USS Ronald Reagan has been deployed forward under 7th Fleet from Yokosuka, Japan. In 2025, USS Nimitz conducted routine flight operations.

China's naval exercises and protection of maritime interests regarding BRI focus on maritime stability and sheltering SLOCs. The global hegemony of the US is contested by China's investment in cyber, space, electronic warfare, port access and ship-building (O'Rourke, 2021). The industrial boom enabled PLAN to emerge as the largest navy in the world by its fleet size, showcasing China's strategic focus on emerging as a maritime power.

The building of China's Islands spree and equipping them with missile launchers, radar systems, runways and port facilities transforms the reefs and rocks into strategic infrastructure that can serve as forward operating bases for PLAN's fleets, aircrafts, submarines, amphibious assault ships and warships, reflecting China's permanent presence in contested waters. This emboldens China's broader strategy to establish de facto control over vital sea lanes that are rich in resources and serve as critical trade routes. Regular patrols, live-fire drills, and joint exercises in the SCS reinforce China's claims and deter regional actors.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision

The US sees the Indo-Pacific (China does not officially use the term Indo-Pacific) as its most consequential region. "The Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America's future." It spans "from the west coast of the US to the western shores of India." The strategy frames China as a strategic competitor (US Department of Defense, 2019). The US does not maintain a separate Pacific Ocean strategy and treats the Indian and Pacific Oceans as one. Its 'Indo-Pacific strategy' indicates the confluence of two seas and a single interconnected strategic theatre in the context of China's ascent.

The Indo-Pacific is vital to the US foreign policy owing to its economic magnitude, security dynamics and geopolitical concerns. The region accounts for approximately 60 per cent of the global maritime trade and container traffic and hosts major shipping routes, including the Strait of Malacca, Luzon, Sunda and Panama Canals, which are major economic lifelines through which a major chunk of global trade is being shipped. The region holds immense significance due to its maritime connectivity and shipment (Kaplan, 2014). Keeping in view the economic security, both China and the US aspire to project power and dominate the key strategic SLOCs. The seabed of the Pacific Ocean contains huge oil and gas reserves, vast minerals and fisheries. The contest over EEZ and maritime frontiers manifest the economic interest of vying powers.

The US FOIP was officially announced in 2017. It envisions that states can make sovereign policies regarding trade flows and regulate maritime commons as per international law. This strategy offset China's mounting regional influence both geopolitically and geo-economically. The FOIP is an all-inclusive approach to shape political, economic and security dynamics. This strategy aims to secure a free, open, secure, prosperous, connected and resilient Indo-Pacific. The regional middle powers are balancing their security ties with the US and economic ties with China. In the contested waters of the SCS, China makes sovereignty claims. Therefore, the freedom of navigation remains a contentious issue.

While the FOIP highlights open seas, China deems the FONOPs as provocative actions against China rather than upholding maritime laws (Raso, 2025; Van & Nguyet, 2023; Siddiqi, 2022). The rule of law advocated in the FOIP is proclaimed in the UNCLOS (UNCLOS is not ratified by the US). FOIP outlines the (1) respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; (2) peaceful resolution of disputes; (3) free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity; and (4) adherence to international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight." In terms of implementation, these principles lack progress in achieving those goals, especially in the SCS region (Siddiqi, 2022).

FOIP is a strategic reaction to China's towering naval capabilities and aggressive activities in the region. China's acquisition of blue water naval capabilities, coupled with the militarization of artificial islands in the SCS has alarmed global and regional powers (Kaplan, 2021). The US fosters FOIP to ensure unimpeded maritime trade and security and is committed to building a region of prosperity, security, and freedom. Contrary to its principle of free trade, the US withdrew from TPP, negating its commitment to regional economic integration (Capling & Ravenhill, 2020). The US upholds global power projection by employing submarine fleets, aircraft carrier strike groups and integration of forward-deployed forces with participating navies. The US modernizes its naval capabilities, including hypersonic weapons and advanced surveillance systems and enforces FONOPs to contest China's expansive maritime claims in the SCS (Nagy, 2019).

Despite the US increasingly reinforcing FONOPS, it advocates for diplomatic solutions and supports legal actions. The US aspires that no single power can control the maritime spaces and force smaller regional states. The US withdrew from the TPP. The FOIP reinforces the sustainable infrastructure and economic partnership through ventures as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the Blue Dot Network, and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), which are proposed as an alternative to BRI.

Moreover, the Quad and AUKUS signify vital US initiatives aiming to sustain regional security and dissuade China's sphere of influence (Panda, 2021). The US fortified its ties and cooperation through the Quad with India, Japan and Australia and the AUKUS with Australia and the UK, buttressing deterrence and interoperability across the region. The US promotes India as a 'net security provider' to contain the rise of China.

The regional middle powers navigate their ties with both China and the US. The Quad partnering states contribute in joint military drills to increase intelligence sharing, surveillance cooperation and forward-deployed bases (Smith, 2021). On the other, China supports ASEAN centrality and a greater role in the region's political landscape and global affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2022).

China criticizes the US Indo-Pacific Strategy as it aims to contain China's ascent. Beijing is of the view that the US promotes 'bloc confrontation' driven by a Cold War mentality, aiming to forge alignments to restrain China's economic and military influence, eventually undermining regional stability.

Strengthening naval posture and freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)

China's ascent presents the most pressing strategic challenge to the US in the Indo-Pacific. China's aggressive military stance manifests in island-building in the SCS and amplified naval deployments have compelled the US to make commitments to its allies regarding FONOPs, asserting navigational rights and freedom in contested waters (Fravel, 2019). However, the UNCLOS (a legal framework to define maritime rights and zones) rejects China's claim of "historic right" and control over the majority of the SCS outlined by the "nine-dash line". Moreover, China militarizes the region and indicts these navigation operations as "provocations" and violations of sovereignty. Also, China invalidates the PCA ruling (2016), stating that PCA lacked jurisdiction and did not participate in proceedings (Mukherjee, Liu & Yu, 2021).

US-led drills are regular and lawful transits through the US aircrafts and warships in the disputed waters, particularly the SCS and ECS, to contest excessive maritime claims of China and espouse the principles of international law under UNCLOS. The multilateral drills such as RIMPAC, Malabar and Sea Dragon (conducted by the US 7th Naval Fleet) are anti-submarine warfare, increase surveillance operations and interoperability with partner navies, deter adversaries and ensure free trade through significant maritime chokepoints. FONOPs are a strategic indication to view both China and the partner navies that the US is able to uphold maritime freedom underpinning regional security and trade.

FONOPs are complemented by a sustained military presence enabled through regional alignments with partner navies such as Japan, Australia and the Philippines. The U.S. seeks to enhance interoperability through multilateral naval exercises, such as RIMPAC and Malabar, and emphasizes maritime domain awareness and defense partnerships with ASEAN nations. Through these measures, Washington seeks to deter Chinese expansionism, reassure regional allies, and safeguard open sea lines of communication. The US responded by conducting increased naval exercises such as RIMPAC and bolstering regional alliances. China's naval force projection in the Indo-Pacific reflects its maritime aspirations, aiming to secure national interest, control SLOCs, expand geopolitical influence and challenge the established domination of the US-led alliances. PLAN has expanded from a coastal force into a blue water naval force capable of sustained operations distant from Chinese coasts. To reinforce its sovereignty and deter other claimants, Beijing regularly conducts live-fire drills and naval exercises in the SCS near contested islands and reefs and challenges the 2016 Hague Tribunal ruling in favour of the Philippines.

Forward-deployed forces and strategic bases (Guam, Okinawa, Hawaii)

Raja Mohan notes that the US is restructuring forward-deployed bases, presence, access denial and solidification of alliances with Japan and Australia while forging new security alignments, particularly with India. India's evolving maritime focus on reinforcing US efforts to increase regional security through burden-sharing. However, the US has sustained its naval presence of the 7th Fleet headquartered in Japan. The US Seventh Fleet, headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan, is supplemented by forward-deployed bases in Hawaii,

Australia, Singapore, the Philippines and Guam, allowing the US to project force across in the Western Pacific and broader Indo-Pacific, bolstering deterrence against China's maritime claims and sheltering SLOCs significant for global trade.

A sustained rise in naval militarization is evident between both China and the US in the Western Pacific, particularly the SCS. The US maintains its 7th Fleet forward-deployed forces based in Guam and Japan and rotational deployment of allies. China's naval expansion and modernization revealed in its blue-water naval capabilities and upgradation and buildup of naval assets, including aircraft carrier, island-spree, long-range missile systems and destroyers. The analysis of competing maritime doctrines indicates that the Pacific Ocean is a hub of securing maritime trade, power projection and geopolitical influence. China's soft diplomacy is leveraging economic ties by investing in infrastructure development through BRI and port access. The US, on the other, depends heavily on alliances and partnerships with Australia, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea and India. The US FONOPs and open and rule-based order enforce China to adopt defensive responses to encirclement, containment and external interference in its adjoining seas. China responded by conducting live-fire drills and joint exercises. The US focuses on distributed lethality and unmanned surface vessels, whilst China adopts A2/AD and qualitative and quantitative buildup of naval assets. Both states are preparing for sustained competition but simultaneously avoiding direct confrontation.

Conclusion

China-US naval conflict of domination signifies the contemporary great power competition in the Pacific Ocean, defined by China's naval modernization, militarization of Islands spree, A2/AD capabilities in the SCS, and the expansive BRI, which contested the established supremacy and liberal world order that has ruled the Pacific waters for decades. Furthermore, China invests heavily in destroyers, nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers. The US, through FONOPs, forward-deployed naval bases and security cooperation with Quad, AUKUS and shared deterrence postures, seeks to offset Beijing's territorial claims and uphold the principle of open seas, but has transformed the Pacific Ocean into a militarized geopolitical theatre. The US is committed to maintaining the global maritime commons. The Pacific Ocean has emerged as an arena for 21st-century power politics, where domination of the seas connects to domination of the future regional dynamics.

Recommendations

China and the US require strengthening negotiations during a crisis between commanding naval officials to avert the risk of escalation during close encounters, particularly in disputed maritime zones such as the SCS. International bodies such as the ASEAN-led mechanism and APEC should be allowed to facilitate cooperation on maritime security and build trust on other shared challenges in the region to prevent unintended confrontations. Even though the UNCLOS has not been ratified by the US, both the US and China need to interpret the freedom of navigational rules and maritime rights to stop direct confrontation.

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