


Chapter 8

China's Maritime Security Strategy in the South China Sea: Impact, Challenges, and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines China's maritime security strategy in the South China Sea under President Xi Jinping, analyzing its transformation from measured assertiveness to aggressive power projection. While China has achieved significant territorial gains through island construction and enhanced military presence, this strategy faces substantial challenges including coordinated resistance from Southeast Asian states, sustained US commitment to regional allies, and erosion of China's diplomatic credibility. The analysis reveals inherent strategic limitations: gray-zone tactics cannot compel decisive outcomes, military infrastructure remains vulnerable during high-intensity conflict, and prolonged competition imposes mounting economic costs. The chapter forecasts continued low-intensity confrontation characterized by tactical probing, escalating naval competition, and diplomatic stalemate, with the South China Sea remaining a critical flashpoint in US-China strategic rivalry for the foreseeable future.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea has emerged as one of the most complex and perilous geopolitical hotspots in the contemporary international system. With its strategic location at the heart of the Asia-Pacific region, this maritime area serves not only as a vital shipping route carrying over \$5.3 trillion worth of goods annually—accounting for nearly one-quarter of global trade—but also as a region containing enormous potential energy resources and holding existential security significance for numerous littoral states (Kang, 2025). This multidimensional strategic importance has transformed the South China Sea into an arena of intense power competition, where national interests intertwine with the geopolitical ambitions of major powers, particularly in the context of deepening US-China strategic rivalry.

Over the past decade, the academic community and policy planners have witnessed a significant transformation in China's approach to the South China Sea. Recent research indicates that under President Xi Jinping, China has abandoned its traditional policy of "hide your strength and bide your time" in favor of a considerably more proactive and assertive maritime security strategy (Chan, 2021; Raymond & Welch, 2022; Kiet et al., 2025). This strategic shift has been manifested through the unprecedented large-scale land reclamation campaign during 2013-2016, the militarization of artificial islands, and the dramatic escalation in both scale and frequency of operations by Chinese coast guard forces and maritime militia in disputed waters (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.). From the perspective of international relations theory, particularly the realism school, these developments reflect the inevitable tendency of a rising power to maximize its relative strength and establish regional hegemony to ensure optimal security within the anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001; Kiet & Tuyen, 2023).

Although considerable scholarship exists on China's maritime strategy and South China Sea disputes, most current research tends to focus on describing specific Chinese actions or analyzing individual countries' responses. What remains absent is a comprehensive and systematic assessment of the actual effectiveness of this new strategy within the dynamic regional context, particularly one that examines simultaneously both initial successes and the serious challenges and inherent limitations China faces. Moreover, previous studies have not adequately clarified the fundamental paradox in Beijing's strategy: why a strategy that appears tactically successful—with expanded territorial control and increased military advantage—simultaneously generates significant diplomatic, legal, and international reputational backlash, leading to increasingly robust and organized resistance from regional states.

To fill this gap, this chapter aims to comprehensively analyze China's new maritime security strategy in the South China Sea under Xi Jinping through three complementary perspectives: (1) assessing the strategy's impact on the regional

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