

# Battle for the sea: the Philippines, South China Sea and the USA foreign policy Gamble

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## Abstract

One of the most strategically important maritime areas in the world (the South China Sea) has been home to increasingly bold territorial clashes between China, the Philippines, and Southeast Asian countries. In this article I examine the South China Sea geopolitics with emphasis on the Philippines turning into a strategic asset, Chinese aggressive encroaching, and the US foreign policies on protecting interests. Using perspectives from Realist theories (Offensive, Defensive) and the ideas of Balance of Power and Balance of Threat, the article provides a detailed explanation of the rationale for the behavior of these states. The article also discusses the larger ramifications of these tensions for regional and global security and policy, painting a full picture of the current geopolitical dynamic in the South China Sea.

**Keywords:** maritime, Territorial Clashes, Geopolitical, South China Sea, Realist Theories

## Introduction

The South China Sea is much more than just a body of water; it is a geopolitical flashpoint with significant global implications. It is an important route for global trade, with around \$5 trillion in world trade passing through every year. In addition, its seabed contains large oil and natural gas deposits, which are an important energy resource for many of the largest economies in the world. The economic factor, combined with the strategic nature of the sea makes the South China sea the focal point for territorial disputes especially in between China, Philippines and other countries within South East Asia. Related: Why Shrimp Farms Are Ruining Two Nations This Is Your Area at the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal — natural violent storm fishing highlighted zones that reflect advantage statements among China and its neighbors in the South China Sea, consisting of the

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Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. The regional tensions are exacerbated by China's sweeping territorial claim symbolized by a "nine-dash line," which causes diplomatic and military confrontations among the riparian regions. Even though the US is not a party to the dispute, it also has considerable interests in the region. All of these interests are motivated by alliance obligations, ensuring the right to free passage in international waterways, and broader geopolitical concerns regarding the rise of China as a global super-power. It also attempts to utilize Realist theories to identify the dynamics of this geopolitical struggle, the ulterior motives of China, the Philippines, and the United States, and the implications of their actions on regional and global security.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **❖ Realism and Its Variants**

Even today, realism continues to be one of the prevalent theoretical perspectives in international relations. At its core, Realism is built on the belief that the international system is anarchic and that states, driven by their national interests, act primarily to ensure their survival and enhance their power (Morgenthau, 19478).

### **❖ Realism in International Relations**

Realism posits that states are the primary actors in international politics, and their behavior is driven by the need to ensure their survival in a competitive and often hostile international system. As such, states rely on their own military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities to safeguard their interests, leading to competition and conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001) For Realists, the primary goal of states is power—whether military, economic, or diplomatic. This power is necessary not only for survival but also for achieving national objectives. In this context, the South China Sea dispute reflects broader Realist themes of power projection, territorial control, and strategic advantage (Kaplan, 2014).

### **❖ Offensive Realism**

Offensive Realism, as articulated by John Mearsheimer, posits that states are inherently power-maximizing and seek to dominate their regional environments. In this theory, states are constantly striving to maximize their power to ensure their security. Mearsheimer argues that great powers, particularly, are always looking to secure regional hegemony to dominate and control their strategic surroundings (Mearsheimer, 2001). In the South China Sea, China's assertive actions, such as the

construction of artificial islands, military installations, and the deployment of advanced weaponry, align with the tenets of Offensive Realism. The actions of China in the region are a strategic pivot towards the Indo-pacific where control over maritime routes, and energy resources is inevitable (Toshi Yoshihara & James R. Holmes, 2018). These activities can also be understood as China's attempts to establish hegemony in the region, enhancing its abilities and securing its position in relation to regional competition.

#### ❖ **Defensive Realism**

In contrast to Offensive Realism, Defense Realism states (as Kenneth Waltz has explained) that states seek only enough power to be secure and do not seek to maximize power if doing so would threaten war. Defensive Realism argues that states act generally cautiously and focus on the preservation of balancing power against instability and wars (Waltz, 1979). The Philippines, on the other side, which is located nearer to China, has been more cautious on its territorial claims and responses to strategic postures. Instead of promoting regional hegemony, the Philippines has striven for sovereignty and regional stability. This approach is more defensive, properly putting the Philippines in a position that it could win without making too much of a fuss, representing how it took legal action through the Permanent Court of Arbitration and is focusing on advancing its defensive ties with the United States (Batongbacal, 2015).

#### ❖ **Balance of Power**

According to the theory of Balance of Power, states seek alignments with others as a counter to a threat (Morgenthau, Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace, 1948). The US engagement in the South China Sea arrange re-read like exert effort to balance the scale against China's increasing military expansion and land-based desires. In particular, the United States is focused on keeping a regional power balance so that no nation can become a challenger to its supreme standing in the region, as displayed by its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), security ties with the Philippines, and wider security obligations to the Indo-Pacific (Green 2017).

#### ❖ **Balance of Threat**

The Balance of Threat theory, which was created by Stephen Walt, is simply an extension of the Balance of Power but instead the emphasis is on the threat states pose to each other. From this perspective, states balance not only against power but

also the intentions and behavior of other states (Walt). The rise of China has nearly always been coupled with perceptions of an increasingly threatening China among the United States and its allies, due in large part to China strengthening its military and advancing territorial competition in the South China Sea.

The United States' strategic response—through FONOPs, military alliances, and diplomatic efforts—can be understood as a direct reaction to China's perceived threat to the balance of power in the region (Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, 2017).

## **The Philippines' Strategic Position and Actions**

### **❖ Geopolitical Significance**

The Philippines' location at the crossroads of the Pacific and Indian Oceans makes it a strategically important player in regional geopolitics. It is situated close to vital maritime routes that facilitate global trade, and its proximity to contested territories in the South China Sea places it at the epicenter of regional security concerns (Batongbacal, *The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereignty and International Law*, 2015); (Storey, 2017).

The Philippines is also an important player in the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture. The region, which includes some of the world's largest economies—China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States—is one of the most geopolitically contested areas in the world (Green, 2017). Thus, the Philippines' position gives it significant strategic leverage, but it also places it at risk of becoming a battleground for competing great power interests (Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*).

### **❖ Territorial Claims and Legal Actions**

The Philippines asserts its territorial claims in the South China Sea, particularly over the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Sea, 1982). Recognizing the strategic importance of international law, the Philippines took legal action against China in 2013 by filing a case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), challenging the validity of China's "nine-dash line" claims (Arbitration, 2016).

In 2016, the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, stating that China's claims had no legal basis under UNCLOS. This ruling was a significant victory for the Philippines

and the broader international community that supports the rule of law in maritime disputes (Beckman, 2017). However, China has refused to accept the ruling and continues its activities in the disputed areas, complicating the diplomatic situation (Thayer, 2017).

#### ❖ **Diplomatic and Military Concerns**

With this context, the Philippines under President Bongbong Marcos has been doing its best to bolster its alliances with its allies, especially the US, against China. This also include the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with its increased rotational presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines in support of joint exercises, pre-positioning of equipment, and enhanced interoperability (Parameswaran, Prashanth, Renato Cruz De Castro, 2016, 2017).

Alongside these bilateral initiatives, the Philippines had sought broader diplomatic channels to assert its interests in the South China Sea, engaging in multilateral forums such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit. While they have yet to produce a clear resolution of the territorial disputes, these forums can provide more opportunities for dialogue and cooperation (Kanishka Busbarat, Ralf Emmers, 2016, 2017).

### **China's Assertive Policies in the South China Sea**

#### ❖ **Expansion of Territorial Claims**

China has based its territorial claims in the South China Sea on its own "nine-dash line", which stretches across almost the entirety of the sea and overlaps the territorial claims of Australia, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines (Bill Hayton, 2014; Zhengyu Gao & Bing Jia, 2013). Such overlapping claims have thus resulted in escalating tensions and a complex regional security dilemma.

This muscular assertiveness has involved the building of artificial islands, construction of military facilities, and militarization of features that are widely perceived as an attempt to dominate critical sea lanes and augment regional hegemony (Toshi Yoshihara & James R. Holmes, 2018).

#### ❖ **Military Build-Up and Strategic Objectives**

Surface-to-air missiles, radar systems and fighter jets have been stationed on China-administrated land features such as Fiery Cross Reef and Mischief Reef as part of its military build-up in the South China Sea. They have built airstrips, ports, and

logistics centers to maintain a permanent military presence ((U.S.), 2020). These were to help to increase China's ability of projection of power and to guarantee the strategic control of key maritime chokepoints (James R. Holmes & Toshi Yoshihara, 2008).

From a strategic perspective, China's actions are aimed at securing vital energy and fishing resources, ensuring freedom of navigation for its own trade, and reinforcing its position in the Indo-Pacific amid competition with the United States. The South China Sea also plays a vital role in the maritime leg of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Rolland, 2017).

#### ❖ Reactions from Regional and Global Actors

China's assertive policies have prompted reactions from regional neighbors and global actors. The United States has conducted regular Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's maritime claims and affirm international maritime rights under UNCLOS (Haddick, 2014). ASEAN has repeatedly emphasized peaceful resolution and dialogue, though its consensus-based structure has limited its ability to apply unified pressure on China (Emmers, 2010).

The growing tension has led to increased military cooperation among Southeast Asian countries and external powers, including joint exercises and defense agreements aimed at countering China's rising influence (Reilly, 2013).

### The United States' Foreign Policy and Strategic Interests

#### ❖ Commitment to Regional Stability

The United States has long been committed to ensuring peace and stability in the South China Sea, given its broader strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. As a global power with strategic alliances with countries like the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, the U.S. seeks to prevent any single power from gaining control over the region's critical maritime trade routes (Green, 2017). The U.S. approach is driven by the belief that stability in the South China Sea is essential for global trade and regional security (Mastro, 2019).

The U.S. also aims to preserve the international order based on respect for international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

(UNCLOS), which underpins its opposition to China's expansive territorial claims (Kraska, 2011). Although the U.S. has not ratified UNCLOS, it adheres to its provisions as customary international law and uses them to legitimize its maritime policies (Roach, 2014). The United States has reaffirmed its commitment to its allies—particularly the Philippines—through statements and policy actions emphasizing that threats to their security will be met with a firm response (Patrick M. Cronin & Robert E. Neuhard, 2016).

#### ❖ **Freedom of Navigation Operations**

One of the primary tools the United States uses to assert its presence in the South China Sea is its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). These operations involve U.S. Navy vessels sailing through disputed waters to challenge excessive maritime claims and affirm the principle of freedom of navigation (James Kraska & Raul Pedrozo, 2013). FONOPs serve as a direct counter to China's territorial claims, which the U.S. views as inconsistent with international law under UNCLOS (Bateman, 2016).

Since 2015, the U.S. has conducted regular FONOPs in the South China Sea, often in direct response to China's activities on artificial islands and militarized reefs. These operations are intended not only to challenge China's maritime assertions but also to demonstrate the U.S.'s commitment to maintaining a rules-based international order and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of maritime commerce (O'Rourke, 2020).

#### ❖ **Military Alliances and Partnerships**

The United States' strategy in the South China Sea is closely linked to its military alliances in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. has longstanding security arrangements with countries such as the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, which provide it with strategic access and enable joint military planning, exercises, and intelligence sharing (Cha, 2016).

In the case of the Philippines, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), signed in 2014, allows for an increased rotational presence of U.S. military personnel and pre-positioned defense equipment on Philippine bases (Castro, 2017). This agreement bolsters Philippine defense capabilities and serves as a deterrent against Chinese aggression in disputed waters. Similarly, the U.S. has intensified military exercises with Japan and Australia under trilateral and multilateral formats,

signaling a coordinated effort to uphold regional security and counterbalance China's growing influence (William Tow & Brendan Taylor, 2010).

### ❖ Diplomatic Engagement

Alongside its military strategy, the United States has emphasized diplomacy in addressing the South China Sea disputes. It has consistently advocated for peaceful resolutions to maritime conflicts, urging all parties to adhere to international law and avoid coercive behavior (Glaser, 2012). The U.S. supports multilateral dialogue through ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, emphasizing diplomacy and legal norms over unilateral actions (Goh, 2016).

After the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in favor of the Philippines, Washington strongly endorsed the decision and encouraged China to comply, highlighting that the legal ruling reinforces norms critical to the peaceful resolution of disputes (Beckman, 2017). U.S. diplomatic efforts are part of a broader commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, a vision promoting sovereign equality, rule of law, and regional cooperation (Pompeo, 2019).

## Implications for Regional and Global Security

### ❖ Escalation Risks

The ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea present significant risks of military conflict, especially as multiple military actors are involved in the region. The presence of advanced weaponry, artificial islands, and military bases on disputed features increases the chances of accidental confrontations. Misunderstandings or provocative actions could lead to direct military clashes, drawing in not only the claimant states but also external powers like the United States. High-profile incidents, such as naval vessels conducting near-miss maneuvers, between China and the US in the South China Sea in recent years serve as a reminder of the danger of escalation. In addition to that, the regional importance makes it very sensitive, where local clash may expand to a wider regional or global conflict.

### ❖ Economic Consequences

The South China Sea is one of the jugular veins of the world economy. This is the route of one of the world's most important maritime trade routes and the short line

disruption in the route can have dire consequences for the global supply chain right from the energy sector to the shipping industry.

It is heaving with economic competition, as it also has many natural resources, oil, natural gas, and fisheries. A disruption to trade because of conflict or the enforcement of restrictive policies could have crippling effects on the international economy. Any significant escalation in the South China Sea would result in oil and gas supply disruption, especially for countries that depend on the South China Sea heavily for oil and gas imports. As a result, it could lead to rising energy prices, shortages of supply and a slowdown in global economic growth. The South China Sea also gives critical access to many Southeast Asian nations to the fisheries that are so vital to food security. If regional stability were to break down, the continued depletion of resources and destruction of a viable environment would further challenge already marginal economies and societies.

Environmental Impact Militarization of the South China Sea has caused not only economic and security risks but also serious environmental harm. The construction of artificial islands and military installations has led to coral reef destruction, marine ecosystem degradation, and biodiversity loss in China. The consequences are dire, not only for the ecosystems of the region, but involve the lives of millions of people who rely on the sea for their food and income. An environmental impact that the long-standing battle in the South China Sea has been causing is aggravated by the upcoming extraction of resources like oil and gas drilling [Ruggeri, 2019]. The race to mine these materials, however, may only lead to further destruction of the ocean environment and heightened controversy between the competing countries.

## **Conclusion**

Out of all the international relations, the highly contentious South China Sea remains one of the most crucial regions. The region is a geopolitical hotspot where overlapping territorial claims, strategic interests and competing nationalisms intersect. Offense/Defense balance theories of Realism, both Offensive and Defensive Realism and Balance of Power and Balance of Threat type of concepts explain important factors about why China, why Philippines, and why the US do the actions they did. China's actions reveal a determination to gain regional domination while safeguarding critical maritime interests. In contrast, the Philippines has been trying to safeguard its sovereignty and regional stability

without further increasing tensions. The role of the United States emphasizes its adherence to international norms, freedom of navigation in the region, and support for regional allies. All stakeholders should, in the future, sit down for constructive talks, abide by international law, and peacefully solve South China Sea conflicts. Stability in the region is essential to the nations involved, and global peace and economic stability. The world needs unity to do away with

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