Militarization of Artificial Islands: A Threat to Indo-Pacific Peace and Security

Asif Ali

Abstract

The Indo-Pacific is fast emerging as a theatre of intense power rivalry, fuelled by escalating military activity in the South China Sea by both the United States and China. This study examines the implications for regional security, highlighting the erosion of legal norms, deepening great-power competition, the rise of small-group security alliances, and rapid weapons-driven modernization at sea and in cyberspace. China's extensive militarization of artificial islands, for instance, challenges the foundations of international law and adds new friction to an already tense region. In response, the United States and its partners are expanding patrols, joint exercises, and arms transfers, creating a complex counterbalance of military measures. Advanced technologies, including drones and space-based surveillance, further heighten the risk that routine monitoring could be misread as hostile action. This analysis also explores the broader consequences for energy security, economic autonomy, and the free flow of goods across the ocean. In this volatile landscape, regional and extra-regional actors must recalibrate defence strategies, blending cooperation with caution in a multipolar world. The future stability of the Indo-Pacific hinges on the choices, action, or inaction, of both local states and external powers.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific security, militarization of artificial islands, South China Sea, power rivalry, emerging technologies

Introduction

Among the world's most contentious geopolitical and economic zones, the South China Sea stands out as a critical theatre of great-power politics. Aggressive territorial claims have made it one of the most controversial seas globally, with China's extensive construction of artificial islands on submerged reefs, particularly in the Spratly Islands, heightening regional tensions. These islands are not merely altering the geography of the region but are reshaping security dynamics across the broader Indo-Pacific, carrying significant implications for regional and global stability. Military infrastructure, including airstrips, missile launch pads, and

Asif Ali is a Research Assistant at The Pakistan Institute of International Affairs.

associated facilities, has transformed these small features into advanced, heavily militarized outposts, further straining China's already fragile diplomatic relations with regional and global actors.

China's claim, defined by the Nine-Dash line, asserts historical and geographical justification yet conflicts with the territorial claims of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. This assertive posture has intensified friction between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours and the wider international community, particularly following the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, which invalidated the legal basis of the Nine-Dash Line.[1]

China's ongoing construction, reinforcement, and militarization of artificial islands, coupled with its frequent disregard for international legal rulings, demonstrates a dismissive approach towards the established legal framework, rendering the region increasingly unstable. Beyond strengthening its capacity for assertive military strategies, these islands allow China to dominate critical maritime chokepoints, marginalize the geopolitical interests of neighbouring states, and selectively bypass international norms. This enhanced military presence supports the implementation of an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, constraining the operational freedom of the United States and its allies in the region.[2] With this change in the security landscape, the United States, Japan, India, and Australia have shown concern regarding the expanding military presence of China in the South China Sea and its overall impact on regional security. The two key questions of this paper are: (i) How has the construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea affected the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region? (ii) What are the long-term strategic and legal effects of the developments on regional cooperation, international law, and the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific? This paper examines the strategic, legal, and diplomatic implications of China's construction and militarization of artificial islands, assessing both the immediate security consequences and the broader shifts in Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

Legal status of artificial islands under the UNCLOS

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) offers a legal framework for artificial islands, but it lacks a precise definition,

---

[1] Ding Hongbin and Ihsan Ullah, (2022, 2 1). 'The South China Sea's Nine-Dash Line: Key Disputes and China's Historical Rights Claims', Vol 3, No. 1, December 2022, pp. 67–86, https://doi.org/10.55733/jpcs.v3i1.53

[2] Fabian-Lucas Romero Meraner, 'China's Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy', *The Defence Horizon Journal,* 9 February 2023, https://tdhj.org/blog/post/china-a2ad-strategy/

addressing them primarily within the context of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) as extensions of continental shelves.[3] Article 60(1) of the UNCLOS places them within the jurisdiction of coastal states, thus permitting the construction of artificial islands and other installations along the coastline, as well as the imposition of jurisdictional control in the segment reserved for customs, taxation, immigration, and environmental protection. However, Article 60(8) states that artificial islands do not have the status of natural islands and thus do not generate territorial seas or possess maritime zones of their own, such as an EEZ or a continental shelf. In other words, artificial islands do not interfere with the international rights of freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight, especially in international straits or the high seas. Article 60(7) also states that such constructions must be marked on charts and encircled as safety zones.[4] In addition, the UNCLOS restricts the legal purpose of artificial islands to jurisdictional control and aims to prevent their use for altering maritime boundaries or claims of sovereignty over the territory.

The status of artificial islands has been a key issue in several territorial disputes in the South China Sea, with claimants such as China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan claiming conflicting maritime sovereignty. China, in particular, has been responsible for some of the most egregious breaches of international law as a result of the wide-scale land reclamation and militarization of the South China Sea over features such as the Mischief, Fiery Cross, and Subi Reefs, which, at the time, were only submerged or low-tide elevations. Similarly, China has sought to exercise what it considers de facto jurisdiction over most of the South China Sea by artificially constructing islands with military installations, ports, and runways, and advanced radar systems. Not only does this act contravene the spirit of the treaty, but also the restrictions of the UNCLOS provisions on artificial island installations providing the status of maritime/territorial claims' entitlement. Their strategic location, military areas, the maritime restrictions that China has declared over them of its own accord have decreased international freedom of navigation, angering neighbouring countries and other global counterparts in the region such as the United

[3] Hwon Lee, 'The Legality of Militarization of the South China Sea and Its Legal Implications'. *KMI International Journal of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries,* Vol. 15, No. 3, June 2023, pp. 1-24, https://doi.org/10.54007/ijmaf.2023.15.1.1

[4] Ibid.

States and Japan, adding to the conflict over maritime areas in the region and spearheading the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOPs).[5]

The measures taken by China have been characterized as unilateral attempts to alter the legal status quo, with the country being accused of heightening the risk of conflict, generating volatility in the Indo-Pacific, and undermining the effectiveness of the UNCLOS as a stabilizing legal framework. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration made a ground-breaking decision in the case of the Philippines versus China that answered important legal questions about artificial islands.[6] China had argued that it possessed historic rights to the area within the Nine-Dash Line. The Tribunal found that China's claims, as defined by the UNCLOS, were devoid of legal merit. More importantly, the PCA found that the majority of China's artificial islands were constructed upon features that were legally defined as low-tide elevation or rocks, and therefore, by international law, not capable of generating any maritime zones, regardless of the developments that may be placed on them. China's primary military installation on Mischief Reef is on a low-tide elevation in the Philippines EEZ and continental shelf, and, therefore, generates no possible EEZ or territorial sea.[7] The Tribunal reaffirmed the foundational tenets of the UNCLOS by stating that legal features of this nature are not altered by construction on them, no matter how substantial.

Strategic motivations behind the militarization of artificial islands

The militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea reflects China's long-term objectives of regional dominance, encompassing the projection of power, and use of force in national defence. The outposts of artificial islands in the South China Sea do not merely serve as territorial

---

[5] Syed Mubashar Ali Shah Rizvi and Syed Qasim Abbas, 'US Freedom of Navigation Operations and Pakistan Legality under International Law and Geopolitical Implication', *RSIL Law Review,* Vol 1, 2021, pp. 1-35, https://rsilpak.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/U.S.-FREEDOM-OF-NAVIGATION-OPERATIONS-AND-PAKISTAN-LEGALITY-UNDER-INTERNATIONAL-LAW-AND-GEOPOLITICAL-IMPLICATIONS.pdf

[6] Mengzhen Liu, 'The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration and the Limits of International Law', *The Diplomat,* 22 July 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/the-2016-south-china-sea-arbitration-and-the-limits-of-international-law/

[7] Xiaodon Liang, 'High Tensions over Low-Tide Elevations in the South China Sea,' *The National Bureau of Asian Studies*, 13 January 2016, https://www.nbr.org/publication/high-tensions-over-low-tide-elevations-in-the-south-china-sea/

extensions of China; rather, they are the outposts of its strategically located military infrastructure meant to shift the power equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific in its favour. Militarily, China's South China Sea strategy has three main objectives: power projection and maritime domination through anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies; control of essential trade routes and economic arteries; and counterbalancing the US and its regional allies.

Power projection, Area Denial (A2/AD), and maritime control

The militarization of artificial islands demonstrates China's power-projection capabilities. China's influence over the South China Sea comes from the outwardly armed reefs, which consist of numerous aircraft, airstrips, missile systems, and accompanying structures. Similarly, China tends to use these islands as unsinkable aircraft carriers, permitting complete military deployment of quasars over the South China Sea. It is impressive how China can project military assets, such as long-range air defence systems, anti-ship cruise missiles, and naval units, onto these artificial islands. These assets, as part of a permanent military presence, are important to China's A2/AD strategy, which is intended to deter and delay access for new rivals, especially the US and its allies, to the contested strategic maritime regions.[8] These artificial islands serve as compulsory boundary lines and are defence observation, surveillance, and action lines against hostile forces within their territorial jurisdiction and sphere of influence.

The integrated defence system includes advanced surface-to-air missiles, such as the HQ-9, along with YJ-12 and YJ-62 anti-ship missiles, and tactical early warning radars.[9] Not only does the defence system safeguard the claimed maritime borders of China, it also poses a serious threat to American naval supremacy in the Western Pacific. The militarization of these islands also enhances China's ability to assert its control over the sea, especially in strategically important areas such as the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Their geographical location enables China to travel and rapidly intercept major sea routes of communications (SLOCs).[10] China has constructed a strategic triangle within the South China Sea, connecting the Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef, which together provide overlapping coverage of a large swath of maritime

8 Op.cit., Mengzhen Liu.

9 Takahashi, K., 'China's PLAN exercises with YJ-62 anti-ship missile', retrieved from *Naval NEWS*: 27 January 2024, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/01/chinas-plan-exercises-with-yj-62-anti-ship-missile

10 Zahra Ahmed, 'What are Sea Lines of Communication?' *Marine Insight,* 14 October 2024, https://www.marineinsight.com/what-are-sea-lines-of-communication/

territory. This arrangement permits China to surveil and engage in contested foreign military activities, assert administrative control over waters, and bolster the broad claims of the Nine-Dash Line, which China has constructed, ignoring contrary legal judgments and pronouncing legal claims as baseless.

Securing trade routes and maritime claims

One of China's strategic interests is to protect the critical trade routes and economic incentives that pass through the South China Sea. Approximately one-third of global maritime trade transits through this region annually, including an estimated 3.5 trillion dollars' worth of commerce, vital energy supplies, and essential raw materials.[11] For China, which relies on fuel imports and export-driven manufacturing, seaborne trade routes are critical. The Chinese approach is to build and arm artificial islands that are within the range of SLOCs, such as the Strait of Malacca and the Luzon Strait, to retain free passage and dominance of global markets and energy. These artificial islands provide China with the capability to monitor, patrol, and dominate critical chokepoints that are likely to be disputed in a crisis. The Maritime Silk Road, which is the maritime component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), must also be vindicated. Controlling the critical points will help China to overpower regional trade and exploit the BRI, using economic means.[12]

Simultaneously, the militarized islands serve as physical anchors for China's sovereignty claims. By garrisoning, building long-term facilities, and placing defensive potential on Mischief Reef or Subi Reef, China strengthens its *de facto* control over the areas it claims, despite the claims being ruled out by the 2016 decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration under the UNCLOS.[13] The militarization effort has the dual effect of consolidating and attempting to legitimize China's claims, regardless of the degree of resistance. It is a variant of the so-called *salami slicing* strategy used by Beijing, that is, altering facts on the ground (or even in the sea) without a significant conflict.

---

[11] Alla Ud Din, Shi Xiaolian, Uzma Siraj, 'China's Maritime Pivot: CPEC and South China Sea Connection,' *Margalla Papers,* Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 1-13

[12] Qing, L. (2024, July 12). *China's maritime foreign trade contributes to over one-third of global maritime transport.* Retrieved from *People's Daily Online*: https://investinchina.chinaservicesinfo.com/s/202407/12/WS6690f6b8498ed2d7b7eb2e7c/chinas-maritime-foreign-trade-contributes-to-over-one-third-of-global-maritime-transport.html

[13] Hwon Lee, 'The Legality of Militarization of the South China Sea and Its Legal Implications'. *KMI International Journal of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries*, Vol. 15, No. 3, June 2023, pp. 1-24, https://doi.org/10.54007/ijmaf.2023.15.1.1

Counterbalancing the US and allied influence

The militarization of artificial islands demonstrates China's strategic counterbalancing of the United States and its partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The region has long been under US military influence through its strategic partners, Japan, South Korea, Guam, and the Philippines, and rotational forces in Australia. Moreover, the defence forces of the United States had established the region as a zone for maritime freedom. Through FONOPs, bilateral alliances, and defence treaties, Washington has sought to ensure an open, rules-based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.

China views this development as a threat to its national and regional security interests. The sole purpose of this alliance, as perceived by China, is to counter its rise. Thus, artificial islands are a strategic means to restrain the US and its allies in the region. China aims to counter the dominance of the US in the region and shift the power balance in its favour. The fortified islands extend Chinese surveillance and strike capabilities closer to American-held territories such as Guam, and to allies such as the Philippines, Japan, and Taiwan.[14]

China is able to conduct its gray operations because of the presence of these artificial islands. These operations have strategic advantages and do not pose the threat of open warfare. For instance, they attack foreign fishing, blockade, resupply, patrol, disrupt allied US exercises, and conduct 'maritime militia' operations. The islands function as operational logistical centres that facilitate and streamline these processes. They go beyond bare-bones military installations; they are operational assets of regional sub-fringe and psychological warfare against US dominance. The counter-contact will allow other regional states to realize that China is in a unique position; it will take responsibility for the South China Sea in contrast to the US. It is the surrendering of her efforts at border-region militarization that reinforces the assertion that China, not the United States, is the ultimate security provider in the South China Sea. China desires, through its regionally controlled surveillance, to construct a strategic condition where determination is a prerequisite. Moreover, China aims to ensure that the region's politics is characterized by its unmatched strategic and military dominance. Its objective has been to

[14] Muhammad Tayyab Usman, Mukhtar Ahmad, and Muhammad Munib Khalid, 'Strategic Position of Indo-Pacific Ocean; Conflict or Cooperation among Major Powers', *Journal of Political Science and International Studies,* Vol. 8, No. 22, pp. 31-43, https://jpis.pu.edu.pk/45/article/view/118

encircle the ASEAN region, which a number of claimants in the South China Sea strongly support.[15]

Regional reactions and impacts on security agreements

The consequences, both local and global, of militarizing man-made islands have been a dramatic shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. China's construction of military bases on submerged reefs has elicited multifaceted strategic, legal, and collaborative defence countermeasures. Such countermeasures have escalated the already heightened tensions between China and its neighbours with respect to the local power configuration, diplomacy, and maritime activity in the region.

China's island bases vs. US and allied naval patrols

The most powerful response to the construction of military bases on artificial islands has come from the US and its allies. The response greatly expanded the level of FONOPs and related maritime and naval operations in the region. The US Navy and its Seventh Fleet, home-ported in Yokosuka, Japan, routinely conduct operations in the vicinity of the militarized regions to counter what Washington, along with its regional allies, are considering countering China's increasingly excessive and illegal maritime jurisdiction and upholding the global maritime order in accordance with the UNCLOS.

These FONOPs have been the target of numerous statements of objections from China, which claims that they are hostile actions and a violation of its sovereignty. The US perceives them as a necessary element for preserving an open Indo-Pacific and preventing the consolidation of unlawful maritime assertions. The rivalry has resulted in a significant number of interactions, and even perilous confrontations, between vessels of the Chinese navy and coastguard, and the US warships *Decatur*, *McCampbell,* and *Benfold*.[16] The South China Sea is a region where the UK, France, Canada, and Australia have increased their activities. In 2021, the United Kingdom's *HMS Queen Elizabeth* carrier group entered these waters as a symbolic assertion of global maritime rights. France has conducted several freedom-of-navigation transits through disputed zones. These transits, which conflict with the

[15] Ibid.

[16] Tajwar Ali and Aftab Alam, 'Sino-US Antagonism in the South China Sea; Is it the Second Cold War?', *Global Strategic & Security Studies Review,* Vol. 5, No. 1, Winter 2020, pp. 40-49.

Chinese legal position, serve to reinforce the position of the international community in favour of a global rule of law.[17]

The conflict between the US and China over military presence on artificial islands has added a new ground for concern regarding the possibility of accidental escalation of the conflict. China's deployment of radar-guided missiles and surveillance systems on the Fiery Cross and Mischief Reefs means that US aircraft and vessels in the vicinity operate under constant Chinese observation and potential targeting. Such a scenario implies that these islands are no longer artificial and their presence has increased the strategic volatility of the South China Sea, as well as leading to the deterioration of US-China defence relations.

Diplomatic response from ASEAN states

China's actions have posed a dilemma for the ASEAN states. Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, for instance, have direct and historical territorial disputes with China over the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Simultaneously, China is ASEAN's largest partner in trading and financing infrastructure and energy projects through the BRI. However, the outcome has been a pattern of diplomatic hedging as ASEAN countries try to balance their economic and national security interests. In the Philippines, during Duterte's presidency, the country adopted a much softer approach towards China. Rather than focusing on the 2016 PCA ruling, he pursued economic relations with China. However, under the Marcos administration, the country has taken a much tougher approach, invited American forces, and shifted the narrative to an aggressive assertion of territorial claims.[18]

Vietnam has taken a more aggressive approach, condemning China's actions of building artificial islands and their militarization as an attack on its sovereignty and a grave violation of international law. As a result, Hanoi has intensified its defence relations with Japan, the US, and India and has undertaken its own island fortifications. In contrast, Malaysia has adopted a more passive approach. Although they still maintain diplomatic relations with China, they have become more focused on trade. As a regional grouping, ASEAN has yet to adopt a common position. The

---

[17] Michael D. Swaine, 'America's Security Role in the South China Sea,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* 23 July 2015, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2015/07/americas-security-role-in-the-south-china-sea

[18] Ridvan Kilic, 'Sharing security interests, ASEAN's big three step up cooperation', Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 3 April 2025, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/sharing-security-interests-aseans-big-three-step-up-cooperation/

2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), framed under border militarization, has not materialized. Efforts to establish a Code of Conduct (COC) with China remain slow and contentious, revealing the group's internal disunity. China-aligned states, such as Cambodia and Laos, are more active in undercutting joint initiatives that advocate the 'sticks' of a hardline approach. From the outside, this is viewed as a loss of focus on ASEAN centrality in regional security discussions. The organization still serves as a point of contact but has effectively ceased unilateral military operations and maritime intimidation against its own members.

Strategic postures of India, Japan, and Australia

Besides ASEAN, key countries such as India, Japan, and Australia have also adjusted their defence policies as a result of China's military actions in the South China Sea. While these countries are not formal claimants, they have significant economic and strategic interests in the unimpeded passage of ships, regional peace, and observance of global governing treaties. India was cautious in the East Asian maritime disputes, but now appears to be more aggressive in its Indo-Pacific strategy. New Delhi vies to support the maintenance of international maritime order and has strengthened maritime relations with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia over time. Moreover, India's South China Sea deployment and participation in multilateral naval exercises such as *Malabar*, in addition to its other maritime strategies, indicate its ambition to assume the status of a net security provider in the region. In addition, its strategic port investments in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in Vietnam and the Philippines, demonstrate its growing appetite for undermining Chinese maritime hegemony. Japan has also revised its naval and coastguard capabilities with most of the Quad states in response to the growing Chinese maritime activity in the vicinity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.[19]
It has also criticized the expanded militarization of artificial islands.

Similarly, as part of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy, Japan has strengthened its defence partnership with ASEAN countries, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines, by providing patrol boats, surveillance aircraft, and maritime training. It has now aligned its strategy with that of the US by increasing its participation in multilateral exercises and expanding its naval activity in the South China Sea.

Australia has shifted from being timid to being one of the most outspoken detractors of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. As

[19] Ibid

part of the AUKUS security pact with the US and the UK, Australia has turned much of its focus to deeper political alignment with Western nations to discourage China's aggressive actions in maritime Asia. This includes freely conducted militarized and non-militarized flights of naval vessels and outspoken remarks about the militarization of contested territories. With India's inclusion, Japan and Australia hold the most weight in countering Chinese expansionism. Their cooperation within the Quad and other minilateral formats represents an emerging alignment in the Indo-Pacific that goes beyond conventional regional patterns.

Shift toward minilateral security formats

With Chinese militarization and ASEAN's diplomatic constraints, regional and global leaders have started the trend of minilateral security formats to organize the response and burden of the strategy. The most notable of these are Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: US, Japan, India, Australia) and AUKUS (Australia, UK, US). The Quad has developed into a more established platform that addresses maritime security, infrastructure building, cyber defence, and pandemic response. Although it does not name China directly, the activities of the grouping (e.g., joint naval drills, such as Exercise *Malabar*), information sharing, and technological cooperation are clearly a response to Chinese activities in the area. The Quad members promote a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and promote ASEAN centrality in rhetoric, but, in reality, are establishing parallel structures to respond to maritime threats.

Meanwhile, AUKUS is a more focused security construct that has a strong technological orientation.[20] The increased capacity of Canberra to operate over vast oceanic territories in the South China Sea, owing to the supply of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, is of primary importance. Artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, seabed surveillance, and cyber warfare are also included in the AUKUS cooperation. This is an indirect response to China's increasing maritime strength, as the alliance seeks to restore the balance of military deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Quad, along with AUKUS, demonstrates the enduring trend for restructuring and reallocation of regional security collaboration. Countries are crafting and integrating their own tailored alliance systems for focused target cooperation, which is less responsive than the ASEAN multilateral approach. This also highlights how China's uncontrolled, expedited, and aggressive militarization of the islands is shattering the security equilibrium of the area.

[20] Simon McKenzie and Eve Massingham, 'AUKUS: The Regulation of the Ocean and the Legal Dangers of Working Together,' *Ocean Yearbook Online,* Vol. 37, No. 1, 26 May 2023, pp. 136-170, https://doi.org/10.1163/22116001-03701008

Future implications for the security of the Indo-Pacific

The Nine-Dash Line displayed on Chinese territorial maps is now claimed by China to extend much farther offshore. Consequently, this expands the reach of Chinese military operations over Indochina while generating unprecedented military dominance in Southeast Asia. Chinese forces would be able to undermine the operational credibility of US Navy FONOPs. The Outer Defence Perimeter and the Second Island Chain provide an optimal operational radius for the expansion of Chinese armaments. The region has also facilitated the consolidation of China's A2/AD umbrella. Combined with the Indo-Pacific's broader shift towards stronger A2/AD penetration, global power competition increasingly benefits from accelerated arms expansion for integrated warfare.

Arms competition, driven by dominant regional A2/AD postures shaping the central Indo-Pacific and China-India rivalry, is rooted in mutually opposing force projections. The rivalry is centred on a region marked by the militarized artificial islands in the South China Sea. The wider Indo-Pacific remains focused on unresolved artificial-island disputes linked to claims of regional expansion and intersecting with multiple independent military systems. Designed and armed simultaneously, the South China Sea has become the core arena of extensive strategic sponsorship. Unregulated maritime zones now extend into newly contested Indo-Pacific spaces, shifting geopolitical and economic boundaries across flexible, trans-regional arrangements. These unresolved tensions will grow more complex with the entrance of shifting and nuclear-armed powers, deepening regional instability.

Escalation of major power competition

The Indo-Pacific Region has become the centre of the increasing US-China rivalry, particularly with the growing competitive dimensions that gravitate across the rest of the world. Along these lines, China is enhancing its postures of denial and area access by constructing and militarizing islands with airstrips, surveillance radars, mobile missile systems, and an assortment of other systems via its island construction and Dual-Use A2/AD programs.[21] Similarly, the US, along with its partners, has intensified surveillance flights, coordinated operations, and shadow basing. The Indo-Pacific region has become particularly broad in the scope of confrontation, enhancing the levels of escalation and conflict. The dynamics of conflict escalation routinely involve intercept-on-intercept, asymmetric breach, and shoot-board-range misses on ships.

[21] Tajwar Ali and Aftab Alam, op. cit., pp. 40-49.

Simultaneously, Washington's determination to maintain relative regional primacy seems to be stimulating an increased regional diversification of effective deterrence in Japan, Australia, South Korea, and India. Early assessments indicate an analytic drift towards within-strike radius pre-emptive postures, including missile, naval, and cyber domains, substantially deepening bilateral anti-access proscription within the counter-*defence* continuum. The response becomes stable and predictable, erecting additional constraints on the constructive derivative for resolving stalemates under the prevailing extended deterrence umbrella.

Expansion of minilateral security frameworks

The recent pattern of a shift to minilateral security arrangements is evident in the Indo-Pacific as traditional multilateral institutions such as ASEAN start to act increasingly like minilateral institutions. Such flexible purpose-driven coalitions, aiming to ensure an adequate balance of power in the region, include the Quad and AUKUS. Although not a formal alliance, the Quad has been instrumental in strengthening collaboration in maritime security and military activities and facilitating resilient supply chains. Meanwhile, the biggest change that may take place concerning the military position of Australia is to have nuclear-powered submarines and more intensive cooperation in the field of cyber and AI technologies with the help of the AUKUS alliance.[22] Although they are meant to counter Chinese assertiveness, their development might further entrench divisions in the region. Bloc politics and its role in undermining inclusive regionalism may become apparent as they also place countries that remain either non-aligned or economically reliant on China under pressure to choose a side. Moreover, the establishment of such bases in parallel to ASEAN-led structures puts into question the latency of the unity of Indo-Pacific security building.

Technological militarization and emerging threats

The utilization of unmanned systems of war, the use of cyber warfare, satellite espionage and surveillance, along with the use of artificial intelligence systems, will aggravate the security downsides of the Indo-Pacific. China's artificial islands not only occupy a physical space, but also combat electronic warfare with jamming radar and long-range observation systems. As rival states compete to exploit and dominate

[22] Kirsty Needham, 'Australian AI startup granted AUKUS exemption for autonomous vessel software', *Reuters,* 16 July 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/australian-ai-startup-granted-aukus-exemption-autonomous-vessel-software-2025-07-16/

these new technologies, the region is likely to face asymmetric warfare drones, subsurface unmanned vehicles, and cyber warfare on critical infrastructure. Most AI ethics and operational philosophies overlook the use of command-and-control systems, which is not only disturbing, but what is worse is that the region of the South China Sea, where fast command and operational response to control the situation will, more likely than not, result in a counterproductive situation. In addition, the growing ability of space-to-sea integrated systems, such as surveillance with the ability of missile interception, is merging with the consolidation of maritime power projection. The unrestrained militarization of these technologies in the absence of global governance can fundamentally alter the deterrence balance.

Strategic autonomy and realignment of middle powers

Aggression from both sides threatens a country's self-determination, prompting many states to adopt a middle ground. They have strengthened relations with Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra while deepening economic ties with China, amounting to strategic hedging. Through joint defence exercises with Western partners, Indonesia, once firmly neutral, has enhanced its maritime domain awareness. Middle powers such as these will become increasingly important in reshaping the Indo-Pacific. They function as self-determining stabilizers amid great-power rivalry. Their ability to maintain stability, overcome internal discord, manage economic weaknesses, and pursue assertive diplomacy will shape their strategic autonomy. Further militarization of the South China Sea will narrow their foreign-policy choices and compel them to adopt either harder or more conciliatory positions in response to regional pressures.

Impacts on energy security and trade

Among the fundamental SLOCs crossing the Indo-Pacific region, the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea SLOCs are of particular significance because they control more than 60 per cent of global energy shipments and over 5.3 trillion dollars of trade annually.[23] China's militarization of these vital chokepoints poses security dilemmas along the routes. During crises and armed conflict, global supply chains and flows are at immediate risk because of obstacles in maritime trade, whether these are blockades, naval clashes, or sophisticated cyber

[23] Srishti Chhaya, 'The $5.3 Trillion Question: How South China Sea Tensions Are Rewriting Global Trade Rules', Atlas Institute for International Affairs, 4 July 2025, https://atlasinstitute.org/the-5-3-trillion-question-how-south-china-sea-tensions-are-rewriting-global-trade-rules/

interference. Trade-dependent economies, such as Japan and South Korea, are particularly exposed because of their dependence on energy imports. This has led to investment in alternative energy transportation routes, regional energy diversification, and energy geostrategic integration. In the long term, maritime trade insecurity might encourage global economic integration infrastructure in the form of strategically located, segmented ports and pipelines to avoid contested waters. This demonstrates further trade securitization.

Conclusion

For China, a more formidable military presence on the artificial islands of the South China Sea, along with the construction of associated military facilities, advances its pursuit of territorial and operational control. The development of these islands, including airstrips and naval infrastructure, has effectively reinforced China's forward military bases. These developments challenge established notions of sovereignty and undermine key principles of international law and geopolitics, particularly the UNCLOS-based order. Military dominance over the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, and other maritime chokepoints threatens global trade and energy flows; any sustained conflict or blockage would significantly raise global energy prices and destabilize vulnerable Southeast Asian economies. Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines are strengthening their defence postures while balancing relations with both Beijing and Washington. They increasingly seek strategic self-reliance through domestic militarization, expanded security cooperation with extra-regional partners, and increased participation in bilateral military exercises. India, Japan, and Australia are central to shaping the Indo-Pacific's future security architecture, drawing closer in response to China's expanding regional control. The widening of Quad deliberations and the establishment of AUKUS signal an intent to preserve a normative order that prevents unilateral Chinese dominance of disputed areas. Continued militarization of artificial islands by China will further exacerbate tensions, weaken international legal norms, and intensify strategic competition in the region.