

Chapter 13

Beijing's Strategic Calculus: Sino–Philippine Relations and Power Dynamics in the South China Sea, 2023

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the complex dynamics in the South China Sea, focusing on the evolving strategic relationships between China, the Philippines, and the United States. It examines the strategic motivations behind China's naval expansion and its implications for regional security, highlighting the geostrategic significance of the South China Sea as a critical maritime crossroads with profound impacts on global trade and military strategy. The chapter discusses the shift in the Philippines' stance towards a more assertive approach in its South China Sea policy under the influence of strengthened U.S.-Philippines defence ties, marked by expanded military cooperation and the bolstering of the Philippines' military capabilities. It also delves into the broader context of Sino-American rivalry, the role of ASEAN, legal frameworks, and the potential for future tensions and alignments. The analysis underscores the importance of diplomacy, international law, and regional cooperation in navigating the challenges in this pivotal maritime domain.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, China has positioned itself as a formidable force in the global economy, a transformation that has been mirrored by its ambitious expansion in military capabilities, especially its far-sea naval projection. This growth in naval power, though anticipated by realist theory, prompts significant inquiries into China's genuine goals and the impact on worldwide maritime security. This exploration addresses China's naval objectives, the strategic ramifications of its bolstered naval presence in the South China Sea, and the wider scenario of Sino-American rivalry on the high seas. As of 2023, the South China Sea's security situation appears relatively stable, with diminished prospects for escalated military conflicts. Nonetheless, China's strategic pivot from the South China Sea to the Taiwan Strait reveals profound consequences for the existing international maritime security framework. In particular, the maritime confrontation between China, Philippines and the influential factor of the United States formulated the geostrategic chessboard of the South China Sea in 2023. This chapter examines Beijing's approach to the Sino-Philippines relations by reviewing the strategic contestation in the South China Sea in 2023. The introduction section provides an overview explaining the contextualisation of the geopolitical dynamic in the South China Sea, as well as China's role within the maritime region. The second part of this chapter discusses the latest development in the South China Sea in 2023; the third section discusses the Philippine's strategic approach in the South China Sea; and the final two sections provides analysis on the possible development surrounding this important issue.

Contextualising the Geostrategic Chessboard of the South China Sea

The South China Sea, an integral part of the Pacific Ocean, stands as a pivotal maritime crossroads that significantly shapes the strategic landscape of Southeast Asia and impacts global dynamics. This region, marked by historical territorial disputes involving key players such as China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, centers on sovereignty issues over the Spratly and Paracel Islands and contentious maritime boundaries. These disputes are not merely regional concerns; they hold vast implications for global trade and military strategy, making the South China Sea a crucial artery for international commerce and a theatre for naval dominance and power projection.

The significance of the South China Sea extends beyond regional concerns, impacting global trade and military strategy. It is a vital artery for international commerce, with a significant portion of the world's shipping passing through its waters, including energy supplies and goods. Furthermore, the sea's strategic military

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