



## China's Role in South China Sea: Analyzing the American Response (2017-2022)

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### Abstract:

The South China Sea is a geopolitically, strategically, and economically significant region marked by territorial disputes, vital trade routes, and abundant resources. China's assertive actions and rapid growth have heightened tensions, drawing the US into the dispute. The US has become more involved due to China's assertive actions and rapid economic growth. This research explores factors and changing tactics influencing the conflict by discussing and analyzing the complex nature of the South China Sea, its historical context, and the US's changing role in it. The US strategy in the region and China's role as a growing regional power are essential concerns that must be addressed. China's assertiveness has raised global concern, which could affect trade routes and regional stability. This study thoroughly examines this crucial geopolitical hotspot and sheds light on the shifting dynamics.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, China and US, geopolitical and strategic importance, conflict, regional trade, stability

### INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea, a vital strategic maritime region pulsating with immense geopolitical and economic significance, is marked by a complex interplay of factors. Conflicting territorial claims, critical trade routes, and abundant natural resources converge in this vast expanse, estimated to be a transit point for roughly one-third of global maritime trade. This vast maritime expanse has become one of the most hotly contested regions on the global stage, simmering with historical grievances, strategic interests, and rising tensions. China's assertive actions, aptly described as "boasting clashes" in the area have fueled the fire (Chang, 2020). Rapid economic growth and military modernization initiatives have bolstered its presence, consolidating its position and intensifying competition for vital marine resources. However, the United States, a global superpower with deep-seated interests in the Asia-Pacific, has been drawn deeper into the fray. Driven by its commitment to international law and the principle of freedom of navigation (Southgate, 2019), the US finds itself locked in a complex competition with China for global influence, adding another layer of complexity to the dispute.

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This dynamic has triggered occasional clashes between the US, Vietnam, and China, particularly as China's assertive foreign policy casts a long shadow over the region. Concerns over the distribution of natural resources, international trade, and China's burgeoning military dominance have become central to the dispute. Artificial island construction, military installations, and territorial claims are the focal points of this contention. The study delves into the intricate web of the South China Sea dispute, dissecting its historical context and the evolving role of the US. By illuminating the key factors fueling the conflict and the shifting changing tactics employed by the US, this research aims to shed light on this critical geopolitical flashpoint.

China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have thrust the region into the spotlight of international concern. Competing territorial claims and escalating tensions have the potential to destabilise the region and disrupt vital trade routes. This study delves into the intricacies of this flashpoint, analyzing China's actions and the diverse responses from the US to illuminate the evolving dynamics at play. The South China Sea pulsates as a critical maritime artery for global trade, rendering an understanding of its internal dynamics imperative. China's burgeoning influence and assertive posture have stoked concerns about sovereignty, access to vital resources, and regional security. Policymakers and the global community must grasp the nuances of China's involvement in the South China Sea and how the US navigates handled these challenges.

The study aims to explore China's assertive actions in the South China Sea. Also It seeks to analyze the multifaceted American response to China's activities. The study has the following research questions; What is China's assertive policy in the South China Sea? How has the American approach in the South China Sea reacted to China's regional actions?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

China's expanding territorial claims and assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, posing a potential threat to US interests, the US has adopted a multi-pronged approach to counter China's positions. Scholars have extensively analyzed this complex dispute. Panda Highlight: Is President Xi Jinping's China transforming into a "new power"? China's remarkable progress, particularly since 2015, suggests that it is actively evolving into a powerful force. Domestic and external reforms and initiatives signal a shift towards a future where Beijing strengthens its internal foundation and strategically positions itself for greater regional and international influence. The current leadership's vision further solidifies this ambition. President Xi, in his New Year's Eve address, emphasized that 2016 marks the beginning of a critical phase in China's national endeavour to achieve a moderately prosperous society (Panda, 2016). The author highlights estimates suggesting the South China Sea holds substantial oil and natural gas reserves, potentially offering significant economic benefits to regional countries. However, China's territorial claims and use of force have hampered the Philippines' efforts to explore and exploit these resources within its exclusive economic zone, creating a complex and tense situation (Guoqiang, 2015).

Beijing employs diverse economic strategies to bolster its presence in the South China Sea. These tactics encompass cooperative economic projects targeting less affluent nations and coercive measures directed at more developed ones. Notably, after the Philippines enacted a law in 2009 aligning its territory with UNCLOS principles and challenging China's claims to Huangyan Island

and the Nansha Islands, China retaliated with a significant 46% decline in imports of Philippine goods (Mastro, 2021).

The author highlights rising South China Sea tensions due to maritime disputes among neighbouring states. China's construction of artificial islands, particularly in the Spratly chain, has further escalated these tensions. Concerns about this activity have been voiced by China's neighbors and non-regional actors like the United States. These concerns primarily focus on the potential ramifications of China controlling these islands, including impacts on resource distribution, global trade, and regional military power (Kohl, 2018). The Obama administration expressed growing concern over China's assertiveness, shaping its strategy around three key pillars. Politically, Washington actively encouraged claimant states to cooperate in reducing internal hostilities. Diplomatically, the US aimed to build a coalition of concerned international players willing to uphold the rules-based order and counter Chinese assertiveness perceived as a threat. Militarily, the administration pursued independent initiatives while bolstering the military capabilities of Southeast Asian nations (Parameswaran, 2016).

This study emphasizes the need for a nuanced analysis of the US response to China's actions in the South China Sea between 2017 and 2022. While existing literature delves into the broader dispute, this research focuses on this specific period to comprehensively examine the evolving dynamics. It delves into how the US's strategies and policies have adapted in response to China's assertiveness.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In analyzing international relations, particularly the complex dynamics of the South China Sea, neo-realism remains a prominent theoretical framework. Its focus on power, the balance of power, and the self-help nature of states offers valuable insights into how states behave within the ever-shifting international system. Developed by Kenneth Waltz in the late 1970s, neorealism, builds upon the realist school of thought. It posits that global power structures, within the framework of the anarchic international system, shape state conduct (Pashakhanlou, 2009). It posits that states operating within a competitive and anarchic international system are primarily driven by the pursuit of influence and security. This inherent quest for power, coupled with the absence of a central authority (self-help system), explains why conflict is prevalent and why the United States, as the current dominant power, plays a crucial role in shaping international dynamics.

The rise of China as a significant regional and global power has alarmed both the US and its neighbors. This power shift has triggered efforts by other nations, through alliances, military strategies, or diplomatic initiatives, to counterbalance China's growing influence. In the South China Sea, states' actions are primarily driven by the need to secure access to vital maritime routes, resources, and economic interests. This inherent quest for security can lead to competition and conflict.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research design, deeming it well-suited for examining the nuances of the US response to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. This approach facilitates an in-depth analysis of policy decisions, initiatives, and their associated effects. Data collection primarily draws from documented sources, encompassing both official documents (press releases, etc.) and

secondary materials like academic publications (books, journals, articles) and media reports (magazines, newspapers). This dual approach ensures a comprehensive investigation of the issue.

### **SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE**

The South China Sea dispute, simmering since the 1970s, is a multifaceted and protracted maritime sovereignty conflict involving multiple parties. Key players include China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian nations like Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam. The US also figures prominently due to its security interests in the region. Tensions around these resource-rich waters have fluctuated over the years, occasionally flaring into skirmishes. Several factors have exacerbated these tensions. Firstly, China's phenomenal economic rise has fueled extensive military modernization, bolstering its capabilities in the South China Sea. As China asserts itself as a global power, it has solidified its position in the region, intensifying competition for vital marine resources (Snyder, 1996).

China's approach to territorial claims in the South China Sea is characterized by strategic ambiguity. While it hasn't formally articulated the precise extent of its demands, its actions often suggest aspirations to control the entire sea. This stance is exemplified by the infamous nine-dashed-line map, which encompasses vast swathes of the region. However, China has consistently refrained from offering detailed justifications or concrete legal arguments to substantiate its claims, opting instead for a mix of historical assertions and implicit actions.

The United States, as a global power, has played a significant role in shaping the South China Sea dispute. Its involvement stems from several factors: strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region, a commitment to upholding international law and freedom of navigation, and concerns about China's expansive territorial claims. This engagement has undoubtedly complicated the issue, fueling competition between the two superpowers on the international scene (Southgate, 2019). Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China has indeed adopted a more assertive foreign policy, particularly in the South China Sea. This assertiveness, characterized by island reclamation, militarization, and increased patrols, has undoubtedly heightened tensions in the region. Consequently, the South China Sea has emerged as one of the world's most volatile maritime flashpoints. While armed confrontations between China and various claimants like Vietnam, the Philippines, and even the US have occurred, these have thankfully remained limited in scale and intensity.

### **Claims of Regional States Over South China Sea**

#### ***China***

China's economic and military rise significantly shapes the South China Sea dispute. Its fastest-growing economy, powerful merchant fleet, and rapidly developing navy fuel its maritime interests. Notably, China claims extensive territory based on historical declarations (symbolized by the contentious nine-dash line encircling 90% of the sea), though these claims face legal challenges under UNCLOS and from the international community (Sukma, et. al. 2015).

Adding to the tension, China has built artificial islands on submerged reefs (unrecognized for establishing claims under UNCLOS) and uses them as military supply depots, raising concerns for neighboring claimant countries. Overall, China's territorial expansion and historical claims remain contentious global issues impacting regional stability and international law (Dung, 2015).

### **Other Claimants**

In the South China Sea, the Philippines has established control over nine islands and regularly patrols Irwing Reef. Claiming legitimate sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, the Philippines cites its proximity to these islands as part of its contiguous zone, in line with UNCLOS regulations (Rowan, 2005). Additionally, these islands are part of the contiguous zone of the major islands of the Philippines, this claim is supported by UNCLOS regulations. Additionally, the Philippines' argues that its historical actions, including post World War II rediscovery and settlements, strengthen its claims (Elleman, et. al., 2013). Taiwan asserts sovereignty over four island groups in the South China Sea: Spratly, Paracel, Macclesfield Bank, and Pratas (Rowan, 2005). Despite controlling only Itu Aba, Taiwan historically claimed the entire Spratly archipelago. Both China and Taiwan base their claims on historical rights dating back to their political separation in 1949. However, Taiwan's military presence in Itu Aba has been contested since the 1970s.

Vietnam also claims the Spratly Islands as part of its Khanh Hoa Province and disputes China's occupation of the Paracel Islands since 1976. Vietnam also claims sovereignty over them. Both countries have engaged in artificial island construction to *bolster their claims* in the disputed region.

Distinct from historical claims, Malaysia asserts its rights based on resource extraction within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Though China and Vietnam contest these claims, Malaysia maintains a military presence on six reefs, including Swallow Reef, and exercises control over five others (Roach & McDevitt, 2014). Brunei, a less active participant, shares overlapping EEZs with China, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the Philippines (Dolven, et. al., 2014). While refraining from forceful measures or artificial island construction, Brunei's claims on Louisa Reef and Rifleman Bank clash with China's expansive nine-dash line.

Indonesia's overlapping maritime borders with China and Vietnam drew it into the conflict, with accusations of Chinese encroachment on its EEZ further heightening tensions (Hyer, 2015). The issue is further complicated by seabed limit agreements between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, which add another layer of complexity to China's nine-dash line claim.

### **China's Assertive Actions in The Sea**

China's assertive actions in the South China Sea (SCS) have emerged as a significant concern in the current security landscape. stands out as a major problem. These actions, particularly its expansive and contested territorial claims, construction of artificial islands with military installations, and increased military presence, pose risks to the region's stability and international law. Additionally, the escalating geopolitical competition between China and the US the situation even more challenging. Following are the major actions taken by the People's Republic of China.

### **Constructions of Artificial Islands**

China's construction of artificial islands, particularly within the Spratly Islands, has significantly escalated tensions in the South China Sea. made the issue even more problematic. This move has alarmed both regional neighbors and external powers like the US. Concerns surround potential impacts on resource distribution, global trade, and regional military balance if China exerts control over these islands. China has built seven such islands in the past four years, primarily through land reclamation on existing reefs. These islands, including Fiery Cross Reef, now boast infrastructure

like ports, buildings, and military facilities. This strategy aims to strengthen China's territorial claims in the strategically crucial South China Sea. China has built seven artificial islands in the South China Sea over the past four years, primarily through land reclamation on existing reefs. Fiery Cross Reef stands out, equipped with ports, buildings, and military facilities. This act strengthens China's territorial claims in this strategically crucial region. Fiery Cross Reef's land reclamation project focuses on building an airstrip potentially reaching 3,000 meters in length, accommodating most of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft (Meick, 2014). This airstrip could support short-duration reconnaissance missions, patrols over China's claimed territories, and potentially defend PLA Navy operations in the region.

Mischief Reef stands as a major point of contention in the South China Sea disputes. China's construction and military fortification of nearby artificial islands has further fueled tensions. On Mischief Reef itself, China has established runways, military outposts, and other infrastructure. China's expansive territorial claims, particularly those encompassing Mischief Reef and outlined by the contested "nine-dash line," were challenged by the Philippines in 2016 through international arbitration. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague invalidated China's claim to Mischief Reef in its ruling (Mustafa, 2020). However, China has disregarded this decision and continues its activities in the region.

Subi Island stands out as another critical piece in China's island-building strategy. The Asia Maritime Initiative (AMTI) of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington reports that China reclaimed 976 acres on Subi alone. Subsequent verification by Philippine authorities confirmed its transformation into a military installation equipped with a helipad and housing for up to 200 troops. AMTI further emphasizes Subi's importance by highlighting the presence of several important structures there (Yang, 2020). Cuarteron Reef, on the western edge of the Spratly, has also witnessed substantial land reclamation efforts. AMTI estimates China reclaimed roughly 231,100 square metres, or 58 acres of the reef accompanied by rapid and extensive development. There are reportedly five potential communication antennas, two helipads, a large multilevel military installation, satellite communication equipment, additional support buildings under construction, radar facilities, and potential gun or missile emplacements. These developments underscore Cuarteron Reef's strategic significance in the region (Macias, 2016).

Gaven Reef, just 30 km southwest of Taiwan's Taiping Island, has witnessed a concerning rise in China's military presence. This growing buildup, if unchecked, might be used as a tactical base for targeting Taiwanese military installations in the South China Sea. Taiwanese media reports of Chinese personnel's active construction of new facilities and infrastructure expansion (DeAeth, 2019). Johnson South Reef, strategically located, is another flashpoint due to a territorial dispute. China has constructed airstrips, naval installations, and other military facilities on this reclaimed island, drawing strong opposition from neighboring countries and the international community (Brimelow, 2022).

China has made significant attempts to reclaim land on Hughes Reef, a submerged reef in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, transforming it into an artificial island complete with military installations. These actions, perceived as incursions by other claimant governments, have heightened tensions in the area.



China's island-building aims to bolster its offensive capabilities, including deploying bombers, fighter jets, and missiles. These installations threaten all nations operating in the vicinity, encompassing international airspace and maritime. Thus, China's assertive behavior carries regional and global implications, particularly for the US.

### **US Interest in the South China Sea**

The United States has remained neutral regarding territorial claims in the South China Sea dispute while voicing serious concerns about China's increasing military build-up and assertiveness in the region. The United States prioritizes two critical interests in the South China Sea: open access and regional stability. Firstly, maintaining unrestricted access to the region's waters is paramount. This vital waterway is the cornerstone of the regional economies, heavily reliant on domestic and international trade. Secondly, maintaining stability and peace across Southeast Asia aligns with US interests, promoting cooperation and preventing conflict. US access facilitates its military projection throughout East Asia, with numerous vessels traversing the area *enroute* to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.

The United States has interests in the South China Sea beyond concerns regarding access and stability. These include honoring its obligations to regional allies while avoiding direct involvement in their specific territorial conflicts. While maritime disputes in East Asia represent only one aspect of this relationship, maintaining a stable and cooperative relationship with China remains another fundamental US interest. Finally, the US seeks to stay impartial on disputed land features' sovereignty.

### **American Response to China's Actions**

The United States closely monitors China's activities in the South China Sea, responding through a multifaceted approach. This approach prioritizes upholding international law, ensuring freedom of navigation, and supporting regional allies. Here are several measures taken by the US to address China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea:

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

To counter China's expansive claims in the contested South China Sea, the United States conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). These operations uphold international law, challenge China's excessive maritime claims and promote a rules-based system of governance. FONOPs also underscores the importance of peaceful dispute resolution and exert political and diplomatic pressure on China. Furthermore, these actions are integral to a broader US strategy safeguarding its regional interests. Beyond upholding international law, they advance US national security and economic goals by securing free access to vital maritime routes and maintaining regional stability.

#### **UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**

In 1982, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea emerged, setting forth a comprehensive legal framework for governing all uses of the world's oceans and their resources. This framework establishes a global regime of law and order for the seas and oceans.

The territorial sea, stretching 12 nautical miles offshore, is a nation's sovereign territory, encompassing airspace and seabed. Beyond lies the contiguous zone, another 12 nautical miles considered international waters where states can enforce specific laws. Finally, encompassing both

zones, the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extends 200 nautical miles from the coast granting states exclusive rights to resource exploration and exploitation.

### **South China Sea as a Focus of Freedom of navigations**

Freedom of Navigation Operations involve actions by U.S. naval and air forces to uphold internationally recognized rights and freedoms in the South China Sea, explicitly contesting excessive maritime claims by various claimant countries. These claims often restrict vital international shipping lanes crucial for trade between Asia, Europe, Africa, and America. Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam all have overlapping claims, making the region a hotspot for territorial conflicts. FONOPs target specific claims deemed excessive, and the United States exercises its right to freedom of navigation as a protest against these restrictions. Claimant countries' assertive actions, like China's artificial island construction, further necessitate these operations.

### **US strategy towards the South China Sea during the Trump Administration**

The Obama administration adopted a comprehensive approach, striving for objectivity in specific cases while upholding commercial and navigational rights. Obama's strategy failed to prevent the People's Republic of China (PRC) from building bases on disputed islands, demonstrating its military might, and applying diplomatic pressure in bilateral relations, even as conflicts remained contained (McDevitt, 2015). By 2017, with Xi Jinping firmly in power and China's assertiveness rising, the Trump administration adopted a more forceful approach. While trade remained the public's primary concern, with trade policies, the strategic importance of the South China Sea rose under Trump era.

He ramped up public pressure and diplomatic engagement, deploying economic sanctions more frequently. These actions bolstered regional claimants like Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. However, depending solely on verbal support without military action raised doubt about the United States' commitment to its allies (Williams, 2020). For their part, claimants yearned for decisive US action before China solidified its dominance (Brands, & Cooper, 2018).

Trump's 2020 declassified Indo-Pacific Strategy, championing a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)," shed light on his competitive approach towards China in the region (Chang, 2020). This strategy focused on several key pillars (1) conducting overflights and Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea (Kirklin, 2020); (2) imposing economic sanctions on PRC officials linked to assertive actions; and (3) publicly criticizing and holding the PRC accountable for its actions in the South China Sea (Zhen, 2019); (4) Countering China's buildup through an increased US Indo-Pacific footprint and (5) pushing allies and partners to act more decisively to protect their interests in the South China Sea region, both individually and jointly (Ng, 2019).

The United States' long-standing position on legal claims in the South China Sea underwent a significant hardening as the Trump administration faced potential defeat in its 2020 re-election bid. Statements from the State Department and the Department of Defence, particularly regarding Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, exemplified this shift. US Secretary Pompeo declared China's claims to offshore resources across the South China Sea unlawful (Poling, 2020). Taking a



firm stance on the dispute, the US categorically declared the PRC's claims false rather than abiding by UNCLOS standards or a particular code of conduct.

### **The Dispute During the Biden Administration**

The Biden administration prioritizes forging a united front with Asian allies to counter China's growing assertiveness. President Joe Biden views this collaboration as the most effective strategy for addressing China's challenges. Notably, the 2016 South China Sea arbitration ruling forms a vital pillar of the Biden administration's "rules-based order" approach (Zinan, 2021). The US government cites China's recent assertive and aggressive actions in the South China Sea as a threat to the established regional order and norms. These actions have led to China being labeled a "revisionist power."

### **US-Philippine Security Alliance**

The US-Philippines alliance, dating back to the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), remains a cornerstone of American security in Asia. As China's perception morphs from economic partner to security rival, the Philippines increasingly sees the United States as a crucial ally against Chinese pressure and expansionism. This shift in public sentiment fuels enhanced security cooperation between the two nations. President Biden's focus on US-China competition in Southeast Asia aims to balance major powers, allowing smaller states like the Philippines to pursue their interests. China's economic influence and assertive South China Sea claims now divide coastal and continental Southeast Asian states. Notably, the Philippines stands out for its unwavering support of the United States, even during the non-aligned movement era. This, along with its unique position as a US outpost in the region, further sets it apart from its neighbors (Raquiza, 2021).

While Southeast Asia initially remained on the back burner for President Joe Biden's in his first year, the latter saw a surge in engagement with high-level gatherings and visits. Biden's strategy now hinges on two intertwined goals: strengthening regional partnerships and alliances while navigating China's growing influence (Ha & Storey, 2022). A vital pillar of the US-Philippines security partnership is the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which was signed in 1998. This agreement provided legal protections for American troops participating in joint military drills within the Philippines. President Duterte's unilateral decision to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in February 2020 initially cast doubt on the partnership's future. However, its subsequent extension in November 2020 signaled both countries' commitment to regional security, as Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin emphasized.

Upon taking office in January 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored the importance of a strong US-Philippines alliance for an open and free Indo-Pacific region in his communication with his counterpart. Later that February, officials from the United States and the Philippines convened to address disagreements regarding the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) while discussing China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. This marked the first such meeting under the Biden Administration. Notably, in March 2021, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana acknowledged the Duterte Administration's recognition of the United States as a counterbalance to China and a regional stabilizing force.

The reinstatement of the VFA during US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit on July 30, 2021, marked a significant win for the United States in its efforts to bolster its relationship with the Philippines, which had grown closer to China in recent years. Beyond facilitating joint military drills, the VFA extension signaled a setback for China's diplomatic gains in the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte's last year in office (De Castro, 2022). Further solidifying the alliance, the 9th U.S.-Philippine Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in November 2021 yielded a "Joint Vision for a 21st Century U.S.-Philippines Partnership." This agreement reflects both nations' commitment to strengthening their alliance in the face of new challenges ("9th U.S.-Philippines bilateral strategic dialogue," 2021). It outlines their intention to develop new bilateral guidelines aligned with their shared understanding of roles, missions, and capabilities within the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty.

The Philippines-US security alliance deepened in 2022, driven by a shared focus on countering China's growing assertiveness in the region. Building on reaffirmed commitment, collaboration surged in joint military drills, information-sharing, and cybersecurity projects to deter Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific. Joint disaster response initiatives showcased the alliance's adaptability in addressing regional issues, including those stemming from China's actions. This sustained collaboration remains a crucial pillar of stability and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating the resilience and strength of the Philippines-United States security alliance in the face of Chinese challenges (Lum et. al, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The US South China Sea policy has significantly shifted under Trump and Biden. Countering China's assertiveness, Trump primarily relied on economic sanctions, increased Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), and verbal support for regional allies. Conversely, Biden administration prioritizes forging a unified Asian front alongside allies, emphasizing a "rules-based order" and fortifying alliances in the face of China's increasing assertiveness. The renewed Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines and the strengthened US-Philippines partnership exemplify this evolving US role in response to China's growing activity. The renewed Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines and the strengthened U.S.-Philippines Partnership exemplify this evolving United States' role in response to China's growing activity.

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Date of Publication

November 25, 2023