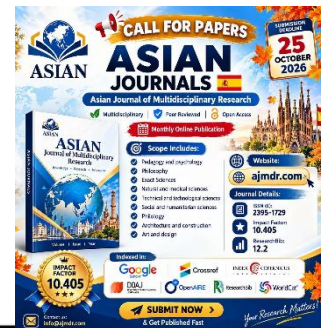




THE FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE REGIONAL SECURITY SYSTEM IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23259503>

Abstract. This article examines the formation and transformation of the regional security system in the South China Sea. It explores the historical evolution of territorial disputes, geopolitical competition, maritime trade routes, and military strategies. Particular attention is given to China's regional ambitions, the United States' balancing role, ASEAN's strategic autonomy, and the influence of international law on regional security dynamics and stability.

Keywords: South China Sea, regional security, territorial disputes, geopolitical competition, maritime security, strategic rivalry, ASEAN, international law, freedom of navigation, great power politics.

In modern international relations, the South China Sea presents itself not merely as a distinct geographical maritime basin, but as a complex regional space where the security interests, economic ties, strategic communication lines, and geopolitical rivalries of various states intersect. The unique character of this region is defined primarily by its location at the geographical junction of East and Southeast Asia, its role in connecting vital international maritime trade routes, its possession of natural resources, and the convergence of various states' interests regarding sovereignty and jurisdiction within the area.

Geographically, the South China Sea constitutes a vast maritime area extending from the sea lanes around the Strait of Malacca and Singapore in the west to the Taiwan

Strait in the northeast. The interests of various political actors—including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Taiwan—converge in this region. The basin contains numerous geographical features, such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands, reefs, and rocks; the majority of these are unsuitable for permanent habitation or are features that remain partially submerged. However, the very location of these geographical features makes issues regarding sovereignty, maritime jurisdiction, and economic rights over them politically critical. The U.S. Energy Information Administration characterizes the South China Sea as a strategically important maritime region encompassing hundreds of geographical features [1].

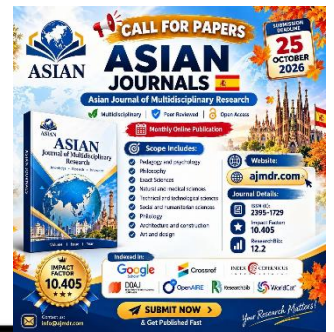
This aspect allows the South China Sea to be viewed as a space for strategic maritime corridors. A significant portion of international maritime trade takes place in Asian waters. According to UNCTAD data, Asia remains the largest hub for global maritime trade [2].

Recent data further clarifies the region's role in the global trading system. In 2024, goods valued at approximately \$6.4 trillion passed through eight key straits associated with the South China Sea. Notably, the Strait of Malacca and the Taiwan Strait each facilitated trade flows exceeding \$2.4 trillion; individually, each accounted for roughly 21 percent of global maritime trade [3].

These figures are crucial for understanding the region's security significance. Given the high degree of dependence of international trade flows on specific geographic straits and maritime corridors, the security of these routes directly impacts states' foreign trade stability, energy supplies, and production chains.

This situation is particularly significant for China, Japan, South Korea, and the nations of Southeast Asia. China's economy relies heavily on international maritime trade; in 2024, 92 percent of the country's crude oil imports were transported by sea [4].

Consequently, the uninterrupted operation of the South China Sea and its connecting



maritime routes is vital not only for China's economic development but also for its energy security and strategic stability.

The geostrategic significance of the South China Sea is also defined by its role as a military-strategic space. The ability to control maritime lines of communication can grant states military advantages in addition to economic benefits. Strategic maritime assets can be utilized for surveillance, intelligence gathering, patrolling, the deployment of naval forces, and the control of communications. Consequently, despite their limited territorial size, islands, reefs, and other maritime features hold great importance in the security policies of states.

This dynamic is a key factor in transforming this geographical area into a security space. Geographical proximity intertwines the security interests of states: the naval, economic, or political activities of one state in the sea are directly observed by others and influence their security calculations.

Furthermore, the security significance of this maritime region is further amplified by its functional connection to international trade routes and strategic straits. While the Strait of Malacca serves as a primary western gateway connecting the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, the Taiwan Strait and the Luzon Strait facilitate its connection to the Pacific Ocean. Consequently, a breach of security in the region could affect not only the states surrounding the South China Sea but also those economically dependent on these communication routes.

Under Article 2 of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan renounced its rights and claims to the Spratly and Paracel Islands, yet the treaty did not explicitly specify which state held sovereignty over these territories. Consequently, the post-war settlement failed to fully resolve the issue of sovereignty over these areas. Subsequently, China and Vietnam interpreted this legal ambiguity in different ways to substantiate their respective claims [5].

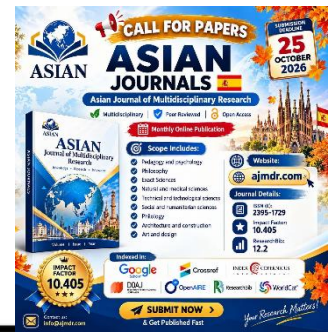
In 1947, the Kuomintang government had published a map featuring an "eleven-dash line" that encompassed vast areas of the South China Sea. After 1949, the new Chinese government maintained these historical claims; in 1953, the map was revised to a "nine-dash line" format following the removal of two lines that had previously covered the Gulf of Tonkin [6].

The Korean War marked a significant turning point for U.S. naval forces in the region. Following the outbreak of war in June 1950, the U.S. Seventh Fleet was deployed to the Taiwan Strait. Washington justified this move as a measure to prevent the conflict from escalating and to maintain control over the situation surrounding Taiwan. However, Beijing viewed this action as interference in China's internal affairs and an obstacle to its plans for the reunification of Taiwan. Thus, the strategic link between the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea intensified [7]. While maintaining maritime routes and military positions in the region became an integral part of the U.S. strategy to contain communism, China perceived the U.S. naval presence as an external threat to its national security.

Due to its geographical proximity to the South China Sea, the Philippines served as a crucial staging area for the United States, enabling the conduct of regional military and logistical operations. Subsequently, during the Vietnam War, the South China Sea became a vital logistical hub for U.S. military operations.

A defining characteristic of the security landscape in Southeast Asia during the Cold War was the growing concern over the spread of communism in the region. The establishment of a communist government in China, the Korean War, and the conflicts in Indochina led U.S. policymakers to view communism not merely as an internal political issue for individual nations, but as a threat to regional security.

The policy of containing the further expansion of communism became a cornerstone of U.S. strategy in Asia. Consequently, the United States developed military alliances,

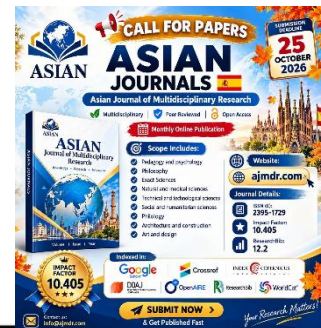


bases, and bilateral security agreements within the region. U.S. policy was not limited to direct military measures against communist states; it also focused on establishing security networks among nations.

The establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 was a product of this political climate. Although SEATO was not a security organization specific to the South China Sea, its existence demonstrated the increasing institutionalization of the region's security environment. However, the security interests of the states in the region did not fully align with the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. ASEAN nations subsequently sought to maintain strategic autonomy in shaping their security policies. US analytical documents from the late 1970s also noted concerns among ASEAN states regarding excessive reliance on US military support [8].

The security system emerging in the South China Sea can be characterized as a multi-centric, multi-level, and interconnected security architecture. Although China figures as the central and dominant regional power, its actions shape the strategic responses of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia; these responses, in turn, encourage the involvement of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India in the region. Consequently, the security system evolves beyond a simple model of bilateral rivalry into a system of multilateral strategic interaction.

The modern security system taking shape in the South China Sea can be described as a regional security framework that is multi-level and dynamic, combining elements of both competition and cooperation. Its defining characteristic is that territorial disputes are no longer merely localized issues between individual states; rather, they are inextricably linked to military competition, economic interests, maritime lines of communication, international law, technological capabilities, and the strategic rivalry among major powers. The transformation of the system is being shaped, on the

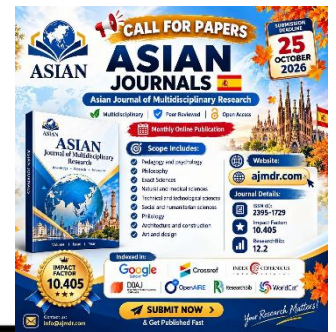


one hand, by the growth of China’s economic and military capabilities and the strengthening of its strategic role in the region, and on the other, by the balancing policies of the US and its partners. At the same time, ASEAN nations are striving to maintain strategic autonomy and balance without uniting into a single bloc. Consequently, a complex, multi-centric security architecture is emerging in the South China Sea-one characterized not by a rigid bipolar model, but by a combination of great-power rivalry, the independent strategic choices of regional states, and the involvement of external actors.

A crucial outcome of this transformation is the broadening of the very concept of security: territorial sovereignty, military capabilities, economic interests, maritime lines of communication, international law, and technological capabilities are converging within a unified strategic security space.

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