

Chapter 9

Can Power Override Justice?

Examining the Challenges to China's South China Sea Expansionism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter systematically analyzes multidimensional challenges confronting China's South China Sea strategy through realism international relations theory. Despite substantial territorial gains via grey-zone tactics and island militarization, China's strategy encounters formidable resistance across five dimensions: determined ASEAN opposition employing collective balancing, intensified US-led containment through alliance consolidation, inherent PLA limitations in combat experience and expeditionary logistics, escalating inadvertent conflict risks, and legitimacy deficits following the 2016 PCA ruling. While offensive realism explains China's expansionist motivations, defensive realist dynamics—particularly balance of power and security dilemma mechanisms—impose structural constraints on Beijing's ambitions. Findings reveal that material superiority alone cannot guarantee strategic success against coordinated multilateral resistance anchored in international legal frameworks, offering critical insights for Asia-Pacific regional stability and conflict prevention.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea, covering approximately 3.5 million square kilometers and strategically positioned at the nexus of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, has emerged as one of the world's most complex geopolitical flashpoints in the 21st century. This maritime region is not merely a vital international shipping lane through which over \$5 trillion in trade passes annually, but also contains abundant oil, gas, and fishery resources, while holding profound strategic security significance for regional states and global powers alike (cited from Kiet et al., 2025a). Over the past two decades, the region has witnessed a dramatic escalation in tensions due to overlapping sovereignty claims between China and numerous Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia (Kiet et al., 2024).

Since the early 2000s, China has pursued a systematic expansionist strategy in the South China Sea, characterized by the construction and militarization of artificial islands on submerged reefs, the deployment of maritime militia and coast guard forces to assert permanent presence, and the leveraging of economic power to influence neighboring countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia (Hiep et al., 2023). This strategy has been implemented by China with persistence and flexibility, combining so-called “gray zone tactics”—actions that fall below the threshold of direct military conflict yet exceed normal diplomatic activities (Kiet et al., 2025b). Today, China has transformed numerous submerged reefs into military bases equipped with runways, seaports, and radar systems, creating crucial “strongpoints” in the open sea. However, while China has achieved significant territorial gains, its strategy is encountering strong and increasingly coordinated resistance from multiple quarters. ASEAN nations, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines, have enhanced their military capabilities and actively built security cooperation networks with extra-regional powers (Hiep & Kiet, 2024). The US, recognizing threats to its strategic interests, has implemented a “Rebalance to Asia” strategy with increased military presence and expanded security alliances (Kiet & Tuyen, 2023). The international community has also voiced stronger opposition, particularly following the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling that rejected China's “nine-dash line” claim (Castro, 2020).

Despite extensive research on the South China Sea dispute, most existing studies focus on analyzing China's strategy and actions from an offensive and expansionist perspective, or examining individual countries' responses in isolation. What remains lacking in current scholarship is a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the multidimensional challenges confronting China's strategy—from regional responses and great power intervention to China's inherent limitations and latent strategic risks. Moreover, many studies tend to either exaggerate or underestimate China's actual power in the South China Sea. Some scholars argue China is on track

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