



The United States' Strategy of Containing China through the Philippines in the China–U.S. Game over the South China Sea

Zhicheng Duan*

Lancang-Mekong International Vocational Institute, Yunnan Minzu University, 650500, China

* 23218020720104@ymu.edu.cn

Abstract. This study focuses on the strategic competition between China and the United States in the South China Sea. The author analyzes in depth how Washington employs the Philippines to contain China in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a unique geopolitical entity and has become the core area of Sino–U.S. confrontation. By strengthening the U.S.–Philippines security cooperation, increasing the scale of joint military exercises, and promoting the South China Sea arbitration, Washington successfully turned the Philippines into a “forward pivot” for containing China at relatively low cost. In circumstances of “security reliance on the United States and economic dependence on China,” the Philippines follows a strategy of “high-profile confrontation and limited cooperation.” On the one hand, the Philippines, upholding its security cooperation with the United States, enhances its bargaining power vis-à-vis China; on the other, it maintains its economic dependence on China and displays only limited strategic autonomy. Despite only partially aligned strategic interests, enhanced U.S.–Philippines cooperation heightened tensions in the South China Sea and further internationalized the disputes between China and ASEAN nations. The oscillation of the Philippines’ policy exposes the dilemma faced by small states caught between big powers.

Keywords: Sino–U.S. Competition, Philippines, South China Sea Rivalry, Off-shore Balancing, Strategic Autonomy.

1 Introduction

1.1 A Geostrategic Background of the South China Sea and Sino–U.S. Competition

The South China Sea is a critical maritime crossroads connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, functioning not merely as a shipping lane but as a passageway of global consequence. With China’s rise as a maritime power and the United States’ implementation of its “Indo-Pacific Strategy,” the South China Sea has transcended the level of a simple territorial sovereignty dispute, and has transformed into a critical theater for China and the United States in the contest for regional order and supremacy. Due to their ongoing

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contest in terms of island construction, freedom of navigation, and rule-making, the situation in the South China Sea has reached a stage where multilateralization, militarization, and institutionalization co-exist, making it a typical microcosm for great-power geopolitical rivalry in the era [1].

1.2 Strategic Position of the Philippines and the U.S. "Offshore Balancing" Strategy

Owing to its geographically critical position overseeing the entrance to the South China Sea, its U.S.–Philippines alliance, and its periodically pragmatic foreign policy, the Philippines has transformed into the best “fulcrum” for the United States’ “offshore balancing” strategy. Therefore, the United States has converted the Philippines into a “forward outpost” to balance China by enhancing joint military exercises and reopening access to military bases in the Philippines. By adopting the “leveraging others’ strength” strategy, the U.S. shifts the risks and costs of direct involvement to its allies, and exerts indirect pressure and strategic containment on China. This shows the kind of typical realist logic in which great powers rely on their allies to perform regional balancing.

1.3 Research Objectives, Core Questions, and Research Significance

This study is based on the realist theory to discuss the competition between China and the United States in the South China Sea in terms of two following questions: How does the United States use the Philippines to contain China? How does the strategic autonomy of the Philippines present in the Sino–U.S. competition in the South China Sea? In terms of theoretical perspective, most of the existing literatures just focus on the overall framework of the United States’ “off-shore balancing” strategy, while the debate on the related micro-level mechanisms of how the United States uses the Philippines to contain China and strategic autonomy of third party in the Sino–U.S. competition are still lacking. The above-mentioned two issues have been neglected by the existing literature, i.e., how the United States uses the Philippines and strategic autonomy of third party has only been focused on in the analysis of the Sino–U.S. geo-strategic rivalry in the South China Sea. In terms of practical significance, the findings of this study may provide useful references for the policymakers to understand the logic of China–U.S.–Philippines tripartite interaction in the South China Sea. In addition, the findings of this study may also provide relevant policies to protect sovereignty and maintain regional stability, to gain dialogue, negotiation and peaceful settlement in the South China Sea.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research Progress on Sino–U.S. Rivalry in the South China Sea

In view of the deepening of Sino–U.S. strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region the South China Sea has gradually become the focal point of strategic competition between the two countries in the Philippines. Liu Amin believes that the recovery of the U.S.–Philippines special relationship is an important link in the implementation of U.S. "great power competition" strategy and rebuilding the Asia-Pacific alliance system and the Philip-pines is gradually included in the U.S.-led regional security system [2]. Li Zihao and Ge Hanwen believe that the Marcos government's foreign strategy has changed from "limited followership" to "highly aligned" for the United States. The Philippines is more resolute in the Second Thomas Shoal standoff, Scarborough Shoal incident and its subsequent actions in the South China Sea arbitration case and has played the role of a "proxy" in the pressure of the United States on China [3]. Ma Yuchen believes that the United States has been using the information war and the guidance of public opinion to maintain the "China threat" pattern in the Filipino people's mind. The "soft containment" strategy not only enhanced the embedding of U.S. strategy in the local area but also weakened the influence of China in the public opinion field of the Philippines [4].

2.2 Theoretical Framework of Third-Party Countries and Small States' Strategic Choices

Within the realist international relations framework, the strategic choices of small states in the context of great power competition are often seen as a balance between “counterbalancing” and “following.” These decisions are influenced by external pressures and internal interests. Li Dalu points out that the Philippines adopts a “high-profile confrontation + limited cooperation” hybrid strategy, which contrasts with the “low-profile defense + diversified balancing” approach followed by countries like Vietnam and Malaysia, reflecting the strategic differentiation of third parties when facing Sino–U.S. pressure [5]. Xu Mengying emphasizes the dual nature of the Philippines' policy toward China—“economically reliant on China, security reliant on the U.S.” As Sino–U.S. competition intensifies, the Philippines tends to prioritize security but may seek to ease tensions with China when domestic economic pressures rise [6]. Liu Qian and Xu Shiyu's research suggests that the Philippines' core interests are not fully aligned with the U.S.'s containment objectives toward China. China may still have opportunities to weaken the “common interest consensus” between the U.S. and the Philippines through deepened economic cooperation [7].

2.3 Research Gaps and Problem Positioning

Although existing literature has accumulated rich results in areas such as U.S.–Philippines security cooperation mechanisms, the drivers behind the Philippines' strategic shift, and the methods of U.S. strategic communication, there remains a significant gap

in systematic research. Most studies focus on isolated dimensions such as military cooperation or public opinion shaping, lacking a comprehensive framework analysis of the U.S.'s strategy of leveraging the Philippines. Comparative analysis of the Philippines' policies over different periods is still weak, and there is insufficient exploration of how U.S. interventions have dynamically adjusted in response to changes in the political landscape of the Philippines. Some scholars emphasize the passivity of the Philippines under U.S. leadership, while others highlight the country's agency and policy oscillations. This divergence underscores the complexity and research value of small states' roles in great power rivalry. To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study deepens the overall framework analysis of the U.S.'s strategy of leveraging the Philippines. It strengthens the comparative analysis of policy changes across different Philippine governments and U.S. intervention methods, explores the application of small state strategic choice theory in Sino–U.S. This study offers a more scientific and systematic theoretical framework for comprehensively understanding the Philippines' function in the Sino-U.S. strategic competition in the South China Sea.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study primarily adopts a qualitative analysis approach, supplemented with key quantitative data, and combines a case-oriented research design to deeply examine how the United States utilizes the Philippines to implement its strategic containment of China. The study first systematically reviews policy documents, military cooperation agreements, joint statements, and official speeches between the U.S. and the Philippines under the context of Sino–U.S. strategic competition to extract core content and the evolution of U.S.–Philippines security cooperation. It then dynamically tracks and phases the trends of their cooperation through a timeline analysis of major geopolitical events. Finally, through the comparison of policy texts and the analysis of the logical connections between events, the study distills the specific methods and strategic features of U.S. operations in leveraging the Philippines to contain China at different stages.

3.2 Case Selection Criteria and Research Objects

This study selects typical cases that are representative and of strategic turning points as the research objects, focusing on the following four core cases: U.S.–Philippines Military Base Construction: Analyzing the impact of U.S. forward presence on the regional security landscape. Upgrades in the Scale of Joint Military Exercises: Demonstrating U.S. strategic guidance and resource investment in the Philippines. South China Sea Arbitration and Its Aftermath: Exposure of how the U.S. employs law for geopolitical rivalry. Philippine Policy Changes: Understanding the balancing logic between the Philippines' security dependence and economic interests.

3.3 Data Sources

Data sources include multidimensional and authoritative data sources. The primary documents analyzed are China's Foreign Ministry position papers on the South China Sea arbitration and U.S.–Philippines joint statements. Official statements include the statements of U.S. and Chinese foreign ministers at ASEAN, and the Philippine presidential office's responses to South China Sea incidents. These documents can reflect the key policy changes at the turning points. In terms of media reports, the study takes the Xinhua News Agency and Reuters, two internationally influential media as examples and focuses on the U.S.–Philippines military exercises, base construction, and diplomatic interactions. These reports supplement the event information and provide the media information. In order to understand the evolution of U.S.–Philippines relations, the official reports of think tanks such as “South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative” and “China South Sea Institute” are also referred to.

3.4 Analytical Framework

This research uses realist international relations theory as its core analytical framework, complemented by geopolitical theory and small-state strategic choice theory, to construct a multi-layered analysis framework. Realist theory, which emphasizes power competition and the security dilemma, is used to explain why the U.S. treats the Philippines as a “low-cost pivot” for containing China, and why China responds with island construction and maritime law enforcement measures. This reflects the power rivalry logic of great powers in an anarchic international system. Geopolitical theory, on the other hand, examines the South China Sea's geopolitical value and the impact of U.S.–Philippines cooperation on the regional security framework from the perspectives of geography and strategic space. Small-state strategic choice theory focuses on the Philippines' dilemmas and decisions in the Sino–U.S. competition, revealing its behavior patterns of “aligning with one side” and the motivations behind such choices.

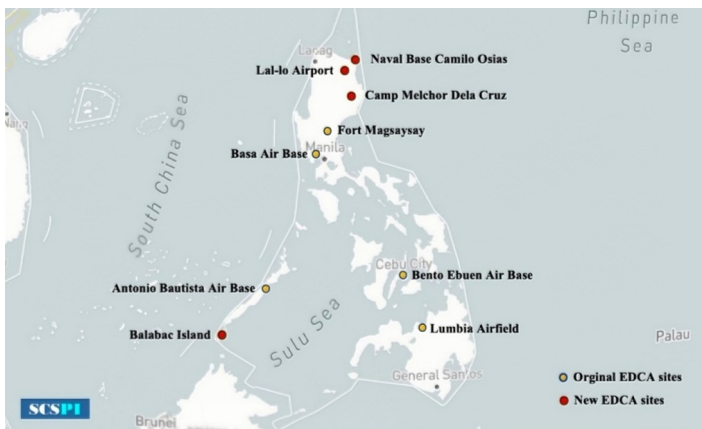


Fig. 1. Location of U.S.–Philippines EDCA Bases

4 Research Results

4.1 U.S.–Philippines Military Cooperation and Joint Military Exercises (EDCA Base Deployments, etc.)

Under the 2014 U.S.–Philippines EDCA, American military bases in the country grew from five to nine by 2023, with three more planned for 2024. These new bases include Camilo Naval Base and Laralo Airport, all located near disputed waters in the South China Sea (just 300 kilometers from the Spratly Islands). These bases are equipped with radar systems, fuel reserves, makeshift runways, and the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). Basa Air Base has also undergone large-scale upgrades, with temporary helipads constructed to support the takeoff and landing of more types of military aircraft (see Figure 1). In 2024, U.S.–Philippines joint military activities in the South China Sea and surrounding areas significantly increased. There were five large-scale joint exercises, mainly focused in the northern part of Luzon Island, Palawan, and Subic Bay. Over 10,000 U.S. troops and approximately 5,000 Philippine troops participated. The "Shoulder to Shoulder 2024" multinational joint exercise, the largest in recent years, began on April 22 and lasted for three weeks, with over 16,700 participants (11,000 U.S. troops, about 5,000 Philippine troops, 150 Australians, and 100 French). The exercise covered areas of Luzon and Palawan and included live-fire drills with HIMARS, amphibious landing exercises, and the U.S. deployment of AC-130J "Specter" gunships to sink simulated "Chinese fishing vessel" targets. U.S.–Philippines regular maritime and air patrols have also become a routine activity, taking place 1–2 times per week in sensitive South China Sea areas such as the Reed Bank and Second Thomas Shoal. These patrols use P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft, MQ-9 drones, and frigates. Additionally, three rapid-response exercises were simulating "rescuing stranded fishermen" and "retaking occupied islands," involving special forces and amphibious assault ships. This demonstrates a clear increase in the scale and frequency of U.S.–Philippines military cooperation, both in terms of time and scope.

4.2 Diplomatic and Legal Measures: South China Sea Arbitration and International Public Opinion Pressure

Regarding the Sino–Philippine South China Sea dispute, in January 2013 the Philippine government, under President Aquino III, unilaterally submitted the dispute to arbitration, claiming that the rights of China in the "Nine-Dash Line" are not in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Philippines remained "non-acceptance, non-participation, and non-recognition" throughout [8]. On July 12, 2016, the Hague Permanent Court of Arbitration upheld its ruling that rejected China's "historic rights" in the South China Sea. None of the islands in the Spratlys enjoys the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) or the continental shelf rights. The United States did not join UNCLOS, but it remained very vocal in support of the arbitration ruling and even utilized international media to expose China as a violator of international law and the "China Threat" image in the international community [9]. In 2025, with the United States' assistance, the Philippines "opened up" on the "9th anniversary

of the South China Sea arbitration case” to restore the “legitimacy” of the ruling. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Chinese Government has stated on July 11 that the Philippines had not fulfilled its obligation to exchange views in advance. The arbitration tribunal has acted beyond its jurisdiction. Its ruling is invalid and has no legal effect.

4.3 Impact of Economic and Aid Strategies on Philippine Policy

To strengthen its alliance with the Philippines and reduce the Philippines' economic dependence on China, the United States has used economic cooperation as part of its broader "Indo-Pacific Strategy" aimed at comprehensive containment of China. During the April 2023 U.S.–Philippines "2+2" meeting and President Marcos' visit to the U.S., the two sides reached several economic agreements. The Philippines joined four pillar projects under the U.S.-led "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" (IPEF), covering supply chain resilience, clean energy, infrastructure, and fair trade. The United States pledged to promote private sector investment, establish a Presidential Trade and Investment Delegation, and focus on supporting the Philippines' development in areas such as the innovation economy, critical minerals, geothermal energy (Mindanao projects), and smart port construction. Both sides also advanced negotiations on the Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement ("123 Agreement") to deepen energy cooperation.

4.4 Evolution of Philippine Policy: Positions on China and the U.S. in Different Government Periods

The "pro-U.S., distancing from China" policy, adopted by the Aquino III administration (2010–2016), marked a distinct phase in the Philippines' approach. This stance was defined by the 2013 South China Sea arbitration case and comprehensive alignment with the United States, which brought Sino-Philippine relations to a near standstill. A “independent foreign policy” approach focusing on economics with China and the shelving of the South China Sea dispute was followed by the Duterte government (2016–2022) at the expense of military relations with the United States. Joint U.S.–Philippine military exercises were suspended to some extent between 2016 and 2019, and economic cooperation between China and the Philippines flourished. The Marcos administration (2022–present) shifted to a dual strategy of "security with the U.S., economic reliance on China." Starting in 2023, the Philippines resumed and expanded U.S.–Philippines military cooperation, reopening and adding EDCA bases, and increasing the frequency and scale of joint military exercises to historic highs. In 2024, the Philippines frequently clashed with Chinese maritime law enforcement near the Second Thomas Shoal and Reed Bank, and allowed U.S. military forces to deploy long-range strike systems at bases near the Spratlys. The Philippines continues to maintain agricultural exports and investment cooperation with China, while leaning toward the U.S. on security and diplomatic issues [10].

5 Discussion

5.1 U.S. Strategic Objectives and Evaluation of Actual Outcomes

The United States utilizes "offshore balancing" as a strategic tool to preserve its hegemonic position in the Asia-Pacific region. Although it decreases the risk of direct war, it relies on the Philippines as a cheap tool to apply strategic pressure on China. From the perspective of a realist, the United States regards the Philippines as a "pawn". The United States enhances military alliances and economic aid to establish a forward outpost and to strategically deter China [11]. Nevertheless, the effect of the strategy is quite weak. On one hand, China's countermeasures such as island construction and maritime law enforcement have successfully attenuated the pressure from the United States military point of view. On the other hand, although the strategy of the United States has induced short-term concave, in the long term, its double standards and attitude of instrumentalism towards international law have weakened its moral legitimacy and have not changed the power status quo in the South China Sea.

5.2 The Philippines' Dilemma and Strategic Autonomy

The Philippines' situation in the Sino-U.S. rivalry illustrates a typical dilemma faced by small states: navigating great-power competition by relying on the United States for security while depending on China for economic growth. The high-level alignment policy announced by the Marcos administration is actually a typical "small-state survival strategy"—hoping to introduce an outside power to balance a neighboring great power and gain more bargaining space in disputes. But the sovereignty cost is that the Philippines is gradually losing control over national defense affairs and is increasingly bound by the balance of power between China and the U.S., domestic elite interests and national identity as well as public opinion. The foreign policy wavering between tough talk and pragmatic compromise of the Marcos administration is the balance of small states' national interests and outside pressure. The case of the Philippines confirms the view that small states under systemic constraints are hard to gain full strategic autonomy.

5.3 Implications for Sino–U.S. Relations and Regional Security Order

By repeatedly exploiting the Philippines to advance its claims in the South China Sea, the U.S. has deepened strategic mistrust and directly contributed to heightened confrontation between China and the Philippines. It has further entangled bilateral relations and raised the risk of miscalculation and conflict. As for ASEAN cooperation, the U.S. intervention has promoted the internationalization and bloc-based tendency of the South China Sea issue. Some ASEAN countries have no choice but to take sides under the pressure of the U.S., which has undermined ASEAN centrality and cohesion in regional affairs [12]. Its interference hinders the implementation of DOC and the negotiations over COC, hindering the deepening of regional cooperation and mutual trust. As for the regional security architecture, the efforts made by the U.S. in boosting its military

presence in the Philippines have aggravated the regional arms race and security dilemma and destabilized the South China Sea as a major maritime route, which has further raised uncertainty and security risks in the Asia-Pacific region [13].

5.4 Effectiveness and Limitations of China's Response Strategy

Through island construction and consistent maritime law enforcement, China has reinforced its de facto control in the South China Sea, guided by a strategy of "firm rights protection" and "gradual cooperation." This two-pronged approach is further evidenced by its engagement with ASEAN to advance the Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations, demonstrating a commitment to cooperation. This strategy not only safeguards China's sovereignty and interests but also helps prevent diplomatic isolation and curb the formation of blocs in the region [14]. These, however, are double-edged swords. On the one hand, military countermeasures will increase the security dilemma and promote an arms race; on the other hand, economic cooperation alone cannot fully compensate for the strategic competition in the security field. After all, the dependence of the Philippines on the Chinese market does not mean its political allegiance to China. In the future, in addition to improving its "hard power", China also needs to improve its institutional discourse power – that is, push the South China Sea back to the track of bilateral negotiation and regional cooperation. It is not advisable to make the South China Sea entirely a geopolitical battlefield. Only by converting strategic advantages into rule-making capacity can China win the initiative in institutional competition and achieve rebalancing of the regional order.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Major Research Findings

First, the United States employs an indirect containment policy of "leverage others' strength." The United States strengthened its military alliance with the Philippines, provided economic aid, and cultivated public opinion to turn the Philippines into a "forward pivot" to contain China. The United States has effectively countered China in the South China Sea with minimal risk and cost, maximizing its strategic encirclement; in doing so, it has enabled the Philippines to adopt a "security with the U.S., economy with China" dual-track approach, aligning closely with Washington on security and taking a tough stance in the South China Sea to secure its support. Economically, however, it remains deeply engaged with China and seeks to avoid full alignment with the U.S., thereby preserving a degree of strategic autonomy. Its pragmatism and wavering show the genuine face of a small state caught in great-power rivalry. Their internal contradiction of U.S. and Philippine strategic interests reveals that the U.S.–Philippine alliance is not a monolithic whole in terms of intensity and means of China containment. The Philippines' balancing between security cooperation and economic partnership shows the strategic misalignment between the two.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

In the new Sino–U.S. strategic rivalry in the South China Sea, China and ASEAN should establish more robust and imaginative mechanisms for coordinated response to avoid turning the South China Sea into a “chessboard” for strategic rivalry. China could continuously protect its sovereignty and maritime rights and interests while enhancing its diplomatic discourse by upgrading the current “dual-track approach” into a holistic “development–security” constraint. Concrete measures could be taken, such as backing pragmatic factions in the Philippines that are inclined towards economic cooperation with China, enhancing Chinese investment in blue economy and maritime infrastructure projects in ASEAN countries, and linking South China Sea cooperation with development in order to reduce confrontation through holistic cooperation. For its part, ASEAN could enhance its strategic autonomy and “centrality” by forming a South China Sea Crisis Prevention Group under the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia (TAC). By leading on the holistic development of non-traditional security issues such as fisheries and coral reef conservation, ASEAN could transform non-traditional security issues into new areas of cooperation and entrench the “ASEAN Way” as the basis of regional order through dynamic equilibrium.

6.3 Research Limitations and Future Prospects

This study uses mainly case methods and is bound by the availability of open data. U.S.–Philippines military cooperation, specific parameters of base deployment, and the black box of internal Philippine decision-making are partly shrouded in mystery or blacked out, which results in some of the analysis depending on media reports and think-tank studies, and limits the comprehensiveness of conclusions. Methodologically, this study is mostly qualitative with limited quantitative data, but lacks systematic modeling and control, so it is hard to calculate the precise proportion of the share of factors affecting the shift of Philippine policy. Future studies can use comparative models or quantitative models. Future studies may also step out of the black box of a single country and compare differentiated strategies of other ASEAN claimant states like Vietnam and Malaysia in the Sino–U.S. rivalry, or explore new security issues like digital maritime governance, multilateral security mechanism, and blue carbon economy that shapes the South China Sea geopolitics to have a more comprehensive understanding of regional changes and order reconstruction.

6.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study uses realist international relations design, combined with geopolitical theory and small-state strategic choice theory, to build a multi-level explanatory model of how the U.S. uses the Philippines as an important pivot for its “offshore balancing” strategy to contain China. The study goes beyond previous single-dimensional analyses by innovatively identifying the micro-mechanisms through which great powers employ third-party actors for low-cost strategic containment. It also reveals the dual structure and limited strategic autonomy of small states such as the Philippines—“security with

the U.S., economy with China.” By doing so, the study provides a new analytical lens for understanding how third-party states position themselves and act within major power competition, enriching theoretical discussions on the agency of small states in great-power rivalry.

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