

Framing the South China Sea in U.S. Indo-Pacific Discourse

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This article examines how U.S. official discourse constructed the strategic meaning of the South China Sea within the Indo-Pacific framework between 2017 and 2024. Drawing on a purposive corpus of seven publicly available texts—four contextual strategy documents and three issue-specific documents—the article employs qualitative framing analysis combining deductive and inductive coding. The initial coding scheme comprised four theoretically informed, non-mutually exclusive frames: legal order, freedom of navigation, security threat, and alliance deterrence; an emergent code allowed interpretations not captured by these categories to be identified. The analysis identifies a cumulative pattern of frame layering rather than replacement, although the frames' relative prominence changed. Legal-order and freedom-of-navigation frames remained foundational, while references to coercion, alliance commitments, partner capacity-building, and integrated deterrence became more prominent. This layering positioned the South China Sea not only as a dispute over maritime access and legal rules, but also as a test of regional order, alliance credibility, and resistance to coercion amid U.S.-China strategic competition. The principal shift therefore lay not in the abandonment of established legal and navigational frames, but in their incorporation into a more security-oriented, alliance-based strategic narrative. As an analysis of public strategic communication, the article does not infer a direct causal relationship between official discourse and policy outcomes.

Keywords: South China Sea, U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, official discourse, strategic narratives, framing analysis, integrated deterrence

Introduction

The South China Sea occupies a prominent place in contemporary debates over maritime security, regional order, and great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific. Located along major routes connecting the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, it contains vital sea lanes of communication and is marked by overlapping maritime and territorial claims. Research has accordingly approached the South China Sea as a legal dispute, a potential military flashpoint, and a challenge to maritime governance, generating important work on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), freedom-of-navigation operations, island-building, coast guard activities, and crisis management (Ba, 2011; Fravel, 2011; Beckman, 2013). Less systematic attention, however, has been paid to the discursive construction of the issue—particularly to how U.S. official language has defined the political and strategic significance of the South China Sea since the Indo-Pacific became an organizing framework for U.S. regional policy.

This article treats official discourse as a component of strategic practice rather than as a neutral account of events at sea. By identifying what is at stake, attributing responsibility, and defining appropriate responses, such discourse connects particular developments to wider understandings of regional order. The South China Sea

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therefore functions both as an object of U.S. policy and as a discursive site through which officials articulate claims about international law, maritime access, alliance politics, and strategic competition with China. The article asks how U.S. officials framed the South China Sea between 2017 and 2024, how the relative prominence and interaction of those frames changed, and what this evolution reveals about the issue's place in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. It argues that change occurred primarily through frame layering rather than displacement. Legal-order and freedom-of-navigation frames remained foundational but were increasingly combined with security-threat and alliance-deterrence frames. The cumulative effect was to represent the South China Sea not only as a dispute over maritime access and legal rules, but also as a test of regional order, alliance credibility, and resistance to coercion amid U.S.-China strategic competition.

To examine this process, the article conducts a qualitative framing analysis of U.S. official discourse from 2017 through 2024. The period covers the consolidation of the Indo-Pacific framework under the first Trump administration and its further development under the Biden administration, allowing both continuity and change across administrations to be examined. The purposively constructed corpus includes publicly available strategy documents and statements issued by the White House, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense, together with selected joint statements issued with U.S. allies and partners. The joint statements are treated as negotiated formulations endorsed by the United States rather than as unilateral expressions of U.S. policy. The provisional coding scheme comprises four theoretically informed, non-mutually exclusive frames—legal order, freedom of navigation, security threat, and alliance deterrence—and retains an emergent code for interpretations not captured by the initial categories.

By treating official discourse as an object of analysis in its own right, this article connects research on U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy with closer examination of how a specific maritime dispute acquires wider political and strategic meaning. It complements the predominantly legal and operational literature on the South China Sea and contributes to research on framing and strategic narratives by showing how established frames can persist while being recombined with security- and alliance-related themes. After situating the argument within the relevant literature and setting out the analytical and methodological foundations of the study, the article turns to the empirical analysis and considers what the layering of these frames reveals about U.S. regional strategy and maritime security.

Literature Review

U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

The shift from the “Asia-Pacific” to the “Indo-Pacific” is generally understood as more than a change in regional terminology. It represents both a spatial reconfiguration, linking the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean within a single strategic frame, and a functional shift from economic integration toward maritime security and strategic competition (Wilson, 2018). This reconfiguration is closely associated with changing perceptions of China's rise: The Indo-Pacific does not merely describe a geographical space but also organizes a particular understanding of regional order and the challenges confronting it (Pan, 2014). Yet the concept's growing strategic prominence has not produced a correspondingly coherent regional architecture. Its institutionalization remains constrained by limited ideational consensus and uneven political leadership (He & Feng, 2020). The Indo-Pacific is therefore best understood as an evolving and contested strategic framework—one that has redefined the geographical scope and policy priorities of regional politics without acquiring a settled institutional form.

Within U.S. policy, this conceptual reordering became embedded in high-level strategy during the Trump administration. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* gave the Indo-Pacific a prominent place in U.S. regional

policy and situated China within a broader account of strategic competition (The White House, 2017). The 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* translated this orientation into a defense agenda structured around preparedness, partnerships, and the promotion of a “networked region” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). The resulting framework cannot be reduced either to a neutral geographical designation or to a conventional containment strategy. Rather, it combines normative claims about openness and rules with a geopolitical effort to shape the regional balance of power (Calabrese, 2020).

The Biden administration retained this framework while placing greater emphasis on collective capacity and institutional coordination. The 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* presents alliances, partnerships, and regional institutions as mutually reinforcing components of an open regional architecture, while the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* situates their security role within the broader concept of integrated deterrence (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). This emphasis has strengthened the role of the Quad, AUKUS, bilateral alliances, and other flexible forms of minilateral cooperation within U.S. regional strategy. Such arrangements do not simply replace traditional alliances; they connect existing bilateral commitments through issue-specific networks addressing maritime security, defense technology, infrastructure, and supply-chain resilience (Tow, 2019). Existing research has explained the geopolitical rationale and institutional development of this architecture in considerable detail. It has devoted less sustained attention, however, to the discursive processes through which particular regional disputes are made to represent the principles, threats, and strategic purposes associated with the Indo-Pacific order.

South China Sea and Maritime Security

Scholarship on the South China Sea has likewise moved beyond treating it solely as a territorial dispute. Legal research initially concentrated on the relationship among sovereignty, maritime entitlements, the status of maritime features, and claims to historic rights. Beckman’s analysis emphasizes the role of UNCLOS in structuring competing maritime claims (2013), while Gao and Jia offer a different interpretation of the history and legal implications of China’s dotted line (2013). The 2016 South China Sea arbitration subsequently generated debate over the binding character of the award, the tribunal’s interpretation of UNCLOS (Guilfoyle, 2018), and the prospects for compliance with compulsory dispute-settlement decisions (Phan & Nguyen, 2018). These debates provide the legal context for understanding why references to “lawful maritime claims”, the arbitral award, and a “rules-based order” have assumed such prominence in U.S. official statements (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

In U.S. policy discourse, however, legal language also performs a wider strategic function. Although the United States is neither a claimant in the South China Sea disputes nor a party to UNCLOS, it invokes the Convention and the arbitral award to distinguish lawful maritime entitlements from claims it regards as excessive or unlawful. International law consequently operates not only as a body of rules but also as a source of political legitimacy in the contest over regional order—a relationship captured in debates over the use of “lawfare” in the South China Sea (Guilfoyle, 2019). The U.S. position announced in July 2020 provided an especially explicit formulation of this approach by aligning Washington’s rejection of several Chinese maritime claims more closely with the findings of the arbitral tribunal (Pompeo, 2020). Legal argument and geopolitical positioning are therefore analytically distinguishable but closely intertwined in U.S. representations of the dispute.

Security-oriented research examines how maritime conduct alters the balance of power and the risks of escalation. Earlier work emphasized China’s broader strategy in the South China Sea, including the calibrated use of diplomatic, administrative, and military instruments (Fravel, 2011, p. 293). More recent studies have focused on island-building, military facilities, coast guard and maritime militia operations, gray-zone tactics, and

U.S. freedom-of-navigation operations. Freedom-of-navigation operations are particularly important because their stated legal purpose is inseparable from the strategic signals that they convey to China, regional claimants, and U.S. allies (Cho & Chao, 2025).

These legal and operational questions increasingly converge in research that treats the South China Sea as a site of contestation over regional order. From this perspective, the dispute concerns not only the control of particular maritime features or waters but also the authority to define legitimate rules and practices (Heritage & Lee, 2020). Studies of norm contestation demonstrate how governments use legal claims, diplomatic practices, and maritime statecraft to defend competing understandings of order (Strating, 2022). Related work shows that appeals to a rules-based order may also constrain their proponents by exposing inconsistencies between declared principles and actual practice (Strating, 2023). The South China Sea thus serves as a setting in which competing visions of international and regional order are articulated and tested (International Crisis Group, 2021). Nevertheless, official language is still frequently treated as evidence of pre-existing policy preferences rather than examined longitudinally as a practice that helps constitute the strategic meaning of the dispute.

Strategic Narratives and Framing

Strategic-narrative research offers a way to address this discursive dimension. Strategic narratives are representations of international politics through which political actors connect interpretations of the past and present to preferred visions of the future. They help define the character of the international system, construct political identities, and justify particular courses of action (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). From this perspective, the Indo-Pacific is not simply a geographical label. It functions as a narrative of regional order that identifies relevant actors, specifies valued principles, and establishes the forms of conduct regarded as either legitimate or threatening. The coexistence of terms such as “free”, “open”, “prosperous”, and “inclusive” also shows that the meaning of the Indo-Pacific remains politically contested rather than universally settled (Barthwal-Datta & Chacko, 2020).

Framing analysis operates at a more fine-grained level. Frames make selected aspects of an issue more salient, thereby shaping how a problem is defined, how responsibility is attributed, how conduct is evaluated, and which responses appear appropriate (Entman, 1993). Applied to maritime disputes and Indo-Pacific politics, framing research has demonstrated how the same events can acquire different meanings across media systems and national contexts (Li & Sheng, 2023). Much of this work, however, concentrates on news coverage and national reception. It provides less direct insight into how official U.S. texts construct the South China Sea as an object of regional strategy.

Strategic-narrative scholarship and framing analysis are therefore complementary but analytically distinct. Strategic-narrative scholarship provides the macro-level context in which the Indo-Pacific is articulated as a vision of regional order, while framing analysis supplies the operational categories through which representations of the South China Sea can be examined. Taken together, the preceding literature suggests four provisional and potentially overlapping frames: legal order, freedom of navigation, security threat, and alliance-based deterrence. These frames are treated as sensitizing concepts rather than fixed categories, allowing the analysis to examine their persistence, interaction, and changing relative prominence over time.

Research Gap

The three bodies of research reviewed above have largely developed along parallel lines. Studies of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy explain the framework's geopolitical rationale and institutional architecture but often

invoke the South China Sea chiefly as evidence of broader strategic competition. Research on the South China Sea provides detailed accounts of legal claims, operational conduct, and regional security but less frequently examines how the dispute is repositioned within an encompassing U.S. narrative of regional order. Work on strategic narratives and framing, meanwhile, establishes that language helps constitute political reality, yet much of it addresses broad regional concepts or media representations rather than longitudinal change in official discourse surrounding a particular maritime dispute. Recent research has begun to examine information operations and competing narratives in the South China Sea (Strating, 2026), but the cumulative development of U.S. official framing across the Trump and Biden administrations has not yet been fully explained.

This article addresses that gap by tracing U.S. official discourse on the South China Sea from 2017 to 2024. It treats the dispute both as an object of policy and as a discursive site through which the United States defines lawful order, maritime access, coercive behavior, and alliance credibility. Rather than presuming a linear transition from one frame to another, the analysis asks whether earlier frames were displaced, reinterpreted, or incorporated into a more extensive strategic vocabulary. In doing so, the article explains how a geographically bounded maritime dispute came to represent wider concerns about the Indo-Pacific order, while also distinguishing discursive change from any direct causal effect on policy outcomes.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

The distinction drawn above between strategic narratives and frames guides the research design. Strategic narratives provide the wider account of Indo-Pacific order within which the South China Sea acquires meaning, while framing analysis identifies the specific patterns through which the issue is defined and connected to policy responses. This section explains how those frames are operationalized, how the textual corpus is constructed, and how the coding is conducted.

Analytical Framework: Framing the South China Sea

Following Entman, a frame is understood here as a pattern of selection and emphasis that defines a problem, attributes responsibility, evaluates the conduct involved, and makes certain responses appear appropriate (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Strategic-narrative analysis provides the wider context within which these frames operate: It shows how individual claims about the South China Sea are incorporated into an account of the Indo-Pacific's character, challenges, and future direction (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Framing analysis, in turn, provides the more specific tool for identifying how that account is constructed across official texts.

The article adopts a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. Four provisional frames—legal order, freedom of navigation, security threat, and alliance deterrence—are derived from the conceptual discussion and literature reviewed above. They serve as sensitizing concepts rather than fixed or exhaustive classifications. Table 1 summarizes their interpretive focus and the rules used to distinguish them during coding.

Table 1

Operationalization of the Four Frames

Frame	Interpretive focus	Inclusion and boundary rule
Legal order	The South China Sea is presented as a test of whether maritime conduct is governed by international law, lawful claims, and peaceful dispute settlement.	Code when legal language diagnoses conduct, evaluates legitimacy, or prescribes a rule-based response. Indicative terms include “international law”, “UNCLOS”, “lawful maritime claims”, “arbitral award”, and “rules-based order.” Exclude passing legal references without an interpretive function.

Table 1 to be continued

Freedom of navigation	The issue is defined in terms of actual or potential restrictions on navigation, overflight, maritime access, or lawful mobility.	Code when access or movement is central to the claim. Indicative terms include “freedom of navigation”, “freedom of overflight”, “sea lanes”, “open seas”, “maritime commons”, and “unimpeded lawful commerce.” Distinguish this frame from legal order when operational mobility, rather than broader legal legitimacy, is the primary concern.
Security threat	Conduct in the South China Sea is represented as coercive, militarized, unsafe, or destabilizing.	Require an explicit attribution of threat, insecurity, coercion, or destabilizing effect. Indicative terms include “coercion”, “militarization”, “intimidation”, “unsafe conduct”, “grey-zone activity”, and “destabilizing action”. Exclude factual references to China or maritime incidents that do not assign a security meaning.
Alliance deterrence	Coordinated action by allies and partners is presented as a response to South China Sea challenges.	Code when cooperation is connected to security capacity, treaty credibility, collective resilience, or deterrence. Indicative terms include “allies and partners”, “treaty commitments”, “capacity-building”, “interoperability”, “maritime domain awareness”, and “integrated deterrence”. Exclude ceremonial or routine diplomatic references.

The indicative terms are used to locate potentially relevant passages, not as a dictionary for automatic classification. Coding depends on the function that a term performs in context. The categories are also non-mutually exclusive: A statement that describes maritime conduct as unlawful and coercive before invoking treaty commitments may combine the legal-order, security-threat, and alliance-deterrence frames. Integrated deterrence is treated as a subcode of alliance deterrence. Material that cannot be adequately interpreted through the four provisional frames is recorded under an “other/emergent” code and assessed for recurrence across the corpus.

The framework also provides the basis for assessing frame layering. Layering is inferred when an established frame remains substantively present after another becomes more prominent and when official texts repeatedly connect the two within the same passage or document. Chronological succession, changes in terminology, or increases in isolated keywords are not sufficient evidence of layering.

Corpus Construction

The corpus covers the period from January 2017 to December 2024. The starting point captures the incorporation of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” into U.S. national strategy during the first Trump administration, while the end date includes the final full year of the Biden administration. This period permits comparison across the two administrations without presuming either continuity or rupture.

For analytical purposes, the corpus is divided into contextual and issue-specific texts. The contextual set comprises four major strategy documents that establish the vocabulary of U.S. Indo-Pacific policy: the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, the 2019 Department of Defense *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, the 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, and the 2022 *National Defense Strategy*. The first three situate the South China Sea within the wider Indo-Pacific framework, while the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* provides the broader defense context for integrated deterrence. Only passages that address the South China Sea directly or establish the regional concepts through which it is framed are included in the analysis; the remaining content serves as contextual background.

The issue-specific set comprises three texts: the July 2020 Department of State statement on the U.S. position on maritime claims in the South China Sea; the May 2023 U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines; and the April 2024 Joint Vision Statement issued by the leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States. Together, these documents provide focal texts for examining the legal, alliance, and minilateral formulations through which the South China Sea was incorporated into the wider Indo-Pacific framework. The bilateral guidelines and trilateral statement are treated as jointly authorized formulations rather than as unilateral expressions of U.S. policy.

Documents were included if they were publicly available through an official government source, fell within the specified period, and either addressed the South China Sea directly or supplied the broader Indo-Pacific language through which it was framed. Duplicate publications, unattributed media reports, and documents containing only incidental references to the South China Sea were excluded.

The resulting corpus comprises seven texts: four contextual strategy documents and three issue-specific documents. It is purposive rather than exhaustive, bringing together foundational strategy documents and focal issue-specific texts issued either by the U.S. government or jointly with allies and partners. This design supports close comparison of authoritative formulations across administrations and institutional settings, while recognizing that the corpus does not encompass every governmental reference to the South China Sea.

Coding Procedure

The document serves as the unit of analysis, while coding is conducted at the level of the meaning unit—a sentence or short sequence of sentences expressing a complete claim. Each document is read in full before relevant passages are coded, allowing individual claims to be interpreted in their institutional and rhetorical context. Multiple codes may be assigned where a passage combines different frames. Any judgment about a document's overall framing is made only after passage-level coding has been completed.

Coding proceeds in two passes. In the first, the provisional scheme is applied across the corpus while ambiguous passages and material not captured by the initial categories are recorded under the “other/emergent” code. Comparison of these passages is used to clarify the boundaries between legal order and freedom of navigation, and between security threat and alliance deterrence. In the second pass, the coded passages are reviewed using the refined rules, and earlier decisions are reconsidered where necessary to ensure consistent application across administrations, issuing institutions, and document types.

Frame presence is recorded when at least one passage meets the relevant inclusion rule. Prominence is assessed by considering a frame's recurrence and its role in organizing a document's definition of the problem and proposed response, rather than by keyword frequency alone. A dominant frame is assigned only when it structures the document's central interpretation; documents without a clear organizing frame are treated as mixed. Keyword searches, where used, serve only to locate potentially relevant passages and do not determine coding outcomes.

Frame layering is assessed through persistence and co-occurrence. Persistence refers to the continued substantive use of legal-order and freedom-of-navigation frames after security-threat and alliance-deterrence language becomes more prominent. Co-occurrence refers to the connection of two or more frames within the same passage or their repeated combination within a document. Layering is therefore inferred from the continued interaction of established and newer frames, not simply from chronological succession or changes in word frequency. Coding notes record borderline decisions, revisions to the coding rules, and passages that depart from the expected pattern. Representative passages and counterexamples are presented in the empirical analysis so that the interpretation can be assessed against the stated coding rules.

Methodological Limitations

This design places clear limits on the conclusions that can be drawn. Official texts reveal how the U.S. government publicly presents and justifies policy, but they do not provide access to internal deliberations or establish whether particular frames shaped policy decisions. The analysis also examines the production of official discourse rather than its reception; it does not assess how regional governments, media, or other audiences interpreted U.S. language, nor how its meaning may have changed through translation and circulation. Finally,

qualitative interpretive coding cannot demonstrate that discursive change directly produced particular policy or regional outcomes.

The findings should therefore be understood as an account of how authoritative English-language U.S. texts constructed the South China Sea within the Indo-Pacific strategic framework between 2017 and 2024. Within these limits, the method makes it possible to identify recurrent patterns of meaning, trace changes across administrations and institutional settings, and assess whether new frames displaced or accumulated alongside earlier ones.

Findings: The Evolution of U.S. South China Sea Discourse

The analysis reveals a cumulative rather than substitutive pattern in U.S. discourse on the South China Sea. Between 2017 and 2024, the issue was increasingly connected to broader claims about regional order, strategic competition, and alliance credibility, yet the established emphasis on freedom of navigation and international law did not disappear. Instead, these frames were joined by more explicit accounts of coercion and by calls for coordinated deterrence through alliances and partnerships.

This development involved three closely related shifts: Maritime access was more firmly anchored in international law; contested conduct was increasingly characterized as coercive and destabilizing; and the proposed response became more explicitly collective. These shifts should not be understood as self-contained chronological stages. Documents from each period frequently combine several frames, and the principal change lies in their relative emphasis and interaction.

Maritime Access and Legal Order

The earliest documents in the corpus already placed freedom of navigation and legal order within the same interpretive framework. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* linked freedom of the seas, open sea lanes, and unimpeded commerce to the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international law. It also described China's construction and militarization of outposts in the South China Sea as endangering trade, threatening the sovereignty of other states, and undermining regional stability. Freedom of navigation was therefore not presented simply as a matter of naval mobility. It was situated within a wider argument about the rules governing regional conduct (The White House, 2017, pp. 46-47).

The 2019 Department of Defense *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* carried this connection into the emerging "free and open Indo-Pacific" framework. Freedom of navigation gave the idea of regional openness practical content by specifying the ability of states to sail, fly, and operate in accordance with international law. The legal-order frame, in turn, supplied the standard against which maritime claims and restrictions could be evaluated. Although analytically distinct, the two frames generally reinforced one another: One identified the activity to be protected, while the other established its normative basis (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

The legal dimension became more explicit in the 2020 statement on the U.S. position regarding maritime claims in the South China Sea. The statement aligned the U.S. position more closely with the 2016 arbitral award and rejected a range of Chinese claims to maritime resources and jurisdiction as unlawful. This marked a shift from general support for international law toward the use of legal rules and adjudication to evaluate particular claims and conduct. It also broadened the focus beyond U.S. navigational rights by emphasizing the sovereign rights of Southeast Asian coastal states (Pompeo, 2020).

This development did not displace freedom of navigation. Rather, it strengthened the connection between operational access and legal legitimacy. Freedom of navigation made the consequences of maritime restrictions

tangible, while the legal-order frame located those restrictions within a broader contest over the rules governing the region. This combination also prepared the ground for later documents to present particular incidents not merely as isolated disputes, but as challenges to regional order.

From Rules-Based Order to Strategic Competition

The security-threat frame did not emerge suddenly after the consolidation of legal-order language. As the 2017 *National Security Strategy* demonstrates, concerns about militarization and regional instability were already present at the beginning of the period. What changed over time was the specificity and prominence of this language. Earlier documents tended to emphasize military construction, capabilities, and their implications for the regional balance. Later statements paid greater attention to recurrent forms of conduct, including coercion, intimidation, obstruction, and the activities of coast guard and maritime militia vessels.

The 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* provides a particularly clear example of this development. It describes Chinese coercion and aggression as especially acute in the Indo-Pacific and connects China's treatment of neighboring states in the East and South China Seas to the erosion of international law and freedom of navigation. The document thus brings several interpretive elements together: It identifies a responsible actor, characterizes the conduct as coercive, specifies the rules being undermined, and presents the consequences as regional rather than merely bilateral (The White House, 2022, pp. 5, 8).

This more behavior-oriented framing is also evident in the 2024 Joint Vision Statement issued by the leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States. The statement combines references to freedom of navigation, UNCLOS, and the 2016 arbitral award with criticism of militarization, unlawful maritime claims, and the coercive use of coast guard and maritime militia vessels. It also characterizes interference with Philippine vessels and resupply operations as dangerous and destabilizing. Legal, operational, and security claims therefore appear within a single account of the dispute (The White House, 2024).

The growing prominence of the security-threat frame altered the diagnostic role of official discourse. The central concern was no longer confined to the legal validity of competing maritime claims; it increasingly included the ways in which particular practices were said to affect regional stability and the ability of smaller states to exercise their rights. International law continued to provide the evaluative standard, but the language of coercion translated legal violations into security risks. In this way, the South China Sea became a concrete setting through which wider concerns about strategic competition could be articulated.

From Strategic Competition to Alliance-Based Deterrence

As coercion became more central to the diagnosis of the problem, alliances and partnerships became more prominent in the proposed response. The 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* placed particular emphasis on building "collective capacity" through a network of alliances, partnerships, and flexible coalitions. It also identified integrated deterrence as a central element of U.S. regional strategy and connected deterrence to interoperability, resilience, and support for states seeking to defend their sovereign rights at sea. Cooperation with allies and partners was therefore presented not merely as diplomatic context, but as a means of responding to coercive conduct (The White House, 2022, pp. 9, 12-13).

The U.S.-Philippines alliance illustrates how this framing was translated into more specific commitments. The 2023 Bilateral Defense Guidelines reaffirmed that an armed attack in the Pacific—including anywhere in the South China Sea—on either country's armed forces, aircraft, or public vessels, including coast guard vessels,

would invoke the mutual defense commitments contained in the 1951 treaty. The guidelines also emphasized interoperability, maritime domain awareness, information sharing, and the development of defense capabilities. These provisions linked developments in the South China Sea directly to alliance credibility and preparedness (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

The 2024 Japan-Philippines-U.S. Joint Vision Statement extended this logic beyond the bilateral alliance. Alongside its references to international law and coercive maritime conduct, the statement called for coast guard cooperation, maritime capacity-building, joint exercises, improved maritime domain awareness, and a trilateral maritime dialogue. The document therefore provides a clear example of frame co-occurrence: Legal order defines the standards at stake, the security-threat frame identifies the challenge, and alliance deterrence specifies the collective response (The White House, 2024).

This framing also changes the position assigned to regional allies and partners. They appear not simply as recipients of U.S. security assistance, but as participants in the production and maintenance of regional order. At the same time, connecting maritime incidents to treaty commitments and deterrence raises their wider strategic significance. The discourse thus legitimizes a more sustained U.S. regional role while incorporating the South China Sea into a networked conception of Indo-Pacific security.

Cumulative Reframing of the South China Sea

The development identified above can be summarized as a change in the relative emphasis and combination of frames rather than a succession of mutually exclusive stages.

Table 2

Frame Layering in U.S. South China Sea Discourse, 2017-2024

Period	Principal shift in emphasis	Recurrent frame configuration	Construction of the South China Sea
2017-2019	Maritime access situated within the free and open Indo-Pacific framework	Freedom of navigation and legal order, with the security-threat frame already present	An open maritime space whose access and governance should remain consistent with international law
2020-2021	More explicit legal evaluation of claims and attribution of responsibility	Legal order more closely connected to the security-threat frame	A test of whether regional rules can constrain unlawful claims and coercive power
2022-2024	Greater emphasis on collective capacity, alliance credibility, and deterrence	All four frames, with security threat and alliance deterrence becoming more prominent	A focal arena for coalition-based efforts to maintain regional order

Notes. The periods indicate shifts in relative emphasis. They do not identify the first appearance of a frame or suggest that any frame operated exclusively during a particular period.

The four frames perform related but distinguishable roles within this discourse. Freedom of navigation identifies the maritime access and mobility at stake. Legal order supplies the standard by which claims and conduct are judged. The security-threat frame attributes responsibility and explains why the conduct matters for regional stability. Alliance deterrence then presents coordinated capacity, credible commitments, and collective action as appropriate responses. Because a single passage may perform several of these functions, their co-occurrence is substantively significant rather than simply a product of overlapping codes.

The comparison across administrations also qualifies the idea of a sharp break between the Trump and Biden periods. The Trump administration institutionalized the Indo-Pacific vocabulary, placed the South China Sea within a more explicitly competitive regional strategy, and sharpened the legal rejection of Chinese maritime claims. The Biden administration retained these elements but embedded them more systematically in alliance

coordination, minilateral cooperation, and integrated deterrence. The principal change therefore lies less in the abandonment of one discourse than in the institutionalization and collective organization of its security implications.

By 2024, U.S. official discourse represented the South China Sea not only as a group of maritime and territorial disputes, but also as a test of whether international law could constrain coercive power, whether regional states could exercise their rights without intimidation, and whether U.S. alliances could sustain a preferred regional order. This transformation did not depend on the disappearance of earlier frames. It resulted from their cumulative combination, through which maritime access, legal legitimacy, security competition, and alliance credibility became increasingly difficult to separate.

Discussion

The preceding analysis points to a broader process of discursive rescaling. Frame layering matters because the four frames do not merely accumulate alongside one another; they form a connected interpretive logic. Freedom of navigation and legal order define the interests and standards at stake. The security-threat frame recasts disputed conduct as a problem of regional stability, while alliance deterrence identifies collective action as the appropriate response. This relationship is analytical rather than strictly chronological, since later documents often bring all four elements together.

The South China Sea as a Regional-Order Test

The central change concerns the relationship between a specific maritime dispute and a wider account of regional order. Strategic-narrative research distinguishes narratives concerned with particular issues from those concerned with the structure of the international system. In U.S. discourse, the South China Sea increasingly connects these two levels. Maritime claims, navigational rights, arbitral decisions, and encounters at sea give concrete form to otherwise abstract ideas about a free and open Indo-Pacific. The regional-order narrative, in turn, gives individual disputes a significance that extends beyond their immediate circumstances. The South China Sea thus operates as an issue through which a broader system narrative is articulated.

This rescaling enlarges the range of actors presented as having a legitimate interest in the dispute. If the South China Sea is understood primarily as a collection of territorial and jurisdictional disagreements, the claimant states occupy the central position. Once it is framed as a test of whether international law can constrain coercive power, the issue is made relevant to a wider group of regional and extra-regional actors. U.S. involvement can then be justified as support for a common maritime order rather than simply as intervention in disputes among other states.

The analysis does not establish that this interpretation is universally shared or accepted. It identifies the justificatory work performed by official discourse: Specific incidents make the regional-order narrative tangible, while that narrative elevates the strategic significance of the incidents themselves.

The Law-Security Nexus

The findings therefore do not support a simple transition from legal language to the language of strategic competition. Legal order remained central because it supplied the standards by which maritime claims and conduct were judged. Freedom of navigation gave those standards an operational dimension by identifying the access and activities said to require protection. When the same conduct was described as coercive, intimidating, or destabilizing, an alleged legal violation was recast as a security problem.

Law and security consequently perform different but complementary functions. Legal language establishes why particular claims or restrictions are considered illegitimate; security language explains why they are said to threaten interests beyond the immediate dispute. The security-threat frame draws normative force from the legal-order frame, while giving legal disagreements greater strategic urgency. This relationship helps explain why later documents could connect individual maritime incidents to wider concerns about China's regional behavior without abandoning references to international law.

The connection is not automatic. Terms such as "unlawful", "coercive", and "destabilizing" are official evaluations rather than neutral descriptions of events. Distinguishing the government's framing from the underlying conduct is therefore essential: The purpose of the analysis is to examine how the texts construct strategic meaning, not to adopt their characterizations as independent findings.

Bringing legal and security language together may also narrow the range of interpretations made available by official discourse. Negotiation, adjudication, and crisis management remain present, but they are increasingly situated within a larger narrative of strategic competition. The corpus cannot show whether this framing displaced diplomatic or legal approaches in policy practice. It does show how those approaches were assigned meaning within an increasingly security-oriented account of regional order.

Alliance Networks and Strategic Legitimation

The alliance-deterrence frame completes this interpretive logic by specifying how the identified challenge should be addressed. As the findings in Section 4 demonstrate, later documents increasingly connect South China Sea issues to collective capacity, interoperability, maritime domain awareness, capacity-building, and deterrence. These references move the proposed response beyond diplomatic protest or unilateral operations and locate it within a wider network of alliances and partnerships.

Alliance language also performs a justificatory function. By emphasizing joint statements, coordinated activities, and partner capabilities, U.S. discourse presents regional order as something maintained collectively. Allies and partners are positioned as participants in the response rather than passive recipients of American protection. This framing allows the U.S. regional role to appear embedded in a broader undertaking supported by other states.

Yet the language of collective action should not be taken as evidence that all participants exercise equal influence over the definition of threats or the selection of responses. Official discourse may recognize the agency of regional partners while still organizing that agency within a strategic framework largely articulated by the United States. The alliance-deterrence frame therefore distributes legitimacy as well as responsibility: It broadens the apparent basis of U.S. engagement, but it also incorporates local disputes into a U.S.-centered account of regional security.

The comparison between the Trump and Biden administrations reinforces this interpretation. The Trump administration consolidated the Indo-Pacific vocabulary, placed the South China Sea more firmly within strategic competition, and sharpened the legal rejection of Chinese maritime claims. The Biden administration retained these premises but connected them more systematically to alliance coordination, minilateral cooperation, and integrated deterrence. The principal change lay in the organization of the response rather than in the displacement of its legal and normative foundations.

Frame layering thus explains how a strategic narrative can remain recognizable while acquiring new meanings. Freedom of navigation and legal order continued to anchor U.S. discourse, but coercion and alliance

deterrence changed what was presented as being at stake and how the United States proposed to respond. The South China Sea became a setting in which maritime access, legal legitimacy, strategic threat, and alliance credibility could be articulated as parts of the same regional-order narrative.

Conclusion

This article examined how U.S. official discourse constructed the South China Sea within the Indo-Pacific strategic framework between 2017 and 2024. Drawing on a hybrid deductive-inductive qualitative framing analysis, it identified a pattern of frame layering rather than linear replacement. Freedom of navigation and legal order remained foundational, while security threat and alliance deterrence became more prominent and increasingly intertwined with the earlier frames.

This layering expanded the strategic meaning assigned to the South China Sea. Maritime access and legal claims remained important, but the issue also came to signify a wider contest over regional order, coercion, and alliance credibility. The comparison across administrations points to continuity as well as change: The Trump administration consolidated a more competitive Indo-Pacific discourse and sharpened the legal rejection of Chinese maritime claims, while the Biden administration embedded these elements more systematically in alliance coordination, minilateral cooperation, and integrated deterrence. The principal shift therefore lay in the widening and collective organization of the discourse rather than in the abandonment of its earlier foundations.

These findings show how a geographically bounded dispute can support a broader strategic narrative. They also demonstrate that discursive change may occur through the accumulation and recombination of frames, not simply through the substitution of one interpretation for another. At the same time, connecting maritime disputes to coercion, deterrence, and alliance credibility may encourage legal and diplomatic questions to be interpreted through the wider lens of strategic rivalry. This is a conclusion about public meaning-making, not evidence that discourse directly determines policy outcomes.

The study is limited to a purposive corpus of publicly available English-language texts and does not capture internal deliberations, non-English communication, or regional reception. Its findings are also shaped by interpretive coding decisions. Future research could compare U.S. framing with Chinese, Southeast Asian, and ASEAN narratives and examine how regional audiences accept, modify, or contest these frames. Within these limits, the article shows that the South China Sea's place in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is constructed through the interaction of legal, operational, security, and alliance-based meanings rather than the dominance of any single frame.

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