
**BETWEEN THE GREAT POWERS: UNDERSTANDING PHILIPPINES
BANDWAGON AMIDST THE UNITED STATES-CHINA RIVALRY IN THE
SOUTH CHINA SEA**

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ABSTRACT

China's rapid economic and military ascent has led to an increasingly assertive foreign policy, particularly in the South China Sea. This rise has significant implications for Southeast Asian nations, with the Philippines experiencing severe challenges to its security and sovereignty due to Chinese naval and coast guard activities. As one of the most vocal opponents to Beijing's claims, the Philippines successfully contested China's actions at the International Court of Arbitration in 2016. The South China Sea has become a focal point of superpower rivalry, with the United States actively engaging in the region to defend its interests and the existing regional order against China's emerging influence. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the Philippines' strategic positioning amidst the US-China rivalry in the South China Sea. Using a descriptive qualitative method based on secondary sources, including official documents, journal articles, and media reports, the study examines various aspects of this complex geopolitical situation. The main argument posits that the Philippines' approach to bandwagoning is primarily driven by security and sovereignty concerns, which are frequently challenged by China's territorial claims and military activities in the disputed areas. This comprehensive analysis aims to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics shaping the Philippines' foreign policy decisions in the context of great power competition in Southeast Asia.

I. INTRODUCTION

China maintains its classic claim known as *the nine-dash line* in the South China Sea with its map known as the “China Standard Map 2023”. This new map released by China's Ministry of Natural Resources on Monday, August 28, 2023, holds China's statement regarding its claim to the South China Sea area which is adding a new area which is the sea east of Taiwan-making the nine-dash line become ten- and expanding claims to the sea area bordering the Philippines. The new map also includes parts of Malaysia's maritime exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near Sabah and Sarawak, Brunei, Indonesia, and Vietnam (Iswara, 2023). These claims are triggering much of the intense international response related to China's territorial disputes. Not a few countries rejected this new map because it was seen as annexing their territory. Further, China's claims will impact more than 400 Filipino civilians, including 70 children living on Pag-Asa Island, which is part of the Spratly Islands and Kalayaan Island Group (KIG).

The intention between the South China Regions has drawn the attention of the United States. China is increasingly challenging that status quo, using its growing military power to press long-standing territorial claims. Therefore, Washington is moving to reshape its decades-old regional alliances to keep Beijing's ambitions in check (Heijmans, 2024). Tensions are especially obvious around Taiwan and in the South China Sea. The Philippines government has repeatedly expressed concern over China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, such as collisions between vessels and illegal fishing by Chinese vessels in November 2021 and a series of clashes between Chinese coast guard ships and the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), recently in early August 2023.

Nonetheless, caught in the crossfire is the Philippines—a nation with historical ties to the US and increasingly deep economic engagement with China. The Philippines step cautiously between two rival powers - sometimes as a threat, sometimes as a benefit giver. The tension between the United States and China is uncertain if the United States will back its commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty (Republic of the Philippines, 1951) due to The Philippines government did not have a strong military unit, and its navy was not equipped to protect themselves (Winston, 2020). In recent months, the Philippines has given the United States access to the main military bases, shown support for allies, and called out Chinese aggression in the region (Wingfield-Hayes, 2023). The Philippines through the National Security Policy (NSP) for the year 2023 to 2028, also explains that amid China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, the Philippines has rebalanced its relations with the US, expanding military

cooperation, as evidenced by the 2014 expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement from five to nine mutually agreed military facilities where US armed forces able to operate. (Espeña, 2023).

The Philippines is one of the countries in Southern Asia. The Philippines has the total number of islands in the archipelago to over 7,600 (Marquez, 2019), but only about two-thirds of these islands are habited. According to World Population Review, the estimated population of 2024 is approximately 119 million people. Manila is the Philippines's capital, while Quezon is the country's most populous city, both cities are part of the National Capital Region (Metro Manila), on the island of Luzon, the Philippines's largest island. The second largest island of the Philippines is Mindanao (Hernandez & Cullinane, 2024).

The name "Philippines" is derived from Philip II, who was king of Spain during the Spanish colonization of the islands in the 16th century when the Philippines was under Spanish rule for 333 years. However, in the 1898 Treaty of Paris, after the Spanish-American War, the United States acquired Spain's colonies in the Pacific, including the Philippines (U.S. Department of State). The Philippines was under the United States' instruction for an additional 48 years. The Philippines did not gain independence until 1946, after World War II, with the July 4th signing of the Treaty of Manila (Albert, 2016). The Philippines's history led to significant cultural affinities with the West and has made the Philippines the second most populous Asian country (following India) where English serves as an official language. Although the official languages are Filipino and English, most of the population speaks Tagalog. The Philippines is composed of 175 ethnolinguistic nations (Republic of the Philippines, 2017).

As an archipelago country lying about 500 miles (800 km) off the coast of Vietnam and has a total land area of approximately 300,000 square kilometers (115,831 square miles), making the Philippines the fifth largest island country in the world. The Philippine EEZ spans 2,263,816 square kilometers (874,064 square miles) of sea and borders the South China Sea to the west.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bandwagoning is one of the political strategies that creates a tendency for small countries that are vulnerable to political dilemmas or political pressures to form alliances with strong countries in order to reduce the possibility of attack. In the context of the reference article, the UAE foreign policy against Yaman, bandwagoning is defined as the UAE adopting the foreign policy of a regional superpower, such as Saudi Arabia, to avoid political or military conflict

over regional affairs. At the beginning of its foreign policy formation, the UAE built a controlled alliance system to strengthen its power. Under the leadership of Sheikh Zayed, the UAE framed their foreign policy with friendship and partnership with their neighboring countries and relatives in the Islamic world and established close security ties with the US through partnership in the international interventions in Bosnia and Afghanistan. Through bandwagoning with the US during those interventions, the UAE was able to increase their military power gradually on the global stage (Dogan-Akkas, 2021).

According to the article “The changing dynamics of China-Myanmar relations post the Military Coup - From Hedging to Bandwagoning?” (Soumyodeep, 2023), bandwagoning refers to a strategy in which a state aligns with a more dominant state in certain situations in order to gain strategic advantage. In the application of bandwagoning in the research article, China increased their investment in Myanmar and provided political support to the military junta. This includes projects in the Belt and Road initiative, investment in the energy sector, and infrastructure development. In addition, China is also trying to increase its influence in Myanmar and in the wider region, and ensure access to the Indian Ocean through the port of Kyaukphyu. Although China is seen as a more dominant country than Myanmar, in this context China can gain strategic advantages by maximizing their interests in Myanmar. These benefits include access to natural resources, new economic opportunities, and protection of existing investments.

The implementation of bandwagoning theory in the article “An ‘Ironclad Friend’: Explaining Cambodia's Bandwagoning Policy towards China” (Sovinda, 2020). Bandwagoning is interpreted as a country's attempt to gain an advantage by allying militarily, economically, and diplomatically with a stronger country. Cambodia is looking towards China for support to keep the Hun Sen regime in power and develop Cambodia's economy. In this economic position, China is the largest trading partner for Cambodia and provides many infrastructure projects and investments to Cambodia. In recent years, China has provided military support to Cambodia, which has increased the country's confidence in facing the threat from Vietnam. The action taken by Cambodia by choosing to get closer to China is because Cambodia sees that ASEAN is unable to provide sufficient security protection.

Bandwagoning, in the view of Łukasz Jureńczyk, is a form of asymmetrical relations conducted by a state towards a state with more dominant national policy and wider influence in the international world. In his article “Polish-American Alliance During the Presidency of Donald Trump in The Perspective of Offensive Bandwagoning”, he emphasizes that the relationship

between the two countries is asymmetrical with the United States playing the role of the dominant country. Given Poland's unfriendly relationship with Russia, it is not surprising that Poland considers the United States as the most important partner guaranteeing the country's security. Initially, the United States did not really consider Poland to play an important role in its global relations, but Poland's pro-American nature combined with Trump's narcissistic nature made the relationship between the two countries even closer. In addition, ideological similarities between the two countries, ranging from negative views on immigration, manifestations of Islamophobia, and so on make their relationship strengthen (Jureńczyk, 2022).

Britnee Carter (2022) in his article entitled "Revisiting Bandwagoning Hypothesis: A Statistical Analysis of The Alliance Dynamic of Small States" explains that when a conflict occurs in the international system a country can decide to join an alliance of countries to deal with the threats, remain neutral, or form a bandwagoning with another country to face the existing threats. Carter also explained that there are several behaviors of a country, especially a small country when form a bandwagoning with another country ; when dealing with external threats small countries will form a bandwagoning with revisionist countries, a country does bandwagoning when the country does not have military power comparable to the threats they have to face, countries do bandwagoning when there is domestic political pressure, countries tend to do bandwagoning to reap the power of the dominant country (Carter, 2022).

III. RESEARCH METHOD

In providing the analysis and explanation, the article utilizes the qualitative research method. The qualitative research method is a research method that begins by formulating research questions, collecting relevant data (primary sources, secondary sources, or both), and interpreting data to obtain results and conclusions (Byrman, 2012).

A distinctive feature of qualitative research methods is its data collection and analysis techniques that emphasize the use of descriptive narratives rather than quantification (Lamont, 2015). Variable measurement in qualitative research methods emphasizes the assessment of non-numerical features, characteristics, and relationships (Roselle et al., 2020). In addition, the qualitative research method also focuses more on the process than the results, because the relationship between the components under examination becomes clearly visible when observed through a process (Moleong, 2014).

The article utilizes a data triangulation technique that combines various types of secondary data sources, including official documents released by governments and international institutions, academic articles accessed from international journals, and news published by mass media, which specifically discuss or are relevant to the United States - China Rivalry, also the Philippines foreign policy in the South China Sea dispute.

The article also utilizes a case study analysis technique. The application of this technique is done through an in-depth and detailed examination of collected secondary data sources, consisting of the events and actors involved, especially the United States, China, also the Philippines in the South China Sea dispute, to identify causal processes and patterns that can explain the reasons behind the occurrence of a case (Lipson, 2005). Ultimately, through the use of the qualitative research method combined with triangulation and case study techniques, the article would then provide an explanation of the Philippines bandwagon amidst the United States-China rivalry in the South China Sea.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

China's Foreign Policy, the Philippines's Position, and the United States's Stance on the South China Sea

Over the past few years, China has emerged as a rising power, which has become actively involved in power struggles in the international system. Its rapid rise in both economic and military power has allowed Beijing to pursue an unprecedentedly assertive foreign policy, including its ambition to become the leading power controlling large parts of the South China Sea. Through its Nine-Dash Line map, China asserts its claim to 80 percent of the South China Sea, including the construction of artificial islands on several contested reefs in the Spratly Islands, such as Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef and Subi Reef (Mastro, 2021). These islands, which are heavily equipped with military installations including a runway, hangars and radar systems, have escalating tensions between China and countries surrounding the SCS, especially the Philippines and even the United States.

China's ambitions in the South China Sea are often linked to its national interests to expand geopolitical influence, strengthen territorial claims and pursue energy concerns. The region is seen by Beijing as strategically important, given its strategic location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans its recognized status as a key global trade route and due to its rich natural resource's potential (Kusuma et al., 2021). The US Energy Information Administration and

geological survey estimates that the South China Sea holds about 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil, and estimates that there may still be 160 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 12 billion barrels of oil yet to be discovered in the South China Sea, while Beijing's estimates for undersea hydrocarbon resources are much higher, but still small when compared to China's overall demand, where oil consumption in 2018 is estimated at 12.8 million barrels per day (AMTI, 2024). Based on these data, it can be concluded that the South China Sea is a heaven and treasure of natural resources for China in ensuring its future energy security.

While the implications of China's increased engagement can be felt across the globe, no country in Southeast Asia has had its security and sovereignty as severely roiled by Chinese naval and coast guard activities as the Philippines has in recent years. Apart from Vietnam, the Philippines has been the most vocal in opposing Beijing's lawless claims, having successfully won a lawsuit at the International Court of Arbitration in 2016. Throughout 2023 to 2024, the Philippines has repeatedly engaged in clashes with Chinese coast guard vessels around the Spratly Islands, which they refer to as the West Philippine Sea, often involving ship ramming and water cannon firing (Elemia, 2023). The situation demonstrates the Philippines' position and firm stance against China, by rejecting all forms of China's claims and activities that have no basis in international law.

The Philippines itself plays a vital role in the South China Sea, and an actor that cannot be ignored in security issues surrounding the region. Aside from its policy of opposing China's Nine-Dash Line territorial claim (especially in the Spratly Islands), Manila is also one of the locations of US military bases in the Indo-Pacific region. As recent as April 2023, the United States announced that it had expanded the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Arrangement (EDCA) to include the opening of four new military base locations in the Philippines, including Naval Base Camilo Osias in Santa Ana, Cagayan; Camp Melchor Dela Cruz in Gamu, Isabela; Balabac Island in Palawan; and Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan (US Department of Defense, 2023). In short, the Philippines' position in the South China Sea is crucial, as it comes face-to-face with two major powers in the region.

Tensions in the South China Sea have also demonstrated that the region has been transformed into a battleground of rivalries, where superpowers such as the United States are engaged in the region in a quest to defend their interests, power and regional order that is being contested by emerging superpowers such as China. The United States considers that China's territorial

claims are unjustifiable under international law as articulated in UNCLOS 1982, and that these actions constitute a unilateral attempt to change to the status quo by force (Nguyễn Anh, 2023). The United States' stance was manifested by the launch of the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP), which aimed to counter China's efforts to assert de facto control over the South China Sea (Kuok, 2016). Through FONOP, US Navy warships routinely patrol disputed areas in the South China Sea region, including in the Philippines in ensuring freedom of navigation in the region. Hence, the relationship between the United States and China, characterized by competition and tension, has made the security situation in the South China Sea become more complex.

The next section of this article will discuss the Philippine-China relationship to understand the dynamics of the Philippine's bandwagon amidst the US-China rivalry.

Philippines' Relations with China in the South China Sea

One of the richest sea regions in terms of natural resources, the South China Sea, has since become a regional hotspot for territorial competition and maritime claims. Today, the relationship between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea has been in the headlines, a mix of persisting bickering and high-level diplomacy from disputes of old to these days. All this never-ending territorial struggle started with China's sprawling claim which is the 'Nine-Dash Line' baloney which overlapped with Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Philippines and the international community have dismissed this assertion as having no legal foundation. The problem is being further exacerbated by a very low level of trust on both sides, which has been borne by decades long battles (Raymond, 2022).

Philippine-Chinese relations dynamics in the SCS have been volatile due to a series of aggressive incidents like Chinese boats firing lasers and water cannons at Philippine boats yet Chinese activities of fishing and artificial islands construction in the disputed territories. In this regard, the Philippines has raised alarm over the incidents leading to heightened tensions in the area. Furthermore, the policy style of the president in the government of the Philippines also affects the relationship between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea. Each president has his characteristics to tackle issues related to China regarding the South China Sea dispute.

Diplomatic ties between the Philippines and China were marked with strains on the South China Sea rows under the presidency of President Benigno Aquino III. Together with: Self-

pinny, this is the work they carried out on 2013 when the Philippines gallies a reasonable case under the decision of UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in Den Haag. In 2016, the PCA handed down a landmark ruling that dismantled the Chinese 'Nine-Dash Line' claim and upheld the Philippines' flout of the South China Sea. But that had little bearing on China's claims in the South China Sea. Consequently, it has affected tensions between the Philippines and China.

The type of policy that is aimed at the current relations with the PRC on the South China Sea differs from the previous relations. President Duterte focused on independent foreign policy and developed relations in the region, including with China. In addition, such a policy was aimed at stabilizing the Philippines' security relationship with the US and managing closer relations with China to resolve the South China Sea's problem. Also, there are general diplomatic relations between the Philippines and China, which are carried out by means of bilateral dialogues. In the future, economic cooperation will open with China, and it is planned to join the Belt and Road. This option of cooperation with China will help to increase the Philippine economy by the construction of infrastructure, job creation, and trade opportunities opening. Aside from the economic benefits, the decision to pursue closer relations with China also involves political risks, such as potentially weakening ASEAN strongholds and rising political clout in dealing with China's territorial expansion. In addition, Duterte continued the ratification process of the Philippines' membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), marking increased economic and infrastructure cooperation with China. This certainly affects the dynamics of relations between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea. But despite the change in the pattern of relations between the Philippines and China under the leadership of President Duterte, it did not immediately resolve conflicts related to the South China Sea issue.

Increased economic ties with China as the largest trading partner on the other hand form a dilemma for the Philippines as the Philippines is tied in a security alliance with the United States, where the US is the main force against China's maritime claims. This dynamic has encouraged the Philippines to implement a bandwagoning strategy, joining China in some ways to gain an advantage, but still maintaining a relationship with the US to remain balanced. The Philippines has significant economic dependency on China, which is a major source of investment and export market. Bandwagoning with China allows the Philippines to access Chinese funds and markets, boosting domestic economic growth. However, bandwagoning

with China is not without risks. This strategy could fuel suspicion and tensions with the US, the Philippines' main defense ally.

Since June 2022, the relations between the Philippines and the United States (US) have markedly warmed and this has implications much broader than simply convincing the Philippines to fall directly into a quadrilateral security mechanism against China. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed off on a new national security framework that says maritime sovereignty in the disputed South China Sea and stability in the Taiwan Strait are among the issues of prime importance. The move was a clear suggestion that Quad is committed to having a robust security cooperation with the US because the US is a fragile ally and potential Chinese threat must be faced head-on. The Philippines is switching its emphasis from ground-based counter-insurgency to the protection of maritime sovereignty. The move was made in response to China's progressively assertive tactics in the South China Sea, including the obstruction of supply missions to the Second Thomas Shoal. This enhanced focus on maritime protection requires the modernization of the Philippine navy and coastal countermeasures, in which the US can play an important role in terms of funding, training and technological transfer. Strengthening the Philippines-US relationship has far-reaching implications for regional stability and geopolitics in Southeast Asia. It can strengthen efforts to counter China's maritime expansion and ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Moreover, enhancing defense cooperation could improve the Philippines' ability to counter potential threats from terrorist groups and other non-state actors.

Diplomacy efforts have struggled between the Philippines and China. Deep-rooted mistrust and suspicion verging on hostility between the two with a huge difference in power and conflicting national interests have been the biggest hurdles to finding peace. Furthermore, international norms that govern the claim of the sea area are yet to be universally recognized, which adds complexity in the future settlement of disputes in a fair and transparent way. The fate of Philippine-China relations hinges on whether the two will walk that thin line together. Stable and beneficial relations in turn hinge on open and frank discussion, as well as on a determination to find peaceful solutions for disagreements. Resource exploration and development by sea should be carried out in collaboration, and disputes between countries over marine boundaries should be resolved proactively to create conditions for mutual cooperation.

Philippines' Relations with the United States in the South China Sea

The United States has had a close relationship with the Philippines since 1946, with ties strengthened by historical and cultural connections and a shared view of democracy. The defense treaty ratified by the two countries in 1951 strengthened the security cooperation between the United States and the Philippines. The United States itself stands by and supports the Philippines' efforts to resolve conflicts and issues in the South China Sea (United States Department, 2024).

Philippine foreign policy in dealing with South China Sea disputes often involves the United States in it. Under the leadership of President Aquino III, there are three important instruments of efforts made by the Philippines in handling the South China Sea dispute, including: military modernization, strengthening bilateral relations with the United States, and relying on international law, especially UNCLOS.

The United States has its own interests in the South China Sea. Based on the views of Navarro and Peter, the United States does not want competitors to seize its hegemonic position in the international world. Therefore, the United States is trying its best to inhibit the power of China which is feared to be able to seize its hegemonic position. This motivation is what drives the United States to take part in the South China Sea Dispute. In 2012, President Aquino III traveled to Washington for talks and sought to strengthen bilateral defense ties with the United States. The South China Sea dispute was one of the main topics of discussion. In this meeting, although the United States was open to the Philippines, the United States still moved cautiously. Given that in 1992 the Philippines had expelled the US military from the Subic Bay Sea Base. This is related to the Philippine Constitution, which prohibits foreign bases in its territory, and the high nationalist sentiment.

In 2014, the United States and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). This agreement calls for military forces from both countries to conduct joint training, respond to natural and humanitarian crises, and achieve modernization. It also allows a number of Philippine military bases to be accessed by the United States military. Under Aquino III's leadership, a firm stance was taken against China in relation to the South China Sea Dispute. In 2016, Aquino III was replaced by Rodrigo Duterte who had a different leadership direction from his predecessor. When Aquino III took a firm stance on China and tended to establish closer relations with the United States.

Duterte instead established good relations with China. At the beginning of his term, Duterte stated that during his leadership, a turning point in relations between the Philippines and China

would be established. The Philippines will promote and try to establish friendly relations with China. This is related to economic issues. The Philippine economy itself has been in a slump for some time, partly due to the poor relations with China during the leadership of the previous president.

Four years back when the Philippines filed the South China Sea case with the international court, China banned tourists, investors and importers from visiting the Philippines. Which made the Philippine economy deflate. In order to restore his country's economy, Duterte established good relations with China, while the Philippines' relationship with the United States began to fray. The Philippines consciously began to release its dependence on the United States (BBC, 2016).

The relationship between the United States and the Philippines worsened with Duterte's policies that seemed controversial to the United States. The policy was the War on Drugs drug policy which was criticized by the United States for not respecting human rights. In February 2020, Duterte announced his unilateral decision to terminate the VFA (Visiting Force Agreement). The termination of the VFA itself has only been in effect for 180 days since it was announced, which will end in August. But before the VFA was officially terminated, Duterte had suspended the decision three times. Trying to reestablish good relations with the United States. This is due to superpower tensions in the South China Sea, the Covid-19 pandemic (Rappler.com, 2020). In addition, the Philippines' military capabilities are relatively low compared to other Asian countries, making Duterte try to re-establish a cooperative relationship with the United States. The economic cooperation that Duterte has established with China over the past four years is considered not as expected as imagined. In addition, China also often takes provocative actions in the region that tend to threaten Philippine security. These actions are 220 Chinese ships that roam around Julian Felipe Reef (Christina et al, 2023). It is these issues that have caused Duterte to reverse course and improve the Philippines' relationship with the United States.

In 2022, the leadership of the Philippines was replaced by Bongbong Marcos who tended to favor the United States. In 2023 the United States established four military bases in the Philippines, one of which directly faces the South China Sea region. The locations of the four military bases include: Naval Base Camilo Osias in Santa Ana, Cagayan; Camp Melchor Dela Cruz in Gamu, Isabela, Balabac Island in Palawan; and Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan. The

construction of the four military establishments in the Philippines is the implementation of EDCA, an agreement entered into by the two countries (Kompas, 2023).

In 2023, feeling that the security of the region and the country was threatened, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr granted access to four additional sites, which were not part of the five sites agreed upon by EDCA in 2014. Thus, there are a total of nine military areas as evidence of cooperation in the field of security between the United States and the Philippines. Marcos' decision was opposed by the Chinese embassy in Manila. It is feared that this will hamper China's ambition to dominate and control the South China Sea region.

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Over the past few years, China has emerged as a rising power, and is actively involved in the struggle for power in the international system. The rapid increase in its economic and military power has allowed Beijing to pursue a highly assertive foreign policy, including its ambition to become a major power controlling most of the South China Sea. Through its Nine-Dash Line map, China has become a hegemon in this region. Economic progress and changes in China's balance of power against American power have changed American foreign policy, making the Asia Pacific region, including the South China Sea, the center of their foreign policy.

Due to China's big policies and ambitions in the South China Sea, it has led to conflicts with several countries around the South China Sea region which are most affected and a major conflict has emerged, namely with the Philippines. Several incidents in the South China Sea between Chinese Coast Guard ships and Philippine Coast Guard ships are a sign that the conflict between the two countries is heating up. Throughout 2023 to 2024, the Philippines was repeatedly involved in clashes with Chinese coast guard ships around the area. The Spratly Islands, which they call the West Philippine Sea, often involve ship collisions and water cannon shooting. China's disregard for the results of the International Arbitration regarding territorial claims in the South China Sea has added to the increasing tension in the conflict. The Philippines' very important role in the South China Sea makes them an actor that cannot be ignored in security issues in the region. In addition to its policy of opposing China's Nine Dash Line territorial claims (especially in the Spratly Islands), Manila is also home and one of the locations of US military bases in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Philippines is one of the countries allied with America in the Asia Pacific region. The existence of this alliance is what makes the Philippines. Tensions in the South China Sea also show that this region has turned into a field of competition, where superpower countries such as the United States are involved in this region in an effort to maintain their interests, power and regional order which are being contested by other countries. new superpowers like China.

In reality, the political dynamics that occur between the Philippines and China do not limit or even sever the Philippines' cooperative relationship with China. There are several collaborations that the Philippines continues to carry out with China by utilizing the Belt and Road policy. China has gained many economic benefits from China's Belt and Road policy. Apart from that, cooperation is also carried out in other fields whose main aim is economic benefits. In the South China Sea issue, the Philippines realistically relies on American strength by continuing to use several areas of the Philippines as American military bases. The balancing of cooperative relations is carried out of course with the hope that their territorial sovereignty will be maintained with the country's economy getting better.

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