

Gaining Influence in Great Power Competition: A Case Study of Vietnam and the Philippines

A Monograph

by

Maj Paul B. Kozick
US Marine Corps



School of Advanced Military Studies
US Army Command and General Staff College
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Name of Candidate: Maj Paul B. Kozick

Monograph Title: Gaining Influence in Great Power Competition: A Case Study of Vietnam and the Philippines

Approved by:

_____, Monograph Director
Philip E. Hultquist, PhD

_____, Seminar Leader
Travis A. Jacobs, LTC

_____, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies
Brian A. Payne, COL

Accepted this 21st day of May 2020 by:

_____, Acting Director, Graduate Degree Programs
Prisco R. Hernandez, PhD

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Abstract

Gaining Influence in Great Power Competition: A Case Study of Vietnam and the Philippines, by Maj Paul B. Kozick, 61 pages.

Since President Obama's 2011 "Pivot to the Pacific" policy, the U.S. has sought to improve economic trade relationships, assure Pacific partners through increased military security cooperation, and develop closer diplomatic ties to enable regional stability. However, given the complexity of the situation for these countries, it remains unanswered whether any or which of these efforts have been successful. The Vietnamese and Philippine governments are in a challenging position between the United States and China, each vying for regional influence. Both Vietnam and the Philippines must consider the weight of influence between domestic and international politics to maintain their autonomy. Vietnam and the Philippines must thread the needle to ensure their survival and protect their sovereignty in the face of two great powers.

The United States has successfully attracted Vietnam to its sphere of influence over the past decade and pushed the Philippines toward China. The ability of both the United States and China to gain or lose influence is determined principally by their level of respect to the autonomy of each weaker nation. China has continued to encroach on Vietnamese and Philippine sovereignty in the South China Sea. The Vietnamese government and people, through their self-reliant policies and practices, perceive China's coercive activities as an infringement on their autonomy. Chinese unilateral claims and enforcement measures have limited their economic expansion, which remains tied to its national goals. The Philippine government, prioritizing economic cooperation with China above all else, has downplayed the concerns over their territorial disputes. America's diplomatic and economic reprisals, due to the Philippines' alleged violation of human rights through the conduct of its anti-drug campaign, has increased tensions between the two allies. With American intrusion coupled with China's cooperative approach, the Philippines have continued to move toward the Chinese sphere of influence. Understanding why the United States has had success in Vietnam, but less success in the Philippines, could potentially provide a blueprint for success with other partner nations in the context of great power competition.

Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Abbreviations	vi
Figures	viii
Tables	ix
Introduction	1
Methodology	3
Strategic Direction.....	7
United States Goals	8
ASEAN and UN Goals.....	9
China Goals.....	12
Vietnam Case Study	13
Diplomacy	16
Bilateral Engagements	17
Multilateral Engagements	18
Defense Diplomacy.....	19
Information.....	20
Military.....	24
Economy.....	26
Conclusion.....	31
Philippines.....	31
Diplomacy	35
Bilateral Diplomacy: United States.....	35
Bilateral Diplomacy: China.....	38
Multilateral Diplomacy	39
Information.....	40
Military.....	43
Economy.....	47
Conclusion.....	50
Challenges, Opportunities, and Risks.....	51
Challenges	51
Opportunities.....	52
Risks.....	54
Conclusion.....	54
Bibliography.....	56

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Abbreviations

A2AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
ADMM+	ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt-and-Road Initiative
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DOC	Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
DoD	Department of Defense
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
FMT	Foreign Military Training
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief
HS-981	Haiyang Shiyou 981
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IMET	International Military Education and Training
IR	International Relations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISR	Intelligence, Reconnaissance, and Surveillance
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty
NSS	National Security Strategy

PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PRC	People's Republic of China
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RIMPAC	Rim of the Pacific
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UNCLCS	United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement
WPS	West Philippine Sea

Figures

Figure 1. People’s Republic of China South China Sea Submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf	2
Figure 2. South China Sea Territorial Disputes.....	8
Figure 3. United States Foreign Military Training, 2009-2017.....	25
Figure 4. Vietnam’s US and China Imports, 2011-2017.....	27
Figure 5. United States Foreign Military Training to the Philippines, 2011-2017.....	46
Figure 6. Philippine Exports to China and US, 2010-2017	49

Tables

Table 1. Asymmetric IR Theory Relationships	5
Table 2. International Relations Theory Competing Paradigms	6
Table 3. American, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Philippine Asymmetric Relationships, 1979-Present	7
Table 4. ASEAN Principles and Goals.....	10
Table 5. United States and China National Defense Principles and Goals	13
Table 6. Vietnam Bilateral Agreements with US and China, 2011-2018	18
Table 7. United States, China, and Vietnam Principles and Goals.....	21
Table 8. Vietnam Bilateral and Multilateral Free Trade Agreements	30
Table 9. US-Philippines Significant Diplomatic Agreements.....	36
Table 10. Philippines Bilateral and Multilateral Free Trade Agreements	50

Introduction

President Obama’s 2011 “Pivot to the Pacific” policy sought to solidify the United States’ influence on the rapidly growing Pacific economy. He aimed to improve trade relations, assure Pacific partners through security cooperation, and develop closer diplomatic ties to enable the region’s stability in the face of China’s rise.¹ This approach has remained consistent through the Trump Administration, as stated in the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS). However, unlike the Obama Administration’s pursuit of a cooperative strategy with People’s Republic of China (PRC), the 2017 NSS formally recognized China as a competitor, “attempting to erode American security and prosperity.”² The 2017 NSS highlights the reliance on Pacific partners and allies to preserve its power and deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific.³ Vietnam and the Philippines are representative of the strategic tug-of-war between the United States and China. With the return to great power competition, their strategic position can provide or deny access for either great power. At the center of this competition are the longstanding South China Sea territorial disputes.

Central to all countries’ interests is access to the South China Sea. Trillions of dollars’ of resources are at stake, between access to shipping lanes, potential hydrocarbon regions, and fishing areas.⁴ China’s 2009 submission of territorial claims of 80 percent of the South China Sea (demarcated by the “nine-dash line”) to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the

¹ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 189 (November 2011): 56.

² Donald Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017, 2, accessed August 11, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

³ Trump, “National Security Strategy,” 46.

⁴ Ronald O’Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, August 23, 2019), 5–6.

Continental Shelf (UNCLCS) further increased tensions and stammered international negotiations (see Figure 1).⁵



Figure 1. People's Republic of China South China Sea Submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. People's Republic of China, "People's Republic of China South China Sea Submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf," May 2009, accessed October 13, 2019, https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf.

Both Vietnam and the Philippines resist Chinese coercion but remain reliant on trade with China's booming economy. Each nation has pursued different approaches to protect their interests. Vietnam has aligned more closely to the United States to counterbalance against China.

⁵ James Bellacqua, *The China Factor in U.S.-Vietnam Relations* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, March 2012, 15, accessed October 14, 2019, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2012-U-000184-FINAL.pdf.

American efforts to protect Vietnam's sovereignty and respect of its autonomy has attracted Vietnam to the American sphere of influence. The Philippine government, prioritizing economic cooperation with China above all else, has downplayed the concerns over their territorial disputes, demonstrating deference to the great power. America's diplomatic and economic reprisals, due to the Philippines' alleged violation of human rights through the conduct of its anti-drug campaign, has increased tensions between the two allies. The common denominator for each great power to gain influence revolves around autonomy. When great powers respect the weaker nation's autonomy, they gain credibility, cooperation, and influence. Understanding this dynamic provides insight to develop a coherent American strategy to achieve the aims originally sought by the "Pivot to the Pacific" policy.

Methodology

Through a comparative case study, loosely following the strategic estimate format from Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, the relationships between Vietnam, the Philippines, China, and the United States since the "Pivot to the Pacific" policy will determine why the United States has successfully influenced Vietnam. Alternatively, it will demonstrate what actions have pushed the Philippines away from its sphere of influence. Through the framework of asymmetric international relations (IR) theory, an assessment of the relationships between the stronger and weaker nations will identify the challenges, opportunities, and risks associated that the United States must consider to gain influence and achieve its aims in the 2017 NSS.

An analysis of each weaker nations' instruments of national power (diplomacy, information, military, and economy) will provide measures of effectiveness for each great power's ability to gain influence. Additionally, an understanding of Vietnam's and the Philippines' national interests and their level of alignment with each great power's will underpin their chosen approaches to managing territorial disputes and seeking economic expansion. Specific measures will include diplomatic agreements, senior leader engagements, perceptions of

credibility, levels of security cooperation, involvement in trade agreements, and economic priorities.

Theory

A deductive application of Brantly Womack's *Asymmetric International Relations Theory* will underpin why each great power has gained or lost influence. The use of asymmetric IR theory aims to understand why relationships between stronger and weaker powers can become stable and resilient over the long term. It counters traditional Western IR theory views where asymmetry is a state of imbalance in power that states compete to overcome. The theory posits that the asymmetric relationships persist due to their mutual benefits provided through cooperation. The cooperative relationship is its own deterrent, where both the strong and weak nations realize that each side cannot force its will on the other without great cost and prefer mutual negotiations to conflict. The great power benefits from trade relationships that outweigh the costs of war with the weaker country, but it requires deference from the weaker power. The weaker power likewise benefits from trade with the great power, as long as the stronger country respects its autonomy.⁶ The weaker power, living in the shadow of the greater power, develops a hypersensitivity to the great power's policies and actions, as any misstep can mean its demise. Thus, both the weaker nation's domestic and foreign policies revolve around the great power's actions.⁷

As shown in Table 1, to achieve normalcy, the great power must respect the weak nation's autonomy and the weak nation must demonstrate deference to the great power. The relationship deteriorates if the great power infringes on the weak power's autonomy, causing the weak power to align with a new great power. When the great power does not receive deference

⁶ Brantly Womack, *China Among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships in Asia* (Toh Tuck Link, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2010), 3-4.

⁷ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21.

from the weak power, it punishes the weak power militarily or economically to regain normalcy.

If both powers fail to provide respect and deference, they enter into conflict.

Table 1. Asymmetric IR Theory Relationships

		Great Power (GP)	
		<i>Infringes on Autonomy</i>	<i>Respects Autonomy</i>
Weak Power (WP)	<i>Gives Deference</i>	WP balances with new GP	Normalcy
	<i>Disrespectful</i>	Hostility/Conflict	GP punishes WP

Source: Created by author with information from Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17-29.

Other prominent international relations theories are insufficient in explaining the actions between great and weak powers. Traditional IR theories posit that anarchy persists without a central, international political authority. Shown in Table 2 are each of the IR paradigms. Realism fails to explain how Vietnam, a weak power without alliances, continues to exist in the face of tensions with a great power such as China. Liberalism ignores the role of power and fails to explain how cooperation fails between two states with vastly different levels of power, as well as deeply ingrained cultural beliefs.⁸ Constructivism can explain states' past behavior through their construction of cultural norms within a society, but fails to anticipate future state behavior.⁹

⁸ Stephen M. Walt, "One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (1998): 35–40.

⁹ Walt, "One World, Many Theories," 31–32.

Table 2. International Relations Theory Competing Paradigms

Realism	Liberalism	Constructivism	Asymmetry
Self-interested states compete constantly for power or security	Concern for power overridden by economic/political considerations	State behavior shaped by elite beliefs, collective norms, and social identities	Power disparity shapes interactions, where powerful must negotiate with the weak due to lack of control

Source: Adapted by author with information from Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21; Stephen M. Walt, “One World, Many Theories,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (1998): 38.

Asymmetric IR theory offers a more realistic lens to view weaker states such as Vietnam and the Philippines approaches on the international stage. It aligns with David Lake’s international hierarchy IR, where an authoritative state bargains with a client state to provide an acceptable social order in return for the client state’s compliance.¹⁰ A preponderance of power by a state does not translate into control. Weaker states persist due to their ability to frustrate a great power through a protracted war, preventing their subjugation. They lack the abilities to defeat a great power but can impose increasing costs it over time. The result is a stalemate, forcing both sides to negotiate, enabling normalization.¹¹

Through this framework, the actions of Vietnam and the Philippines to balance against either China or the United States become evident. China, through its South China Sea claims and militaristic expansion in the South China Sea, escalating in 2009, directly infringed on Vietnam’s and the Philippines’ autonomy. The United States, through its diplomacy and security cooperation, continued to respect each nation’s autonomy and remained an attractive counterbalance. However, the United States’ more recent interference in the Philippines’ ongoing anti-drug campaign pushed it toward China.¹² This pushed the Philippines to seek favor with a

¹⁰ David A. Lake, “Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics,” *International Security* 32, no. 1 (2007): 54–55.

¹¹ Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, 19–22.

¹² Diosdado B. Lopega, “On President Rodrigo Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’: Its Impact on Philippine-China Relations,” *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal* 5, no. 1 (May 2019): 138.

new great power, where it downplayed the territorial disputes with China to enable renewed economic cooperation (see Table 3).

Table 3. American, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Philippine Asymmetric Relationships, 1979-Present

		Great Power (GP)	
		<i>Infringes on Autonomy</i>	<i>Respects Autonomy</i>
Weak Power (WP)	<i>Gives Deference</i>	US-Philippines: Early 2016 ▲ China-Philippines: Early 2016 ■	US-Philippines: Before 2016 ▲ US-Vietnam: 2009- present ★ ● China-Vietnam: 1988-2009 ■ China-Philippines: Mid-2016 to present ★US-Vietnam: 1995-2009
	<i>Disrespectful</i>	US-Vietnam: 1986-1995 ★ US-Philippines: Mid-2016 to present ▲ ■ China-Philippines: Before 2016 ● China-Vietnam: 2009-present ● China-Vietnam: 1979-1988	

Source: Created by author.

Strategic Direction

The South China Sea disputes remain a complex web of historical claims by numerous South East Asian nations. China, Vietnam, and Taiwan all claim the Spratly Islands in their entirety. The Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei also claim portions of the expansive archipelago. Vietnam and China both claim control of the Paracel Islands (see Figure 2).¹³ The United States, China, and several multinational institutions all have significant interests in the settlement of the disputes to stabilize the strategic economic causeway in their favor. Each has adopted varying ways to achieve their goals.

¹³ O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, 6–7.

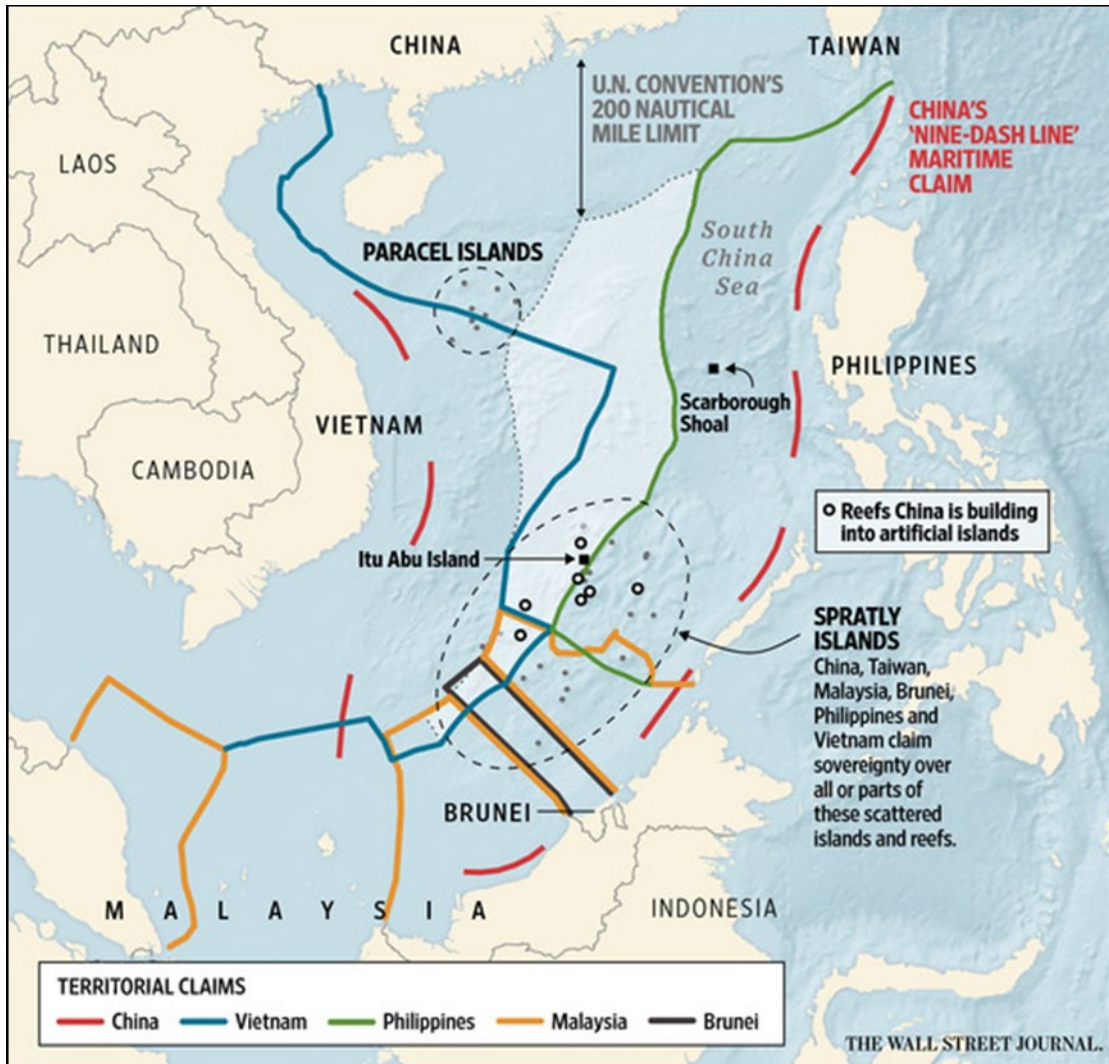


Figure 2. South China Sea Territorial Disputes. Trevor Moss, “5 Things About Fishing in the South China Sea,” *The Wall Street Journal*, n.d., accessed February 13, 2020, <https://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2016/07/19/5-things-about-fishing-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

United States Goals

The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) recognizes the return of great power competition. It centers on four key pillars: to protect the homeland, promote American prosperity, preserve peace through strength, and advance American influence.¹⁴ Through its allies and partners, the US aims to deter Chinese aggressive behavior to provide stability. The promotion of

¹⁴ Trump, “National Security Strategy,” 4.

shared values and interests aims “to achieve [US] goals while our partners achieve theirs.”¹⁵ The United States’ 2018 National Defense Strategy promotes freedom of the seas underpinned by international rules and norms, and ensuring respect of all countries’ sovereignty.¹⁶ Within this framework, Vietnam and the Philippines remain important partners and allies to ensure the success of American goals in the Indo-Pacific to ensure ’ free flow of trade through the South China Sea.

ASEAN and UN Goals

Several multinational bodies have attempted to litigate the South China Sea disputes: the United Nations Security Council, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS), the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Each has failed to settle the disputes, as none of the institutions contains enforcement mechanisms.

The UN Security Council has the power to act on “threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, or acts of aggression,” but has failed to do so.¹⁷ China, as a veto-wielding permanent member of the Security Council, has denied the International Court of Justice’s (ICJ) ability to take any legal action to solve international disputes. In 2006, China flippantly declared it would not accept any international court or arbitration in disputes over sea delimitation, territorial disputes, and military activities.¹⁸ China’s coercive activities have continued to violate the 1982 UNCLOS agreement, which established the current internationally recognized laws of the sea to

¹⁵ Trump, *National Security Strategy*, 26–37.

¹⁶ US Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy” (2018), 9.

¹⁷ David Scott, “Conflict Irresolution in the South China Sea,” *Asian Survey* 52, no. 6 (2012): 1021.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1021–1022.

include: sovereignty over territorial sea out to 12 nautical miles, the 200-nautical mile Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ), and freedom of navigation and overflight within the EEZ.¹⁹ China’s rejection of the 1982 UNCLOS and prevention of further ICJ arbitration have remained obstacles for all South China Sea claimants.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), composed of 10 Southeast Asian nations, is principally a body to promote diplomatic collaboration and economic growth. ASEAN principles, based on consensus, non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs, ensure no military alliances (see Table 4).²⁰ Both China and the United States are active participants in many of its official forums, such as the ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).²¹ Each of these forums aims to increase dialogue to address political and security challenges faced by member nations.

Table 4. ASEAN Principles and Goals

Principles	Goals
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations. 2. The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion, or coercion. 3. Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another. 4. Settlement of differences or disputes of one another. 5. Renunciation of the threat or use of force. 6. Effective cooperation among themselves. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To accelerate the economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours [<i>sic</i>] in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations. 2. To promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter. 3. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific, and administrative fields. 4. To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the

¹⁹ UN Oceans & Law of the Sea, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982*, 1994, 27–44, accessed February 21, 2020, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf.

²⁰ Ministry of National Defence Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Vietnam National Defence” (2009): 29.

²¹ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, 7.

Principles	Goals
	educational, professional, technical, and administrative spheres. 5. To collaborate more effectively for the greater utilisation [<i>sic</i>] of their agriculture and industries, the expansion of their trade, including the study of the problems of international commodity trade, the improvement of their transportation and communications facilities and the raising of the living standards of their peoples. 6. To promote Southeast Asian studies. 7. To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organisations [<i>sic</i>] with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves.

Source: Adapted by the author with information from The ASEAN Secretariat, “Association of Southeast Asian Nations Overview,” 2020, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://asean.org/asean/about-asean/overview/>.

ASEAN’s dialogue with China to settle South China Sea disputes has been successful in preventing military conflict but has not had any binding authority to resolve the persistent diplomatic conflict. In 2002, ASEAN signed the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) with China to reaffirm principles for freedom of navigation. However, it failed to settle territorial conflicts or impose any sanctions if any parties violated the agreement. China continued to unilaterally pursue its territorial claims through on the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Realizing the failure of the DOC, in 2011, ASEAN attempted to re-negotiate an agreement through the Declaration of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Again, it provided no enforcement measures to change Chinese behavior.²² The ASEAN body has remained fragmented due to Chinese economic influence on its client states of Cambodia,

²² Scott, “Conflict Irresolution in the South China Sea,” 1026–1027.

Myanmar, and Laos. ASEAN's requirement for consensus from all members to affirm any policies or statements has prevented progress on South China Sea disputes.²³

China Goals

China's goals aim to safeguard its sovereignty, ensure stability, and through the principle of non-interference, achieve international cooperation to further its development (see Table 5).²⁴ However, counter to its published strategy, its actions have not matched its words as it has patiently executed its "talk and take" strategy.²⁵ Central to its objectives are the settlement of the territorial disputes in its favor, reduction of the United States regional influence, and control of the South China Sea.²⁶ It primarily intends to do this through negotiations for a new international code of conduct for freedom of navigation in the South China Seas and its artificial island construction. Beginning in 2013, China initiated its island-building and militarization in the South China Sea, constructing numerous outposts in the Spratly and Paracel Islands. China's continued physical presence on each of the islands is key to their strategy of cementing its maritime claims and expanding its EEZ to limit American access. If successful, China's renegotiation of the law of the sea would prevent the presence of foreign military forces within its EEZ, legally barring the United States' freedom of navigation activities.²⁷

²³ David Martin Jones and Nicole Jenne, "Weak States' Regionalism: ASEAN and the Limits of Security Cooperation in Pacific Asia," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 16 (2016): 229; Dong Phuc Nguyen, "Framework for Naval Cooperation Between Vietnam and the United States" (Master of Military Art and Science, Strategic Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2017), 65–66.

²⁴ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 6–7.

²⁵ O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1–3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

Table 5. United States and China National Defense Principles and Goals

	Principles	Goals
United States	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations 2. Peaceful resolution of disputes 3. Free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity 4. Adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defend the Homeland • Remain the preeminent military power in key regions remain in our favor • Ensure the balances of power in key regions remain in our favor • Advance an international order that is most conducive to our security and prosperity
China	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty 2. Mutual non-aggression 3. Non-interference in each other’s internal affairs 4. Equality and mutual benefit 5. Peaceful co-existence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To deter and resist aggression • To safeguard national political security, the people’s security and social stability • To safeguard national sovereignty, unit, territorial integrity and security • To safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests • To safeguard China’s overseas interests • To support the sustainable development of the country

Source: Table created by author, adapted from information available through US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, June 1, 2019, 12–16; The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, First (Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., 2019), 6–8, accessed August 18, 2019, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm.

Chinese coercion activities to retain its self-proclaimed territories have directly infringed on Vietnamese and Philippine autonomy. This has pushed Vietnam to cooperate closely with the United States to protect its sovereignty and economic interests. More recently, American infringement in Philippine domestic interests has provided justification to overlook territorial disputes and cooperate closely with China. Understanding why the United States has had success in Vietnam, but less success in the Philippines to gain influence could potentially provide a blueprint for success with other partner nations in the Indo-Pacific.

Vietnam Case Study

The United States respect for Vietnam’s autonomy, coupled with China’s coercive actions interfering with the Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) domestic aims, have drawn Vietnam’s government into America’s sphere of influence. Vietnam’s past decade of struggle with China has provided opportunities for the United States to influence the communist regime

and simultaneously erode Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. To achieve its national aims of territorial sovereignty, continued economic growth, and survival of the CPV, Vietnam has pursued multiple self-preservation approaches.²⁸ The CPV continues to mitigate the risk to its autonomy through bilateral engagements with China, multilateral engagements with international institutions, and military modernization efforts.²⁹ However, Vietnam remains constrained by its “three no’s” policy: no alliances, no foreign military bases on its soil, and no reliance on any country to fight against a third country.³⁰

The United States respect for Vietnam’s autonomy, coupled with China’s coercive actions interfering with the Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) domestic aims have drawn Vietnam’s government into America’s sphere of influence. Vietnam’s past decade of struggle with China has provided opportunities for the United States to influence the communist regime and simultaneously erode Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. To achieve its national aims of territorial sovereignty, continued economic growth, and survival of the CPV, Vietnam has pursued multiple self-preservation approaches.³¹ The CPV adopted bilateral engagements with China, multilateral engagements with international institutions, and military modernization

²⁸ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Overall Strategy for International Integration Through 2020, Vision to 2030*, n.d., accessed October 13, 2019, <http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/English/strategies/strategiesdetails?categoryId=30&articleId=10056863>.

²⁹ Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,” 351–353.

³⁰ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Vietnam National Defence,” 21–22.

³¹ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Overall Strategy for International Integration Through 2020, Vision to 2030*, n.d., accessed October 13, 2019, <http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/English/strategies/strategiesdetails?categoryId=30&articleId=10056863>.

efforts.³² However, Vietnam remains constrained by its “three no’s” policy: no alliances, no foreign military bases on its soil, and no reliance on any country to fight against a third country.³³

Vietnam’s long, asymmetric relationship with its dominating northern neighbor has shaped its domestic attitudes and international policies. Southeast Asia expert, Carlyle Thayer, discusses Vietnam’s “tyranny of geography,” where its shared border in the shadow of the giant nation has created a relationship of cooperation, struggle, and paranoia.³⁴ Until 2009, China and Vietnam had achieved normalcy through mutual respect of each nation’s interests. However, as maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea reemerged, their relationship deteriorated as China unilaterally pursued its territorial claims.

Vietnam’s path to its current status was fraught with numerous wars with China spanning over 1,000 years.³⁵ In the twentieth century, the South China Sea disputes created new tensions between the two nations. Prior to Vietnam’s unification in 1974, China invaded and gained control of the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam, underpinned by its unfounded, historical claims from the PRC’s established 9-dash-line in 1949.³⁶ In 1988, China invaded the Vietnamese controlled portion of the Paracel Islands, killing 74 soldiers and took physical control.

However, the hostile relationship between the two nations normalized in 1991. Vietnam’s implementation of its *doi moi* (renovation) policy in 1986 mainly attributed to the normalization, which liberalized its economy, provided governmental reforms, and emphasized international

³² Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,” 351–353.

³³ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Vietnam National Defence,” 21–22.

³⁴ Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 349.

³⁵ Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*, First. (New York: Random House, 2014), 57–58.

³⁶ Tom Miller, *China’s Asian Dream* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2017), 200.

cooperation.³⁷ Through increased cooperation with China, Vietnam's economy flourished, providing diplomatic avenues to settle two centuries of territorial disputes on its northern border in 2008.

Their cooperation quickly shifted in 2009 as maritime territorial disputes erupted after China protested Vietnam's and Malaysia's extended continental shelf submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS). China's submission, which came a day after Vietnam's, claimed "indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof."³⁸ Its U-shaped 9-dash line overlapped with Vietnam's EEZ.³⁹ Chinese claims directly impacted Vietnam's access to fishing waters, oil and gas exploration activities, and access to foreign markets. Vietnam has found itself in a difficult position, trying to thread the needle between maintaining good trade relations with China and finding avenues to negotiate territorial disputes.

Diplomacy

Vietnam's diplomatic ideology centers around the concepts of *doi tac* (object of cooperation) and *doi tuong* (object of struggle). It uses cooperation to further its national interests and struggle when it needs to protect them.⁴⁰ Its most recent strategy, released in 2016, aligns

³⁷ Lawrence E. Grinter, "Vietnam's Thrust into Globalization: 'Doi Moi's' Long Road," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 3, no. 3 (2006): 154.

³⁸ People's Republic of China, "People's Republic of China South China Sea Submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf," May 2009, accessed October 13, 2019, https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf.

³⁹ People's Republic of China, "People's Republic of China South China Sea Submission to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf," May 2009, accessed October 13, 2019, https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2009re_mys_vnm_e.pdf.

⁴⁰ Thayer, "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea," 351.

with this ideology through its objectives to strengthen its economy, maintain its autonomy, and ensure the Communist Party of Vietnam's survival.⁴¹

To achieve these goals, Vietnam has developed three lines of effort consisting of bilateral cooperation, multilateral cooperation, and defense diplomacy, remaining constrained by its “three no's” policy.

Bilateral Engagements

Vietnam's bilateral engagements delicately balance between the United States and China. China prefers bilateral engagements where it negotiates from a position of strength, leaving little negotiation space for Vietnam.⁴² China's July 2019 defense policy stated:

China resolutely safeguards its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The South China Sea islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory. China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea.⁴³

In response to continued Chinese coercion and its rigid policies, Vietnam has sought American support to improve its position.

Vietnam's approach of “shelving the past, looking forward to the future,” permitted normalization of relations with the United States.⁴⁴ In the face of Chinese pressure, Vietnam has welcomed the United States' presence in the South China Sea. It signed numerous agreements to strengthen security cooperation over the past decade, but to prevent a Chinese backlash, it has continued to negotiate similar agreements with the PRC (see Table 6).

⁴¹ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Overall Strategy for International Integration Through 2020, Vision to 2030*.

⁴² Scott, “Conflict Irresolution in the South China Sea,” 1023.

⁴³ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 6–7.

⁴⁴ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Vietnam National Defence,” 23.

Table 6. Vietnam Bilateral Agreements with US and China, 2011-2018

US-Vietnam Diplomatic Agreements
2011- Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation
2013- Comprehensive Partnership Agreement between Presidents of Vietnam and US
2015- Elevation of relationship from strategic partnership to a comprehensive partnership
2015- US–Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations
2016- US fully lifted its ban on sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam; Agrees to continue to provide maritime security assistance
China-Vietnam Diplomatic Agreements
2011- Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Maritime-Related Issues
2013- Elevation of relationships from strategic partnership to strategic cooperative partnership
2014- Agree to annual Border Defence Friendship Exchange Program and ministerial level

Source: Table created by author, adapted from information available through The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “United States-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement,” July 7, 2015, 2–3, accessed August 25, 2019, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/07/united-states-vietnam-joint-vision-statement>; US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, 14; Scott, “Conflict Irresolution in the South China Sea,” 1027–1030; US Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations with Vietnam: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet,” December 11, 2017, 3, accessed October 13, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-vietnam/>; Ton, “Vietnam’s Maritime Security Challenges and Regional Defence and Security Cooperation,” 22.

Multilateral Engagements

As a United Nations (UN) member, Vietnam has continued to underpin its maritime claims through the 1982 UNCLOS ruling. China’s rejection of the law of the sea has remained a significant obstacle, as Vietnam lacks the maritime capabilities to counter its unilateral aggression. To counter its asymmetric disadvantage, Vietnam has actively supported multilateral organizations to harmonize its efforts with its regional partners. As an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member, Vietnam relies on the institution to protect its interests in the South China Sea. However, due to Chinese influence, ASEAN has failed to reach a consensus to dispute Chinese actions, forcing it to seek additional mechanisms to ensure its autonomy.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jones and Jenne, “Weak States’ Regionalism: ASEAN and the Limits of Security Cooperation in Pacific Asia,” 65–66.

Defense Diplomacy

Vietnam's 2009 National Defence [*sic*] Strategy stated that defense diplomacy "is part of the State's diplomacy," reliant on strengthening its military to ensure its homeland defense.⁴⁶ Its strategy stemmed from its unsuccessful alliance with the Soviet Union during the 1979-1988 Sino-Vietnam war, where it relied on external support to protect its autonomy. In 1988, the Soviets failed to respond to Vietnamese requests for assistance after the Chinese seizure of the Johnson Reef in the Spratly Islands. This abandonment left a deep scar on the CPV, resulting in their aforementioned "three no's" policy, but it left room to seek external support.⁴⁷

Vietnam has sought to substantiate its defense diplomacy primarily through increased American security cooperation. In 2009, United States naval vessels visited Cam Ranh Bay for the first time, marking the beginning of the sustained American naval presence in the South China Sea. In 2010, Vietnam and the United States conducted their first joint naval exercise, which included the USS George Washington aircraft carrier.⁴⁸ Subsequent defense agreements further strengthened security cooperation. The 2015 Joint Vision Statement (JVS) aimed to further strengthen Vietnamese access to improved equipment, agreeing to share information on selected research and development of military technologies. President Trump agreed to a three-year Plan of Action for Defense Cooperation for 2018 to 2020 to further increase bilateral naval cooperation. Additionally, the USS Carl Vinson Strike Group visited Da Nang in March 2018, the first visit by a US aircraft carrier in more than 40 years. Vietnam also participated for the first

⁴⁶ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, "Vietnam National Defence," 23.

⁴⁷ Hai Ha Hoang, "Vietnam's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy with Major Powers," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 30, no. 4 (December 2018): 601.

⁴⁸ Ian Tsung-Yen Chen and Alan Hao Yang, "A Harmonized Southeast Asia?: Explanatory Typologies of ASEAN Countries' Strategies to the Rise of China," *The Pacific Review* 26, no. 3 (2013): 279.

time in the United States hosted 2018 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercise, the world's largest international maritime exercises held biennially.⁴⁹

Though Vietnam has continued to develop closer American ties, it continued its balanced approach with China. Its participation in the 2018 China-ASEAN Joint Maritime Exercise sought to improve relations with China and relieve South China Sea tensions.⁵⁰ Vietnam has continued to engage in various high-level forums with the Chinese, such as the ninth Beijing Xiangshan Forum in October 2019, where senior defense officials discussed ways to further cooperate in the South China Sea.⁵¹ Cooperative exercises and forums like these demonstrate a level of deference to the Chinese, allowing Vietnam to continue its American engagements without incurring Chinese retaliation.

Information

A great power's credibility is vital in maintaining influence over a weak power. When a great power's words do not match its actions, both its credibility and influence suffer. Both the United States and China have communicated cooperative policies to Vietnam to resolve disputes in the Pacific peacefully.⁵² However, the way in which each nation has enacted these policies has differed greatly. China's infringement of Vietnamese territory has sparked national outrage. Its coercive actions have undermined its credibility as a benign, cooperative actor and pressured the CPV to respond aggressively to satisfy their domestic audience.

⁴⁹ US Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "FACT SHEET- U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam," August 2018.

⁵⁰ US Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," May 2019, 24, accessed August 18, 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf.

⁵¹ Thu Trang, "Strategic Security Vision Should Be Crafted to Guide Future Cooperation in Asia-Pacific: Gernal Lich," *People's Army Newspaper* (Beijing, China, October 22, 2019), accessed October 24, 2019, <https://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/strategic-security-vision-should-be-crafted-to-guide-future-cooperation-in-asia-pacific-general-lich-510667>.

⁵² Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," 58; Ton, "Vietnam's Maritime Security Challenges and Regional Defence and Security Cooperation," 22.

In contrast, the United States has adopted a cooperative approach of attraction, or what Joseph Nye defines as “soft power.”⁵³ America has vocally supported Vietnamese autonomy and continues to respect its policy of non-interference, negating CPV fears of forceful imposition of American values on its citizens. The impact of each countries’ actions on public perception is striking. In a 2017 Pew Research Center poll, 84 percent of Vietnamese had a favorable view of America, where only 10 percent favorably viewed China.⁵⁴ The United States’ guiding principles align directly with Vietnam’s national interests (see Table 7). On the contrary, China’s policy of non-negotiation of what it views as its rightful territory undermine Vietnam’s autonomy by limiting its access to vital resources, and in turn, fomenting domestic enmity.

Table 7. United States, China, and Vietnam Principles and Goals

	Principles	Goals
United States	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations 2. Peaceful resolution of disputes 3. Free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity 4. Adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defend the Homeland • Remain the preeminent military power in key regions remain in our favor • Ensure the balances of power in key regions remain in our favor • Advance an international order that is most conducive to our security and prosperity
China	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty 2. Mutual non-aggression 3. Non-interference in each other’s internal affairs 4. Equality and mutual benefit 5. Peaceful co-existence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To deter and resist aggression • To safeguard national political security, the people’s security and social stability • To safeguard national sovereignty, unit, territorial integrity and security • To safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests • To safeguard China’s overseas interests • To support the sustainable development of the country

⁵³ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 21.

⁵⁴ Margaret Vice, *In Global Popularity Contest, U.S. and China-Not Russia- Vie for First* (Pew Research Center, August 23, 2017), accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/23/in-global-popularity-contest-u-s-and-china-not-russia-vie-for-first/>.

	Principles	Goals
Vietnam	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure independence 2. Self-reliance 3. Ensure peaceful environment 4. Cooperation and openness with all nations 5. Friend and credible partner to all nations 6. Respect for other countries' independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and national interests on the basis of the United Nations Charter and international laws. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a peaceful environment to promoted socio-economic development • Safeguard the Homeland • Protect Vietnam's independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and national interests • Protect the regime

Source: Table created by author, adapted from information available through US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, 12-16; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 6-8; Socialist Republic of Vietnam, "Vietnam National Defence," 18-33.

Though information is only one aspect of soft power, it is potent due to its communication of culture, political values, and foreign policy. It is reliant on the credibility of the actor sending the message. If the targeted audience perceives the communicated message as mere propaganda, it undermines credibility and its ability to influence.⁵⁵ Even in the entertainment industry, this remains true, as Vietnam pulled Dreamworks' animated film, "Abominable," from theaters due to a scene with a map showing the 9-dash-line.⁵⁶

China's repeated actions have undermined any effective message or themes targeting the Vietnamese. Chinese and Vietnamese conflicts at sea in 2011 and 2014 give examples to this effect. Anti-Chinese demonstrations lasted for weeks in 2011 after Chinese marine vessels cut exploration cables to a ship conducting seismic surveys of the continental shelf of Vietnam.⁵⁷ In May 2014, the Chinese deep-water oilrig, Haiyang Shiyou 981 (HS-981), entered the Vietnamese EEZ to drill for hydrocarbons with a military escort. The incident sparked a fierce backlash from

⁵⁵ Nye, Jr., *The Future of Power*, 83.

⁵⁶ Ben Westcott and Dan Tham, "Dreamworks' 'Abominable' Pulled from Movie Theaters in Vietnam over South China Sea Map," *CNN* (Hong Kong, October 18, 2019), accessed October 25, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/15/asia/vietnam-abominable-south-china-sea-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁵⁷ "China Violates Sovereignty," *Vietnam News* (Hanoi, Vietnam, May 30, 2011), accessed November 19, 2019, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/211778/china-violates-sovereignty.html#ZfBQxqKFmd7lJkct.97>.

the Vietnamese public, fueled by social media for calls to protest, resulting in nation-wide demonstrations. The demonstrations quickly became violent, as protestors damaged more than 300 factories, burning some to the ground, and killing a Chinese national.⁵⁸ An important aspect of the 2014 incident was the ability of the public to mobilize through its use of the internet. The CPV, which controls the content on all Vietnamese sites, demonstrated tacit support to the public's protests until they turned violent and finally restricted communications. Taking advantage of the public outrage to gain domestic support for the regime, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung officially denounced China's actions at the 2014 ASEAN Summit.⁵⁹

Most recently, in July 2019 a Chinese research vessel, escorted by armed coast guard vessels, entered the Vietnamese EEZ, off the Spratly Islands.⁶⁰ This last incident again gave rise to further protests and a response from Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, stating in regard Vietnamese territorial integrity, "We have never made concessions."⁶¹ Though the Vietnamese government has sought to remain balanced in its relationship between the United States and China, it continues to acquiesce to domestic pressure.

By matching its words and actions, the United States has continued to gain credibility with the people of Vietnam and the CPV. As evidenced through anti-Chinese protests, CPV public condemnation of Chinese actions, and continued positive perception of American efforts, the United States has effectively attracted Vietnam to its sphere of influence. China, through its

⁵⁸ Edmund Malesky and Jason Morris-Jung, "Vietnam in 2014: Uncertainty and Opportunity in the Wake of the HS-981 Crisis," *Asian Survey* 55, no. 1 (February 2015): 165–168.

⁵⁹ Vu Lam, "Public Diplomacy: Whi Is It Rudimentary yet Relevant to Vietnam's Politics?," *Asian Politics & Policy* 7, no. 3 (2015): 401–404.

⁶⁰ Associated Press, "Recent Developments Surrounding the South China Sea," *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2019, accessed October 29, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/recent-developments-surrounding-the-south-china-sea/2019/10/28/927bb492-f939-11e9-9e02-1d45cb3dfa8f_story.html.

⁶¹ The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, Office of the Prime Minister, "For Territorial Integrity, Viet Nam Never Makes Concessions, PM Affirms" (Hanoi, Vietnam, October 21, 2019), accessed October 29, 2019, <http://primeminister.chinhphu.vn/Home/For-territorial-integrity-Viet-Nam-never-makes-concessions-PM-affirms/201910/3725.vgp>.

heavy-handed, coercive approach, has fomented mistrust and undermined its legitimacy where its words have not matched its actions.

Military

Chinese coercive actions through military force in the South China Sea have been the principal reason the United States successfully attracted Vietnam further into its sphere of influence. China's continued island-building and base-construction activities in the Spratly and Paracel Islands since 2013 have heightened concerns for the Communist Party of Vietnam. To supplement its defense diplomacy and limit Chinese expansion, the CPV has steadily grown its country's military budget, procured foreign equipment, and increased American security cooperation. Though Vietnam has taken great strides to increase its military capabilities, it remains significantly inferior to China's military. With a clear-eyed acknowledgment of its inability to unilaterally compete with its giant northern neighbor, Vietnam has continued to increase military ties with foreign partners, principally relying on the US naval presence.

Vietnam's military budget more than doubled in 2011-2018, growing from \$2.687 billion to \$5.5 billion.⁶² However, it remains dwarfed by China's expenditures, where during this same time, its military spending increased from \$138 billion to \$250 billion.⁶³ Due to its limited resources and lack of a military industrial base, Vietnam has selectively procured assets focused on sea denial capabilities to compete with China's much stronger maritime assets. Since 2011, Russia, as Vietnam's primary vendor since the Cold War, has sold naval, air, and missile defense assets to increase Vietnam's anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities, a deal worth over \$6 billion. Its Navy received six kilo-class submarines, six Gepard-class guided missile stealth

⁶² World Bank Group, "Military Expenditure (Current USD) - Vietnam," 2019, accessed November 27, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?end=2018&locations=VN&start=1995&view=chart>.

⁶³ World Bank Group, "Military Expenditure (Current USD)- China," 2019, accessed November 27, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?end=2018&locations=CN&start=1995&view=chart>.

frigates, numerous fast patrol boats, as well as a deep-water port at Cam Ranh Bay for ship docking and repair. Vietnam will most likely continue to engage with Russia as its primary vendor due to its large inventory of Russian made equipment, but opportunities with the United States have recently emerged.

The lifting of the 2016 lethal weapons ban has provided new military hardware and closer ties in military research and development supporting Vietnam’s modernization efforts.⁶⁴ The United States has steadily increased its Foreign Military Training (FMT) program, which encompasses International Military Education and Training (IMET), Combatant Command security cooperation activities, and numerous other enforcement and peace initiatives (see Figure 3).⁶⁵ As part of the FMT, in 2013, the first Vietnamese officers began studying at the Army’s Command and General Staff College and Army War College.

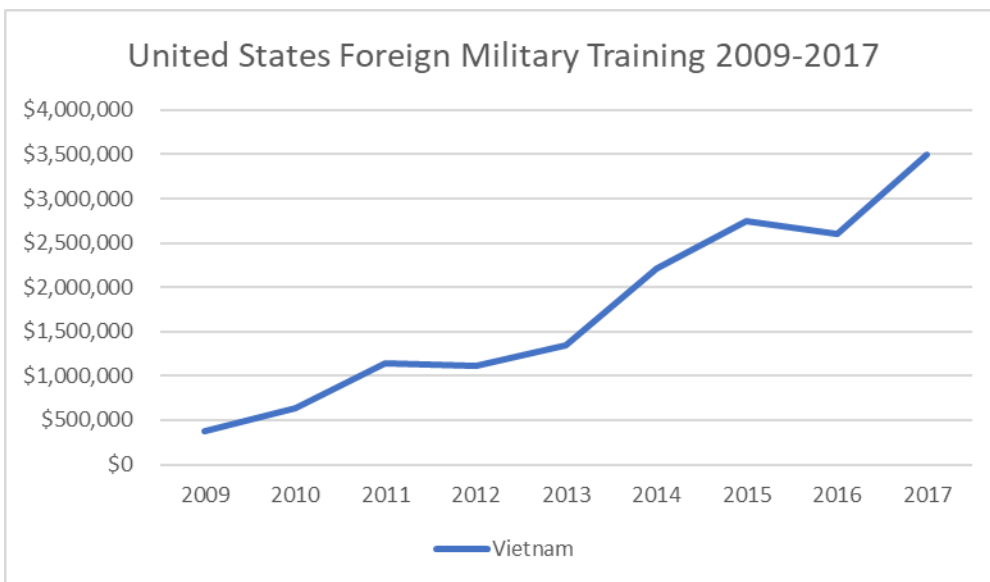


Figure 3. United States Foreign Military Training, 2009-2017. Figure created by author, data available through US Department of Defense and US Department of State, *Foreign Military Training Report* (Washington, DC, 2009-2018).

⁶⁴ US Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “FACT SHEET- U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam.”

⁶⁵ US Department of Defense and US Department of State, *Foreign Military Training Report: Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018* (Washington, DC, 2017).

Although American military funding efforts fall well short of the Russian sales, its increase in funding through multiple programs have demonstrated its continued support of Vietnamese national interests. Additionally, the US Navy's presence to ensure freedom of navigation has allowed Vietnam to focus primarily on modernizing and expanding its sea denial capabilities, underpinned by its mistrust of Chinese behavior.

Economy

Since the 1986 reforms of the *doi moi* policy, Vietnam's economy has made tremendous gains through its liberalized economy. Its transition from a centrally planned to a mixed market economy has enabled its growth from one of the world's poorest countries to a lower middle-income country. Vietnam's population of 94 million has transitioned from a mostly agrarian society to an urbanized and nascent industrialized economy. Through this progression, Vietnam has lifted over 40 million of its people out of poverty over the past 30 years.⁶⁶ Since 2010, its annual growth rate has averaged 6.5 percent Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and is forecasted to continue this trend, outpacing even China's prospective growth rates.⁶⁷ However, Vietnam remains reliant on Chinese trade and investment to achieve its aims. To diffuse its overreliance on its northern neighbor and provide it more diplomatic leverage, it has sought multilateral trade deals to institutionally bind China to a more level playing field.

Since normalization of their relations in 1992, Chinese trade and investments have spurred Vietnam's economic success.⁶⁸ Vietnam remains highly linked to China's economy as its

⁶⁶ The World Bank Group, *Country Partnership Framework for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for the Period FY18-FY22*, May 4, 2017, 2–6, accessed November 29, 2019, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/173771496368868576/pdf/111771-PUBLIC-Vietnam-FY18-22-CPF-FINAL.pdf>.

⁶⁷ World Bank Group, *Global Economic Prospects: Heightened Tensions, Subdued Investment*, June 2019, 94, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>.

⁶⁸ Thayer, "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea," 351.

number one trade partner, but maintains a lopsided trade imbalance in China’s favor.⁶⁹ The majority of Vietnam’s imports originate from China (27.5 percent), and China is Vietnam’s second largest export market (16.5 percent, with the United States first at 19.3 percent) (see Figure 4).

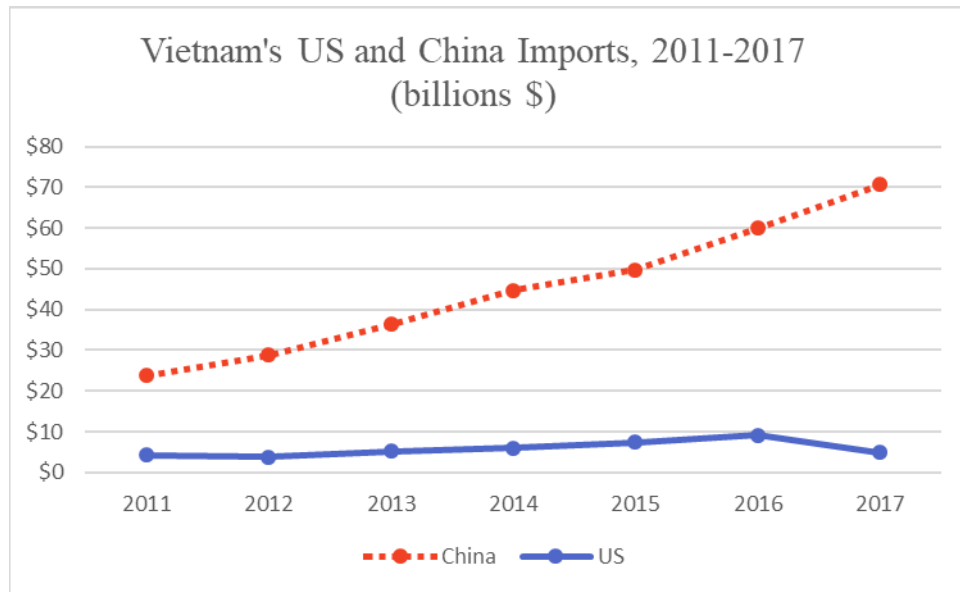


Figure 4. Vietnam’s US and China Imports, 2011-2017. Adapted by the author from information at Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Vietnam Country Profile,” 2019, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/vnm/>.

Additionally, China has continued to grow its economic influence in Vietnam through its Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI). Seeking to expand and modernize its economy, the CPV has welcomed the infrastructure projects to attain better transportation networks. However, it remains concerned that its overreliance on Chinese trade and investments will further limit its ability to engage on territorial disputes, fearing economic repercussions. In one example, in 2018, PetroVietnam ordered the Spanish energy company, Repsol, to halt work on a project off

⁶⁹ The Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Vietnam Country Profile,” 2019, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/vnm/>.

Vietnam's southern coast, costing the company and its partners \$200 million, due to Chinese pressure.⁷⁰

Conflicts over access to off shore drilling sites have persisted over the last decade. Vietnam's modernization efforts and growing middle class have increased its energy demands, increasing potential conflict with China's energy exploration activities.⁷¹ China's aims are twofold: 1) control the South China Sea to secure the shipping lanes where 78 percent of its oil imports are transported; and 2) reduce dependence on foreign crude oil suppliers through hydrocarbon exploration in the South China Sea.⁷² There are potentially \$2.5 trillion worth of hydrocarbons being competed for, which could supply one third of China's oil and natural gas demands.⁷³ China has repeatedly attempted to block non-regional companies from oil exploration, complicating Vietnamese efforts for energy self-sufficiency.⁷⁴

Despite Chinese pressure, Vietnam has continued its energy exploration activities. Its current largest offshore project, Ca Voi Xanh, or "Blue Whale," a joint venture with Exxon Mobil Corporation and its stated owned Vietnam Oil & Gas Group, is located 80 kilometers from Danang and outside of China's 9-dash-line claims. Projected to generate \$20 billion in

⁷⁰ Philip Heijmans and Stephen Stacyszynski, "Exxon's South China Sea Oil Project Tests Chinese Influence," *Bloomberg*, September 23, 2019, accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-23/exxon-s-south-china-sea-oil-project-tests-chinese-influence>.

⁷¹ The World Bank Group, *Vietnam 2035: Toward Prosperity, Creativity, Equity, and Democracy* (Washington, DC, 2016), 42, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23724/VN2035English.pdf>.

⁷² US Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," 12.

⁷³ Guy Taylor, "State Department Accuses China of Muscling Vietnam out of Oil and Gas Exploration," *The Washington Times*, August 22, 2019, accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/aug/22/state-department-accuses-china-muscling-vietnam-ou/>.

⁷⁴ Hui Yee Tan, "Vietnam Digs in on South China Sea Oil and Gas Projects amid Chinese Pressure," *The Straits Times* (Bangkok, Thailand, September 13, 2019), accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/vietnam-digs-in-on-south-china-sea-oil-and-gas-projects-amid-chinese-pressure>.

government revenues, Blue Whale will supply 10 percent of Vietnam's energy demands.⁷⁵ The project remains tenuous, as the CPV is unsure of continued US support to counter Chinese pressure in light of the NSS's America First policy.⁷⁶ With continued competition for offshore oil drilling sites in the South China Sea, coupled with its uncertainty of US long term support, Vietnam has engaged in development of multilateral frameworks to diffuse Chinese pressure.

In 2015, the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) enabled member states to negotiate trade agreements individually or as a whole, creating a complex web of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTA) (see Table 8).⁷⁷ The AEC aims to establish a single market across ASEAN nations, to reduce tariffs and promote shared economic growth.⁷⁸ Vietnam's inclusion in the multiple FTAs will lower trade barriers and increase market access for its goods and services. The recent Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)(which replaced the defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the United States withdrew in 2017) and planned Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will potentially bring dramatic economic benefits to its members.⁷⁹ Vietnam, through ASEAN's multilateral trade agreements with China, has used these institutions to diffuse China's dominant economic advantages. However, China's FTA with ASEAN, as an active participant in RCEP negotiations, has enabled to influence the policies in these institutions. America remains absent from each of these FTAs. Since President Trump came to office, his administration has adopted a

⁷⁵ Heijmans and Stapczynski, "Exxon's South China Sea Oil Project Tests Chinese Influence"; Tan, "Vietnam Digs in on South China Sea Oil and Gas Projects amid Chinese Pressure."

⁷⁶ Gary Sands, "Will China Scuttle Exxon Mobil's South China Sea Gas Project With Vietnam?," *The Diplomat*, November 16, 2017, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/will-china-scuttle-exxonmobils-south-china-sea-gas-project-with-vietnam/>.

⁷⁷ Brian Harding and Kim Mai Tran, *U.S.-Southeast Asia Trade Relations in an Age of Disruption*, CSIS Briefs (Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 2019), 1–2, accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-southeast-asia-trade-relations-age-disruption>.

⁷⁸ US Department of State, *2018 Investment Climate Statements: Vietnam*, July 19, 2018, accessed August 12, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-investment-climate-statements/vietnam/>.

⁷⁹ Harding and Tran, *U.S.-Southeast Asia Trade Relations in an Age of Disruption*, 5–6.

policy of pursuing only bilateral trade agreements.⁸⁰

Table 8. Vietnam Bilateral and Multilateral Free Trade Agreements

Vietnam Bilateral and Multilateral Free Trade Agreements			
Vietnam Bilateral FTAs	ASEAN FTAs with one nation	CPTPP	RCEP
European Free Trade Association	Australia	Australia	ASEAN
European Union	China	Canada	Australia
Israel	Hong Kong	Japan	China
Hong Kong	India	Mexico	Japan
Chile	Japan	New Zealand	New Zealand
Japan	New Zealand	Singapore	South Korea
Eurasian Economic Union		Vietnam	
Republic of Korea		Brunei (pending ratification)	
ASEAN		Chile (pending ratification)	
		Malaysia (pending ratification)	
		Peru (pending ratification)	

Source: Table created by author, adapted from information available through Brian Harding and Kim Mai Tran, *U.S.-Southeast Asia Trade Relations in an Age of Disruption*, CSIS Briefs (Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2019), 3, accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-southeast-asia-trade-relations-age-disruption>.

Though Vietnam has no trade agreements with the United States, it remains an important trade partner. America is its number one export market, helping offset its significant Chinese trade imbalance, resulting in an overall positive trade balance of \$15.7 billion in 2017.⁸¹ The United States has indirectly enabled further Vietnamese opportunities through its trade war with China. The tariffs imposed on Chinese goods pushed companies out of China, relocating across the border in Vietnam to escape the increased US importation costs.⁸² Vietnam’s domestic reforms and focus on high-tech, high-value industries have also made it more appealing to foreign companies. Although the US government has retracted from multilateral trade opportunities in

⁸⁰ Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” 20.

⁸¹ The Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Vietnam Country Profile.”

⁸² Harding and Tran, *U.S.-Southeast Asia Trade Relations in an Age of Disruption*, 8.

Southeast Asia, its private businesses continue to invest in the growing region, benefiting Vietnam's economic aspirations.

Conclusion

Underpinning Vietnam's aims to ensure its autonomy, expand its economy, and ensure the communist regime's survival lies a balanced approach of cooperation. China's aggressive, unilateral actions to acquire its claimed territories in the South China Sea by force has directly infringed on Vietnam's autonomy. To protect its autonomy, Vietnam has sought to diffuse Chinese strength through multilateral economic institutions, shifting its deference to the United States as Asymmetric IR theory expects. However, the CPV continues to rely heavily on economic cooperation with China, preventing overt, sustained criticism of Chinese actions, fearing economic reprisals. Additionally, the American withdrawal from the TPP and its America First policy have brought uncertainty to its economic commitments in the region, preventing any real alternative to China's expansive market. However, the people of Vietnam's hypersensitivity over its territories in the South China Sea and lack of ASEAN unity has increased its reliance on defense diplomacy with American support. Chinese coercion, coupled with American protection of its autonomy, has led Vietnam to change its deference from China to the United States, increasing American influence in the weak power.

Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines has sought a hedging strategy to achieve its strategic goals of security, autonomy, and economic growth.⁸³ Its diplomatic relationships with the United States and China were historically cooperative, but over the past decade, have fluctuated. The 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident began the steady decline of Sino-Philippine relations until the

⁸³ Republic of the Philippines, "2017-2022 National Security Policy for Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People," April 2017, 2–5, accessed October 30, 2019, <http://www.nsc.gov.ph/attachments/article/NSP/NSP-2017-2022.pdf>.

election of President Duterte in 2016. US criticism of Duterte’s “War on Drugs” infringed on Philippine autonomy, pushing them to seek a relationship with a new great power. China capitalized on its support of Duterte’s anti-drug campaign. Duterte, prioritizing economic prosperity with China, marginalized the South China Sea disputes. As China increased its respect of Philippine autonomy, the Philippines shifted its deference from America to China.

For over a century, the Philippines’ relationship with the United States has arguably been the most influential in shaping its identity. After three hundred years of Spanish rule, the United States gained power over the archipelagic state in 1898 upon its victory in the Spanish-American War. The United States consolidated its control of the territory after defeating insurgent Filipino forces to end the Philippines War in 1902. In World War II, the United States liberated the Philippines from the Japanese, leading to the state’s independence in 1946. After relinquishing administrative control, the United States remained heavily involved in the Philippines.⁸⁴ It has been the historical guarantor of the Philippines’ security in the region through the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty.⁸⁵ The United States has provided funding and advice to combat communists and Islamic insurgents from the 1960s to the present day. It has continued to support its close ally until their relationship peaked under President Benigno Aquino (2010-2016) in the face of rising Chinese aggression.⁸⁶

At the heart of the tensions between China and the Philippines, lay the Spratly Islands. Located in the center of the South China Sea, nine hundred nautical miles to the south of the Chinese island of Hainan and 120 nautical miles to the west of the Philippine island of Palawan,

⁸⁴ Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*, 121–123.

⁸⁵ US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, June 1, 2019, 37–38.

⁸⁶ Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*, 128–129.

they consist of more than 235 features covering an area of over 250,000 square kilometers.⁸⁷ The vast continental shelf they cover is a source of potentially enormous oil and natural gas reservoirs. China, Taiwan, and Vietnam claim the entirety of the Spratly Islands, and the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei claim portions of the archipelago.⁸⁸

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the numerous claimants began extracting resources from the seabed within their claimed EEZs, leading to tension and conflict over the territories and surrounding waters.⁸⁹ With the realization of potential hydrocarbon resources, the Philippines government officially claimed them in 1971, when it publicly announced its occupation of a portion of the islands. The ongoing tensions between China and the Philippines rose in 1994, when China occupied Mischief Reef, a Philippine-claimed, submerged feature in the Spratly Islands. The Philippines' military forces discovered Chinese-built structures on Mischief Reef in 1995, and since Chinese occupation, numerous incidents, including exchanged naval gunfire and the sinking of fishing vessels, have occurred.⁹⁰

The most significant incident occurred in 2012 over the Scarborough Shoal, located approximately 12 nautical miles west of Luzon and 800 nautical miles from the Chinese mainland. After the Philippine Navy boarded a Chinese vessel to arrest the fishermen illegally fishing in Scarborough, a two-month standoff ensued between the Philippine Navy and two Chinese surveillance vessels. The United States diplomatically intervened to deescalate the

⁸⁷ Dong Manh Nguyen, *Settlement of Disputes under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: The Case of the South China Sea Dispute* (New York: UN-Nippon Foundation, December 2005), 9, accessed December 12, 2019, https://www.un.org/depts/los/nippon/uniff_programme_home/fellows_pages/fellows_papers/nguyen_0506_vietnam.pdf.

⁸⁸ O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, 6.

⁸⁹ Jones and Jenne, "Weak States' Regionalism: ASEAN and the Limits of Security Cooperation in Pacific Asia," 226.

⁹⁰ Tongfi Kim, *Sino-Philippine Disputes and the US-Philippines Alliance*, US Alliance Obligations in the Disputes in the East and South China Sea (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2016), 15–16, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14540.5>.

situation and brokered an agreement for both nations to withdrawal from the area. However, only the Philippines complied with the verbal agreement. China remained at Scarborough Shoal and cordoned off parts of it to prevent the Philippines access.⁹¹

In response to the incident, the Philippine administration submitted a case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague to dispute China's maritime claims. China refused to participate in the proceedings.⁹² In July 2016, the international tribunal stated that China's nine-dash line claims to areas overlapping the Philippines' EEZ had no legal basis. China declared the verdict "null and void."⁹³ Although a tremendous legal victory, the newly elected President Duterte sought not to enforce the ruling as a gesture of deference to China to gain closer economic cooperation.⁹⁴

President Duterte's "War on Drugs" and China's continued expansion in the South China Sea have principally undermined the United States-Philippines relationship. Duterte's vow to eliminate illegal drugs from the Philippines gained him nation-wide support during his presidential campaign, enabling his political victory in 2016 and has become a cornerstone for his domestic policy in his administration. The United States has repeatedly condemned the violent, indiscriminate tactics by the Duterte regime, claiming human rights abuses and withholding financial aid. Unphased by the criticism and withheld support, Duterte has continued to pursue the brutal tactics, perceiving the United States as interfering with domestic affairs. However, China has praised Duterte's efforts. In 2018, it released a joint statement where it stated, "its firm

⁹¹ Sainath Patrick Panjetti, "Preserving Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea Nad the Strategic Significance of the Philippines to U.S. Maritime Strategy" (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2016), 22.

⁹² Kim, *Sino-Philippine Disputes and the US-Philippines Alliance*, 16.

⁹³ Thomas Lum and Ben Dolven, "The Philippines" (Congressional Research Service, August 5, 2019), accessed December 23, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10250>.

⁹⁴ Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, and Ronald O'Rourke, "South China Sea Disputes: Background and U.S. Policy" (Congressional Research Service, February 23, 2017), accessed January 1, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10607>.

support to the Philippine government's efforts in fighting illicit drugs and drug-related crimes, and express willingness to strengthen cooperation."⁹⁵

China's support for the Philippines' "War on Drugs" has successfully moved the Philippines closer to their sphere of influence, where China has gained a more cooperative partner in its pursuit to cement its ownership of the South China Sea. This radical shift in its relationships with China and America is remarkable in its stark contrast to the previous relationships under the Aquino administration. Until 2016, the Philippines were one of the staunchest challengers to China's South China Sea claims.

Diplomacy

The Philippines has used bilateral and multilateral engagements with America, China, and ASEAN, respectively, to further its aims. Though Duterte has distanced his nation from the United States, he has continued to maintain a reduced level of defense ties to the nation. Not blind to China's efforts to potentially encroach on Philippine sovereignty, Duterte has continued security cooperation with America as a form of insurance.

Bilateral Diplomacy: United States

Following its independence in 1946, the Philippines forged its alliance with the United States through the signing of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). The MDT states "an armed attack in the Pacific Area on either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common dangers."⁹⁶ With its external security provided by the United States, the Philippines could focus its attention inward to secure its sprawling,

⁹⁵ Lopega, "On President Rodrigo Duterte's 'War on Drugs': Its Impact on Philippine-China Relations," 156.

⁹⁶ "Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines; August 30, 1951" (Yale Law School, 2008), accessed January 7, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/ph il001.asp.

archipelagic territories from communist and terrorist threats.⁹⁷ Without a significant external threat coupled with domestic pressure, the Philippine Senate revoked the Military Bases Agreement, forcing the United States to close its bases in 1992.⁹⁸ However, this changed after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In 2002, the United States deployed hundreds of Special Operations Forces to support Philippines’ counterinsurgency operations against Al Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups in Mindanao, significantly increasing defense cooperation between the two nations.⁹⁹ A decade later, with the rise of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, the Philippines, under President Benigno Aquino III, sought to further bolster its security assurances. With the Obama administration’s 2011 “Pivot to the Pacific” policy in effect, the United States readily obliged with the signing of the 2011 Manila Declaration and 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (see Table 9).¹⁰⁰ In its domestic policies, the United States saw a reliable partner in President Aquino, as he sought to improve his nation’s track record on corruption and human rights violations, working to reform his nation’s judicial system to decrease extrajudicial killings by his police force.¹⁰¹ However, with the election of President Duterte in 2016, this all changed.

Table 9. US-Philippines Significant Diplomatic Agreements

U.S.-Philippines Significant Diplomatic Agreements	
Treaty	Significance
1951- Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT)	An armed attack against either nation’s territory, armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific warrants a response by both nations
1998- Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)	Allowed joint Philippines-US military operations, but prevented establishment of permanent bases
2011- Manila Declaration	Reaffirmed the bilateral security relationship and called for multilateral talks to resolve maritime disputes in the region
2014- Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement	Allowed for increased presence of US military

⁹⁷ Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*, 122–123.

⁹⁸ Thomas Lum and Ben Dolven, *The Republic of the Philippines and U.S. Interests- 2014* (Congressional Research Service, May 15, 2014), 11, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43498>.

⁹⁹ Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*, 128–129.

¹⁰⁰ Lum and Dolven, *The Republic of the Philippines and U.S. Interests- 2014*, 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

(EDCA)	forces, ships, aircraft, and equipment in the Philippines and greater US access to Philippine bases
2018- Asia Reassurance Initiative Act	Developed a long-term, strategic vision and a comprehensive United States policy to support Indo-Pacific allies and partners through a whole of government approach. Provides \$1.5 billion a year from 2019-2023

Source: Table created by author, adapted from information available through *Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018*, vol. 5387, 2018, 1–5, accessed January 17, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ409/PLAW-115publ409.pdf>; Lum and Dolven, *The Republic of the Philippines and U.S. Interests- 2014*, 1–11.

President Duterte won the 2016 election primarily through his “War on Drugs” policy. In a 2017 Pew research poll, 78 percent of Filipinos approved Duterte’s handling of illegal drugs and 86 percent had a favorable view of their president.¹⁰² However, Duterte’s promotion of extrajudicial killings of accused drug dealers and users quickly received condemnation from President Obama.¹⁰³ Duterte responded to the criticism at the 2016 ASEAN conference stating, “I am no American puppet. I am the president of a sovereign country and I am not answerable to anyone except the Filipino people. Your mother’s a whore.”¹⁰⁴ A month later, Duterte again disparaged the United States as he stated, “Do not treat us like a doormat because you’ll be sorry for it. I will not speak with you. I can always go to China.”¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, in February 2020, President Duterte announced that he would end the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement. This was in response to the United States’ revocation of the visa for Duterte’s former police chief, Ronald

¹⁰² Jacob Poushter and Caldwell Bishop, *People in the Philippines Still Favor U.S. Over China, but Gap Is Narrowing* (Pew Research Center, September 21, 2017), accessed November 27, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/09/21/people-in-the-philippines-still-favor-u-s-over-china-but-gap-is-narrowing/>.

¹⁰³ Lopega, “On President Rodrigo Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’: Its Impact on Philippine-China Relations,” 141.

¹⁰⁴ Alfred W. McCoy, “A Rupture in Philippine-U.S. Relations: Geopolitical Implications,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 4 (November 2016): 1049.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1050.

Dela Rosa, due to his implication in the extrajudicial killings during Duterte's war on drugs.¹⁰⁶

As the cracks in their relationship continue, China has moved to quickly fill them.

Bilateral Diplomacy: China

China and the Philippines formally established their diplomatic relationship with the signing of the 1975 Joint Communiqué. Since then, the two countries' relationship has steadily grown and fostered further economic cooperation, shelving their territorial disputes.¹⁰⁷ However, under President Aquino, their relationship quickly deteriorated as the Philippine government authorized increased exploration activities in the Spratly Islands and took the bold step of renaming the entire area the West Philippine Sea. These activities ultimately led to the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, where China gained physical control of the disputed territory.¹⁰⁸ As a result, Aquino's administration brought its case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration and ultimately won the legal battle in 2016. However, during the PCA's proceedings, China accelerated its island dredging activities and retaliated with coercive economic policies, excluding the Philippines from its Belt and Road project and decreased imports from the Philippines. However, their relationship drastically changed with the election of President Duterte.¹⁰⁹

"I announce my separation from the United States, both in military, but economics also." These comments by President Duterte in October 2016 at the Philippine-Chinese trade forum in Beijing brought loud applause from the Chinese audience.¹¹⁰ President Duterte's abrupt shift in

¹⁰⁶ Adam Taylor, "The Philippines' Duterte Is Trying to Trump Trump," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2020, accessed February 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/13/philippines-duterte-is-trying-trump-trump/>.

¹⁰⁷ Amado M. Mendoza and Richard Javad, *The Philippines, ASEAN-China Free Trade Area* (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2012), 58, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05889.9>.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Kreuzer, *Dealing with China in the South China Sea* (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2018), 7–11, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19996.6>.

¹⁰⁹ Kreuzer, *Dealing with China*, 11–15.

¹¹⁰ McCoy, "A Rupture in Philippine-U.S. Relations: Geopolitical Implications," 1049.

Philippine strategy prioritized economic prosperity and domestic autonomy over its territorial disputes with China. He ignored the PCA's ruling and reestablished diplomatic communications through high-level visits. Subsequently, the two governments began talks on joint exploration for hydrocarbons in the disputed South China Sea waters.¹¹¹ China responded positively through increasing imports from the Philippines and including the Philippines in the Belt and Road project through the funding of numerous infrastructure projects in the country.¹¹² China continued to express support for Duterte's "War on Drugs," praising his protection of human rights.¹¹³ Through support of Duterte's domestic agenda, increased economic cooperation, and shelving territorial disputes, China has gained significant favor with the current Philippine administration, creating further separation from the United States.

Multilateral Diplomacy

The Philippines' 2018 National Security Strategy stated the Philippines "will continue to draw on our strong position in the ASEAN to sustain meaningful diplomatic relations and exercise an independent foreign policy anchored on international law."¹¹⁴ Principally, the Philippines aim to use ASEAN as a mechanism to diffuse interstate tensions and conflicts.¹¹⁵ Its focus on supporting the development of the South China Sea Code of Conduct between ASEAN and China provides an indirect mechanism for the Philippines to reinforce its maritime claims without incurring Chinese reprisals. China has positively responded, stating it "stands ready to

¹¹¹ Raissa Robles, "Duterte's South China Sea U-Turn: Illegal Climbdown, or Clever Gambit for Oil?," *South China Morning Post*, September 11, 2019, accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/print/week-asia/politics/article/3026795/dutertes-south-china-sea-u-turn-illegal-climbdown-or-cleverPrintout>.

¹¹² Kreuzer, *Dealing with China in the South China Sea*, 16–21.

¹¹³ Lopega, "On President Rodrigo Duterte's 'War on Drugs': Its Impact on Philippine-China Relations," 138–139.

¹¹⁴ Republic of the Philippines, "National Security Strategy: Security and Development for Transformational Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People," April 2018, ii.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

continue to work with relevant parties to vigorously advance the consultation on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.”¹¹⁶

Information

American credibility has deteriorated due to its criticism of Duterte’s anti-drug campaign and ambiguous stance in its Mutual Defense Treaty obligations. China, however, has gained credibility through its commitment to reestablish economic cooperation as President Duterte downplayed their territorial disputes. The perceptions of the United States and China by Filipinos remains strongly influenced by President Duterte. His high domestic approval rating has enabled him to take risks with the Philippines’ foreign policy, distancing his administration from the United States and cooperating with China. In a Pew research poll, the Filipino people’s favorable view of the United States fell from 92 percent in 2015 to 78 percent in 2017.¹¹⁷ The United States’ credibility as a protector remains in question as to whether it would fulfill its MDT obligations if China attacked the disputed territories in the South China Sea. China, on the other hand, has eased its pressure in the South China Sea since President Duterte began cooperating with Xi Jinping, where Chinese actions have matched its words, increasing its credibility and influence.

The United States’ lack of perceived commitment to fulfill its MDT obligations has brought into question US reliability. The signing of the 1951 MDT between the United States and the Philippines predated the Philippines’ acquisition of territories in the South China Sea. The United States has adopted a neutral position in regard to South China Sea territorial integrity to promote bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to address the disputes. With its stated neutrality, it

¹¹⁶ Kreuzer, *Dealing with China in the South China Sea*, 23.

¹¹⁷ Poushter and Bishop, *People in the Philippines Still Favor U.S. Over China, but Gap Is Narrowing*.

has become unclear if the American MDT obligations pertain to the disputed South China Sea territories. The United States has not acknowledged Philippine jurisdiction over them.¹¹⁸

In 2012, the United States negotiated the withdrawal of Chinese and Philippine forces from Scarborough Shoal. However, the Chinese reneged on the agreement and maintained its naval vessels in the area to the United States' embarrassment. Furthermore, in 2016 when the PCA ruled against China, America took no action to enforce the ruling. These two significant incidents undermined perceived American resolve to protect the Philippines, providing President Duterte justification to criticize and distance his administration from the United States.¹¹⁹ With waning American influence, the United States has attempted to reassure its ally. In March 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated, "As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our mutual defense treaty."¹²⁰

Despite these assurances, an additional concern for the Philippine government is that the MDT could potentially drag the Philippines into an unwanted conflict with China. The Philippines' Defense Secretary, Delfin Lorenzana, stated the MDT needed to be re-examined to make it less ambiguous and prevent the Philippines from "being involved in a war that we do not seek and do not want."¹²¹ All of these factors have changed the perception of the MDT from a deterrent to escalation into a potential liability.

¹¹⁸ Kim, *Sino-Philippine Disputes and the US-Philippines Alliance*, 17-18.

¹¹⁹ James E. Fanell, "China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure," *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 10-55, 30-31.

¹²⁰ Regine Cabato and Shibani Mahtani, "Pompeo Promises Intervention If Philippines Is Attacked in South China Sea amid Rising Chinese Militarization," *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2019, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pompeo-promises-intervention-if-philippines-is-attacked-in-south-china-sea-amid-rising-chinese-militarization/2019/02/28/5288768a-3b53-11e9-b10b-f05a22e75865_story.html.

¹²¹ Jim Gomez, "Philippines Worried It May Get Involved in War at Sea for US," *The Canadian Press*, March 5, 2019, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.lumen.cgscarl.com/ehost/detail?vid=4&sid=92563a39-df01-4453-bd84-f5c737f1e817%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=MYO186530170219&db=n5h>.

Chinese credibility significantly increased in the wake of de-escalation over its maritime disputes. Early in President Duterte's presidency bilateral communications were reestablished. President Duterte and his staff began regular engagements with Xi Jinping and his high-level officials. As China continued to militarily develop its established reefs, atolls, and islands in the Philippines' EEZ, President Duterte perceived them in a different light. A presidential spokesman stated, "As long as there is no reclamation of new islets or reefs, then we continue to respect that they are true to their commitment."¹²² Additionally, Sino-Philippine law enforcement incidents, which had been increasing from 2013 to 2016, dramatically fell starting in the second half of 2016. Finally, China increased its economic cooperation with the Philippines on multiple fronts (which will be covered further in the next section). The totality of China's actions increased its credibility, as it decreased its hostile behavior over territorial claims and significantly increased its diplomatic and economic cooperation.¹²³

The Duterte administration's perception of a reliable partner dramatically shifted from the United States to China. American uncertainty to protect Philippine sovereignty, coupled with its increased potential for conflict with China has made the Philippines relationship with the United States a liability. Since President Duterte came to power, his administration's deference to the PRC over the South China Sea territorial disputes diffused tensions and created a cooperative atmosphere where both nations have benefited. Though the majority of Filipino's still have a favorable view of the United States, its lack of commitment to the security of the nation has damaged its credibility and enabled the Duterte administration to cooperate more closely with China.

¹²² Kreuzer, *Dealing with China in the South China Sea*, 18.

¹²³ Kreuzer, *Dealing with China in the South China Sea*, 16-24.

Military

Though the Duterte administration has aligned more closely with China, American military forces continue to provide insurance against potential Chinese aggression through freedom of navigation operations. The Philippines' 2018 National Security Strategy states the "dispute over the West Philippine Sea (WPS) remains to be the foremost security challenge to the Philippines' sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹²⁴ This recognition has shifted focus from its internal threats such as the Islamic terrorist groups in its southern island of Mindanao and the Communist Party of the Philippines.¹²⁵

This is a noteworthy shift from a very real threat. As recently as 2017, American forces supported the Philippine defeat of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) aligned fighters after their capture of the city of Malawi.¹²⁶ Though President Duterte has sought to distance himself diplomatically from the United States, he and his administration have continued to rely on an American presence in the South China Sea. However, his recent termination of the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement further demonstrated Duterte's deference toward China and his frustration with American interference in his nation's domestic interests.¹²⁷

In September 2016, President Duterte stated to the United States that, "I will establish new alliances for trade and commerce, and you are scheduled to hold war games again, which China does not want. I will serve notice to you now that this will be the last military exercise."¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Republic of the Philippines, "National Security Strategy: Security and Development for Transformational Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People," 13.

¹²⁵ Republic of the Philippines, "National Security Strategy," 3, 31.

¹²⁶ US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, 37.

¹²⁷ Nick Aspinwall, "Duterte Terminates U.S. Defense Pact, Pleasing Trump but Few Others," *Foreign Policy* (Taipei, Republic of China, February 14, 2020), accessed February 27, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/14/vfa-philippines-china-duterte-terminates-us-defense-pact-trump/>.

¹²⁸ Andrew V. Pestano, "Philippines' Duterte Ending Joint U.S. Military Drills; Foreign Secretary Disputes," *UPI Top News* (Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2016), accessed January 23, 2020, <http://web.archive.org/web/20160929100000/http://www.ups.com/ehost/delivery?sid=c42b10f6-f80b-44aa-8701-51b7237820d0%40sessionmgr4006&vid=1>

However, his administration quickly backtracked, claiming the statement was taken out of context. Regardless, the annual United States-Philippine joint military exercise, Balikatan, became significantly scaled down in 2017. It focused only on humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) and counter terrorism operations, excluding traditional territorial defense operations and maritime security.¹²⁹

Due to its long-term reliance on US security through the MDT and internal focus, the Philippine maritime and air capabilities remain inadequate. Its army is roughly three times the size of its naval forces, a significant shortfall to protect the archipelagic nation consisting of over 7,100 islands.¹³⁰ Duterte's administration has recognized its capability shortfalls, requiring to "increase the size and deterrent capability of the Navy and Air Force as quickly as possible to serve as our external defense, protect our national territory and Economic Exclusion Zone, and modernize all branches of the armed forces."¹³¹ The Philippines have sought to increase its defense spending to provide a credible deterrent to potential increased Chinese hostility. The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement has remained in effect under Duterte, allowing the rotational presence of US forces, ships, and aircraft at Philippine bases.¹³² However, Duterte's

1&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2fweb.a.ebscohost.com%2fhost%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d10%26sid%3dc42b10f6-f80b-44aa-8701-51b7237820d0%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJnNpdGU9ZW hvc3Qt bGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl.

¹²⁹ Thomas Adamson, "Philippines, US Begin Smaller-Scale Joint Military Exercises," *AP English Worldstream* (Manila, Philippines, May 8, 2017), accessed January 23, 2020, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=c42b10f6-f80b-44aa-8701-51b7237820d0%40sessionmgr4006&vid=9&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2fweb.a.ebscohost.com%2fhost%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d8%26sid%3dc42b10f6-f80b-44aa-8701-51b7237820d0%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJnNpdGU9ZW hvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl>.

¹³⁰ Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 126–132.

¹³¹ Republic of the Philippines, "National Security Strategy: Security and Development for Transformational Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People," 25.

¹³² Lum and Dolven, "The Philippines."

termination of the in 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement in February 2020 potentially increases the risk of the termination of all previous defense agreements, including the MDT.¹³³

Philippine defense spending has consistently remained insufficient, where its highest spending year in 2016 reached 1.43 percent of GDP, a total of \$4.358 billion, falling to \$3.77 billion in 2018. To overcome its ally's meager defense budget, the United States has sought to modernize the Philippines' capabilities through multiple approaches. In fiscal years 2018 and 2019, America provided over \$270 million to increase security cooperation and Philippine military modernization. Additionally, the US Department of State provided \$60 million in security assistance through the US Department of Defense (DoD) Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative and American foreign military training has nearly doubled since 2014 (see Figure 5).¹³⁴ The United States has used part of the DoD's five-year, \$425 million 2015 Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative to improve the Philippines maritime capabilities and conduct freedom of navigation patrols.¹³⁵ Finally, the United States recently partnered with the Armed Forces of the Philippines in a fifteen-year modernization upgrade to increase its defense capabilities in maritime security, intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR), and aviation.¹³⁶

¹³³ Nick Aspinwall, "Duterte Terminates U.S. Defense Pact, Pleasing Trump but Few Others," *Foreign Policy* (Taipei, Republic of China, February 14, 2020), accessed February 27, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/14/vfa-philippines-china-duterte-terminates-us-defense-pact-trump/>.

¹³⁴ Aspinwall, "Duterte Terminates U.S. Defense Pact, Pleasing Trump but Few Others."

¹³⁵ Dolven, Lawrence, and O'Rourke, "South China Sea Disputes: Background and U.S. Policy."

¹³⁶ US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, 37–38.

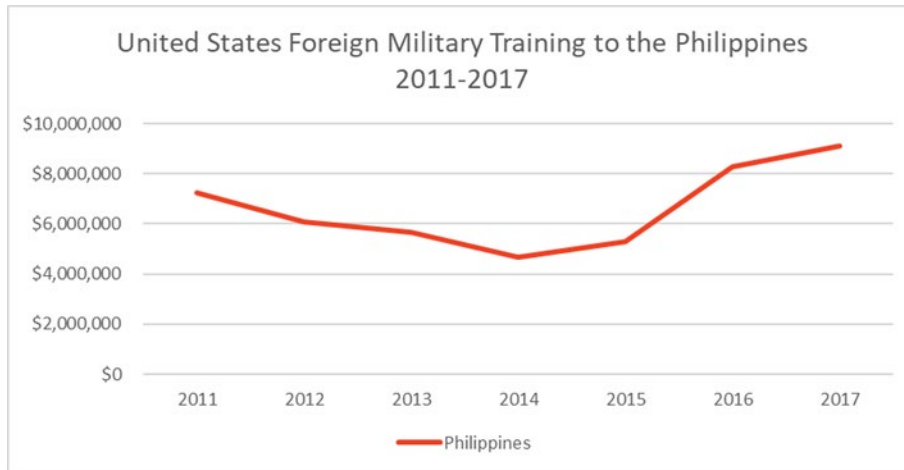


Figure 5. United States Foreign Military Training to the Philippines, 2011-2017. Figure created by author, data available through US Department of Defense and US Department of State, *Foreign Military Training Report* (Washington, DC, 2011-2018).

American security cooperation under Duterte has increased in size and scope since 2017. That year, the United States supported Philippine forces during Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines to combat terrorists in Mindanao. The Philippines had 280 planned bilateral defense activities with the United States in 2019 and hosted the largest number of bilateral exercises with the United States in all of INDO-PACOM.¹³⁷ Additionally, the 2019 Balikatan joint military exercise reestablished amphibious operations training with 7,500 participants from the Philippines, United States, and Australia.¹³⁸

As the Philippines maintained security cooperation with the United States, it remained focused on a balanced approach to demonstrate its deference to China. The Philippines participated in the first ever 2018 China-ASEAN Joint Maritime Exercise, focusing on de-escalating unexpected encounters at sea. However, their security cooperation has focused

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Lum and Dolven, “The Philippines”; Prashanth Parameswaran, “What Does the 2019 Balikatan Exercise Tell US About the US-Philippines Alliance?” *The Diplomat*, April 1, 2019, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/what-does-the-2019-balikatan-exercise-tell-us-about-the-us-philippines-alliance/>.

primarily on the Philippines' internal threats.¹³⁹ In 2017, China offered support to assist in Duterte's "War on Drugs," providing weapons for Philippine forces.¹⁴⁰ and has continued to provide military assistance to combat terrorist groups in the southern Philippines.¹⁴¹

American funding and its forward presence have insured Philippine security from both external and internal threats. As President Duterte has continued to cooperate with China and table the territorial conflicts, the United States has insured against potential Chinese escalation. Without American assistance, Duterte's administration may potentially increase its vulnerabilities to Chinese pressure over territorial issues, putting its sovereignty and autonomy at risk. However, the Philippines termination of the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) severely limits American security cooperation, evidence of its increased deference toward China.

Economy

The continued growth of the Philippine economy lays at the heart of President Duterte's national interests. It underpins his principal aims to increase the Philippines self-sufficiency, quality of life, and security.¹⁴² His economic strategy relies heavily on continued economic cooperation with and investment from China. However, his administration has sought to diffuse China's economic advantage through its inclusion in ASEAN's Free Trade Agreements and pursuit of new foreign investors.

¹³⁹ US Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," 25.

¹⁴⁰ Lopega, "On President Rodrigo Duterte's 'War on Drugs': Its Impact on Philippine-China Relations," 156.

¹⁴¹ Genalyn Kabiling, "PH Pushes for Intensified Military, Defense Cooperation with China," *Manila Bulletin* (Boao, China, April 11, 2018), accessed January 23, 2020, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2018/04/10/ph-pushes-for-intensified-military-defense-cooperation-with-china/>.

¹⁴² Republic of the Philippines, "2017-2022 National Security Policy for Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People," 2-5.

The Philippine economy has continued to expand at a high rate under President Duterte, with GDP growth of 6.9 in 2016 and 6.7 percent in 2017, second only to China in the region.¹⁴³ China is the largest trading partner of the Philippines, with 20 percent of its export market (\$20 billion) and 21 percent of its imports (\$21.9 billion) in 2017. The Philippines has remained reliant on access to China's market for trade materials and manufacturing of electronic goods, both its top import and export.¹⁴⁴ After tabling the South China Sea disputes, China rewarded Duterte's deference with increased trade and \$24 billion of cheap loans for infrastructure projects, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (see Figure 6).¹⁴⁵ The Philippines' economic progress and Chinese loans directly support Duterte's ambitious, six year, \$180 billion "build, build, build" infrastructure program.¹⁴⁶ The program aims to further propel the Philippine economy by bringing about a "golden age of infrastructure."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ World Bank Group, *Global Economic Prospects: Heightened Tensions, Subdued Investment*, 94.

¹⁴⁴ "Philippines Country Profile" (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2019), accessed January 23, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/phl/>.

¹⁴⁵ Parag Khanna, *The Future Is Asian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 124.

¹⁴⁶ Irene Chan, *Current Trends in Southeast Asian Responses to the Belt and the Road Initiative, ASEAN and the Indian Ocean: The Key Maritime Links* (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2017), 48, accessed December 14, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05888.10>.

¹⁴⁷ Cliff Venzon, "Duterte Shelves Chinese Projects but Still Pushes 'Build, Build, Build,'" *Nikkei Asian Review* (Manila, Philippines, November 15, 2019), accessed January 23, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Duterte-shelves-Chinese-projects-but-still-pushes-Build-Build-Build>.

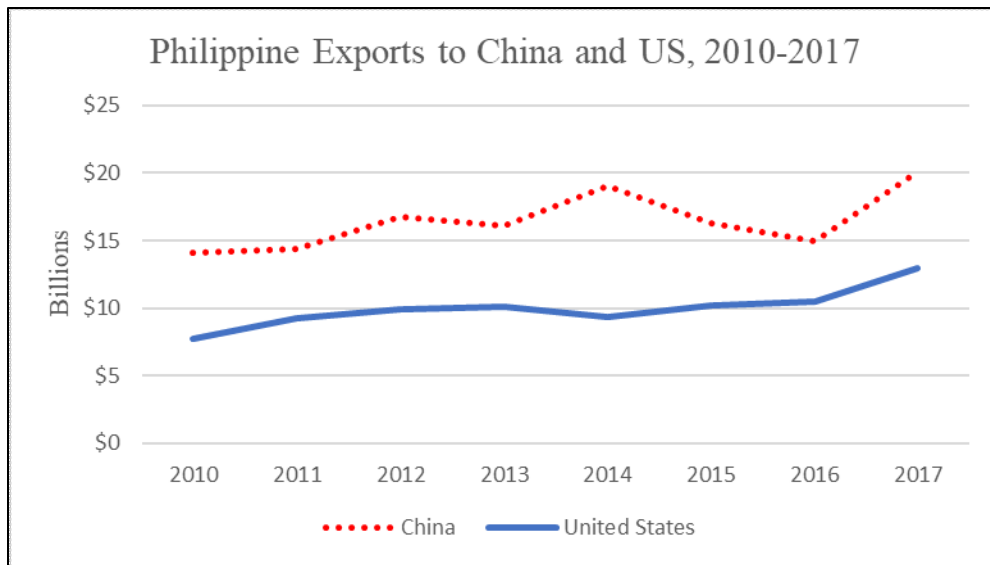


Figure 6. Philippine Exports to China and US, 2010-2017. Adapted by the author from information at The Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Philippines Country Profile,” 2019, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/visualize/line/hs92/export/phl/show/all/2010.2017/>.

Additionally, Duterte has sought joint hydrocarbon exploration with China within the Philippines’ EEZ. After discussions with Chinese officials, Duterte stated that they would be “gracious enough” to grant the Philippines a 60 percent share of the deal on joint exploration, further demonstrating his willingness to table territorial disputes to ensure continued economic cooperation.¹⁴⁸

With its opposition to multilateral trade agreements as part of its America First policy, the United States continues to lose opportunities to participate in Asian economic institutions. China’s participation, on the other hand, has assured its regional economic influence (see table 8). The Philippines has continued to benefit economically from its ASEAN membership through institutional FTAs.

Though the United States is absent from these institutional mechanisms, it has maintained a stable bilateral trade relationship with the Philippines, importing \$12.6 billion in 2018 (up 8.4

¹⁴⁸ Robles, “Duterte’s South China Sea U-Turn: Illegal Climbdown, or Clever Gambit for Oil?”

percent from 2017) and exporting \$8.7 billion (up 3.0 percent from 2017).¹⁴⁹ It is also one of the Philippines biggest investors, investing \$8.3 billion in 2017, compared to China’s \$2.2 billion.¹⁵⁰ Though the United States has maintained a steady economic relationship, it has lacked the ability to substantially offset Chinese influence due to its failure to engage in multilateral trade deals.

Table 10. Philippines Bilateral and Multilateral Free Trade Agreements

Philippines Bilateral and Multilateral Free Trade Agreements		
Philippines Bilateral FTAs	ASEAN FTAs with one nation	RCEP
Japan	Australia	ASEAN
European Free Trade Association	China	Australia
European Union	Hong Kong India Japan New Zealand	China Japan New Zealand South Korea

Source: Table created by author, adapted from information available through Brian Harding and Kim Mai Tran, *U.S.-Southeast Asia Trade Relations in an Age of Disruption*, CSIS Briefs (Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 2019), 3, accessed October 28, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-southeast-asia-trade-relations-age-disruption>.

President Duterte’s desire to maintain his country’s tremendous economic growth has become the predominant driver in his foreign policy. China rewarded his effective cessation of the disputed South China Sea islands with closer economic cooperation in volume of trade, joint exploration activities, and cheap loans. The United States’ failure to engage in multilateral trade agreements has limited its influence, relegating it to bilateral trade agreements that pale in comparison to the Chinese bilateral and multilateral trade volume.

Conclusion

The United States’ perceived interference in the Philippines’ domestic policies degraded their mature asymmetric relationship. Through public condemnation of Duterte’s “War on Drugs”

¹⁴⁹ US Trade Representative, *U.S.-Philippines Trade Facts* (Washington, DC, 2020), accessed January 30, 2020, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/philippines>.

¹⁵⁰ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Foreign Investments in the Philippines* (Quezon City, Philippines, February 22, 2018), 29, accessed February 4, 2020, <https://www.psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/Fourth%20Quarter%202017%20Foreign%20Investments%20Report.pdf>.

and withdrawal of financial aid, Duterte's administration sought to hedge against the United States through a stronger relationship with China. Duterte's willingness to not pursue the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitrations' ruling over its South China Sea claims eased tensions with China, offering a deferential olive branch to enable their economic cooperation. The Chinese support of Duterte's "War on Drugs" and decreased levels of conflict in and around Scarborough Shoal demonstrate the China's willingness to respect Philippine autonomy, increasing their credibility as a benevolent hegemon.

As diplomatic and economic cooperation strengthen between the PRC and the Philippines, the United States' only remaining leverage remains in its security cooperation. Realizing the importance of the US military's presence in the area as insurance against potential, renewed Chinese aggression, Duterte walked back from his initial statements to remove the US military presence from his country. However, ambiguity on whether the United States would come to aid the Philippines with the current Mutual Defense Treaty has failed to reassure the Philippine government. With tensions in the South China Sea reduced and seeking not to upset its continued economic growth, the Philippine government continues to distance itself from the United States to benefit from Chinese economic cooperation.

Challenges, Opportunities, and Risks

Challenges

The challenges presented between both Vietnam and the Philippines have unique aspects to each nation, and in other cases, similarities. The most significant challenge remains how to regain influence in the Philippines. American criticism of Duterte's extrajudicial killings of his citizens created a significant rift in their relationship and provided justification to align closer with China. The MDT with the Philippines remains somewhat ambiguous as to whether the United States would come to the Philippines' defense and is increasingly viewed as a liability. With this uncertainty, the Philippines have opted to reduce its opposition to Chinese expansion in

the South China Sea, where it received improved economic cooperation. Vietnam's "three no's" policy prevents an American alliance and permanent presence to increase security cooperation in the face of continued Chinese incursions.

A similar challenge for American influence in both Vietnam and the Philippines remains their reliance on access to the Chinese economy. Fearing reprisals, they each must continue to demonstrate a level of deference toward China. Additionally, American absence from the multilateral economic institutions in the Pacific has enabled China, as an active participant, to further influence trade policies to its benefit.

Opportunities

As criticism against the Philippines has failed to alter its behavior on the "War on Drugs," the United States can adopt an indirect approach to assist in pursuing a more legitimate anti-drug campaign. American support of anti-terrorism operations is a successful example, where Special Operations Forces advised Philippine during the conduct of stability activities. President Duterte's Vice President Leni Robredo, a member of Duterte's opposition party and elected separately to office, publicly chastised the "War on Drugs" as a failure.¹⁵¹ Numerous US agencies, to include the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and US Agency for International Development (USAID), have met with Philippine government officials to offer assistance and develop a more humanitarian approach to the anti-drug campaign. Both Duterte and the United States could potentially benefit, providing further American resources to legitimize and demonstrate progress toward Duterte's aims. The increased cooperation could provide additional in-roads for US influence to demonstrate its aim to protect Philippine autonomy.

¹⁵¹ Jim Gomez, "Duterte's Drug War a Failure, Says Philippines Vice President," *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2020, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/dutertes-drug-war-a-failure-says-philippines-vice-president/>.

To reduce uncertainty and assure the Philippines of the United States' commitment to its security, the United States should seriously consider reviewing and redesigning the Mutual Defense Treaty for the benefit of both nations. The United States can signal its resolve to the Philippines through less ambiguous statements on when it would aid its ally. Furthermore, the United States could soften the language of the Article 4 commitments by the Philippines, where an attack on the United States in the Pacific would not necessarily require a Philippine response. In return, the United States could broker a treaty with firm assurances of permanent access to Philippine bases. A new MDT would achieve aims within the interest of both parties: assured access for the United States and reduced uncertainty of US resolve to defend its ally.

For Vietnam, the increased levels of security cooperation and the lifting of the 2016 lethal weapons ban opened new avenues for further cooperation. With Vietnam's emphasis on development of its maritime capabilities, the United States has the opportunity to increase its influence by increasing the complexity and frequency of bilateral and multinational exercises. Additionally, through increased foreign military sales and training assistance, the United States can further demonstrate its commitment to the CPV's protection of its territorial integrity.

Finally, the United States has the opportunity to influence both nations through participation in the multiple, multilateral economic institutions that both nations are a part of. The United States' inclusion can diffuse Chinese influence over institutions such as the CPTPP and RCEP. Additionally, through an institutional binding, further trans-governmental connections can create a "spillover" effect. With the United States "locked in," the institution's policies would provide continuity for the long term, enabling increased diplomatic cooperation, and reducing fears of a United States withdrawal from the Pacific.¹⁵²

¹⁵² G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 69.

Risks

The United States' most significant risk is its loss of access in the South China Sea through a deterioration of its relationship with its allies and partners. The US Commander, Indo-Pacific Command (INDO-PACOM) testified in 2018 that "China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States."¹⁵³ If China gains sea control and continues to erode American alliances and partnerships in the region, it could have significant ramifications on diplomatic relationships, economy, and military options.

Additionally, without the United States' support, the autonomy and sovereignty of both the Philippines and Vietnamese would be at high risk. With a reduced American presence, China could complete its *fait accompli* and control the causeways in the South China Sea. The Philippines and Vietnam would have few options to resist Chinese coercion, heightening the potential for increased military conflict or capitulation. If China is successful in driving a wedge between the United States and its allies and partners, it could be the beginning of a shift to a new global status quo.

Conclusion

As the United States has shifted its focus toward the Pacific through multiple presidential administrations, it has sought to reduce Chinese influence through pursuit of strengthening its alliances and partnerships in the region. Asymmetric International Relations Theory offers a framework to understand the complex motivations US allies and partners. For the United States to increase its influence in the Pacific region to align with its foreign policy aims in the 2017 NSS, it must understand each nation's domestic and foreign policy goals, and where it can align their interests to foster further cooperation.

¹⁵³ O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, 8–10.

China, through its coercive actions in the South China Sea, has undermined Vietnamese autonomy by impeding on its territorial sovereignty and through threatening economic reprisals. This has pushed Vietnam to seek cooperation with the United States as a balancing power to protect its national interests. In the other case, the United States has infringed on the Philippines autonomy through its perceived interference in its domestic policies, eroding the trust of the regime, and pushing them to seek China as the balancing power. For the United States to realize the aims set by Obama's "Pivot to the Pacific" policy and build a long-term, stable environment to foster a cooperative economic environment, it must adopt a strategy that aligns its national interests with those that it seeks to influence. Through this approach, the United States can promote its values, achieve its national aims, and gain greater influence.

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