

## GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION OVER MARITIME ROUTES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

**Rabbimov Og'abek Tolib o'g'li**

*A second-year student of the International Relations program  
at the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan.*

**Annotation:** *This paper examines the intensifying geopolitical competition over maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific region, a strategically vital area that serves as the backbone of global trade and energy supply. The study explores how the rising influence of China, the strategic interests of the United States, India's regional aspirations, and the roles of ASEAN and other regional actors have contributed to growing tensions over control and access to critical sea lanes. The paper also evaluates the implications of military build-up, naval alliances, and freedom of navigation operations for regional security and international law.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-Pacific, maritime routes, geopolitical rivalry, China, United States, India, South China Sea, freedom of navigation, naval strategy, sea power, trade security*

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the epicenter of 21st-century geopolitical competition, particularly over strategic maritime routes that are essential to global commerce, energy transport, and military logistics. Stretching from the eastern shores of Africa to the western Pacific Ocean, this region encompasses some of the world's busiest sea lanes, including the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

As global economic interdependence increases, so too does the significance of ensuring unimpeded access to these maritime corridors. However, growing rivalries—most notably between the United States and China—have transformed the region into a focal point of great power competition. China's Belt and Road Initiative, including its Maritime Silk Road, has raised concerns about strategic dominance, while U.S.-led freedom of navigation operations seek to counter unilateral maritime claims and ensure open seas.

In addition to major powers, regional actors such as India, Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN member states play critical roles in shaping the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. These dynamics have given rise to overlapping military alliances, naval modernization, and competing legal interpretations of international maritime law.

This paper analyzes the geopolitical struggle over maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific, its impact on global trade and regional stability, and the legal and strategic responses of key players. It also addresses the broader implications for international norms, multilateral cooperation, and the balance of power in one of the most contested maritime regions in the world.

The Indo-Pacific region, encompassing the vast waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, has become a central arena of geopolitical competition. The region hosts some of the most

vital maritime routes in the world, including the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Bab el-Mandeb, through which a significant share of global trade and energy resources flow. As a result, the control, access, and security of these sea lanes have gained heightened strategic importance among global and regional powers.

One of the main actors driving this competition is **China**, whose assertive maritime policy and expansive claims in the South China Sea have triggered widespread concern. Through the construction of artificial islands and the militarization of contested areas, China seeks to strengthen its strategic footprint. The “**Nine-Dash Line**” claim, which overlaps with the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of several Southeast Asian countries, challenges the established norms of the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** and threatens freedom of navigation.

In response, the **United States** has positioned itself as a defender of open sea lanes and a counterbalance to Chinese influence. U.S. Navy patrols under the **Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)** framework regularly challenge China’s maritime claims, reaffirming international legal norms and signaling continued military presence. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizes alliances with like-minded partners, including Japan, Australia, India, and ASEAN states, to preserve regional order and deter unilateral aggression.

**India** has also emerged as a proactive maritime actor in the Indian Ocean, bolstering its naval capabilities and strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The Indian Navy’s presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as its participation in joint naval exercises like **Malabar**, reflects its interest in securing trade routes and projecting influence across the eastern Indian Ocean. India’s **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)** vision emphasizes inclusive maritime cooperation, while also signaling concern over China’s growing presence in South Asia through port projects and military facilities.

Regional powers such as **Japan, Australia, and ASEAN** countries play nuanced roles in navigating the Indo-Pacific’s complex power dynamics. While Japan and Australia support the rules-based order and enhance naval cooperation through the **Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)**, ASEAN members like Vietnam and the Philippines balance between economic ties with China and maritime sovereignty concerns. The lack of a unified ASEAN stance on the South China Sea dispute illustrates the challenges in forming a cohesive regional response.

The growing militarization of maritime spaces in the Indo-Pacific raises the risk of conflict and escalation, particularly in contested zones like the **South China Sea** and the **Taiwan Strait**. Military build-ups, strategic port developments (e.g., Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti), and intensified intelligence gathering have transformed the region into a potential flashpoint.

To manage these tensions, diplomatic and legal mechanisms such as **UNCLOS arbitration, code of conduct negotiations**, and **multilateral forums** like the **East Asia**

**Summit** and **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)** are crucial. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks depends on the political will of the parties involved and their commitment to peaceful resolution.

In summary, the Indo-Pacific region reflects a dynamic and fluid geopolitical landscape where maritime routes are not just commercial arteries, but also instruments of strategic influence. The convergence of national interests, military presence, and legal interpretations has led to an increasingly competitive environment. Balancing power projection with cooperative maritime governance remains a central challenge in maintaining peace and stability across this critical region.

The Indo-Pacific region stands at the crossroads of global strategic interests, where maritime routes serve as lifelines for international trade, energy security, and military mobility. As geopolitical rivalries intensify, particularly between China and the United States, the struggle for influence over critical sea lanes has become a defining element of contemporary international relations. India's growing maritime assertiveness and the active roles of regional players such as Japan, Australia, and ASEAN further complicate the regional balance of power.

While naval modernization, alliances, and freedom of navigation operations demonstrate the growing securitization of maritime space, these developments also increase the risk of miscalculation and escalation. In this context, international law—particularly UNCLOS—and multilateral dialogue frameworks must be strengthened to ensure that competition does not undermine peace and stability.

Moving forward, sustainable solutions will require a delicate balance between strategic deterrence and diplomatic engagement. Only through cooperative maritime governance, legal clarity, and inclusive regional architectures can the Indo-Pacific's sea lanes remain open, secure, and beneficial to all.

## References

1. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982.
2. U.S. Department of Defense (2022). *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*.
3. Ministry of External Affairs, India. (2021). *India's Maritime Security Strategy*.
4. ASEAN Secretariat. (2020). *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*.
5. Panda, J. P. (2021). *The Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific: Contest and Cooperation*.
6. Kaplan, R. D. (2010). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*.
7. Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). (2023). *South China Sea Tensions: Backgrounder*.
8. The Quad Joint Leaders' Statement. (2023).
9. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2022). *The Military Balance: Asia-Pacific Chapter*.
10. Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*.