



Navigating South China Sea Tensions: The Philippines and Vietnam



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Summary

As the geopolitical focus shifts towards the Indo-Pacific, the South China Sea's importance is ever growing. In recent years, the Philippines and Vietnam have increasingly recognized the security threat posed by China's expansive claims in the South China Sea. Although the two adopt markedly divergent public approaches, this brief contends that their underlying relationship reflects a growing convergence not immediately apparent. The Philippines, since the election of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, has adopted a loud approach of resistance towards Chinese aggression amidst continued infringement on Philippine-occupied islands and in Philippine-maritime territory. Vietnam, on the other hand, is publicly very quiet towards China. During the past couple of years though, Hanoi has moved to fortify its own capacities and influence in the Spratly island group of the South China Sea, imitating Chinese practice of land reclamation and island-building. Despite these differing approaches, bilateral cooperation between the two are also seemingly strengthening. This brief investigates the evolution of two seemingly divergent approaches, analyzes the rationale behind each, and argues that their convergence is greater than generally recognized.



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Introduction

When, in June 2024, a Filipino soldier lost a thumb in a skirmish with the Chinese Coast Guard, it highlighted the increasing tensions between Beijing and Manila.¹ These tensions reflect the broader shift in Philippine foreign policy since the inauguration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr in 2022. Without adopting an explicitly confrontational stance, the Philippines now places much more emphasis on guarding its sovereignty, which has led to an increased number of incidents in and around the contested Spratly Islands in the southern part of the South China Sea (SCS).

Vietnam, which largely claims the same islands and reefs as China (and Taiwan), has adopted a significantly quieter stance on its claims and its concerns over Chinese intrusions into its waters. Like the Philippines, however, it has also stepped up its efforts to counter Chinese influence in recent years. As a result, the SCS is today a shared body of water over which there are increasing tensions, as China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and, to some extent, Indonesia all make rival claims. The region is host to almost a quarter of global shipping, which gives these geopolitical tensions global significance. Avoiding confrontations between states will be key to maintaining the safety of

international navigation and secure shipping routes through the South China Sea.

The contrasting approaches of Vietnam and the Philippines are noteworthy because they make the two largest claims to these waters after China (and Taiwan). This brief examines recent developments in the two different approaches, asks why they are being pursued and argues the two approaches are more similar than is often presumed.

History of the claims

The origins of the dispute over islets in the SCS can be found in the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, which formally ended the state of war between Japan and the Allied Powers, by which Japan renounced its right, title and claim to the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the SCS, ending imperial rule over the geographic features.² The treaty, however, did not anoint a successor to the island groups, which opened the door for new powers to make their claims. Both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Vietnam staked a claim to both island groups shortly after the treaty was concluded.³ Each would move to occupy several islands but tensions between them were muted until the 1970s.

¹ Mendoza, John Eric. 'PH Navy Sailor Loses Thumb, Others Injured in CCG Ramming Incident'. Inquirer.net, 18 June 2024. <https://www.inquirer.net/ph-navy-sailor-loses-thumb-in-ayungin-shoal-resupply-encounter-with-china/>.

² United Nations, Treaty of Peace with Japan (with two declarations). 8 September 1951. [volume-136-I-1832-English.pdf](#)

³ Buszynski, Leszek, The origins and development of the South China Sea maritime dispute. In Buszynski, Leszek and Roberts, Christopher B. (Eds) *The South China Sea Maritime dispute*, 2015. Routledge. p, 4-5



The changing dynamics of the dispute can largely be attributed to the possibility of oil extraction. Beijing controlled the eastern Amphitrite group and was of the view that whoever controlled the Paracels could prospect for oil in the surrounding waters and control access to southern China.⁴ Consequently, China forcefully annexed the western Crescent group in the Paracels in 1974 (see map), which at the time was occupied by South Vietnam. Saigon was busy fighting a war on the mainland and therefore unable to muster any defence. Thus, the PRC gained full control of the Paracels.⁵ After reunification, Hanoi would eventually inherit the claims made by Saigon, despite the fact that it had initially stayed quiet regarding the dispute.⁶

The 1970s also marked the entry of the Philippines into the dispute, spurred by businessman Thomas Cloma, who brought Manila's attention to the Kalayaan area, which encompasses much of the Spratly Islands. This interest culminated in a formal claim in 1971, largely driven by oil surveys conducted at the time.⁷ This new claim would divert attention to the Spratly Islands, where Vietnam, China and Taiwan all occupied islands. Malaysia's claim to 11 geographical features in the SCS was also stimulated by Manila's occupation of islands.⁸ Although not

a large player in the dispute, Brunei also claims a continental shelf and the resources within it. The possibilities of extracting natural resources in and around the Spratly Islands has long played a part in all the claims made.

In 2009, the dispute entered a new phase when China publicly introduced its "nine-dash line", which claims almost the entire SCS as Chinese territorial waters.⁹ This development extends the dispute beyond competing claims over island features and also challenges established maritime law. The nine-dash line overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs¹⁰) of all the SCS countries, which further complicates the issue. This has become a point of contention as disputes have occurred mainly over the right to extract oil and fishing rights. Indonesia has been brought into the dispute even though it does not make any claims to any maritime features. Claimants rely on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to legitimize their claims. Although China bases its claim on historic rights recognized by UNCLOS, uncertainty surrounds the exact nature of the claim and its interpretation suffered a legal blow following the findings of a Tribunal in 2016, which will be explained below.¹¹

⁴ Hayton, Bill, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 2014. Yale University Press. p, 72

⁵ Samuels, Marwyn, *Contest for the South China Sea*, 2005. Taylor & Francis Group. p, 100-101

⁶ Hayton, Bill. p, 78-79

⁷ Buszynski, Leszek. p, 9

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid. p, 7

¹⁰ An EEZ is an area of 200 nautical miles from a country's coastline in which it has exclusive rights to explore for and exploit natural resources.

¹¹ Batongbacal, Jay L. *Philippines v. China: Impact of the Arbitral Tribunal Award on the Merits*. In Hiebert, Murray; Poling, Gregory B. and Cronin, Conor (Eds) *In the Wake of Arbitration*, 2017. p, 33-38



An increasingly assertive Philippines

The Philippines was the first SCS claimant to explicitly confront Chinese expansion. The Philippines took control of a number of Spratly Islands following submission of its formal claim in 1971, but follow-up action was initially minimal. This changed in the 1990s when Manila began to assert its position in response to China's expansion

into eastern South China Sea waters claimed by Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.¹² Outwardly, rhetoric and actions were still tempered, however, as no ASEAN member state, including the Philippines, wanted to risk its relations with China. Bilateral consultations with China were pursued as the main way of dealing with the issue.

This changed in 2013 when the administration of Benigno Aquino III used UNCLOS to institute a tribunal at the

¹² Hayton, Bill. p, 87



Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in protest at repeated Chinese incursions into its EEZ and maritime claims. The PCA ruled in favour of the Philippines on almost all of the 15 disputed points. It ruled that China's historic claim to the Spratly Islands had no legal basis and that most of the features were shoals and reefs, which do not derive their own territorial water – something which China had seemingly claimed through its nine-dash line.¹³ This has strengthened the legal standing of other claimants on EEZ issues.¹⁴ China, however, dismissed the Tribunal's authority from the outset and chose not to participate in the proceedings. In the absence of both parties' agreement, the Tribunal could not issue a binding judgment. Nonetheless, China's use of UNCLOS as justification was undermined, as its historic claims to the Spratly Islands conflict with UNCLOS provisions, given that the features fall within the Philippines' EEZ and that its continental shelf does not generate an EEZ. The effects of the decision, however, would be rather muted.

Rodrigo Duterte took office in the Philippines in 2016, shortly after the Tribunal decision. However, Duterte aimed to foster closer ties with Beijing and Xi Jinping, and therefore did not acknowledge the tribunal's favourable ruling. Instead, he instigated a transactional foreign policy and a shift from the US, securing economic deals, loans and aid from China reportedly worth US\$24 billion.¹⁵

Scholars are divided over whether this shift occurred because he initially prioritized domestic issues over the SCS dispute, pursued the change due to personal preferences or sought rapprochement in the hope of reducing Chinese incursions. The latter part of his term saw reinvigorated US relations and public use of the Tribunal judgment as part of his SCS rhetoric, which suggests that he, at least, had hoped for decreased Chinese incursions, which didn't occur. The growing strength of public opinion concerning the importance of sovereignty in the SCS might also have played a part in his backtracking.¹⁶

Public sentiment is probably also a strong driver of the wider shift pursued by Marcos since his inauguration in 2022. Duterte's rapprochement strategy has been discontinued, despite some continuity with policies on the SCS. He still promotes a stance of "friends to all, enemies to none", while also pursuing strong economic relations with Beijing. However, the approach to skirmishes and moves to enhance defence capabilities speak of a different approach. The alliance with the US has been revitalized and enhanced. The Mutual Defense Treaty (signed in 1951) remains intact, and in 2023 an Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement gave the US access to four additional military bases, three of which are in the northernmost part of the Philippines.¹⁷ Another sign of the increased focus on its own defence capabilities is in the

¹³ Permanent Court of Arbitration, PCA Case No 2013-19. 12 July 2016

¹⁴ Council of Councils. 'The Hague Tribunal's South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence?', 18 August 2016.
<https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/hague-tribunals-south-china-sea-ruling-empty-provocation-or-slow-burning-influence>.

¹⁵ Arugay, Aries A. When Populists Perform Foreign Policy: Duterte and the Asia-Pacific Regional Order, 2018. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. p. 6

¹⁶ Fang, Songyin and Li, Xiaojun. Southeast Asia under Great-power Competition: Public Opinion About Hedging in the Philippines. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 22, 481-501. 2022. p. 489

¹⁷ U. S. Embassy to the Philippines. 'Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) Fact Sheet', 20 March



most recent National Security Policy, for 2023–2028, in which the strategic identity of the Philippines as an archipelagic state is mentioned for the first time.¹⁸ This has influenced legislation. Marcos recently signed two bills, the Maritime Zones Act and the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, which strengthen legislation in accordance with the 2016 Tribunal judgment and UNCLOS.¹⁹

Vietnam's quiet but growing resistance

Even though Vietnam and China have the biggest conflicting claims (excluding Taiwan), relations between the two have been relatively calm since their normalization in 1991. That is not to say that there have not been incidents at sea, but the reaction from Hanoi to Chinese incursions into its EEZ or fishing boat incidents has been fairly subdued. The exception to this rule was the response to the 2014 Hai Yang Shi You 981 Standoff, or China-Vietnam Oil Rig incident. When the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation located its deep-sea oil rig HD-981 in Vietnam's EEZ south of the Paracel Islands, Vietnam launched diplomatic protests and dispatched ships.²⁰ The rig was removed a month earlier than initially

planned but there were still widespread anti-Chinese protests across Vietnam.

Since its first Defence White Paper in 1998, Vietnam has placed an ever-increasing emphasis on its sovereignty and improving its defence. At the same time, it has set out rules on non-alignment based on “three nos”: no aligning with one country against another, no engaging in military alliances,²¹ and no foreign military bases on its territory.²² A 2019 White Paper introduced a fourth no, against advocacy of the use of force, but an important passage hints at potential leeway in Vietnam's non-alignment principles: “Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Viet Nam will consider developing necessary appropriate defence and military relations with other countries on the basis of respecting each other's independence, sovereignty, territorial unity and integrity...”²³

While none of the four White Papers explicitly name China as the biggest security threat, there is increasing recognition of the SCS as a potential security flashpoint. The need for a Peaceful Code of Conduct (COC) between ASEAN member states and China

2023. <https://ph.usembassy.gov/enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement-edca-fact-sheet/>.

¹⁸ Government of the Philippines. National Security Policy 2023-2028, 2023. p, 8, 21, 22, 28

¹⁹ Cupin, Bea. ‘What Are the PH Maritime Zones Act, Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act All About?’ *RAPPLER* (blog), 9 November 2024.

<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/explainers/mari-time-zone-archipelagic-sea-lanes-act-explained/>.

²⁰ Poling, Gregory B., and Ernest Z. Bower. ‘China-Vietnam Tensions High over Drilling Rig in Disputed

Waters’. CSIS, 7 May 2014.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-vietnam-tensions-high-over-drilling-rig-disputed-waters>.

²¹ Zeberlein, Jeff. Vietnam and the Four Nos. *Navar War College Review*, Vol 77, No. 1, Art 8. 2024. p, 118-119

²² Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019 Viet Nam National Defence. Ministry of National Defence. National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2019. p, 23-24

²³ Ibid.



was first explicitly mentioned in the 2004 White Paper with regards to security.²⁴ In the 2009 White Paper, the territorial dispute in the SCS was described as increasingly complicated and a potential flashpoint.²⁵ In the 2019 White Paper, there was increased recognition of the security risk the dispute poses. Disputes over territory and sovereignty are mentioned as “likely to become more complex, potentially leading to conflicts, threatening regional stability, peace, and prosperity, and triggering a regional arms race”.²⁶ The “ever-changing regional context” undoubtedly refers to the disputes in the SCS.

Vietnam has not only stressed the increased importance of the SCS, but also taken action to boost its own capabilities. In July 2024, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative published satellite images that show how Vietnam is increasing the landmass on several of its occupied Spratly Islands.²⁷ This expansion imitates how China has expanded its presence using an illegal but effective dredging technique.²⁸ Previously, Vietnam only had one, 1,300-metre-long runway, on

Spratly Island. However, its land reclamation has provided Hanoi with the possibility of adding at least one more. In October 2024, it was reported that work had begun on building a 3,000-m long runway on Barque Canada Reef.²⁹ Ladd and Pearson Reefs, both occupied by Vietnam, have also undergone transformations that would allow the construction of runways, and military structures have been erected on various features.³⁰ This expanding presence will allow Vietnam to enhance and strengthen its military capabilities. When Hanoi, which has not addressed these expansions, will be satisfied with its land reclamation remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that Vietnam is aiming to make use of features in the Spratly Islands to counteract China’s military presence on the Mischief, Subi and Fiery Cross Reefs there. In case of Chinese hostility towards Vietnamese-occupied features, Vietnam now boasts stronger capabilities.

The protests triggered by the Oil Rig standoff in 2014 could provide part of the rationale for Vietnam’s assertiveness in the Spratly Islands

²⁴ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Vietnam’s National Defense in the Early Years of the 21st Century. Ministry of Defense, Hanoi, 2004. p, 17-18

²⁵ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Vietnam National Defence. Ministry of National Defence, Hanoi, 2009. p, 15–16

²⁶ 2019 Viet Nam National Defence. p, 11

²⁷ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. ‘Hanoi in High Gear: Vietnam’s Spratly Expansion Accelerates’, 7 June 2024. <https://amti.csis.org/hanoi-in-high-gear-vietnams-spratly-expansion-accelerates/>.

²⁸ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. ‘Vietnam Ramps Up Spratly Island Dredging’, 15 November

2023. <https://amti.csis.org/vietnam-ramps-up-spratly-island-dredging/>.

²⁹ Radio Free Asia. ‘Vietnam Builds Airstrip on Reclaimed Island in South China Sea’, 25 October 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/southchinasea/2024/10/25/vietnam-china-spratly-airstrip/>.

³⁰ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. ‘How Many Runways Is Vietnam Building in the Spratly Islands?’, 30 October 2024. <https://amti.csis.org/how-many-runways-is-vietnam-building-in-the-spratly-islands/>.



as part of a deterrence strategy. Vietnam's low-profile approach was widely attributed to favourable party-to-party relations between the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as Vietnam's economic dependence on China. The standoff and more recent incidents show, however, that the population's historic anti-Sino sentiment still prevails.³¹ These incidents not only raise the issue of sovereignty, but also force the CPV to balance domestic and foreign dynamics. While Chinese skirmishes and incidents with Vietnam have historically occurred near the Paracels and in Vietnam's EEZ, Vietnam's expansion into the Spratly Islands affects its military preparedness in the SCS as a whole, providing wider scope for military capabilities. Imitating China's dredging and land reclamation tactics also appears to be a sound strategic decision, as it limits possible objections from China and maintains the status quo while deterring further Chinese aggression.

³¹ Cave, Damien, and Linh Pham. 'Bullied by China at Sea, With the Broken Bones to Prove It'. *The New York Times*, 28 October 2024, sec. World.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/28/world/asia/vietnam-south-china-sea.html>.

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. '4th Meeting of the Japan-Philippines Maritime Dialogue', 22 October 2021.

https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000259.html.

³³ Philippine Embassy of Canberra Australia.

'Philippines and Australia Strengthen Robust Maritime Cooperation', 4 October 2024.

<https://philembassy.org.au/latest/news/philippines-and-australia-strengthen-robust-maritime-cooperation>.

Vietnam-Philippines relations

Hanoi and Manila have increased their external maritime cooperation. Most significant of course is the relationship between the US and the Philippines, which contains a maritime focus. The Philippines has also developed relations with Japan through the Japan-Philippine maritime dialogue,³² as well as with Australia to bolster its maritime capabilities.³³ The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) recently announced plans to buy 40 fast patrol boats from France.³⁴ Vietnam has also increased external maritime cooperation, mainly with Japan,³⁵ but also with India.³⁶ Perhaps the most interesting maritime cooperation that the two engage in, however, is with each other.

Despite their conflicting claims, and the fact that Vietnam does not adhere to the 2016 tribunal judgment with its expansion into the Spratly Islands, Vietnam and the Philippines have instead sought to foster closer ties. The

³⁴ Presidential Communications Office. 'News Releases - PBBM Okays Purchase of 40 Fast Patrol Crafts for PCG', 7 November 2024.

https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-okays-purchase-of-40-fast-patrol-crafts-for-pcg/.

³⁵ Nguyen, Hanh. Maritime Capacity Building Cooperation between Japan and Vietnam: A Confluence of Strategic Interests. ISEAS, Perspective, No. 148, 2021.

³⁶ Sharma, Ashok. 'India Offers \$300 Million Loan to Build up Vietnam's Maritime Security, Saying It Is a Key Partner'. AP News, 1 August 2024.

<https://apnews.com/article/india-vietnam-credit-maritime-security-modi-chinh-734a703315dd1ae7512c486aeeee71b9>.



first joint drills between their respective coastguards were held in August 2024.³⁷ Hanoi has expressed an interest in discussing the overlapping claims in this context. The two countries are also widely expected to conclude a defence agreement in early 2025.³⁸ This follows the establishment of a hotline between the two coastguards and a ramping up of naval cooperation. Whether the two can settle their disputed claims remains to be seen, but this signals potential progress. At the same time, Hanoi is wary of jeopardising its relations with China, as was evident by the reported confidential nature of two Memorandums of Understanding signed in January 2024 regarding coastguard cooperation and managing “incidents” in the SCS.³⁹ Nonetheless, it was through a similar chain of events that Vietnam was able to reach a bilateral agreement with Indonesia on the boundaries of their respective EEZs, when joint coastal exercises predated an eventual settlement in 2022.⁴⁰

It is unlikely that Vietnam will commit to a clear joint public stance on China with the Philippines in the immediate future. Nor have

public statements on cooperation explicitly mentioned such an outcome. Once again, this showcases Vietnam’s aim to establish a multidirectional foreign policy. The coming defence agreement is also significant for Manila as Singapore is currently the only Southeast Asian state that it has such an agreement with. It will therefore strengthen its regional security arrangements. With ASEAN-led COC talks hamstrung by member states such as Laos, Cambodia and Thailand eager to avoid provoking China based on a dispute in which they are not involved, this signals that other avenues are being explored to manage security.

Both Vietnam and the Philippines have been able to leverage the growing importance of the SCS to expand cooperation with other countries in the Indo-Pacific, notably the US,⁴¹ Japan and Australia. Engagement with European powers, however, has been more limited. While the EU launched a strategy for the Indo-Pacific in 2021, assertions with regard to the SCS have been few and far between. Although there have been sporadic port calls by Dutch, French and German

³⁷ Lim, Peh Hong. ‘Philippines, Vietnam Conduct 1st Joint Drills amid South China Sea Tensions’. Voice of America, 9 August 2024.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/philippines-vietnam-conduct-1st-joint-drills-amid-south-china-sea-tensions/7737213.html>.

³⁸ Radio Free Asia. ‘Vietnam, Philippines to Sign Defense Cooperation Agreement’, 30 August 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/southchinesea/vietnam-philippines-defense-agreement-08302024060808.html>.

³⁹ Dañguilan Vitug, Marites. ‘Vietnam Is the Philippines’ Bestie in ASEAN’. *RAPPLER* (blog), 30 July

2024. <https://www.rappler.com/plus-membership-program/exclusive-content/sui-generis-vietnam-philippines-best-friend-asean/>.

⁴⁰ ASEAN Business News. ‘Vietnam, Indonesia Agree on Boundaries for EEZs’, 26 December 2022.

<https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/vietnam-indonesia-agreement-on-boundaries-for-eezs/>.

⁴¹ The U.S. involvement in the SCS is extensive but will not be further detailed in this brief. For insights into American interests and actions in the dispute, see: [Why Tensions in the South China Sea Are Bolstering the U.S.-Philippines Alliance | Council on Foreign Relations](#)



frigates, the principal strategy has been to advocate for ASEAN's role and the implementation of a COC.

Concluding remarks

This brief has shown that while geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea have escalated in recent years, the responses of Vietnam and the Philippines, though outwardly distinct, reveal underlying similarities in strategic intent. As the two largest claimants after China, both countries recognize the need to manage their disputes with China to safeguard national security and

maritime interests. Whilst the Philippines has adopted a more assertive approach aimed at gaining international attention and leveraging US ties for defence capability enhancement and guarantees, Vietnam has adopted a quieter, low-profile stance whilst simultaneously bolstering their own capabilities through island-building. Amidst this, the two are seemingly fostering closer ties with recent joint coast guard drills and the expectation of a coming defence agreement.



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