

My paper "Navigating Security and Strategy: U.S. Policy and Interests in the South China Sea" is an important part of my academic and personal growth as an international security student, which is why I decided to include it in my portfolio." I was able to examine the intricacies of U.S. foreign policy under past administrations and gain a thorough understanding of one of the most strategically important areas in global politics through this essay. I find this piece particularly interesting because it is still relevant in the current environment, especially given the growing tensions between the US and China under the Trump administration. I also valued the challenge of addressing counterarguments and proposing creative, forward-looking policy recommendations, such as a multilateral South China Sea Council modeled after the Arctic Council. This essay reflects not only my capacity for analysis and policy-oriented thinking but also my broader dedication to comprehending and resolving global power dynamics strategically and peacefully. It exemplifies the type of work I hope to accomplish: research-based, application-focused, and motivated by the desire to advance world peace and cooperation.

Navigating Security and Strategy: U.S. Policy and Interests in the South China Sea

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Introduction

The strategic significance of the South China Sea for trade, military presence, and counterbalancing China's increasing influence makes it indispensable to U.S. national security. The preservation of regional peace and freedom of navigation have been the fundamental goals of previous US policy; this should continue but with an emphasis on fortifying relationships and multilateral diplomacy.

Background: Past US Policy on the South China Sea

- Obama Administration

The United States had been involved in the maritime conflicts in the South China Sea for decades, although their approach was once referred to as "scrupulous noninvolvement." However, the early 2010s saw China become more active in those waters, finally prompting President Barack Obama's administration to shift American policy in favor of a more aggressive posture (Chang, 2020). The Obama administration focused on enhancing defense cooperation with regional allies, such as the Philippines, Singapore, Japan, and Australia (Blackwill, 2024). Furthermore, a very important decision was made during the last term of former President Obama. The arbitral tribunal in charge of the Philippines' South China Sea case against China ruled overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines on July 12, 2016, finding that many of China's claims, such as its nine-dash line, its recent land reclamation efforts, and other actions in Philippine waters, were illegal (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2016). The decision offered some more clarity for the US and its allies and partners, which helped them make military decisions that were consistent with their stated beliefs and previous commitments. These include patrols, exercises, and FONOPs (Parameswaran, 2016).

Obama's strategy, however, was unable to stop the PRC from establishing military outposts on disputed SCS islands, showing its military might, and utilizing bilateral diplomatic pressure.

- Trump Administration

By enacting tariffs, the Trump administration switched its focus from cooperation with China to rivalry. However, the fundamental issue was the weakening of the alliances that were required to restrain China. First, Trump's decision to withdraw from the TPP on day one alarmed partners in Southeast Asia since it would hurt trade in the area. Weakening trust in the US by its regional partners strengthened China's influence (Blackwill, 2024).

Nevertheless, even with Trump's "America First" slogan, his administration still cultivated partnerships in Southeast Asia. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington said that the United States would align its policies with the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling

rejecting them. Thus, Pompeo argued, China has "no legal grounds to unilaterally impose its will on the region," no right to create exclusive economic zones surrounding its constructed islands, and no authority to obstruct other nations' efforts to explore for energy or engage in fishing (Chang, 2020).

- Biden Administration's First Year

Going forward, the US would confront the PRC from a strong position, derived from its allies and partners. Together with its partners in Europe and Asia, the Biden administration aimed to present a unified front against China. It emphasized the value of allies and partners on numerous occasions. In the South China Sea, it has focused especially on using established Western allies like Britain, France, and Germany to accomplish rebalancing with China (Zinan, 2021).

In addition to strengthening Western allies, Biden prioritized strengthening the Quad alliance to address challenges in the South China Sea. In response to challenges to the maritime rules-based order, particularly in the East and South China Seas, this multilateral partnership, and US cooperation with ASEAN, advocates for respect for international law, particularly as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the preservation of freedom of navigation and overflight (The White House, 2022). This turned into an important weapon in countering China's regional aggressiveness.

US National Interests in the South China Sea

- Freedom of Navigation

It is impossible to overestimate the South China Sea's economic importance. As one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, it is a crucial route for global trade. Any impediment to the free circulation of ships through these waters would have profound effects on the world economy, influencing not only the nations embroiled in the conflict but also the international community at large. The United States' economic interests would be immediately impacted by any move by China to impose restrictions on access or exercise control over the South China Sea. This might result in increased shipping costs, supply chain disruptions, and market instability. South China Sea trade accounts for 5.72% of all trade in goods for the United States. Maintaining American leadership in the global economy and preserving American prosperity depend on preserving freedom of navigation in the South China Sea (Beaver, 2024).

In addition to this, the South China Sea is rich in oil and natural gas. According to Rystad Economy, the South China Sea contains 40.3 trillion cubic feet of proven and probable natural gas deposits and about 3.6 billion barrels (b) of petroleum and other liquids (EIA, 2024). China would have a substantial economic edge and be able to exercise more influence over regional partners and friends of the United States if it were to monopolize the South China Sea's natural resources.

- Balancing China's Influence

Countering China's influence and preventing Chinese dominance over a crucial strategic area is a very important national interest in the South China Sea. Beijing threatens to cut off Southeast

Asian coastal states from shipping lanes, undermines their sovereign rights in the South China Sea, asserts its unilateral dominance, and denies fishermen access to their means of subsistence (United States Department of State, 2021). Unchecked, China's influence has the potential to shift the balance of power in the area, erode American influence, and jeopardize the security of American partners.

- Supporting Regional Stability

China views itself as a global force in the maritime realm, but its acts show that it is not willing to abide by international law. Beijing shows blatant disrespect for global cooperation in, on, and around the sea, not only in the Pacific but everywhere in the world (Rosarda et al., 2024). The US's ability to defend and assist its regional allies in Southeast Asia against Chinese aggression in the South China Sea conflict is critical to the US's relationship with these countries. In the end, the United States wants to guarantee a multipolar zone where regional stability and international law are upheld, prohibiting any country—particularly China—from taking unilateral control of the South China Sea.

Potential Counterarguments to US National Security Interests

- Risk of Escalation

Critics could contend that a stronger American military presence might lead to hostilities with China and heighten tensions in the area. Nevertheless, the purpose of American military presence in the Indo-Pacific is to deter, not to incite, potential conflict with China. The persistent aggressive actions of the Chinese government in the region pose a continuing danger to maritime security in and around the South China Sea. China routinely intimidates and harasses nearby neighbors with its sizable coast guard and navy. The presence of the United States deters further Chinese aggressiveness in the region (Fong, 2024). Moreover, US security and partnership are crucial for US allies in the region. Maintaining and enhancing deterrence in the Indo-Pacific area, particularly the South China Sea, requires close cooperation with allies and partners. One country can't handle intricate and linked problems on its own, and the South China Sea is no different (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021).

- Regional Burden-Sharing

Another counterargument could be that, rather than requiring significant U.S. involvement, regional parties, such as Southeast Asian countries, ought to assume greater accountability for their security in the South China Sea. It is imperative that the United States initiates overt signals and calls for greater defense accountability from its Indo-Pacific partners and allies. However, of all the world powers, America alone possesses the credibility to design long-term solutions for this problem. This goes beyond just means. It also has to do with morals. Only America possesses the moral and material strength to halt the decline into chaos—not for the sake of power, but for the sake of peace. The US should work alongside its allies to promote peace and security, but a decrease in US deterrence against China will be impossible to replace. American isolationism will threaten the continued existence of the worldwide system of laws that has enabled so many people to live free and prosperous lives (Mille, 2023).

- Focus on Diplomacy

Some who oppose U.S. military involvement in the South China Sea contend that diplomacy should take precedence over military action, pointing out that focusing on diplomatic relations with China and other regional players might ease tensions and promote peaceful resolutions.

Historically, diplomacy has been tried and has failed repeatedly. Beijing has announced and promised that militarization of the South China Sea won't happen or even that demilitarization will happen, which in the end are empty promises (Collinson, 2023). The Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 decision rejecting China's claims in the South China Sea further demonstrates Beijing's disdain for international law. Despite this setback, Xi Jinping has continued to militarize artificial islands and take harsh measures against smaller regional states.

Washington and its allies have failed to stop Beijing's persistent advance in the South China Sea. In reality, diplomacy alone as the way of solving this dispute won't succeed because of China's leader, Xi Jinping, who claims the waters belong to China (Collinson, 2023). When it comes to authoritarian nations, this is nothing new. Sometimes, military presence is required to complement diplomacy to make a threat of force credible and encourage negotiation.

Policy Recommendations for the Next Three Years

- Maintain and Expand Naval Presence and Defense Cooperation:

In order to show its commitment to an open and free Indo-Pacific, the US should keep conducting FONOPs. In addition to showing China that the US will not permit it to exploit its weaker neighbors in the area, the US intends to reassure its allies about its military might and commitment to them.

Moreover, the US should strengthen naval partnerships with allies such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. This is to maintain a credible naval deterrence against China which now has the world's largest number of battle force ships. With the majority of its ships stationed in the Western Pacific, China has an asymmetrical military edge over the United States Navy, which is overburdened protecting every ocean in the globe (Stein, 2024). The success of US foreign policy and national security depends on having strong allies. In order to maintain the stability of the South China Sea and the whole Indo-Pacific region, the United States needs its partners to step up.

Furthermore, the US needs to take part in cooperative military drills with its allies in the region, intelligence cooperation, and capacity-building programs that improve the ASEAN countries' abilities to monitor and safeguard their waters, discouraging illicit activity and Chinese encroachment.

- Multilateral Alternative Options

China, ASEAN, and ASEAN claimant states have created a number of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms over the last thirty years to address the SCS conflict. The results of the current bilateral and multilateral management processes are, at best, unreliable.

Beyond China and the ASEAN member states, other parties should be involved in the direct management of the SCS problem. The United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India, and

South Korea are obvious contenders. Some European nations, including France and Britain, or the European Union (EU) as a whole, may think of themselves as eligible candidates. One could argue that the future, norms, and order pertaining to the SCS should not be formed and chosen solely by China and the ASEAN candidate member states, as all these countries have a direct stake in the peace and stability of the region (Peng & Ngeow, 2022). Another option could be establishing a South China Sea Council modeled after the Arctic Council. A South China Sea Council could serve as a platform for managing disputes, promoting dialogue, and fostering cooperation on issues like resource sharing, environmental protection, and maritime security (Swaine, 2015).

Alignment with International Relations Theories

Understanding why China is reiterating its claims throughout the SCS requires a realistic perspective. Since there is no organized government in the SCS, anarchy prevails there. China is using state power to force its neighbors and the international community to accept the status quo in the South China Sea without facing any legal ramifications (Moulton, 2022). Realistic thinking is also demonstrated by the United States' emphasis on maintaining a military presence in the South China Sea, which is a calculated use of force to protect regional stability and counterbalance Chinese influence. The main principles of realist theory—power competition, deterrence, and national security—are given precedence in this strategy. On the other hand, the importance of international institutions such as UNCLOS, ASEAN, and the rules-based order aligns with liberalism in the possibility of cooperation and peace between countries.

Conclusion

Under the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, US maritime policy in the South China Sea has undoubtedly changed, as has the level of intensity. Yet, the primary objective has been the same: preserving unrestricted navigation. The South China Sea continues to be a crucial geopolitical flashpoint where American objectives in preserving regional security, allowing free passage, and countering Chinese dominance coincide. In the future, maintaining U.S. interests in this hotly disputed region will require a careful management of military presence, support for international law, and strong ties with regional partners.

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