



Chokepoint Diplomacy and Maritime Contestation: Naval Posturing Amid U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

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This article examines the intensifying great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), focusing on the strategic interplay between U.S.-led Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) and China's maritime expansion through its blue-water navy and String of Pearls infrastructure network. Centered on the geostrategic chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca, this study utilizes a qualitative content analysis of secondary sources including defense white papers, academic publications, and policy reports to unpack the narratives and strategic postures underlying both actors' naval maneuvers. Findings indicate that U.S.-led FONOPS serve not only as assertions of international maritime norms but also as instruments of alliance reassurance and deterrence signaling. In contrast, China's evolving blue-water capabilities and the consolidation of dual-use port facilities reflect a layered strategy aimed at securing its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and counterbalancing perceived encirclement. The study also reveals that regional actors, particularly ASEAN states, are navigating an increasingly complex security landscape marked by strategic hedging, infrastructure dependency, and maritime capability building. The interplay of these dynamics underscores a shifting maritime order in which chokepoint control emerges as both a tactical necessity and a geopolitical symbol of strategic primacy.

Keywords: China, Diplomacy, Indo-Pacific, Maritime Contestation, United State.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific has re-emerged as a critical theater of maritime strategic competition, shaped by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China. This renewed focus on naval power reflects a broader transformation in the global distribution of power, where maritime dominance is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of geopolitical influence, economic resilience, and national security. The transition from a United States of American (U.S) led unipolar maritime order to a more contested multipolar environment has prompted both established and rising powers to assert their presence across vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), particularly in areas marked by overlapping claims, congested waterways, and strategic chokepoints (Grant et al., 2023). Within this evolving security architecture, **naval posturing** has become a defining feature of great power rivalry. Naval posturing refers to the deliberate

deployment, maneuvering, and signaling of naval forces to convey strategic intent, deter potential adversaries, and reassure allies of one's commitment to regional stability. It is a form of coercive diplomacy that operates below the threshold of open conflict, often involving visible demonstrations of force such as carrier strike group patrols, joint naval exercises, and Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS). These actions are emblematic of a broader strategic competition, wherein states seek to gain relative advantage through military modernization, economic influence, and technological innovation without necessarily resorting to direct confrontation (Mazarr, 2022).

A focal point of this maritime contestation is the **Strait of Malacca**, a narrow but immensely significant chokepoint that connects the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Geographically situated between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, the strait serves as one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. It facilitates the passage of



approximately 90,000 vessels annually, accounting for nearly 40% of global trade and over 60% of China's energy imports (Gerke & Evers, 2006; Dastjerdi & Nasrabady, 2021). Its importance is underscored by the fact that a single disruption resulting from armed clashes, piracy, or ecological incidents could severely impact supply chains, energy access, and the broader stability of the Indo-Pacific.

For the United States and its allies, the Strait of Malacca represents a linchpin in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. Through FONOPS and persistent naval presence, Washington seeks to uphold international maritime norms and deter unilateral attempts to restrict access. Conversely, China views the strait as a potential strategic liability a "Malacca Dilemma" given its dependence on energy imports transiting through this narrow passage. In response, Beijing has pursued a hedging strategy through the development of alternative overland and maritime routes, as well as the construction of dual-use port infrastructure across the Indian Ocean, commonly referred to as the "String of Pearls." Thus, the Strait of Malacca is more than a commercial artery; it is a geopolitical fulcrum where competing visions of maritime order, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy converge. Understanding its role is essential to grasping the broader dynamics of naval posturing and great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

The Strategic Imperative of Chokepoints

Maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca are not merely narrow waterways, they are critical arteries in the global maritime system where geography compresses vast flows of international trade and naval mobility into confined corridors. These straits serve as both economic lifelines and strategic pressure points, where the convergence of commercial and military interests creates a complex and often volatile security environment. The Strait of Malacca, in particular, stands out as one of the most vital and vulnerable chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific. It facilitates the passage of approximately 90,000 vessels annually, accounting for nearly 40% of global trade and over 60% of China's energy imports (Pitakdumrongkit, 2023; Dastjerdi & Nasrabady, 2021). This immense volume of traffic underscores the strait's indispensable role in sustaining global supply chains and energy flows.

However, this centrality also renders the strait highly susceptible to disruption. Any blockage whether caused by armed conflict, piracy, maritime accidents, or environmental disasters would have cascading effects on global commerce, energy markets, and regional stability. For instance, a single incident involving a grounded vessel or a targeted attack could delay shipments, spike oil prices, and trigger diplomatic tensions among major trading nations. The Strait of Malacca thus embodies the paradox of chokepoints: they are simultaneously indispensable and fragile.

From a military perspective, chokepoints offer both strategic leverage and operational vulnerability. Control over such

corridors enables states to project naval power, interdict adversary logistics, and enforce maritime norms. For example, a navy that dominates the Strait of Malacca could effectively influence the flow of goods between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Yet, the same narrowness and congestion that make chokepoints valuable also expose them to asymmetric threats. Submarine ambushes, sea mines, and cyber-physical attacks on port infrastructure are all plausible scenarios that could paralyze maritime traffic (Gunathilake, 2021). These risks are not hypothetical they are embedded in the strategic calculations of both status quo powers like the United States and rising powers like China.

The United States and its allies approach maritime security through the doctrinal lens of sea control, the ability to use the sea for one's own purposes while denying its use to adversaries. This concept is foundational to U.S. naval strategy and underpins alliance interoperability across the Indo-Pacific (USINDOPACOM, 2023). In this framework, sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are not just commercial routes; they are strategic enablers of military mobility, deterrence, and crisis response. Ensuring the openness and security of these SLOCs is therefore a central objective of U.S. and allied maritime operations.

One of the most visible manifestations of this objective is the conduct of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS). These operations, grounded in international law particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) serve a dual purpose. First, they challenge excessive maritime claims that threaten the principle of free navigation. Second, they signal the United States' commitment to a rules-based international order (Mastro, 2022). FONOPS are not isolated or symbolic gestures; they are part of a broader strategy of deterrence signaling and strategic reassurance. By deploying naval assets through contested waters, the U.S. communicates its resolve to uphold international norms while simultaneously reassuring allies of its security commitments.

This strategic posture is reinforced through multilateral naval exercises with key regional partners. Countries such as Japan, Australia, and India share the U.S. emphasis on open SLOCs and maritime domain awareness. Joint exercises like RIMPAC, Malabar, and CARAT operationalize these shared interests by enhancing interoperability, building trust, and demonstrating collective resolve (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2023). These exercises are not merely training events; they are institutionalized mechanisms of collective deterrence that signal unity and preparedness in the face of maritime coercion.

In essence, the strategic imperative of chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca lies in their dual identity: they are both economic arteries and geopolitical flashpoints. Their security is not just a matter of national interest but a regional and global public good. As such, safeguarding these chokepoints requires a coordinated approach that blends legal norms, military presence, and diplomatic engagement. In the Indo-Pacific's evolving maritime order, FONOPS, allied cooperation, and sea

control doctrines converge to shape the balance of power and the future of regional stability.

U.S.-Led Naval Posturing: FONOPS as Power Projection

Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) have become a central pillar of U.S. naval strategy in the Indo-Pacific, especially in contested maritime zones such as the South China Sea and the eastern Indian Ocean. These operations are designed to challenge what the United States considers excessive maritime claims that restrict navigation rights beyond what is permitted under international law. At their core, FONOPS aim to uphold the principle of open access to the global commons, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, their significance extends far beyond legal assertion. In practice, FONOPS serve as strategic tools for signaling U.S. resolve, deterring adversaries, and reassuring allies of Washington's commitment to a rules-based maritime order (Cho & Chao, 2024; Freund, 2017).

Since 2015, the U.S. Navy has conducted regular FONOPS near disputed maritime features such as Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Triton Island. These operations often involve sailing within 12 nautical miles of these features territorial waters claimed by China and other states to assert navigational rights and contest unilateral restrictions (Freund, 2017). Each operation is typically accompanied by official statements emphasizing the U.S. commitment to international law and freedom of the seas. Yet, as Cho and Chao (2024) highlight, the messaging function of FONOPS is not always clear-cut. While the U.S. views these operations as peaceful and lawful, regional actors may interpret them as provocative or coercive, especially when conducted with advanced warships or aircraft. This sender–receiver gap in interpretation can lead to misperceptions and unintended escalation.

To reinforce the strategic impact of FONOPS, the United States has increasingly integrated them into a broader framework of allied cooperation and interoperability. Joint naval exercises with key regional partners such as India, Japan, and Australia—serve to amplify the credibility and visibility of U.S. maritime operations. Exercises like *Malabar*, *RIMPAC*, and *Talisman Sabre* involve complex training across surface, subsurface, and aerial domains, enhancing joint readiness and maritime domain awareness (U.S. Embassy India, 2024; CSIS, 2017). These engagements are not merely symbolic; they institutionalize shared threat perceptions and foster a networked deterrence architecture that extends beyond bilateral ties. For example, the 2024 iteration of *Exercise Malabar* featured coordinated deployments of destroyers, maritime patrol aircraft, and anti-submarine warfare assets, demonstrating the collective resolve of Quad members to uphold maritime stability in the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Embassy India, 2024).

When viewed through this broader strategic lens, FONOPS function as a form of cumulative deterrence a concept that

emphasizes the steady accumulation of credible signals over time to shape adversary behavior and reinforce international norms (USINDOPACOM, 2023). Unlike one-off shows of force, cumulative deterrence relies on consistency, multilateralism, and legal legitimacy. By combining FONOPS with multilateral exercises, diplomatic messaging, and alliance coordination, the U.S. and its partners aim to demonstrate that any attempt to undermine maritime norms will be met with a coordinated and sustained response. This approach not only deters revisionist behavior but also reassures smaller regional states that the U.S. security commitment is credible and enduring. U.S.-led FONOPS are not isolated legal maneuvers. They are embedded within a broader strategic ecosystem that includes power projection, alliance management, and the defense of a rules-based maritime order. Their effectiveness lies not only in asserting navigational rights but in reinforcing a collective vision of maritime governance, one that privileges openness, legality, and multilateral cooperation over unilateral coercion.

China's Strategic Counter-Moves

China's maritime strategy has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, evolving from a coastal defense posture to a robust blue-water naval capability. This shift reflects Beijing's strategic imperative to secure its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), project power beyond the first island chain, and counterbalance U.S.-led maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Central to this transformation is the modernization of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the expansion of overseas port infrastructure under the "String of Pearls" strategy, and the integration of naval objectives within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework.

I. Blue-Water Naval Modernization

Over the past two decades, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has undergone a dramatic transformation, evolving from a coastal defense force into a formidable blue-water navy. This shift reflects China's strategic ambition to project power far beyond its immediate periphery and to secure its expanding maritime interests across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Today, the PLAN is recognized as the world's largest navy by fleet size, comprising over **370 active vessels**, including **three aircraft carriers**, **72 submarines**, and a growing number of **modern destroyers and amphibious assault ships** (IRIA, 2024). This numerical expansion is not merely symbolic, it represents a deliberate effort to build a navy capable of sustained operations in distant waters.

A key milestone in this modernization trajectory is the commissioning of the *Fujian*, China's third aircraft carrier and the first to feature an **electromagnetic catapult launch system**. This advanced technology, comparable to that used on the U.S. Navy's *Gerald R. Ford*-class carriers, allows for the launch of heavier aircraft with greater payloads and range, significantly enhancing China's ability to conduct long-range strike missions and air superiority operations (Friedberg, 2023). The *Fujian*

thus marks a qualitative leap in China's naval aviation capabilities, signaling a shift from regional deterrence to global power projection. However, the ability to operate far from home waters requires more than just advanced warships, it demands a robust and reliable **logistics and sustainment infrastructure**. Recognizing this, China has rapidly expanded its fleet of **underway replenishment ships**, which are essential for refueling, rearming, and resupplying naval task forces at sea. As of 2024, the PLAN operates **twelve such vessels**, a significant increase from previous decades (Friedberg, 2023). These ships enable Chinese naval groups to remain deployed for extended periods without returning to port, thereby enhancing their operational endurance and strategic reach.

This combination of high-end platforms and logistical enablers reflects China's broader ambition to transition from a **regional maritime power** focused primarily on the South and East China Seas, to a **global naval actor** capable of influencing events across the Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific, and even into the Atlantic. The PLAN's modernization is not only about matching the capabilities of other great powers but also about reshaping the maritime balance of power in ways that align with Beijing's long-term strategic objectives.

II. The String of Pearls and Dual-Use Infrastructure

China's maritime expansion across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is underpinned by what analysts have termed the **"String of Pearls" strategy**, a network of commercial ports, logistics hubs, and infrastructure projects stretching from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa. This strategy reflects Beijing's long-term objective to secure its sea lines of communication (SLOCs), particularly those critical to energy imports and trade flows, while simultaneously expanding its strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific (Kahandawaarachchi, 2021; Singh, 2023). At the heart of this strategy are **key maritime nodes** that serve both economic and military functions. Among the most prominent are:

- a. **Gwadar Port in Pakistan**, developed under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), provides China with direct access to the Arabian Sea and a potential bypass to the vulnerable Strait of Malacca. While officially a commercial port, its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and integration with road and pipeline infrastructure enhances its strategic value (Calabrese, 2024; Kahandawaarachchi, 2021).
- b. **Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka**, leased to China for 99 years after Sri Lanka's debt default, is strategically located near major shipping lanes. Though framed as a commercial investment, the port's deep-water capacity and adjacent industrial zones raise concerns about its potential use for naval logistics and surveillance (Chansoria, 2023; Singh, 2023).
- c. **Djibouti**, on the Horn of Africa, hosts China's first overseas military base, established in 2017. Located near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—a chokepoint through which a significant portion of global oil shipments

pass—this base supports Chinese anti-piracy operations and provides logistical support for PLAN deployments in the western Indian Ocean (Gering & Sloane, 2021; Wang, 2018).

While these facilities are presented as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and are often operated by state-owned enterprises, they exhibit **dual-use characteristics**. This means that although they are built and managed as commercial ports, they are designed to accommodate military functions such as naval resupply, intelligence gathering, and forward deployment of forces (Kahandawaarachchi, 2021). The presence of extended runways, deep berths, and secure storage facilities suggests latent military utility. Moreover, China has integrated these ports with **industrial parks, special economic zones, and digital infrastructure**, including fiber-optic cables and satellite tracking stations. This integration enhances their strategic utility by enabling the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to maintain a **persistent and flexible presence** along critical maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb (Gering & Sloane, 2021; Wang, 2018). These chokepoints are vital not only for China's energy security but also for its broader ambition to shape the maritime order in the Indo-Pacific. The String of Pearls is not merely a series of isolated infrastructure projects, it is a **strategically coherent network** that supports China's transition from a continental power to a global maritime actor. By embedding military potential within ostensibly civilian infrastructure, Beijing has created a flexible and deniable mechanism for power projection, complicating regional security calculations and challenging the traditional dominance of Western naval powers in the IOR (Kahandawaarachchi, 2021; Singh, 2023).

III. BRI and the Security Nexus

China's naval expansion is increasingly intertwined with the broader strategic ambitions of the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, a global infrastructure and connectivity program that Beijing promotes as a vehicle for economic development and regional integration. While Chinese officials consistently frame the BRI as a "win-win" initiative focused on trade, investment, and connectivity, the initiative also serves as a **strategic enabler** of China's maritime power projection. This dual character is particularly evident in the maritime domain, where BRI-linked ports and infrastructure projects are increasingly designed to support both commercial and military functions.

A key driver of this dual-use capability is China's policy of **civil-military fusion**, which is codified in national legislation. Under this framework, Chinese companies, especially state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are legally required to ensure that overseas infrastructure projects, including ports, are compatible with military standards (Asia Society Policy Institute, 2020). This means that even if a port is built and operated as a commercial facility, it must be capable of supporting military logistics, surveillance, and resupply operations if needed. As a result, many BRI ports are equipped with features such as deep-water berths, secure storage facilities, and reinforced runways that can accommodate naval vessels and aircraft.

This strategic logic is encapsulated in the concept of “**strategic strongpoints**”, a term used by Chinese analysts to describe commercial ports that possess latent military functionality and are located near key maritime chokepoints and sea lines of communication (Wu & Ji, 2020). These strongpoints are not formal military bases, but they provide the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) with the logistical infrastructure needed to operate far from China’s shores. By embedding military potential within civilian infrastructure, Beijing is able to extend its maritime reach while maintaining **plausible deniability** and avoiding the political backlash that might accompany overt militarization.

Beyond their physical utility, these BRI-linked ports also serve as instruments of **political influence**. Through mechanisms such as **debt diplomacy**, **infrastructure dependency**, and **elite co-optation**, China is able to cultivate leverage over host governments. For example, when countries are unable to repay Chinese loans, Beijing may negotiate long-term leases or operational control over strategic assets, as seen in the case of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port. This creates a form of **strategic entanglement**, where economic incentives are closely tied to geopolitical alignment. Smaller states, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region, often find themselves caught between the short-term benefits of Chinese investment and the long-term risks of strategic dependency.

In this context, China’s naval expansion cannot be viewed in isolation from its broader economic and diplomatic strategies. Rather than relying solely on traditional military modernization, Beijing is pursuing a **multidimensional approach** that blends **economic statecraft**, **infrastructure diplomacy**, and **maritime power projection**. The BRI thus functions not only as a development initiative but also as a platform for reshaping the regional maritime order in ways that favor China’s strategic interests.

Strategic and Security Implications for the Indian Ocean Region

The intensification of great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has profound implications for regional actors, particularly ASEAN member states, India, and Australia. As the maritime domain becomes increasingly securitized, these actors are compelled to recalibrate their strategic postures, navigate complex alignments, and engage in multilateral mechanisms to preserve regional stability and autonomy.

i. Implications for Regional Actors

For **ASEAN member states**, the escalating naval rivalry between the United States and China presents a complex mix of **strategic opportunities and existential dilemmas**. On one hand, the preservation of **open Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)**, a principle championed by U.S.-led Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) is vital to ASEAN’s economic lifeblood, as the region’s prosperity is deeply tied to

uninterrupted maritime trade. On the other hand, overt alignment with either Washington or Beijing risks compromising ASEAN’s foundational principles of **neutrality, centrality, and non-alignment**, which have long underpinned its diplomatic posture and internal cohesion.

In response, ASEAN states have adopted a **hedging strategy**, a calibrated approach that involves engaging both major powers while simultaneously investing in indigenous maritime capabilities and strengthening regional institutions. This includes participation in multilateral naval exercises, enhancement of coast guard fleets, and support for ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) (Parameswaran, 2024). However, this delicate balancing act is increasingly under strain. China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea ranging from the militarization of artificial islands to the deployment of maritime militias have exposed the **limitations of ASEAN’s consensus-based diplomacy** in deterring coercive behavior and safeguarding regional maritime norms.

For **India**, the strategic stakes are even more pronounced. As a **resident power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**, India views China’s expanding naval presence, particularly through the development of dual-use ports under the “String of Pearls” strategy as a direct challenge to its **maritime primacy and strategic autonomy**. In response, New Delhi has adopted a more assertive and multidimensional maritime strategy. This includes expanding naval deployments in the eastern and western Indian Ocean, enhancing surveillance capabilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and deepening security partnerships with like-minded actors through platforms such as the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)** and the **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)** (Pant & Saha, 2023).

India’s strategic calculus is shaped by the imperative to **prevent encirclement**, maintain **credible deterrence**, and assert its role as a **net security provider** in the region. Initiatives such as **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** and **Mission MAHASAGAR** reflect India’s commitment to regional maritime stability, capacity-building, and humanitarian assistance. These efforts are not only aimed at countering China’s influence but also at reinforcing India’s leadership role in shaping the maritime governance architecture of the IOR.

Australia, though geographically removed from the northern Indian Ocean, considers the region a **critical component of its Indo-Pacific strategy**. Canberra’s engagement is driven by multiple strategic imperatives: the need to uphold a rules-based maritime order, concerns over China’s growing influence in the South Pacific, and the necessity of ensuring resilient supply chains and secure maritime infrastructure. In recent years, Australia has significantly increased its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, participated in high-end multilateral exercises such as RIMPAC and Talisman Sabre, and invested in maritime

domain awareness through initiatives like the Pacific Maritime Security Program (West, 2023).

Australia has also deepened its trilateral and quadrilateral partnerships particularly with the United States, Japan, and India to promote interoperability and collective deterrence. The AUKUS agreement, which includes plans for nuclear-powered submarines and advanced defense technologies, underscores Canberra's long-term strategic alignment with its allies. At the same time, Australia continues to support inclusive regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), recognizing the importance of ASEAN centrality in maintaining regional cohesion and legitimacy. ASEAN, India, and Australia each face distinct but interconnected challenges in responding to the evolving U.S.-China naval rivalry. Their strategies ranging from hedging and balancing to proactive alignment reflect differing threat perceptions, strategic cultures, and geopolitical priorities. Yet, all three actors share a common interest in preserving maritime stability, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

ii. Risks of Miscalculation and Maritime Escalation

The intensification of naval deployments and strategic signaling in contested maritime spaces particularly in the South China Sea and broader Indo-Pacific has significantly elevated the risk of miscalculation, misperception, and inadvertent escalation. As multiple state and non-state actors operate in close proximity, often with overlapping claims and divergent interpretations of maritime law, the potential for conflict arising from tactical misjudgments has become a persistent concern. This is especially acute in grey zone scenarios, where the distinction between civilian and military actors is deliberately blurred. The increasing use of coast guards, maritime militias, and paramilitary vessels often operating without clear rules of engagement complicates attribution and heightens the risk of unintended escalation (Woodward et al., 2023).

Compounding these risks is the absence of robust crisis communication mechanisms and the lack of binding regional protocols for deconfliction. Unlike Cold War-era arrangements such as the U.S.-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA), the Indo-Pacific lacks institutionalized frameworks for managing maritime incidents in real time. This institutional vacuum is particularly dangerous in high-tension flashpoints such as the Spratly Islands, where close-quarter naval encounters and ambiguous signaling including radar locking, aggressive maneuvering, and unannounced live-fire drills can rapidly spiral into confrontation.

The proliferation of dual-use infrastructure commercial ports with latent military functionality further exacerbates strategic uncertainty. These facilities, often developed under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), blur the line between economic development and military basing, thereby fueling encirclement narratives among regional actors. The opacity surrounding China's long-term strategic intentions, particularly

its refusal to clarify the scope of its maritime claims, has prompted several Indo-Pacific states to adopt preemptive posturing, expand naval procurement, and deepen security alignments in anticipation of potential coercion (Woodward et al., 2023).

Moreover, the normalization of aggressive maritime behavior including ramming, water cannon use, laser targeting, and radar jamming has eroded the credibility of international maritime norms. These tactics, often employed by Chinese coast guard and maritime militia units, are designed to assert presence without crossing the threshold of armed conflict. However, their cumulative effect is to lower the threshold for kinetic escalation, particularly when such actions provoke defensive responses from other claimants. A particularly destabilizing development is the enforcement of expansive maritime claims under the legal framework of China's Coast Guard Law, which authorizes the use of force against foreign vessels operating in what Beijing defines as "waters under Chinese jurisdiction." This terminology is deliberately vague and deviates from internationally recognized legal categories such as territorial seas and exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The law's ambiguity especially following the enactment of Order #3, which permits the detention of foreign vessels for up to 60 days introduces legal uncertainty and operational volatility, particularly in areas where jurisdiction is contested (Singleton & Breaux, 2024). Such legal opacity not only undermines the authority of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but also increases the likelihood of escalatory incidents, as opposing forces may interpret the same maritime space through incompatible legal lenses. The convergence of militarized maritime behavior, legal ambiguity, and institutional gaps in crisis management has created a volatile security environment in the Indo-Pacific. Without the establishment of confidence-building measures, incident prevention protocols, and transparent legal frameworks, the region remains vulnerable to escalation triggered not by deliberate aggression, but by misunderstanding, miscalculation, or miscommunication.

iii. Multilateral Responses and Institutional Adaptation

In the face of mounting strategic contestation and maritime insecurity in the Indo-Pacific, regional actors have increasingly embraced multilateral frameworks as critical instruments for promoting collective security, policy coordination, and the preservation of a rules-based maritime order. These institutional platforms serve multiple functions, including facilitating structured dialogue, disseminating normative standards, enhancing crisis response capabilities, and delivering transnational public goods particularly in complex, contested maritime domains where bilateral instruments prove insufficient in scope and legitimacy (Clayton, 2024). The imperative for such mechanisms is further underscored by the limitations of existing maritime confidence-building measures and the growing need for comprehensive, flexible governance in an increasingly multipolar maritime environment.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has emerged as a central node within this evolving institutional architecture. Initially established in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as an ad hoc humanitarian coordination effort, the Quad has since evolved into a coherent strategic alignment that encompasses shared concerns about maritime security, freedom of navigation, and regional infrastructure resilience. A defining feature of the Quad's evolution is its emphasis on maritime interoperability, critical infrastructure protection, and non-traditional security challenges. The launch of the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience in 2023 exemplifies this strategic recalibration focusing on the safeguarding of undersea cable systems vital to digital infrastructure from malign interference, thereby reinforcing the integrity of the Indo-Pacific's information and economic backbone (Hemrajani, 2023).

In parallel, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) continues to advance an inclusive, consensus-based model of maritime cooperation. Though lacking the hard security orientation and enforcement capabilities of more robust alliances, IORA plays an increasingly salient role in norm diffusion, technical cooperation, and regional capacity-building. Through initiatives such as the Jakarta Declaration on the Blue Economy and the establishment of the Working Group on Disaster Risk Management, IORA has prioritized sustainable development, regional resilience, and human security objectives that align with the developmental imperatives of its diverse membership (IORA, 2017). This normative emphasis has allowed IORA to maintain relevance in a shifting maritime order by engaging small and middle powers in constructive issue-based collaboration.

The functional convergence between the Quad and IORA particularly across domains such as climate adaptation, maritime governance, and digital connectivity points to the emergence of hybrid governance pathways. These hybrid arrangements combine the Quad's strategic agility and technological bandwidth with IORA's regional legitimacy and inclusiveness, thus offering a layered, mutually reinforcing governance framework. Such synergies could help bridge the divide between hard and soft maritime security, enabling issue-specific cooperation without the political sensitivities attached to formal alliances (United States Studies Centre, 2024).

However, the enduring effectiveness and legitimacy of these multilateral responses depend on several key factors. First, they must align with ASEAN's centrality norm, which serves as a political and institutional cornerstone of Indo-Pacific multilateralism. Second, frameworks must avoid securitization fatigue, where overly militarized narratives alienate neutral or non-aligned actors. Third, these initiatives must deliver concrete benefits such as port capacity-building, early warning systems, and green maritime infrastructure—to maintain traction among smaller regional states. Without these adjustments, even well-intentioned multilateral efforts risk diminishing credibility and exacerbating strategic fragmentation. A synthesized, adaptive approach that navigates

the intersection between economic connectivity and maritime security will be essential to upholding a stable, inclusive, and rules-based regional order (East Asia Forum, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The Indo-Pacific maritime domain is increasingly defined by the friction between the principle of *freedom of navigation* and the assertion of *sovereign maritime entitlements*. While the United States and its allies invoke international law particularly UNCLOS to justify Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) as a means of upholding a rules-based order, China perceives such operations as infringements upon its maritime sovereignty and strategic space. This normative divergence has crystallized into a pattern of naval posturing, where legal interpretations are operationalized through military signaling, thereby heightening the risk of miscalculation and escalation. Critically, the trajectory of naval dynamics in the Indo-Pacific suggests a shift from episodic contestation to sustained strategic competition. The proliferation of dual-use infrastructure, the expansion of blue-water capabilities, and the normalization of grey-zone tactics indicate that maritime competition is becoming more institutionalized and multidimensional. As both the U.S. and China deepen their naval presence and alliance networks, the region risks entering a security dilemma spiral, wherein defensive measures are perceived as offensive provocations. This dynamic is further complicated by the strategic hedging of regional actors, who must navigate between economic interdependence with China and security alignment with the U.S.-led coalition. To mitigate these tensions, there is an urgent need to institutionalize confidence-building measures (CBMs) and de-escalatory maritime diplomacy. Mechanisms such as the *Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)*, bilateral *hotlines*, and *Maritime and Air Communication Mechanisms (MACM)* should be expanded and operationalized with greater transparency and inclusivity. Multilateral platforms like the *ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)*, *Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)*, and *Quad* can serve as venues for norm diffusion, joint training on crisis management, and the development of shared protocols for maritime conduct. Furthermore, the establishment of a regional *Maritime Risk Reduction Center* modeled after the European Incident Prevention frameworks could institutionalize early warning systems and facilitate real-time communication during high-risk encounters. Ultimately, the sustainability of maritime order in the Indo-Pacific hinges not merely on the balance of naval capabilities, but on the political will to embed restraint, reciprocity, and legal clarity into regional maritime governance. Without such efforts, chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca may evolve from strategic arteries into flashpoints of confrontation undermining not only regional stability but the very norms that underpin global maritime commerce.

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