



Taiwan as a Maritime Pivot: Sea Power Competition in the Northwest Pacific

Rabia Anwar¹, Areesha Batool²

¹PhD Scholar at Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan

²PhD Scholar at the University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

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Abstract: Taiwan's geographical position as being centrally located within the First Island Chain makes it an important player in the maritime geography of the Northwest Pacific and an arena of growing strategic competition between the United States and China. The geopolitical significance of Taiwan in the First Island Chain is analyzed from the perspective of maritime geography and its role in influencing great power politics in the Northwest Pacific through the sea power theory propounded by Alfred Thayer Mahan. The current work emphasizes the significance of having control over maritime spaces and lanes to maintain the power equilibrium of states. However, previous research has neglected the role of maritime geography and strategic discourse in the long-term trends. The purpose of this research is to fill the research gap by utilizing discourse analysis of the national security strategies, defense white papers, and naval doctrines of both the US and China for the period 1991-2025. The focus on Taiwan is as an example of sovereignty conflicts and a maritime pivot. The findings demonstrate a transition from the unquestionable supremacy of the US in the oceanic domain to a situation in which strategic competition is characterized by the Chinese Anti-access/area-denial system, along with other forms of competition in different spheres such as the economy and technology. In general, it is found that no matter what geographical conditions and naval innovations exist, deterrence and crisis management play a crucial role.

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INTRODUCTION

The maritime space in East Asia is currently recognized as being among the most strategically contested spaces in international politics. Among these spaces, the Northwest Pacific, including the Taiwan Strait and First Island Chain, is recognized as an important arena of strategic rivalry between the US and the People's Republic of China (China). The First Island Chain is a chain of islands that runs from Japan's mainland, passes through the Ryukyu Islands, then moves on to Taiwan, and finally ends with the Philippine archipelago.

✉Corresponding author E-mail: rabiaanwar78@gmail.com

This chain of islands forms a natural maritime boundary for China along its eastern coastline. This geographic position is considered to be one of the important strategic barriers that play an important role in maritime mobility and power projection in the Western Pacific. Taiwan is a critical flashpoint due to its geographical importance, which links the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean in the changing equation of sea power in the Northwest Pacific. Modern analysts Ryu (2025) highlight the significance of Taiwan in regional containment policies, akin to what Alfred Thayer Mahan had argued in terms of sea power theory.

Taiwan's strategic importance cannot be grasped without considering the bigger picture of geopolitics related to sea power. Classical theories about sea power, especially the works of Alfred Thayer Mahan, emphasized that naval routes and oceanic locations play an important role in the ascendance or decline of major powers. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* by Mahan is a classic work that asserts that countries with the capacity to control sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and exert naval power have a distinct advantage in world politics. This classical approach to sea power and navy emphasizes the inherent connection between sea power and maritime trade, where control over key maritime locations would enable countries to control regional and international trade (Mahan, 1890). Recent research has highlighted the enduring relevance of Mahan's theories to current maritime rivalry, especially in relation to the changing structural conditions in the East Asian region (Wiegand, 2008).

As far as East Asia is concerned, the First Island Chain has two functions in relation to the mobility of naval forces through this region: namely, it can be used to facilitate or impede strategic mobility. As far as American strategic interests are concerned, the First Island Chain provides a defensive boundary for the United States. The inclusion of Taiwan within such a strategic approach occurred during the early Cold War era, when the United States government sought to contain the spread of communism and control of the seas in the Pacific theater (Krupan, 2025). Instead of reducing the strategic value of the islands, the collapse of the Soviet Union turned them into a structural asset in dealing with the growing naval power of an emerging China.

The exponential increase in maritime capability through China's fast-paced economic development has changed the dynamics of geopolitics in the region. Beginning in the early 2000s, China has adopted an aggressive naval modernization policy aimed at developing its naval forces into a blue-water navy capable of performing missions in regions outside its near-seas zone. This has intensified strategic competition in the Northwest Pacific, where regional states are worried about the future balance of maritime power. China's strategic thinking focuses on the security of maritime access, the protection of vulnerable sea lines of communication, and the avoidance of vulnerabilities at key strategic maritime choke points. China's strategic thinking is inextricably linked to its dependence on maritime trade and energy transportation (Heginbotham et al., 2015).

From a geographical standpoint alone, Taiwan is located precisely at the middle of the First Island Chain. It is strategically positioned to command the main shipping lanes that lead from the East and South China Seas out into the deeper waters of the Western Pacific Ocean. From a strategic point of view, Chinese control or dominance of Taiwan would allow for Beijing to breach the geographical barrier provided by the island chain and project its naval power into the Pacific Ocean. On the other hand, provided that Taiwan remains autonomous, the U.S. and its allies in the region can counter the threat of external naval aggression or expansion by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) (Bellocchi, 2023). This explains why Taiwan is viewed as one of the most volatile areas in international politics today.

The strategic interaction in the Northwest Pacific region has become an interesting subject for scholars due to China's emerging maritime capability and the maintenance of US maritime dominance. There are many studies on different issues, including the geography of island chains, rivalry at sea between the US and China, naval modernization, strategic deterrence in the Taiwan Straits, and strategic choke points. Nevertheless, many of the writings tend to consider Taiwan and the First Island Chain separately without taking into account geographic determinism, theories of sea power, or military strategic discussions.

A fundamental trajectory of maritime security literature is concerned with understanding the logic behind the geographical construct of island chains that impact naval rivalries and deter adversaries. However, as mentioned by Erickson & Wuthnow (2016), Chinese strategists believe that the First Island Chain is a fixed structure that obstructs the free navigation of their fleet. This observation is useful in understanding Chinese strategic thinking but still falls short of offering a comprehensive explanation of the interaction between US maritime strategy and China's response to that strategy. Moreover, similar to this line of thought, Till's (2018) wider conceptual consideration of the idea of sea power recognizes that geography remains relevant to controlling the oceans but does not go so far as to make operational the notion of island chains vis-à-vis current great power competition.

Further insights into American maritime strategy can be gleaned from academic literature on the topic. According to Haynes (2013), after the Cold War, the United States adopted a naval strategy that emphasized presence and reassurance for its allies in the Western Pacific region by maintaining regional stability through sea control. Nonetheless, this method is only capable of explaining the U.S. policy with respect to deterrence without considering the effects of geographical locations like Taiwan on the maritime doctrine. Similarly, Green (2017) examines the grand strategic history of the United States in East Asia but acknowledge deficiencies in the competition. Furthermore, although studies like *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* place considerable focus on issues like freedom of navigation and forward presence, research in academia has not examined the use of geographical chokepoints in these strategic narratives to achieve operational priorities (Corps et al., 2007).

Yet, academic research on Chinese naval strategy seems to be dominated by efforts to understand how the People's Liberation Army Navy develops its hardware capability in relation to anti-access/area-denial strategies. For instance, the works of O'Rourke (2025) offer a good review of the quantitative buildup of the People's Liberation Army Navy, covering its submarine forces, surface vessels, and missile systems. Although empirically sound in terms of military capabilities, such studies are biased toward hardware rather than Beijing's strategic rationale. Heginbotham et al.'s (2015) assessments also measure the growth of Chinese naval power in terms of capability competition, thereby allowing room for studies that examine the influence of geographic location and strategic discourse on Chinese naval doctrine.

The Taiwan Strait and deterrence stability constitute another area that has been extensively discussed in the empirical research literature. Ross (2000) offers an elaborate examination of the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-1996, where he examines the role played by naval deployments in stabilizing the crisis. As important as it is in explaining the dynamics of periodic deterrence, Ross' study contributes little to explaining the issue of structural competition. Recent works still view the issue of Taiwan as a significant factor in shaping the crises between China and the United States (Yang, 2024).

The concept of island chain theory itself has also been incorporated into studies of great power competition, albeit without adequate discussion regarding the strategic narratives and doctrines at play. According to Krpan (2025), strategic planners use the concept of island chain theory to construct deterrent lines in the region against Taiwan. Nonetheless, most of this literature is descriptive in nature and lacks evaluation of the use of geographical discourse in justifying the region's defense postures. Similarly, studies of Pacific chokepoints recognize their material importance in sea lanes but do not discuss the strategic importance attached to them.

Moreover, some themes and gaps still need to be further explored in contemporary literature. First, there is an absence of studies relating economic and maritime strategic competitions. Although Allison (2017) notes that a semiconductor lead may be one of the attributes of great power status, most maritime security literature seems preoccupied with naval platforms, not the economic forces that shape geostrategic considerations. Second, there is an absence of studies connecting fast-changing technology with geographic determinism. Despite the recognition by Tangredi (2018) of such technologies that could influence naval rivalry as missile defense, cyber, and unmanned systems, little research is conducted about the effect of Anti-access/area denial technologies on classical chokepoints such as Taiwan.

Methodologically, however, there is an evident dichotomy in the existing literature: most studies use quantitative measures of fleet size, capability, and military spending, neglecting the importance of strategic narratives in policymaking. As Roselle et al. (2014) state, strategic narratives play an important role in international security by shaping threats and legitimacy, we rarely see the application of these concepts when analyzing the First

Island Chain. However, incorporating strategic narratives into the analysis alongside material geography provides a more holistic approach. Moreover, while conceptual approaches such as the RSCT approach (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) stress the importance of geographic clusters and the interdependency of states with respect to security, these approaches have been used primarily in a terrestrial sense and rarely from a perspective involving complex maritime geographies. Consequently, there is a special requirement for understanding the relationship between maritime geography and interdependencies in the region, which unfortunately has not received due attention in the literature.

The use of the longitudinal approach to link the concepts of geographic determinism, sea power capabilities, and strategic narrative will address some of the existing research gaps. Instead of reducing Taiwan to an issue of political tensions only, this paper presents it as a strategic maritime pivot that influences the decisions made by major powers. Furthermore, the sea power theory is expanded through an analysis of the role played by national security policies, defense white papers, and naval doctrines in creating island chain politics. Furthermore, whereas most of the existing literature deals with specific crises, this paper considers a more prolonged perspective, which involves analysis of the period in three stages after the Cold War: American maritime hegemony (1991–2008), a period of rebalance transition (2008–2016), and increasing strategic rivalry (2017–2025). Most importantly, through application of a qualitative discourse analysis of strategic literature, the paper shows the impact of politics and the military on geography.

Theoretical Framework

For the present study, sea power theory will be used to understand the significance of Taiwan geo-strategically as one of the states within the First Island Chain in relation to strategic competition between the US and China. Sea power theory of Alfred Thayer Mahan is anchored on the idea that the control of sea space, the capability to dominate strategic seaways, and the geographic location of a state play a significant role in enhancing a nation's capabilities in safeguarding its national interests. In his seminal work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, published in 1890, Mahan asserted that the control of strategic choke points and the geographical location of critical maritime shipping lanes contributed to the global supremacy attained by Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries (Mahan, 1890). For Mahan, sea power is a multifaceted structure involving a state's naval power, merchant ships, and ability to defend maritime shipping lanes, which are all inherently determined by a country's geography, unity, and economic power (Mahan, 1890). Historical research by Mahan revealed can wield sea power, it not only ensures its economic prosperity but also gains an upper hand over other states through the control of point of intersections, since the prerequisite of wielding sea power is that of having long coasts, islands of strategic importance, and proximity to sea trading.

Modern interpretations of the Mahanian theory still focus on its relevance to understanding modern maritime security challenges in the Northwest Pacific, where rapid naval modernization efforts and great power strategic rivalry have sparked renewed

academic interest in maritime grand strategy. For example sea power remains a core element that helps to achieve national influence in a globalized world where more than 90% of all global commerce travels through (2020).

In today's literature on strategy, Mahan's ideas have been linked directly to politics and economics. Mahan has made it clear that there cannot be any independent maritime strategy without consideration of commerce and trade, and he further points out that control over the seas enhances mobility and supports economic development (Mahan, 1890). The inherent dual nature of sea power, which brings together elements of both military and economics, is highly relevant to the current competition between China and the US, as each country tries to gain maritime access that is advantageous to it. China's emergence as a naval power shows the use of Mahanian theory, as it seeks to move beyond its near seas area to safeguard its growing maritime trade (Sherazi et al., 2020).

Concerning Chinese military strategies, Mahan's theory has been extensively used to explain state behavior, since present-day Chinese maritime doctrines have much in common with the classical Mahanian approach stressing sea control and maritime structures. The rapid growth of the Chinese naval forces, including aircraft carriers, submarine units, and surface vessels, can be considered deliberate effort to convert geography into sea power capacity (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2005). Moreover, China's strategic endeavors aimed at gaining control over regional maritime chokepoints and expanding its regional presence can be seen as an embodiment of the adaptation of sea power theory in the contemporary world.

Outside China, modern naval doctrines such as the American Tri-Service doctrine, A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower, emphasize issues like forward naval presence, interoperability among allies, and maintaining maritime commons as key aspects of national and international security, borrowing heavily from sea power theory (Corps et al., 2007). This emphasis on freedom of navigation and power projection is in line with the primary contention to Alfred Mahan's doctrine that naval power and mastery of the sea lanes are critical to achieve a power (Mahan, 1890). In the Northwest Pacific region, this has led to the use of highly advanced US Navy ships along with cooperation among navies in the region to protect the security of SLOCs in light of increased competition in naval power.

Environmental systems and technological evolution necessitate modifying Mahan's theories to fit the environment. Mahan's theory began with the notion that then factors determining control of the seas are capital ships and fleets (Mahan 1890). However, today's competition involves the capabilities like precision-strike, anti-access/area-denial technologies. Despite progress in technology, the core of Mahanian doctrine still holds true: geography and local sea power are key elements in naval strategy (Till, 2018).

In terms of the application of concerning three theoretical linkages make the research unique:

- **The Chokepoint Nexus:** Firstly, the geographic location of Taiwan in the heart of the First Island Chain, right in between the East China Sea and South China Sea, makes it a classic example of a Mahanian strategic chokepoint, which requires that the US and Chinese navies achieve mastery over it to secure their respective SLOCs.
- **Structural Integration:** Secondly, whereas previous literature has examined Taiwan from the perspective of political status and cross-Strait diplomacy, this approach employs a systematic integration of maritime geography and sea power considerations to understand the influence of Taiwan on the regional security complex.
- **Discursive Modeling:** Third, by comparing strategic discourses developed in the context of national security doctrines, it can be demonstrated that Mahanian theories of sea power do affect contemporary alliance behavior, maritime operations, and deterrence strategies.

In doing this, the current research applies sea power theory to develop an analytical framework in which the concept of geographic determinism is integrated into strategic discourse and planning. Unlike the independent approach used by sea power theory to define naval power, this research demonstrates how geographical position can affect competitors' strategic discourse and behavior. The longitudinal approach used in this research allows for a detailed analysis of how modern great powers interpret, criticize, and apply Mahanian theories. This serves two purposes:

1. It elaborates on the importance of Taiwan's geographic location as a geographic pivot that influences great power conflicts due to its presence in the First Island Chain.
2. It demonstrates the applicability of Mahan's sea power theory to current times by modifying some of its elements to explain modern maritime strategies and doctrinal shifts in US and Chinese policy discourses.

The significance of sea power theory as an analytical paradigm helps connect the study of material geopolitics with the more interpretive approach of narrative geopolitics. This, in turn, contributes to our greater understanding of why classical geopolitics is still relevant in today's geopolitics of great powers rivalry in the maritime environment.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, the methodological approach of qualitative discourse analysis is applied to explore the strategic importance of Taiwan as a maritime pivot in the Northwest Pacific. Qualitative discourse analysis is chosen as the main methodological approach because it is an interpretive approach that allows researchers to analyze how material geopolitical facts become strategically significant through official state language. According to critical geopolitical scholars, spaces and sea lanes are not physical realities; rather, they are socially constructed entities that are continually renegotiated by rival states to justify power

projection and military formation (Wirth, 2023). By emphasizing the role of language in constructing maritime strategies, this approach fills a gap in the analysis between naval capabilities and international security.

Data Corpus and Selection Criteria

To study the longitudinal transformation of maritime competition across three chronological periods after the Cold War era (1991 to 2025), secondary data were used. In compliance with the documentation guidelines set forth by Roselle et al. (2014) for qualitative policy analysis, the selection criteria required that all items analyzed be official institutional publications, be relevant to regional security architecture (either legally or doctrinally), and reflect the authoritative position of senior civilian or military leaders.

The secondary data set can be divided into two separate tracks for analysis, namely:

- **United States Strategic Documents:** This track comprises different versions of the National Security Strategy (NSS) documents, which the White House has developed; the National Defense Strategy (NDS) from the Department of Defense, and the tri-service maritime strategy document such as “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower” (Corps et al., 2007).
- **Strategic Documents of China:** This category includes official Defense White Papers regularly published by the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, focusing on essential developments that include coastal defense to far-sea defense (for instance, China’s Military Strategy, 2015; China’s National Defense in the New Era, 2019), complemented by institutional analyses of the quantitative development of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) (O’Rourke, 2025).

Analytical Framework and Coding

With regard to the methodology associated with the strategic narrative theory approach, the text corpus was systematically analyzed through a coding matrix, chronologically, to analyze structural changes in geopolitical discourse, security framing, and spatial orientation. Content analysis was conducted using a coding approach based on three major thematic pillars:

- **Maritime Maneuver and Power Projection:** Texts were analyzed with regard to the terms “sea control,” “sea denial,” “anti-access/area denial,” and “forward presence” to establish how naval maneuverability was considered within the First Island Chain (Heginbotham et al., 2015; Tangredi, 2018).
- **Geographic Encirclement and Pivots:** The lines were categorized based on mentions of “containment,” “ocean barriers,” “encirclement,” and “choke points” to determine how both sides used rhetoric to construct the geography of Taiwan regarding ocean problems (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2005).

- **Multi-Domain Interdependencies:** Keywords like “supply chain security,” “semiconductor industry,” and “technological superiority” were part of the coding process to examine the relationship between economic statecraft and sea power’s logic in contemporary maritime environments (Ryu, 2025; Wong et al., 2024).

By examining the structural convergence of such codes over many decades, this method demonstrates how great power discourse constructs classic Mahanian concepts in the realm of modern maritime geopolitics.

FINDINGS

Qualitative discourse analysis of strategic documents from the United States and China shows that the Northwest Pacific maritime space serves as a dynamic structural arena where geography and strategic narrative meet. Through analyzing the transformations in each of the three operational stages in the period after the Cold War, from 1991 to 2025, it becomes clear that both countries have been discursively operationalizing and contesting the traditional Mahanian concepts of sea power, sea control, and chokepoints.

The Geopolitical Logic of the First Island Chain and Sea Power Theory

Maritime geography’s structural rationale is the foundation of the whole US-China competition model in the Northwest Pacific region. According to sea power theory, physical geography does not play an insignificant role as a mere backdrop to history; on the contrary, it determines the power balance and grand strategy of sovereign nations (Mahan, 1890). According to Mahanian theory, states with control over sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and geographical location would enjoy an edge in the international political economy (Mahan, 1890). The current international security environment sees this structural paradigm manifesting itself through the geopolitical rivalry between the dominant naval power (U.S.) and the emerging continental power (China).

Taiwan serves as an example of a maritime pivot and chokepoint in this theatre. It is situated at the intersection of the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Western Pacific Ocean, serving as a gateway into continental East Asia by controlling access to sea lines of communication for these regions. The First Island Chain serves as both a defensive line and a zone of maneuver for naval operations. Even with all the technological advancements that have taken place in high-intensity warfare, the importance of islands in naval warfare cannot be overlooked (Till, 2018).

As part of the Chinese strategic language, the First Island Chain is conceptualized as an artificial barrier that acts as a means of containment, preventing the People’s Liberation Army Navy from accessing the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean (Erickson & Wuthnow, 2016). China’s sense of strategic encirclement throughout history has shaped its maritime strategy, compelling the Chinese government to invest heavily in highly sophisticated surface combat ships, carrier battle groups, and precision strike platforms to enable the transition from littoral defense to distant seas protection (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2005).

On the other hand, the United States uses discourses of forward deterrence and regional balance when addressing the case of Taiwan. The US grand strategy in East Asia focuses on alliance flexibility and freedom of movement in the maritime commons without territorial occupation (Green, 2017). US-Japan alliance is used as a core part of this strategy, offering the geographical infrastructure needed and acting as a force multiplier for US power projection in the Western Pacific. These physical factors are enabled by rival strategic narratives, which aim to legitimize activities in the region and achieve alignment through soft power. As described by Roselle et al. (2014), states engage in competition by constructing narratives to shape perceptions of threat and system legitimacy. The US is advocating for a “rules-based maritime order” characterized by multilateralism, freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), and unrestricted business. On the other hand, China’s narrative is based on absolute sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Phase 1: The Era of Absolute United States Maritime Primacy (1991–2008)

During the early years after the Cold War, the nature of maritime politics involved a clear-cut unipolar structure that was not contested. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the U.S. Navy had no rival in terms of a blue-water navy, meaning that Washington could enjoy its superiority in regional SLOCs and deploy its naval capabilities at will across the maritime domain. During this period, the discourse of the United States emphasized having a forward presence at sea (Haynes, 2013).

The First Island Chain was a network infrastructure that provided the basis for maritime surveillance and forward logistics. The technological dimension involved enhancing the US’s system-centric warfare through the acquisition of carrier strike groups, precision-guided weapons, and network-centric command systems, which improved its margins of power projection (Till, 2018). In this unipolar world, Taiwan was not considered a geostrategic pivot, but rather a crisis management issue. This is evidenced in the case of the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995 to 1996, where the rapid response of US carriers restored the credibility of its extended deterrence and absolute sea control (Ross, 2000).

In contrast, China’s strategic doctrines in this era were characterized by heightened sensitivity to its maritime vulnerabilities and encirclement problems. Confronted with the absolute dominance of US Navy supremacy, Beijing took advantage of this unipolar moment to launch a strategy of long-term strategic balancing (Friedberg, 2011). China’s strategic thinking emphasized transforming the People’s Liberation Army Navy from its basic form of coastal defense (anhaifang) into “near seas active defense” (jinhaifangwei), laying the foundation for quantitative naval buildup in the years to come.

Phase 2: The Era of Transitional Naval Rebalancing (2008–2016)

Phase two involved structural changes toward a highly competitive maritime domain, owing to the fast-paced growth of the Chinese economy coupled with its efforts to invest in asymmetrical naval capabilities. To counteract the emerging dynamics in the balance of power, the US adopted a new approach to its regional policies through the “Pivot to Asia”

strategy (Clinton, 2011). The strategy aimed to shift the US alignment policy from a rigid hierarchy of bilateral relationships to more fluid networks and security cooperation with non-traditional countries such as India and some Southeast Asian countries.

On the technological front, the main source of friction in this period was the implementation of an anti-access/area-denial strategy by China. China had made massive investments in anti-ship ballistic missiles, advanced conventional submarines, and air defense systems designed specifically to increase the cost of operations for intervention forces inside the First Island Chain (Heginbotham et al., 2015). The emergence of the first Chinese aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, in 2012 is indicative of this change in doctrine, as China's naval strategy officially moved from its previous defensive "near-seas" doctrine towards an integrated approach involving "offshore waters defense" and "open seas protection". This change in strategy was aimed at nullifying the forward deployment strategy of the United States by making the First Island Chain a contested region.

Phase 3: The Current Era of Intensifying Strategic Competition (2017–2025)

The present-day world is characterized by a structured and multi-domain strategic competition that goes beyond conventional battles fought between naval platforms. The change is evident in the way the United States adopted the "Indo-Pacific strategy" instead of the "Asia-Pacific" one to emphasize that maritime security has been extended to cover technology supply chain security and cybersecurity, among others. Great power competition occurs within multiple strategic domains at once (Allison, 2017).

The alliance systems during this period have been very much institutionalized and networked, as evidenced by the establishment of the Quad and the trilateral security system known as AUKUS (Medcalf, 2020). The systems are concerned with improving interoperability, joint patrols of the maritime environment, and deterrence against gray zone activities. Technology has changed the face of maritime warfare through the advent of artificial intelligence, hypersonic strike capabilities, cyberspace manipulation, and autonomous naval vessels (Tangredi, 2013). However, China has maintained its fast-growing navy force by developing multi-carrier task groups and state-of-the-art guided missile destroyers to ensure blue water power beyond the First Island Chain. As a result, the US has adapted its naval strategy by focusing on the concept of "distributed lethality," moving from platform dominance to distributed forces.

Most importantly, the example of the Taiwanese semiconductor industry has added a critical economic dimension to the modern theory of sea power. Because state-of-the-art microelectronics are essential to the functioning of not only the global economy but also modern warfare equipment, Taiwan's near-exclusive position in producing state-of-the-art semiconductors makes the island an indispensable economic fulcrum. It follows that securing semiconductor supply chains is one of the stated objectives in the national security doctrines of both the United States and China (Ryu, 2025; Wong et al., 2024). This complex

geostrategic intersection is graphically represented through a system-centric network model as illustrated in Figure 1.

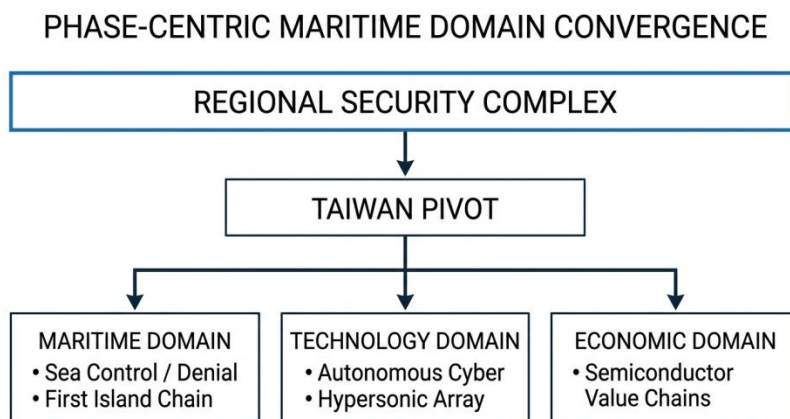


Figure 1. Convergence of the Maritime Domain through System-Centricity at the Taiwan Pivot Point

Source: Created by the author by combining the multi-domain frameworks of Buzan and Wæver (2003), Holmes and Yoshihara (2005), Tangredi (2018), Wong et al. (2024), and Ryu (2025).

This multi-domain concept shows that the threats faced in the East Asia region are not singular. According to Regional Security Complex Theory, security interdependencies exist geographically such that an alteration in naval power projection in the maritime domain would have direct impacts on technology and global supply chains at the same time (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). As an integrated whole, the interdependence of political, military, and economic factors will be realized in the same theater. From the example cited above, Taiwan is the core structural element in the security complex of East Asia. Any change in Taiwan's security will affect the surrounding alliance systems, technology supply chains, and world maritime order, transforming the Northwest Pacific from a regional territorial conflict into a systemically important point in the world.

Political Implications

Geopolitical trends in the modern era in the Northwest Pacific region are characterized by a dynamic combination of struggles for maritime power, structural geography, alliances, and economic security connections. Taking into account the principles of classical sea power as presented by Alfred Thayer Mahan, the research under consideration focuses on the point that the geographical position of Taiwan as a central part of the First Island Chain is a structuring element of regional politics. The geopolitical implications of this structural fact go well beyond the realm of military strategy and extend to the way states conduct themselves diplomatically, economically, internationally, and during crisis management in the region. Systemically, the maritime structure of the Northwest Pacific region has transformed itself from a system characterized by centralized cooperation into one that is highly competitive in nature, featuring maritime pluralism.

Geopolitical theory, according to Mahan, shows how a nation's ability to influence the international system in the long term is largely determined by its control of strategic sea

lines. According to geopolitical theory, the First Island Chain acts as a containment system that ensures the movement of naval forces and deterrence capability in the region is well controlled. While the United States uses its modern naval forces to project presence in the theater, China is working to extend its operations through its modern navy, which has anti-access/area-denial capabilities (O'Rourke, 2018).

Another equally important implication is that of the changing dynamics of alliance politics and regional security architecture. Over the past several decades, the United States has been building up its security alliance with countries such as Japan and Australia to retain an appropriate balance of power in the Western Pacific region (Medcalf, 2020). On the other hand, the rapid military build-up in Japan, along with the expansion of its surveillance network, is due to institutional apprehensions over a possible kinetic conflict in the Taiwan Strait (Hughes, 2020). As per the concept of the regional security complex, geographical proximity leads to high security interdependence, whereby a potential threat arising in one country is considered a threat to the entire regional complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). As such, small countries within the region face the challenge of maintaining good economic relationships with China while ensuring that their security is guaranteed by the United States.

In this regard, the behavior of smaller regional states becomes a perfect example of a common survival strategy under conditions of great power disparity. In fact, small countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore are increasingly finding themselves obliged to adopt pragmatic foreign policies that enable them to balance their economic reliance on China with their military relationships with the US. This pragmatism forms part of a broader structural transformation away from Cold War ideological relationships toward strategic behavior aimed at avoiding regional polarization.

It is worth noting that the Northwest Pacific is among the most economically integrated regions in the international system, where Taiwan's monopoly on microelectronic production is a significant element of this region. Taiwan's monopoly in semiconductor production provides the state with a unique strategic and geoeconomic advantage in the global technology market (Wong et al., 2024). In this context, modern great power rivalry goes beyond conventional war and territorial expansion into economic competition for control over global value chains and technology supply chains.

In this regard, this type of economic diplomacy has a direct relevance to sea lines of communication (SLOC) security. Because about 80% of international commerce moves through maritime channels, the security of such SLOCs is critical for ensuring macroeconomic stability. Economic development in China depends on safe SLOCs through the South China Sea and the narrow Malacca Strait; hence, any threat to these maritime channels would have serious economic implications for the global economy.

Moreover, rapidly changing technology has been reshaping maritime competition. Artificial intelligence, cyber warfare systems, and autonomous weapon systems are some

examples of new technologies that have made maritime power projection not only about supremacy in capital ships anymore, but also about network-centric and system-centric warfare systems (Tangredi, 2013). This technology change threatens classical deterrence stability, making crisis management more complex.

This makes crisis stability very difficult to achieve in the Northwest Pacific region. The Taiwan Strait is considered among the most dangerous areas in international politics, where a high operational tempo combined with the proximity of opposing naval forces greatly increases the potential for a fast kinetic escalation. Although the strategy of strategic ambiguity employed by the US throughout history has been beneficial in terms of operational flexibility, it increases the likelihood of strategic miscalculation in the context of intense diplomatic crises (Ross, 2000). Even though competition becomes increasingly fierce in many areas, nuclear deterrence ensures that great power competition remains limited and low-intensity strategic competition rather than total warfare (Lieber & Press, 2017).

In terms of institutions, recent scholarship indicates a growing weakness in the efficacy of maritime governance institutions. The interpretation and enforcement of international regimes that include the issue of freedom of navigation have become increasingly contentious. Challenges to Chinese claims of historical maritime rights often stem from Western interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which is essentially an ideological contest between a sovereign-based international order and a liberal international maritime organization. In domestic politics, the maritime security issue is commonly used as an instrument for constructing nationalism and national security.

Looking into the future, the North West Pacific is undergoing the transition from a period of unipolar maritime hegemony to that of high levels of multipolar maritime contestation (Friedberg, 2011). Such a geopolitical landscape is further complicated by the role played by non-traditional security factors, among which is environmental security. As a result of global warming and rising sea levels, there are increasing dangers posed to the sustainability of critical naval facilities and island bases across the First Island Chain. In any case, although classical theories of geopolitics continue to provide analytical foundations for explaining state actions, modern-day maritime analyses have to adopt a multi-dimensional approach.

CONCLUSION

Geopolitical competition in the Northwest Pacific is one of the most important structural changes taking place in international politics today. This paper shows that Taiwan acts as an important structural maritime pivot that defines the security structure of the region, distribution of great powers' capabilities, and global supply chains. From the above findings, it is clear that although geography remains one of the key factors that influence international relations, contemporary sea power has moved beyond the traditional concept of numbers of ships and has become more of a technological, economic, and strategic

issue. The First Island Chain still plays an important role in determining the structural maritime boundary between continental Asia and the deep ocean in the Western Pacific.

Historical analysis reveals that there has been a notable transformation in the composition of the regional power equilibrium following the end of the Cold War period. During the era of US maritime supremacy (1991-2008), the unchallenged dominance of the US Navy became the major factor contributing to regional stability due to the absence of an opponent to the US Navy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the dominance of the US Navy encouraged China to accelerate naval development to become independent from geographical restrictions associated with the First Island Chain (O'Rourke, 2018).

For the current era (2017-2025), the rivalry assumes the form of an institutionalized multi-dimensional contestation carried out in a multipolar regional order. This can be seen from the adoption of the "Indo-Pacific" approach, implying that naval contests are no longer enough to be used as tools of maritime security rivalry. This is because they have been complemented with economic coercion, advantages in the technological value chain, and cyber war. In this regard, strategic narratives have become important soft power tools used by countries to shape threat perceptions, nationalism, and alliances (Roselle et al., 2014).

The crucial idea here is that Taiwan plays a unique role in the world semiconductor value chain, introducing a new economic factor into sea power theory and making the microelectronics industry a core component of the security policy of both the US and China (Wong et al., 2024). In addition, the US relies on a complicated alliance system involving Japan, Australia, and other Southeast Asian countries to ensure stability in the East Asian security complex, which sees local threats quickly developing due to the region's geographic proximity. Within the context of such a highly competitive struggle between great powers, nuclear deterrence remains an insurance policy, ensuring stability and preventing total war from breaking out (Lieber & Press, 2017).

Policy Recommendations and the Way Forward

To achieve deterrence stability and avoid any kinetic escalation in the Northwest Pacific region, the following policies must be followed by the concerned parties:

- **Institutional Crisis Management Mechanisms:** This is necessary for the strategic planners of both the US and China to concentrate on enhancing military-to-military communication. Both sides must develop effective crisis hotlines and confidence-building measures to avoid any form of misunderstanding and accidental encounters between naval forces within the dynamic environment of the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.
- **Adopt Flexible Strategic Hedging:** Regional states need to resist pressures for either/or military positioning that further divide the region. Hedging policies allow

smaller regional states to balance their economic ties to China with their security ties to America.

- **Diversify Semiconductor Value Chains:** International actors need to cooperate in order to create diverse global supply chains of semiconductors. Diversifying microelectronic manufacturing will ensure that global economies are not exposed to possible blockades or conflicts in the region.
- **Strengthen Maritime Surveillance and Intelligence Sharing:** There needs to be more cooperation among countries in the region in terms of maritime surveillance and domain awareness. Joint surveillance will help to mitigate the risks of conflict arising from accidents at sea.
- **Reinforce International Maritime Law Regimes:** Steps should be taken to improve the global governance of international waters. Legal principles for freedom of navigation, through multilateral forums, help reduce the probability of conflict escalation over territorial issues.

Limitations of the Study and Avenues for Future Research

Nevertheless, although this study provides an extensive longitudinal analysis of the geostrategic elements surrounding Taiwan, there are also certain limitations associated with this research which must be taken into consideration. First, the use of open-source documents, state strategies, and defense papers means that this research is unable to consider the impact of classified military doctrines, private diplomatic negotiations, and covert military planning that play a significant role in shaping state actions. Second, the use of qualitative discourse analysis means that this study is focused on the state's strategic narratives and thus does not include any inconsistencies with its military tactics. Third, while sea power theory and Regional Security Complex Theory have sufficiently covered structural and geographical dependencies, they pay less attention to the influence of individual psychology, domestic politics, and decision-making institutions in both Washington and Beijing. Lastly, owing to the rapidity associated with technological changes, especially the real-time changes in cyber and autonomous war systems, the conclusions drawn from the analysis of multi-domain competition are restricted to the 1991–2025 periods.

In the future, academic scholarship needs to broaden its focus to examine the fast-changing nature of maritime warfare. First, there is a need for extensive research to determine the impacts that the use of AI and autonomous naval weapons will have on traditional sea control and denial doctrines. Second, the future geostrategic consequences of climate change need to be examined, especially the effects that rising sea levels will have on the structural stability of key island bases in the First Island Chain. Finally, comparative regional studies should be done to examine the effects of politics at home on foreign policy.

Overall, it is apparent that Taiwan continues to be a crucial geographical point and pivot in today's geopolitical world. The First Island Chain will continue to be one of the key

structures that define the strategic competition between the United States and China. Despite the likelihood that friction between the United States, China, and Japan will remain locally ongoing, the importance of ensuring strategic rivalry through deterrence, stability, and crisis communications becomes paramount to prevent a military disaster.

Author Contributions

- Rabia Anwar (70%): Conceptualization, study design, literature review, data analysis, and drafting.
- Areesha Batool (30%): Methodology, validation, editing, and critical review.

Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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The data supporting the results of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

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