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Cooperation and Struggle: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea Dispute

Master's thesis in Political Science

Supervisor: Katja Levy

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Abstract:

This analysis examines how national domestic concerns and international political considerations shape Vietnamese and Philippine responses to Chinese activities in the South China Sea dispute. The conflict involves Chinese efforts to establish de facto control over areas that, according to international law, belong to Vietnam and the Philippines. Through qualitative case studies within a constructivist framework of International Relations theory, based on document studies and multiple case studies, my research reveals a significant survival-oriented understanding in both states. This understanding, rooted in historical troubles of economic turmoil and political instability, influences their approaches. This understanding also influences the assertive balancing policy aimed at deterring China in the case of the Philippines. Balancing is a common trend; however, Vietnamese policy is more pragmatic and seeks to maintain a delicate balance with China whenever possible. This is often called a soft-balancing policy and is aimed. Finally, the study finds that a key difference in these approaches stems from differences in historical experiences, political relationships, and cultural factors.

Sammendrag:

Denne analysen undersøker hvordan nasjonale politiske hensyn og internasjonale politiske hensyn former vietnamesiske og filippinske tilnærminger til kinesiske aktiviteter i konflikten om Sør-Kinahavet. Konflikten innebærer kinesiske forsøk på å etablere kontroll over områder som ifølge internasjonal lov tilhører Vietnam og Filippinene. Gjennom en kvalitativ case-studie strukturert innenfor en konstruktivistisk ramme av IR-Teori, og basert på dokumentstudier, avdekker min forskning en betydelig overlevelsesorientert mentalitet i begge stater. Denne forståelsen, forankret i historiske utfordringer med økonomisk uro og politisk ustabilitet, påvirker deres tilnærminger. Denne forståelsen påvirker den aktive og defensive balanseringspolitikken som tar sikte på å avskrekke Kina i tilfellet av Filippinene. Balansering er en vanlig trend; imidlertid er den vietnamesiske politikken mer forsiktig og søker å opprettholde en god relasjon til Kina når enn det er mulig. Denne politikken kan kalles en myk-balanseringspolitikk. Til slutt viser studien at en viktig variabel for forskjellene i disse tilnærmingene stammer fra historiske erfaringer, politiske forhold og kulturelle faktorer

Preface:

This project was hard work, researching this topic is without a doubt one of the most challenging things I've undertaken due to its nature, but also extremely rewarding. It could not be a better ending to 5 years as a student in Trondheim. I enjoyed the process and I have learnt a lot from doing this work in a field that interests me greatly, but now I am very ready for a holiday.

However, doing this would not have been possible under any circumstances without the recreation and support given to me underway by my closest friends. Audun, Tore and Jonas, you have never left my side in any form and our relationships, and our ridiculous jokes have been essential for my happiness. I'm sad you all moved away a while ago, but your presence and our ridiculously funny video-game sessions on Discord have been invaluable.

I also want to thank my mother, Maria, for always being available on the phone whenever the stress of this work became overwhelming. Your emotional support has been invaluable in writing this project, without a safe space to just complain I don't think I could have done it.

A final thanks to my mentor Larsen, and my father Morten, for also offering valuable motivation and emotional support to me in this process. A final big cheer I want to extend to all the people I've met along the way, even if just over a beer on a Saturday-night. I cherish every single one of you, and this period would not be the same without any of you. I hope to see you all again soon in the beautiful dance that is called life.

Finally, I want to thank my advisor Katja, your energy and passion has been invaluable in keeping me on-track and I have appreciated our talks. I also have greatly benefited from your non-nonsense and direct approach towards the actual work on the thesis. Thank you for all the great help with the thesis, other future related affairs, and professional advice.

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List of Abbreviations:

SCS – South China Sea

SRV – Socialist Republic of Vietnam

ROP – Republic of the Philippines

CPV – Communist Party of Vietnam

PRC – People`s Republic of China

IR – International Relations

1 Introduction

In 2009, a map was published by the People's Republic of China (PRC), under the nickname of the nine-dash line. This map shows Chinese claims to the entirety of the South China Sea as its own Exclusive Economic Zone or EEZ. This followed a development where several states in the region, among some the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), and the Republic of the Philippines (ROP), notified the relevant organs about claims. This set of submissions and subsequent disagreements mark the starting point of the modern tensions and came because of UN calls for claims to the extensions of continental shelves, which form the basis for the start of Exclusive Economic Zones¹. Ever since this matter, Chinese vessels have regularly intruded and disturbed the economic operations of these states in the waters of the South-China Sea to establish effective control over the seas²The dispute has sparked tense clashes, standoffs, and increasing involvement from other geopolitical actors worldwide. One reason for this can be attributed to the importance of the waters for natural resources and transportation of trade. The waters are also home to an immense number of fish, which are vital to the states surrounding them.

I, therefore, turn the attention in my thesis to Vietnam and the Philippines, two of the states with the most active disagreements with China over rights to the waters. My thesis wants to discover the efforts made by these two states to meet this challenge, and how it is reflective of societal dynamics and international dynamics. The Philippines, to balance China, has drawn closer to the United States, taken bold measures, and brought the matter for arbitration at international courts. On the other hand, Vietnam, given its proximity to China and its political relations, has adopted a more cautious approach. I argue this presents an interesting puzzle, and that a study of societal dynamics through a constructivist International Relations perspective will contribute to the understanding of the dispute.

At first glance, this dispute may seem to fit into the classic realist scenario of stronger great powers fighting and challenging smaller states. Such an analysis from a realist perspective would be valid. However, my thesis aims to delve deeper into the complexities of this conflict. I argue that there are layers of multidimensionality to the dispute, making it a complex puzzle that defies easy categorization by assumptions.

My thesis is thus an attempt to make sense of what shapes state responses in this conflict given the interwoven nature of the states in the dispute. Research-wise there is a useful amount of work done on the nature of responses by these two states and the reasoning behind it. This provides a decent amount of data to support my research. However, the literature lacks theoretical anchoring and substantial analysis digging into the societies of these states, and concrete explanations for these responses. As a result, my thesis will anchor in the perspectives of International Relations theory (IR), and the constructivist perspective championed by Alexander Wendt. Followingly this has relevance given that the matter can be categorized as interstate relations and political behavior. My research questions are the following.

¹ Doyle 2009

² Thayer 2012

My Research Questions:

- RQ1: *How are the Philippines' and Vietnam's responses to the South China Sea dispute different?*
- RQ2: *How do these responses reflect their respective national self-understandings?*
- RQ3: *What conclusion can be drawn about why these differ, considering their national characteristics?*

Thus, this thesis will anchor itself in these three research questions. RQ1 starts off by describing and understanding how the responses taken to counter China in the dispute can be categorized and how they differ. RQ2 is aimed at understanding from a constructivist lens which ideas and understandings in each state interact in shaping them, by looking at societal dynamics and threat perceptions. These two RQs will be answered individually in chapters 4 and 5, respectively. RQ2 also seeks to understand to what extent the state leadership makes the dispute out to be a security threat with the aid of the frameworks of Buzan and colleagues of 1998 to complement the understanding³. Finally, in RQ3, I will in chapter 6 make use of comparative design to study if there are any relevant factors that are present in both states and explore which conclusions can be made about why they differ. My frame of analysis will be anchored in A. Wendt`s 1999 described concepts of national self-understanding and how the state leadership understands their role and required courses of action in line with societal and international dynamics⁴. Here I will focus mainly on historical and cultural factors.

1.1 Relevance

This section will argue for the relevance and introductory reasons for studying the topic, thus introducing some key elements. The rise of the People`s Republic of China (PRC) is a highly relevant phenomenon of study in the field of Political Science in a multitude of dimensions. Given the increasing economic power and affluence of the People`s Republic of China (PRC) in all relevant political spheres, this is highly understandable. Much emphasis has also been placed on the increasing international diplomacy and economic influence of China. The emergence of China as a larger political power in addition to the United States has often been called the coming "multipolarity" in world politics, as many scholars highlight that the PRC will surpass the economic might of the United States, and all this entails⁵. This is one reason why studying conflicts China is involved in will be of benefit to the academic understanding of International Relations.

One key area in the PRC has, in recent decades, begun asserting itself much more is the case of territorial claims in the waters surrounding the South China Sea (SCS). Here, the PRC in 2009 issued the claims nicknamed "the nine-dashed line." this claim has later been proven to be at odds with international laws regulating distributions of zones and jurisdiction under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

³ Buzan et al 1998: 1-10

⁴ Wendt 1999: 220-240

⁵ Flockhart 2016: 1-6

(UNCLOS)⁶Opposition to this claim has been significant. The key to the present dynamics of the dispute lies in the fact that the Chinese claim authority over all the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea (SCS), and rights to exclusive economic activity in the whole South China Sea. The Philippines and Vietnam disagree with this, considering their own claims⁷⁸. All in all, I argue this study has relevance because it can allow for an improved understanding of conflict dynamics and insight into the implications of China`s increasing political significance.

1.2 Structure and Scope

Analytically, the scope of the thesis is the 2009-2023 period, as 2009 is commonly referred to as the start of the escalations and tensions seen in recent years. I will also focus on the issues occurring in the waters around the Spratly Islands due to its relevance in regard to tensions and political activity. I would start with the calls from the UN Commission on the Continental Shelf`s call for states to notify if they intended to apply for extensions of their defined continental shelves in the South China Sea. The Significance of this stems from the fact that it would allow the states to have a so-called Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of more than 200nm, which is the usual limit. This was a round of information requested by the commission that states make it known if they planned to claim more. In this round in May 2009, extension claims were submitted by Vietnam and Malaysia jointly, for extensions, and later the Philippines. The result of this was a Chinese protest and the resulting submission of the infamous nine-dashed line. After this point, the dispute can be said to have escalated over the years with standoffs and increasing global relevance and involvement. The vast bulk of the research literature done on the topic is also done within this time, with a peak after the Scarborough Shoal standoff of 2012, the oil rig incidents in 2014, and the international arbitration ruling in 2016. In addition, in 2023 and 2024, at the time of writing, there are developments occurring on this front, which also will be briefly discussed⁹.

2 The Background for the Study: Literature Review

The literature on South-China Sea territorial disputes is plenty given the rather global relevance of the subject. The scientific literature on the subject tends to emphasize the global and more abstract top-down views of the approaches of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), and the Republic of the Philippines. The perspective of understanding these from a constructivist view has little coverage in the literature, and I've found few sources summarizing and comparing the two. Thus, this thesis will utilize a variety of sources. This includes a mix of primary sources like news-reports, satellite imagery, statements, and speeches, to secondary sources, like findings in academic literature and books. This section will first give an overview of some relevant general arguments found in the literature, followed by the literature`s conclusions on each state`s approach state by state, finalizing a summary of the relevant observations.

⁶ Qi 2021: 1-10

⁷ Cruz De Castro 2020: 1-2

⁸ Thayer 2016: 1

⁹ Thayer 2012

2.1 The Overview

Murphy 2017 writes in a book regarding ASEAN, the regional Southeast Asian organization as a place of increasing Sino-American rivalry given the involvement of the United States on different sides of the dispute, and China`s involvement in the organization¹⁰. Gao & Jia argue that in the context of the dispute, Chinese interests are primarily focused on territorial and maritime sovereignty, while the American involvement, comes with a larger focus on ensuring international shipping is undisturbed given the significance of the seas¹¹. Feng 2020 also points to the fact that disagreements on jurisdiction and sovereignty in the waters have been a recurring trend between China and the ASEAN states of Vietnam and the Philippines and that it`s an increasing arena for geopolitical competition ¹².

2.1.2 Philippine Assertiveness

In line with the research questions, there are reasons to believe the two states have differences in their approach. Wu & Velasco 2022, explain that Philippine politics have been assertive in the face of Chinese incursions. This is pointed out by the significant naval presence around the highly contested Scarborough shoal, and as a result, they experienced trade sanctions from China on the Philippines` key exports, bananas¹³. They also argue that an initial diplomatic approach was ruined by the arbitration, which the PRC viewed as a unilateral, provocative, and unbinding ruling¹⁴. Han, Jiang, Peng & Li (2023) find that the Filipino strategy to face the PRC is based on a hedging strategy in the period of 2016-2021, influenced by increasing geopolitical competition. They also conclude that Filipino politics is prone to and often shaped by the different personifications of Filipino leaders, explaining changes between presidents¹⁵¹⁶.

2.1.3 Dynamics of Leadership

De Castro (2020) describes the Pilipino approach to the Chinese incursions as also one of balancing but argues that it was significantly more assertive prior to 2016 and more focused on appeasement between 2016 and 2021 under Rodrigo Duterte¹⁷. This paper again highlights the changing nature of the Philippine strategy; as it argues in the Aquino 3 term (prior to 2016), it was more centered on utilizing international organizations like ASEAN to increase political pressures and more cooperation with the United States ¹⁸

2.1.4 Appeasement and Personification

Rabena (2018) highlights the complexity of the Philippine strategy by arguing that Duterte's appeasement politics were highly linked to the value of Belt and Road initiatives in the Philippines as a factor in wanting more favorable relations with China¹⁹. One key difference

¹⁰ Murphy 2017: 57-58

¹¹ Gao & Jia 2013: 23

¹² Feng 2020: 1-3

¹³ Wu & Velasco 2022: 7

¹⁴ Ibid 2022: 1-3

¹⁵ Han et al 2023: 9-11

¹⁶ Hendel 2018: 14

¹⁷ De Castro 2020: 1-3

¹⁸ Ibid 2020: 2-6

¹⁹ Rabena 2018: 8-11

between these arguments is that before Duterte, Heydarian 2017 argued the Philippines had closely aligned itself with the US in a balancing attempt prior to this. He also points to the different influence of presidents²⁰.

2.1.5 Diplomacy to no Avail

One of the critical features of the Philippine strategy is described in the arbitration ruling of 2016, which was submitted by the Aquino administration in 2014. This is pointed out by Truong (2018) and reinforced by De Castro, who saw it as a legal and diplomatic approach to solving the issue. However, this is described as to no avail, given the unilateral rejection by the PRC. This is also argued to have contributed to more tensions^{21,22}. Gunawan and colleagues (2018) concur with the no-avail ruling earlier discussed, as later the same year, the PRC issued a blank rejection stating that the court had ruled outside of its mandate, arguing the UN Convention of the Sea does not cover issues of sovereignty. They also describe economic consequences and a consequent deterioration of relations²³.

2.1.6 Increasing Focus on Power Politics and Future Ramifications

Imanuddin 2021, argues that in recent years, there has been a once more increasing focus on defending their more strategic possessions by increasing hard power and increasing military might. He highlights a significant increase in military spending and investments in the Philippine Coast Guard²⁴. After the accession of the new president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the intensity of the strategy can be said to have changed. This is based on reports showing increasing defense dialogue with Western-oriented allies Japan, the US, and Australia, my analysis also finds indications of this²⁵

The literature does not seem to significantly discuss any significant national identity pointers that could potentially explain this. However, some survey data done post 2020, show that more and more Filipinos now believe that their country should cooperate more with countries of similar values, and skepticism towards China is significant alongside an arguably weak democratic functioning²⁶. This is thus why my analysis will be focused on the political and recent history of the Philippines, as It seems likely to hold some of the relevant answers for why they can be said to be balancing.

2.1.7 Vietnam

The literature and data on Vietnam have a different perspective. Common themes include the historical legacy of the relationships between the two states. Hai 2018 argues that China is Vietnam`s most significant export and trading partner²⁷. Some argue this creates an

²⁰ Heydarian 2017: 10-11

²¹ Truong 2018: 1-5

²² De Castro 2020: 1-3

²³ Gunawan et al 2018: 4-6

²⁴ Imanuddin 2021: 7-8

²⁵ Phillipino Coast Guard 2023

²⁶ Gavilan 2023

²⁷ Hai 2018: 14

asymmetric dependence level between the two parties, which often makes the lesser strong party susceptible to the stronger party leveraging this in their favor.²⁸

2.1.8 A Cautious Nature

Reports by the Asia Pacific Maritime Dispute also point to land reclamation by Vietnam in the contested Spratly Islands, but not near the same extent as the PRC²⁹. Thao (2001) writes that because of the complicated nature of the South Sea disputes, Vietnam has previously had the position that all conflicts should be solved based on mutual respect for "sovereignty and independence"³⁰. Amer (2014) also backs this argument with examples of peaceful resolutions earlier achieved in other conflicts related to the Gulf of Tonkin. Amer also argues that violations of sovereignty have been met with primarily diplomatic protests and protests but never any Vietnamese escalations³¹.

2.1.9 Common Theme: Cooperative Struggle

Thayer (2016) can describe the line of security strategy. Thayer writes that the SRV's political behavior has been called something of "cooperation and struggle," emphasizing Vietnam's desire to cooperate with the PRC in whatever way possible and struggle against incursions where possible. Here, the close economic ties to China and its historical legacy are critical. His argument further entails that the state attempts to work as proactively as possible to safeguard its own interests while not provoking any escalation in the dispute.³²

Vietnam's foreign relations can be summarized as being China-centred and then more of a hedging nature, in the sense that they cannot afford to not be on good terms with most states. Hai (2018) describes that for Hanoi, the key has been showing the PRC through signals that they have "unbroken resolve to resist unreasonable claims and actions, while not leaving China an excuse for legitimate use of force." Hai (2018) also describes that significant investments have been made into military strengthening, new fighter jet purchases, and the Coast Guard³³. Vuvang 2022 also argues that the Vietnamese in the 1980's significantly reoriented their foreign relations because of material losses and social unrest to a doctrine named doi-moi, which emphasizes a pragmatic approach to foreign relations independent of ideology. Chapman 2017 argues that Vietnam, in the 1980s, shifted to a foreign policy doctrine that place great emphasis on international friendship, cooperation, and international engagement. He argues along with Vuvang 2022 that this is due to economic and political turmoil. This has thus in recent decades shown itself through rapprochement with the US, and China, which in recent years they argue seem to take more the shape of a soft-balancing policy³⁴³⁵

²⁸ Phan 2023: 6

²⁹ Asia maritime Transparency Initiative 2016

³⁰ Thao 2001: 6-8

³¹ Amer 2014: 3-5

³² Thayer 2016: 2-10

³³ Do & Hai 2018: 10

³⁴ Chapman 2017: 1-4

³⁵ Vuvang 2022: 1-3

2.1.10 Tendency of Restraint and Caution

Phan (2023) argues that the Vietnamese Government is, for instance, not taking legal action due to the limitations in the international legal framework. Phan also argues that the Vietnamese government primarily wishes to use peaceful and carefully calibrated means to negotiate with the Chinese to have a peaceful solution. This he argues can be understood as a delicate way of safeguarding oneself given a perception of dependence on the PRC³⁶.

Dar (2023) also confirms these findings by writing that Vietnam does not desire to endanger its “comprehensive strategic partnership” with the Chinese. Dar also argues that the Vietnamese have achieved successful and fruitful cooperation, which has seen a steady increase in trading volumes between the two, and diplomatic dialogue while having friction over the South China Sea³⁷. Dar does however highlight that the oil rig crisis between the two in 2014 made the Vietnamese realize they needed to increase their scope of diplomatic allies and that this however froze the development of the cooperations but did not cool them³⁸.

2.1.11 Present-day indication

In recent years there can be said to have been a change and an increase in cooperation. Pradhan (2023) quotes the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), stating that “good China-Vietnamese relations remain its strategic priority”, despite the meetings and increasing strategic partnership with the USA³⁹. The literature thus appears to be pretty in union regarding the Vietnamese security strategy in the SCS being based on one of cooperating while struggling without escalation.

2.1.12 Summary

The literature seems to agree on the nature of the responses from the two. From this, I argue indications point to that there is a significantly more conciliatory and cautious response from Vietnam than the Philippines. The literature seems to lack a comprehensive case study to explain the formation of these policies and comparisons. In addition, few works bridge and compare the two states. I argue therefore, that a more specific case study of each state with a comparative design will complement the scientific understanding of the South China Sea disputes. Most of the literature has focused on surface explanations and does not attempt to establish causality regarding domestic interests and specific state interests. I thus depart and attempt to place my research between these findings of cooperation vs assertion and attempt to explain why this is the case. I will focus on the case of Philippines on studying the political and societal history, as exploring the links between democratic confidence and political history can provide insights. In the case of Vietnam, it will be similar, the relationship seems to be significantly based on economic and other political factors. Thus, I will explore if there is a link between economic and political priorities in the South-China Sea responses. Here arguably history will also be important to explore.

³⁶ Phan 2023: 7-10

³⁷ Dar 2023: 8-10

³⁸ Ibid 2023: 9

³⁹ Pradhan 2023

2.2 Theoretical Framework

In this section, I will disclose and elaborate on the theoretical perspective used for my study, the key concepts I use, why they are relevant, and how they will look in practice. I will focus on constructivist IR theory for my main research. It will be complemented by the Securitization theory of rhetoric to help build understanding. This theoretical framework is chosen as it permits an understanding of state responses by exploring how the states perceive the situation and what understanding of reality is central to their decision-making⁴⁰⁴¹. A study like mine also has elements argued explained by realist understandings regarding differences in power capabilities between the two states and China, warranting a balancing stance and rational pursuit of security⁴². In addition, the liberalist focus on trade is important as it would provide an understanding of the Importance of interstate cooperation in economics and societal matters. I chose to focus on my framework, which can be argued to provide a cohesive understanding of policy by studying societal dynamics. Thus, I am working on Wendt`s work and his concept of national self-understandings and international cultures of anarchy. I will also complement the analysis using Buzan and colleagues' rhetorical security framework (1998). To a certain extent, I will elaborate on this at the end of sub-chapter 1.3 as it does not guide my analysis to the same extent as constructivist IR-theory. I argue these are relevant frames of analysis and understanding of how societal dynamics shape conflict responses in the South China Sea dispute.

2.2.1 Understanding the Theory

Constructivist theories are summarized paradigms of International Relations that explain the reality and preferences of states and subsequent dynamics as subjective and based on the individual perceptions the states have of themselves and their place in the world⁴³One of its key architects, Alexander Wendt, is often quoted explaining this with a one-line phrase that describes it well: "Anarchy is what the state makes of it."⁴⁴. The relevance of this quote is that a classical realist understanding often describes the international political arena as one of complete anarchy where state interests are shaped primarily by security aims and the lack of an overarching protection mechanism⁴⁵. Wendt`s work a social theory is a part of the constructivist trend of studying International Relations (IR) and emphasizes a more culturally and socially conditioned way of understanding state behavior⁴⁶. To complement the analysis, I also apply the securitization theory of Buzan and colleagues; these two are thus, my main theoretical frames⁴⁷. Finally, the main theoretical understanding of my work is based on Wendt`s book, ``A Social Theory of International Politics.

Some of Wendt`s arguments that differ from the classic realist framework include his views on the international system`s alleged anarchy as conditioned on individual state-understandings of world politics. He also argues that the structures of the international

⁴⁰ Wendt 1999: 1-20

⁴¹ Nye & Welch 2017: 305

⁴² Mearsheimer 2001: 1-7

⁴³ Wendt 1999: 1-20

⁴⁴ Ibid 1999: 241

⁴⁵ Nye & Welch 2017: 220-225

⁴⁶ Wendt 1999: 170-178

⁴⁷ Buzan et al 1998: 1-3

system, such as the transition from a Westphalian order of balancing politics as the norm to a modern-day order largely focused on international dialogue and diplomacy as preferred mechanisms of conflict resolution, would not have occurred if ideas and cultures of rational behavior would remain unchanged⁴⁸.

He exemplifies this logic through the following phrase: "Once Hobbesian values have become dominant, the idea may take hold collectively that success in war is a matter of not only life and death but one of prestige and virtue," or that "once ideas are entrenched in a culture it is a significant task to overcome them."⁴⁹ His argument here is that the dominant accepted idea of interstate relations greatly influences how they relate to each other, in the sense of an integrated EU where the idea of interstate military conflict is arguably viewed as irrational, vis a vis, for instance, a Hobbesian world of suspicion and prestige where it's a rational mechanism for prestige and virtue which would warrant a perception and state-behavior more influenced by the assumptions tied to realist anarchy⁵⁰. The realist outcome would, on the other sense, state that these types of situations are usually motivated by specific oriented goals through a logic of presumptions regarding the balance of power and survival⁵¹.

In this discussion, Wendt argues that states can be viewed as actors with identities and societal impulses that interact with and shape their policies in IR. He introduces a definition that I apply to my analysis, the term self-understanding, defining it as "a subjective or a unit-level quality rooted in the self-understanding of an actor⁵². This is a term used to describe the identity of a state outwards as one that mixes the self and other, where the self is how the state itself decides its interests and political orientations and how this is influenced by interactions with other states⁵³. He uses these distinctions in comparison to humans. The point is that those states, as humans, can have several identities, and which one has priority is decided based on the situation the actor finds himself in. He also distinguishes between different types, such as corporate, role, type, and collective identities. This is relevant as it reveals that state orientations can have different shapes⁵⁴. Wendt underscores that self-understandings in IR are primarily influenced by domestic concerns and international concerns without any predetermination. However, domestic concerns can be downplayed in favor of international concerns and vice-versa in a situation requiring specific political action⁵⁵.

This concept of understanding thus forms the basis of my analysis, as I argue this will provide an insight into how the states articulate their responses based on domestic concerns and international considerations. Which can be understood as exploring how factors that influence factors of how states identify their role and appropriate actions in the dispute, which is my focus. *From here on, I will refer to it as self-understanding*. Historical factors can be said to be important in painting this image, as it is also rooted in domestic concerns,

⁴⁸ Wendt 1999: 324-326

⁴⁹ Ibid 1999: 326

⁵⁰ Wendt 1999: 325-327

⁵² Ibid 1999: 224

⁵³ Ibid 1999:

⁵⁴ Wendt 1999: 230

⁵⁵ Wendt 1999: 225-240

which means culture and history should play a significant role to understand how these concerns play out.⁵⁶

Following this logic of international considerations, Wendt argues that national interests are shaped by identity formulation based on ideas of the international environment and national considerations. He argues that national interests are formulated through ideas to safeguard five different aims: survival, autonomy, independence, economic well-being, and collective self-esteem⁵⁷. According to Wendt`s theory, the diplomatic or forceful pursuit of national interests is linked to the concept of “cultures of anarchy.” In this framework, what is named a “Kantian” culture of anarchy would solicit cooperative dialogue and peaceful measures to ensure the pursuit of national interests. On the other hand, one of “Hobbesian” natures would solicit balancing and more forceful measures in pursuit of these. These cultures, as he names it, are categorizations based on how the states perceive the climate of their international environment and adjust their acts accordingly. The mechanism of relevance here is the social learning of constructivism. In constructivism, this mechanism emphasizes that identities and interests, along with their pursuit, are shaped by perceptions of appropriate and rational behavior in its dealings with other states. Meaning that the way interests and actions are taken externally will be shaped by resembling other actors that the state deems successful. For instance, following a conflict-resolution strategy of a state, another state wishes to resemble in one dimension or many, or what is the established norm in international politics⁵⁸. This is relevant because it provides a roadmap for understanding external relations outside of a realist structure and considering what is a dominant idea in the international community.

2.2.2 Relevance of Constructivism to the Case

This sub-section will briefly exemplify how this may look in my analysis. Constructivism, in this sense, is thus a more fluid and dynamic approach, allowing me to understand and analyze the world views based on an analysis of the state`s own constructed reality⁵⁹. Considering my research puzzle, this is crucial for understanding how policy responses reflect national characteristics.

The indication of a difference in degrees of assertiveness can thus lead to a proposition that the interests driving their calculations in these matters are of a multi-layered nature and require a theoretical approach that allows the study of different societal factors of political policy formation. Statements from Vietnamese leader stress their “openness” and that their strategy is “set to closely attach national peace and interests to regional and global peace, and to proactively participate in preserving peace and stability in the region and world.”⁶⁰ This can be understood as identifying interests very much in the direction of one closely attached to peace and stability, and there is reason to argue domestic and international concerns have contributed to it⁶¹.

⁵⁶ Wendy 1999: 230-240

⁵⁷ Ibid 1999: 235-237

⁵⁸ Ibid 1999: 225-240

⁵⁹ Ibid 1999: 32

⁶⁰ Ministry of National Defense Vietnam 2019: 6

⁶¹ Thayer 2016: 1-6

In the case of the Philippine relationship with China, this is also relevant. The literature often describes it more alike, balancing politics in the realist sense, which makes it stand out from the Vietnamese⁶². For instance, under the Aquino administration, the Philippines brought sea disputes to the International Court of Arbitration. Given differences in political structure and history, I argue this framework is relevant to dig up these domestic and international concerns, to see how this contributes to articulate and shape the state's responses in the dispute⁶³.

2.2.3 Securitization.

To explore the perceptions of state leaders about threats, I will utilize the securitization theory to understand how states construct images of danger to their existence. For this, I will use the Securitization concept by Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde (1998). This framework describes how political actors, such as states or leaders, make situations a security issue in terms of their threat potential towards state sovereignty. One criterion of creating a security issue in this framework is if an issue is "permitted to take priority over everything else, and thus allows for a breaking of the rules" or summarized framed as an existential threat⁶⁴. For instance, in the case of the south-sea disputes phenomenon, it can argue that the issue of violations of recognized EEZ constitutes a threat to the sovereignty of Vietnam and the Philippines if the leaders express it as a threat to sovereignty and justify the use of extraordinary measures. This is then done, with the intent to protect the threatened aspect⁶⁵. Logically, it can be argued that this will influence what risks they pursue in handling the conflict⁶⁶⁶⁷.

Thus, I focus on the core concept of something that is framed as a threat to the relevant actor, which, in this case, means state sovereignty. The aim of utilizing this theory is to understand the gravity of the issue of sovereignty claims made by the leaders of Vietnam and the Philippines. It will, according to constructivist theory, be relevant in how, at the state level, the governments pursue action in the dispute, as a key tenet in this is domestic political legitimacy.

2.3 Methods

A crucial part of social science research is establishing and generating valid inferences. An inference can be divided into two sub-categories, where one is "descriptive" and the other is "causal." This concept is often categorized as using "the facts we know to learn about the facts we do not know."⁶⁸ In my research, the inferences will be limited in time and generalizability, given that I am studying a snapshot of a phenomenon that is still in development. To answer my research questions, I will do so through a qualitative multiple-case study, comparing the two different responses to find similarities and differences.

⁶² Hai 2018: 1-3

⁶³ Cruz De Castro 2020: 1-10

⁶⁴ Buzan et al 1998: 33

⁶⁵ Buzan et al 1998: 33-36

⁶⁶ Ibid 1998: 193-196

⁶⁷ Ibid 1998: 199

⁶⁸ King et al 2021: 3-

My study examines how one can understand how the self-understandings of states as actors in the dispute are reflected in states' responses. This means examining historical factors' role in shaping each state's contemporary politics and social dynamics and how cultural factors are involved.⁶⁹ For this reason, I choose to utilize a case study design. A case study is defined by Yin 2018, as an empirical method that sets out to "investigate a contemporary phenomenon (the case), in-depth and within its real-world context." Especially when the boundaries between the case and its context may not be clear. A case study can be viewed as a relevant method in this case, given that, in this case, I cannot control the chain of events in the disputes, and I desire to study a snapshot of a phenomenon that is still ongoing.⁷⁰

This study examines and compares the responses of Vietnam and the Philippines to balance China's activities in the South China Sea dispute. To achieve this, the research will employ a multiple-case study methodology, focusing on the responses of these two countries as distinct cases. This means I study the cases considering RQ1 and RQ2 separately and then attempt to draw cross-case conclusions to answer RQ3. Thus, my two cases are different responses, with case one being Vietnamese and the other being Filipino. The questions will be repeated for clarity in the next section. Thus, case selection is made under a premise of replication, where cases need to be selected on the basis that they can be used in a replicative manner, i.e., that they can be expected to predict similar results or show contrasting results for specific expected reasons if the analysis was to be redone.⁷¹ In this study, the cases are expected to predict different results, more like a different design, but for anticipatable reasons that the analysis will uncover.

A benefit of the case-study approach is that it allows the utilization of various data, including official documents, interviews/statements, direct observations, and scientific literature. A case study allows for this to be used as a triangulation method through the different data sources⁷². Thus, from this and the literature review, I develop two assumptions that underline my analysis and RQs: The Philippines responds with an assertive balancing strategy. Vietnam attempts to avert China's activity by a softer and cautious balancing-strategy than the Philippines. Given the emphasis on domestic and international concerns as shaping state's understandings, I argue answers to these questions is found in studying what constitutes domestic concerns and dynamics, which is often influenced by historical and cultural factors⁷³.

Studying these fits well within the design of a case study. Building on the earlier definition, Yin also argues that a case study is well suited to "illuminate a decision or a set of decisions in the sense of why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result"⁷⁴. This is thus again adequate for the question given at its core; this analysis is about understanding a set of decisions taken (responses) and to what extent this reflects national

⁶⁹ Wendt 1999: 167

⁷⁰ Yin 2018: 43-46

⁷¹ Yin 2018: 92-95

⁷² Ibid 2018: 43

⁷³ Wendt 228-240

⁷⁴ Yin 2018: 44

characteristics. Based on my literature and theory I have formulated the following research questions that I aim to answer

My Research Questions:

- *RQ1: How are the Philippines' and Vietnam's responses to the South China Sea dispute different?*
- *RQ2: How do these responses reflect their respective national self-understandings?*
- *RQ3: What conclusion can be drawn about why these differ, considering their national characteristics?*

RQ1 aims to explore my assumptions regarding the differences in responses and attempt to build validity for them. To answer RQ2, the aim is to develop a proposition of how the state leaderships of Vietnam and the Philippines response reflects domestic and international concerns. This is based on Wendt`s framework and the securitization theory which will complement the understanding by giving meaning to threat-perceptions. The securitization aspect, formulated by Buzan and colleagues (1998), will be explored to assess the extent to which these interests are pursued by securitization processes and perceptions of danger from both the state level. This theory is one of rhetoric, and how threats are constructed, and is used to deepen the understanding of how they understand and perceive appropriate action⁷⁵. Furthermore, to address Research Question 3, I will structure it comparatively. According to RQ3, Mill`s Method of Agreement logic will be assessed. Here, the aim is to find common factors in cases that are, from the outset, quite different and attempt to explain this⁷⁶. This analysis aims to provide insights into how smaller states respond to disputes with asymmetric counterparts, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the regional dynamics at play and how the characteristics of different societies interact in forming them.

2.3.1 Data and Usage

The data for this study will be fetched from a variety of sources. These include findings in relevant academic literature, primary sources such as speeches and quotes from government leaders, written statements, and documents submitted to international organizations. In addition, news reports will be crucial for overviews of the dispute`s characteristics. This approach, often referred to as a hybrid strategy of using multiple sources of evidence.⁷⁷The study's measurements will be validated by referencing actual documentation of how the incidents occur to evaluate to what extent the situations have played out in line with their stated interests and aims.

One essential choice to be made here is to select data carefully. To cross-reference and establish if there is correspondence, I avoid state-controlled news outlets to mitigate risks regarding bias, except when utilizing direct quotes from political leaders and evaluating attitudes. For the latter part, I also reference some publications on social media by the

⁷⁵ Buzan et al 1998: 1-10

⁷⁶ Moses & Knutsen 2019: 101

⁷⁷ Yin 2018: 173-174

Philippine defense forces for indications of the developments from the present day. These serve solely as indications, given the potential for bias.

Finally, I will also utilize NVIVO auto coding to establish which sentiment leaders use most in addressing the dispute. From the statements and speeches, I have sampled in total 14 statements around the time periods of high tension in the dispute, 2013-2015, and from 2019-2023; in the case of the Philippines, they are also focused on including some key statements from President Aquino and Ferdinand Marcos. These sources are all published in English by official representative organs, meaning that translations have not been taken. These results will, if proven rightly, serve as illustrations of the assumptions. Validity for them will primarily come from the qualitative analysis prior, as the method has its limitations.

2.3.2 Expectations and Logic

To analyze and answer the research questions (RQs), I argue that focusing on correspondence between stated policies and actual responses is essential for validity. In a case of proven cooperative responses towards an adversary in the South China Sea (SCS). In this case, I expect to observe evidence of restraint during periods of increased tensions. Examples of this would, in my view, be: In the case of a violation of sovereign waters, then I see a trend of calling for diplomatic action and a tendency of caution towards China. This would mean observing no political actions that could directly be seen as provocative, such as, for instance, accepting significant foreign military aid and or garrisons. Additionally, I expect the language in official statements regarding the dispute`s nature, aims, and implications to be mostly neutral and non-confrontational, emphasizing diplomacy and cooperation rather than inflammatory rhetoric.

On the other hand, seeking evidence of a more assertive Filipino response suggests the following in my view: I would expect that when Exclusive Economic Zone violations and clashes occur, the policy response takes shape with less restraint. This means there is reason to believe it would prioritize more condemnation and explicit remarks about the threat posed, in other words, a tendency of more negatively loaded dialogue, like through explicit remarks about threats to state sovereignty or security. Moreover, a stronger perception of Danger from China might also warrant closer alignment with allied partners like the US, given the current geopolitical situation.⁷⁸, alongside efforts to enhance defensive capabilities, diplomatic efforts to gather support, and challenging China`s activity by for instance making the issue global. The literature highlights the Philippine arbitration case that was filed against China and its cooperation with the US as reasons for these expectations.

One important thing in a case study is to analyze documentation critically and be aware of the context of sources like state documentation. Thus, this is a potential source for selection and measurement bias in this analysis if the focus is too anchored on curated information⁷⁹. Given the contemporary nature of my analysis, I will follow Yin 2018`s logic of

⁷⁸ Flockhart 2016: 1-3

⁷⁹ Yin 2018: 155-160

“triangulation” of sources, which is very common in journalist works and news reporting. The idea behind this is to examine different types of information and see if the conclusions and arguments remain robust in different sources. This is something well-suited to the diversified nature of case studies. It also helps mitigate potential biases in information by cross-referencing along similar lines of understanding. If this is done right, it strengthens the findings' validity and replicability⁸⁰⁸¹⁸². The rhetoric will serve to illustrate the differences if proven in line with the assumptions of my research.

In practice, this makes my case study primarily structured by document analysis, more than one focused on direct observations and interviews, as described by Yin 2018⁸³. To aid in this process and establish a systematic overview of the different data findings, I will also utilize qualitative coding software to help build validity for the underlying thought of differences.⁸⁴. I will use NVIVO`S auto coding feature, which categorizes words according to their sentiments in sentences. This distinguishes between positive and negatively loaded words per sentence, and, as a result, texts are sorted according to how large a portion of sentences in the text contains positive, mixed, neutral, or negative sentiment based on words. If there is a proven difference in line with the assumptions and evidence, this serves to illustrate and deepen the validity of the findings. More details regarding this procedure will be found in my Appendix section.⁸⁵. An example of how this software works is the following. “They are cutting vital and valuable resources, leaving the vulnerable and needy in even more sorry and dangerous situations”, would be categorized as mixed given the use of positive and negative words such as “vital and valuable”, combined with “dangerous”.⁸⁶ This means that I can more practically see how many types of sentences there is in each source, and make the verdict based off this.

2.3.3 Causal Strategy

Finally, for the nature of the conclusions, constructivism, which I would describe as a lack of explicit structural explanations, makes causal argumentation difficult and lacks specific literature, thus creating a limitation in the study. Consequently, the conclusions will manifest as propositions akin to working hypotheses. These propositions typically lack directly testable data, especially within an experimental framework. This approach is appropriate considering the exploratory nature of my analysis, which operates within a theoretical framework which in this topic of study is rather uncharted territory.⁸⁷. However, I am basing myself on Wendt's concepts of actor self-understandings and perceptions of the international system as guiding lines that shape state behavior.⁸⁸. I am thus looking for what can constitute the self-understanding of state leaders in their encounters with the dispute and analyzing how this has influenced their response, alongside discussing the role

⁸⁰ Yin 2018: 171-172

⁸¹ King et al 2021: 1-7

⁸² Buzan et al 1998: 1-20

⁸³ Yin 2018: 144-170

⁸⁴ QSR International 2024

⁸⁵ Ibid 2024

⁸⁶ QSR international 2024

⁸⁷ Burks 1951: 2-5

⁸⁸ Wendt 1999: 237

of international norms of political behavior. I do this by studying societal, cultural, and historical factors. Thus, the aim is to figure out how the historical background of each state contributes to shaping the self-understanding of actors in the dispute in the realms of priorities, rationale, and desired outcomes. It attempts to bridge the responses to what is arguably a perception of reality in the dispute.

For example, this means that studies in one state show a history of trouble relating to foreign policy decisions. Then, an argument could be made that this is because awareness of previous political and economic woes created new principles for a pragmatic approach to foreign relations, and this is then mirrored in a less confrontational response. Naturally, this will not provide the clearest causal arguments, but I argue that the understandings I come up with are relevant and will provide insights into conflict dynamics.

2.3.4 Structure

Thus, I will, from this point, structure the thesis according to the following standard. One main chapter where I discuss and describe how the SCS-Dispute looks in practice, its background, and its characteristics. After this, I will have two chapters, one for each state, where I discuss and analyze their responses to the dispute and build a constructivist understanding. Thus, RQ1 and 2 are answered individually in chapter 4 and 5 respectively. After this, I will answer RQ3 in section 6 and look at what similar factors can be said to contribute to the responses to the degree of comparison that exists.

3 The South China Sea Dispute

This section will serve as a general introduction and overview of key trends in the South-China Sea disputes, main lines of approach, and the current contemporary situation. It will first present a historical basis for the conflict, what is being fought about, how it is being fought, and what it looks like today. Thus, I will briefly introduce why the dispute is still unresolved and then introduce its contemporary dynamics. After Chapter 3, I will do two separate chapters in Chapters 4 and 5, where I again present each state`s approach to the dispute, considering incidents and analyzing them in light of the theoretical framework. In Chapter 6 I will answer RQ3

3.1 Historical Backdrop and Basis


The disputes in the South China Sea have been lingering for several years. They mainly result from changing regional governments and a lack of international treaties and agreements on the issue. This section will discuss this and clarify what characterizes the dispute in the 21st century, primarily regarding the waters and islands in the Spratly group. During the period surrounding the Second World War, the Spratly Islands were originally of interest to the French colonial regime in Vietnam and Indochina, and this caused disagreements and quarrels with China and resulted in some gains for both parties in skirmishes. Thus, the turmoil and the preoccupation with the French during the Second World War are argued to have caused a moment of opportunity for the then-Republic of China to seize more features and islands. With regime change in China in 1949 and the expulsion of the nationalists to Taiwan, the islands wound up split among more governments. Some were controlled by the exiled government in Taiwan, some by the new People`s Republic, and some by French Indochina. In 1974, China established complete

control over the Paracel Islands, and in a naval skirmish in 1989 with Vietnam, more features in the Spratly Islands.⁸⁹ The disagreements on islands in the modern age also transferred more to matters of rights to exclusive economic activity, as under international law, recognized land masses near the sea are entitled to 200nm zones of economic jurisdiction for the recognized claimant. Thus, the following noteworthy developments occurred in the 1990s, when the states started clashing with each other again, surfacing in focus towards the first code of conduct negotiations and the agreements reached in 2002, and in 2009 when the issue flared up again due to the different requests for extensions of continental shelves⁹⁰.

Thus, it can be argued that the disputes on the South China Sea have been lingering since the end of World War 2, and changes in state control have left the issue unresolved by any official treatise or order.⁹¹ The issue has reignited on and off, emphasizing disagreements regarding ownership of the islands and who has the right to exclusive economic activity under International Law. In Figure 1, I have added an overview of which states currently occupy which features. Later, in Figure 2 I show an example of a clash can look like, and in Figure 3, I show what the internationally recognized exclusive economic zones under UNCLOS look like.

Figure 1 **Spratly Islands Per 2015:**



Sources: U.S. government; Reuters. *Occupation does not signify undisputed sovereignty.
 Staff, C. Chan 25/05/2015 

⁸⁹ Tønnesson 2006: 30-40

⁹⁰ Thao 2001: 1-10

⁹¹ Tønnesson 2006: 29-42

Source: Reuters, published In Qi 2021⁹²

In 2015, the islands in the Spratlys were controlled by numerous different states, including China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. In this sense, control is often a diffuse term to utilize, as many of the features do not fall within the internationally recognized definitions to generate an EEZ under UNCLOS. This is because many of the features are small and do not naturally sustain human life, which is a requirement. Thus, the literature often refers to the "rocks," given this fact.⁹³

From this map, one can see that most of the claimant states occupy land features in this island group, which, in many ways, is the center of the conflict. From the map one can see that the largest features, and the majority of these, are constructed and controlled by the PRC, following Vietnam and Malaysia, which are close by. The features with a circle around them also show that the current controller is expanding and building infrastructure on these features. The reasoning for using the term features is that the ruling brought in by the Philippines in 2014 judged that none of the territories in the Spratlys qualified to create continental shelves and counted solely as "rocks" meaning that they do not qualify for EEZs under UNCLOS. However, one can see that significant reported construction and/or reclamation is still occurring on the features.^{94,95}

I will analyze the noteworthy moments following when the conflict reignited in 2009 over extension claims by Malaysia and Vietnam regarding their continental shelves. The Southeast Asian states of Malaysia and Vietnam submitted a joint submission to the United Nations Committee on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) for a recommendation that would condone them doing an extension of their legally defined "continental shelf."⁹⁶ Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), this committee is the organ assessing geographic data along with relevant law to assess claims and recommend how to apply the laws in practice between states. This is in line with the UNCLOS convention, which, in normal operation, grants the coast states an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of up to 200nm from their coastline. Such an area is relevant because being granted an EEZ allows the state "sovereign rights to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage the natural resources found in the sea within these zones."⁹⁷

Disagreements and desires in such matters are often stopped by the CLCS committee of the UN, which was the recipient of the claims from Malaysia and Vietnam. If the requests meet certain parameters, this committee can provide a technical and scientific evaluation to support the state's desire if the claim is in line with international law. In practice, this means that during these extension claims, the focus was on increasing the defined continental shelves of the states. If certain geographical and legal criteria are met in the eyes of the commission, the states can then legally extend this shelf with legal backing, thus creating a larger than 200nm zone in some cases.⁹⁸ That same year, the Philippines

⁹² Qi 2021: 5

⁹³ Qi 2021: 3-6

⁹⁴ Southerland 2016: 1-5

⁹⁵ Commission on the Continental Shelf 2022

⁹⁶ National University of Singapore, Centre for International Law 2024

⁹⁷ Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf 2024

⁹⁸ Ibid 2024

warned it would submit a similar claim that overlapped with those of the other states regarding the southern part of the Spratlys.⁹⁹

As a reaction, the People`s Republic of China (PRC) submitted a protesting input to the same committee one day later. Here, it iterated its position of “indisputable sovereignty over the Islands in the South China Sea, and adjacent waters” while attaching its submission with the infamous map detailing the nine-dashed line.¹⁰⁰ Thus, when the re-ignition of the conflict is argued to have taken place as in later years, there was a documented increase in tensions, clashes at sea, and international attention.

The core of the dispute here can thus be said to be a matter of rights to exclusive economic zones in the waters surrounding the Spratlys. Given its historical legacy of changing jurisdiction and parties, it can be said to leave room for greater disagreement. One factor facilitating this development is the significant number of natural resources in these areas, and the seas are one of the world`s most densely trafficked shipping lanes. Reports from the Naval War College of the United States indicate that the sea lanes in the SCS possessed shipping accounting for 40% of Chinese total trade and 6% of US trade value. The report points out that any situations blocking or constraining these waters would be a detriment to a large portion of the world`s economic activity, and scenarios have compared it to the blockade that occurred in the Suez Canal in 2022, which created significant global difficulties.¹⁰¹

3.2 The Contemporary Conflict Dynamics: 2009-2023

Following the developments of 2009 and the publications of different claims, it can be argued that tensions started to develop in 2011¹⁰². One such case is the accusations launched by Vietnam that a Chinese vessel cut seismic survey cable equipment from a Vietnamese vessel undertaking seismic surveys in their own EEZ¹⁰³ Another is the so-called Scarborough Shoal Standoff between the Philippines and China in 2012, which caused huge tensions due to its significance and the large Chinese naval presence.¹⁰⁴ There are some common denominators in how the countries clash against each other regarding this. From the contenders` point of view, the PRC often takes the shape of interrupting or unilaterally having ships intrude into the EEZ of other states, trying to chase away other vessels and establish de facto control.¹⁰⁵ 2014 also saw the so-called oil rig incident. The Chinese placed the oil rig Haiyang-Shou inside Vietnam`s EEZ, causing sharp diplomatic backlash and a long naval standoff.¹⁰⁶ Thus, one thing that categorizes the dispute is the incursions by Chinese navy vessels attempting to establish control over the entire South China Sea and the waters.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁹ National University of Singapore, Centre for International Law 2024

¹⁰⁰ Ibid: 2024

¹⁰¹ Harbaugh 2022: 6-8

¹⁰² Hookway 2011

¹⁰³ BBC 2011

¹⁰⁴ Thayer 2012

¹⁰⁵ Han et al 2023: 1-3

¹⁰⁶ Radio Free Asia 2024

¹⁰⁷ Zhang et al 2023: 1-9

3.3 Characteristics.

As mentioned earlier, the ways the dispute is being fought often take the shape of confrontations at sea. This means cases where fleets of the states meet and attempt to maintain their presence solidly and do not take further action unless the other person gives way. This can be viewed as establishing de-facto control of water through non-lethal means¹⁰⁸. Parties have also made efforts to solidify their holdings in the area by creating artificial land and expanding features artificially. China is, as mentioned, the leading party in this, having produced around 3000 acres of extra artificial land, while Vietnam and the Philippines have much less¹⁰⁹.

Figure 2: Example of Clash between the Chinese and Philippine vessels:



Source: Brad Lendon CNN¹¹⁰

Figure 2 displays an example of how this can look like in practice. In the photograph, a Philippine fishing vessel was intercepted during a patrol mission to a Philippine garrison in the areas near Second Thomas Shoal¹¹¹. These types of operations have been a defining feature of the dispute since the reignition around 2009. Strategies like this can be understood as an effort by the Chinese to exercise coercion without and to establish de-facto control of waters. It can be understood partly as an element of a gray-zone coercive tactic. A gray-zone tactic is a ``opportunistically timed progression of incremental but intensifying steps to attempt to increase effective control over disputed areas and avoid escalation to military conflict``¹¹². These clashes often include tactics that are calculated and non-lethal. Still, there have also been examples of risky scenarios with vessels making

¹⁰⁸ Feng 2020: 4-6

¹⁰⁹ Southerland 2016: 1-4

¹¹⁰ Lendon 2023

¹¹¹ Ibid 2023

¹¹² Feng 2020: 4

rapid changes in direction to block the path of the vessels, as one example¹¹³. Situations like this have been a recurring trend in the timeframe 2009-2023 and are, in many ways, what characterizes it¹¹⁴.

In addition, the dispute is often fought diplomatically, using international mechanisms, some of which are international courts, as well as diplomatic negotiations and statements. One reason for this is that the gray-zone measures make it difficult to calculate what counts as an appropriate response accurately and to evaluate risks. This makes the consequences and intentions of the attacks rather unclear.¹¹⁵. Therefore, the responses have a mix of armament, diplomatic negotiations, and other elements in common. This will be elaborated more on concerning each state in its own chapter.¹¹⁶¹¹⁷.

These cases are what characterize the dispute in the years after 2009, where there is increasing activity from all parties in their sea activity. These are usually concentrated around a few key areas, some being around the Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal. The Vietnamese most often encounter Chinese vessels closer to their own coastlines. Both parties also regularly find their sovereignty of Exclusive Economic Activity rights, even close to their own coastlines, challenged by Chinese vessels.¹¹⁸. Each state's legally internationally recognized boundaries are illustrated in the figure below and indicate what is legally valid. Figure 3 thus shows that if international law is the measurement, the Chinese have no basis for their claims towards most of the waters. This was also confirmed by a ruling of the International Court of Arbitration in 2016¹¹⁹.

¹¹³ Simonette & Guinto 2023

¹¹⁴ Peace Palace Library 2024

¹¹⁵ Zhang 2020: 1-9

¹¹⁶ Nguyen 2015: 1-4

¹¹⁷ Cabactulan 2014: 1-4

¹¹⁸ Qi 2021: 1-10

¹¹⁹ Wu & Velasco 2022: 7-10

Figure 3– **Economic Zones in the South China Sea (Recognized)**



Source: Peace Palace Library¹²⁰

3.4 Strategies

Given the rather subdued nature of the fighting, it is very interesting to examine if there are significant differences in how these two states approach them. In the most practical sense, they are both lesser in military strength and economic force. Both states are also significantly different regarding national identity, policy orientations, and ideologies. To address the challenges posed by the PRC, both states have adopted different responses towards them. The Vietnamese have attempted to remain firmly diplomatic in their response, emphasizing cooperation and diplomatic negotiations while not trying to escalate situations. This is an approach referred to in the literature as “cooperation while struggling” as an effort to sustain the long-achieved strategic partnership between Vietnam and China and their extensive trade ties¹²¹. This has led Vietnam to quietly maintain and strengthen its own military and maritime capabilities. Simultaneously they have worked on achieving a stronger diversification in line with national political doctrines.

The Philippines has resorted to a more traditional balancing politics by more closely aligning with the United States and its partners, more assertively met the Chinese challenges, and pursued significant diplomatic effort to defend its own interests. They have also repeatedly rejected calls from Beijing to deal with the issue bilaterally and taken a stronger one-sided foreign policy by allying themselves closer in defense and political matters with the U.S and indo-pacific allies¹²². I argue studying these responses will present interesting knowledge regarding conflict dynamics in the modern era.

¹²⁰ Peace Palace Library 2024

¹²¹ Thayer 2016: 1-2

¹²² Jianwei 2014: 6-10

4 Studying the Philippines in The Dispute

In this section, I will present and discuss how the Philippines have behaved towards China in the dispute. First, I will briefly discuss contemporary and historical developments in the Sino-Philippine relationship. This part will also include a table giving a brief overview of incidents. The incidents have been selected based on the quantity of available data, and relevance for policy. Afterward, I will discuss and present the responses and cases the Philippines has faced, divided by the presidents. I will start by going through it chronologically, from after 2009 and following the developments from time to the present day. The chapter regarding President Duterte is shorter than the others, given his lack of a coherent strategy and response. Following this, I will discuss how I can understand the self-understanding of Philippine leaders in approaching this and which factors can be said to drive it forward. At the end of sub-chapter 4.2 I will also do a study of the rhetoric used by Philippine leaders in addressing various aspects of the dispute. The sub-chapter 4.3 will attempt to understand this from Wendt`s theoretical framework of national self-understanding, and function as the analysis chapter.

4.1 Historical Backdrop: Philippines and China

The Philippine-China relationship has been described as one of “careful cooperation”¹²³. This description builds on the premise that there has always been a history of territorial competition between the two, originating in the skirmish regarding the so-called Mischief Reef in 1995, which saw a change in the attitudes of Filipino leaders to the rise of China. This came against the backdrop of a Chinese occupation of the feature and was viewed as China “taking advantage of the power vacuum,” which followed US troop withdrawal from the Philippines in 1992¹²⁴. Following this, a charm offensive came from China, ensuring relations were improved through increasing cooperation between China and ASEAN, which the Philippines and Vietnam are members of, and the Code of Conduct negotiations in the late 90`s. Despite this, it is argued that ever since the 90`s, Philippine's relations with China have been categorized by skepticism¹²⁵. One example of this is seen in that in leading up to the early 2000`s, the Philippines was the ASEAN state with the lowest levels of trade and economic integration to China¹²⁶. However, they are argued to have been “warm and cordial” for most of the early 2000`s up until tensions erupted into the 2010`s with more tensions in the South-China Sea. However ever since the tensions re-erupted the tensions have been cooling and reaching what has been described as a historical low point¹²⁷. This however changed slightly in the first parts of the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, which favored a rapprochement policy towards China to begin with. To this day there are clear indications of increasing tensions, and stronger Philippine cooperation with the United States.

¹²³ Baker 2004: 1

¹²⁴ Ibid 2004: 4

¹²⁵ Ibid 2004.

¹²⁶ Abola & Manzano 2004: 2-3

¹²⁷ Wong 2014: 1-2

Figure 4: Table of Relevant Incidents Involving the Philippines

Incident Actions	Location	
Nanshan Island Incident, February 2010	Within what appears to be Philippine EEZ. Exact distance to borders unknown.	Lack of strong response, focus on upgrading and modernizing maritime capabilities, aligning more with the US ¹²⁸
Scarborough Shoal Standoff, 2012	Within Philippine EEZ, 220km from mainland (119nm)	Diplomatic outlash, stronger cooperation with US, starting the arbitration process, and attempts diplomatic calls in ASEAN.
Arbitration period, 2013-2016	N/A	Strong deterioration between the Philippines and China, sements the cleavage, stronger tensions as a persistent trend.

Source: Polling 2022: 186-191¹²⁹

4.1.1 Overview of the Philippines in the Dispute

The Philippine strategy towards dealing with China in the SCS-dispute is argued to have been following a trend of political balancing in the realist sense, beginning in the Aquino presidency from 2010-2016¹³⁰¹³¹. This means in practice that the state has taken stronger stances towards deterring Chinese efforts by improving their own security capabilities and allying themselves closer to the United States¹³². An aim can be understood from this as ensuring the ability to defend themselves and assert their own interests given the significant differences in material capabilities. Since the 90`s Hong 2013, argues that Filipino leaders have repeatedly viewed the PRC, as a "political and military threat to Southeast Asia"¹³³¹³⁴. Some key developments are the assertive legal action launched by President Aquino 3 in 2014, followed by his balancing politics and international arbitration case¹³⁵. With Aquino`s election loss to President Rodrigo Duterte would see this changed initially to a policy of appeasement. Concluding I will describe and discuss the responses by the new administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr who was inaugurated as president in 2021¹³⁶.

The security responses of the Philippines can be roughly divided into two eras in the last decade. From a stringent balancing strategy undertaken by Aquino to safeguard sovereignty

¹²⁸ Poling 2022: 186-190

¹²⁹ Polling 2022: 186-191

¹³⁰ Cruz De Castro 2020: 1-2

¹³¹ Wu & Velasco 2022: 2

¹³² Ibid 2022: 4

¹³³ Hong 2013: 8

¹³⁴ Zeberlein 2016: 1-2

¹³⁵ Hendler 2018: 15

¹³⁶ Wu & Velasco 2022: 3-4

through arbitration and increasing US interconnectedness. Following this, the Term of Rodrigo Duterte was an era categorized under a hedging lens with the aim of increasing the economic benefits from Chinese Belt and Road investments ¹³⁷. Following these indications exist of a return to a more assertive balancing strategy after 2021 under the new president Marcos JR¹³⁸

The literature categorizes and is agreeing on the large influence of different personalities and sectors in shaping Philippine politics, particularly the role of the president in shaping external policies. This is why I will divide the sub-chapters according to the three presidents relevant for the last decade of the dispute, this roughly will correspond to the same structures used in my chapter on Vietnam, as the categorization according to presidents and their events happen roughly in the same time periods.

4.1.2 2009-2010

In 2009 when the dispute reignited after the claim's submissions regarding extensions of EEZs, the infamous Chinese nine-dashed line claim was reiterated. This raised the tension in the sense of that it was the first time this claim had ever been utilized in an international forum. The Philippines and others wanted to have America voice strict opposition and signal close allegiance with them, as a balancing maneuver¹³⁹. The inclusion and activity of Philippines corresponded with the accession of President Benigno Aquino 3, from here named solely as Aquino

4.2 President Aquino 2010-2016

The term of President Benigno Aquino 3, Aquino for short, is the one that set the framework for later strategies used to respond to Chinese activity in the SCS. His term began with a significant negative spiral of the PRC relationship due to the hijacking of a tourist bus in Manilla, leaving 8 Chinese nationals dead. Manila police were accused of having failed in their preventive efforts. This led to significant outrage from the PRC, leading Aquino to begin making intense efforts to improve the relationship between the states. This line of rapprochement was quickly abandoned when Filipino vessels doing survey work were intercepted and blocked by 3 Chinese law-enforcement ships in the waters near Nanshan Island. The responses to this were a diplomatic protest and complaint met with a staunch Chinese reply emphasizing "indisputable Chinese sovereignty" over the waters in question¹⁴⁰.

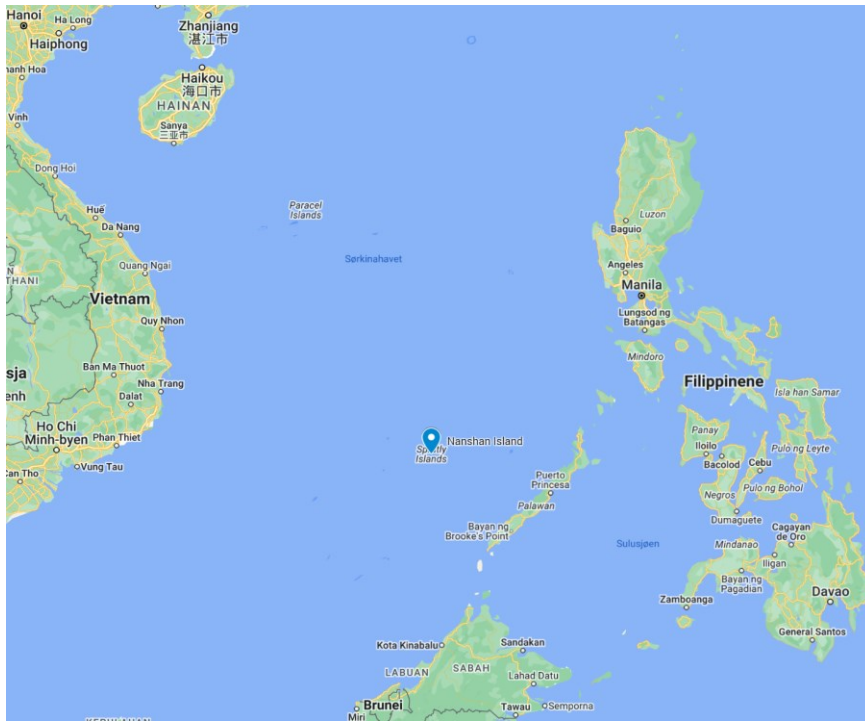
¹³⁷ Poling 2022: 3-6

¹³⁸ Heydarian 2022: 8-9

¹³⁹ Poling 2022: 186-187

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 2022: 186

Figure 5 Map Showing Nanshan Island`s Location.



Source: GPS-coordinates from AMTI overlaid in Google Maps data¹⁴¹¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Google Mymaps 2024

¹⁴² Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2015, accessed 2024

4.2.1 The Scarborough Shoal Standoff

Figure 6: **Disputed Areas Map showing Scarborough Shoal**



Source: Thayer 2012, Yale published article¹⁴³

A Philippine navy frigate ignited this standoff to investigate a report of Chinese fishermen operating in the area. Historically speaking the two have fought over this feature before, meaning that the area already had a disputed nature. However, the encounter of Chinese fishing vessels followed a long period of political tensions and attempts to coerce each other away from the area by increasing the number of ships on both sides¹⁴⁴. In this case, there was little to no direct diplomatic contact between the Philippines and China, resulting in Washington stepping in as a mediator and withdrawing both parties after two months. Later, however, the PRC seized control over the shoal, leading to the Philippines returning soldiers to an old warship parked in the Scarborough area since the 90s, functioning as a military garrison¹⁴⁵¹⁴⁶. This area is one of the areas with the highest tensions in the Philippine part of the dispute, as Chinese vessels regularly attempt to disrupt the flow of marine traffic here.¹⁴⁷

Following this development, Aquino embarked on a military and infrastructural improvement policy. One co-influencing reason for this is the state's inability to patrol and enforce authority in its internationally recognized waters effectively. For instance, in responding to the Nanshan Island incident, the Philippines could dispatch two vessels to secure the survey ship, along with one patrol aircraft and light-attack aircraft and no fighter jets or patrol

¹⁴³ Thayer 2012

¹⁴⁴ Wu & Velasco 2022: 5

¹⁴⁵ Ratcliffe 2023

¹⁴⁶ Thayer 2012,

¹⁴⁷ Bradsher 2014

aircraft with survey capabilities. The country's Air Force thus had limited potential, along with the Navy, to effectively supervise the waters. Under a modernization program, Aquino pledged hundreds of millions in new investments to the armed forces. He also initiated significant new investment in naval- surveillance capabilities with aid from the Pentagon, along with donations of new modern naval vessels that could drive longer and could more effectively patrol the islands around the Spratly.¹⁴⁸ Thus, the modernization program was effectively launched, and capabilities for maritime activity significantly increased over the years.¹⁴⁹

This effort built off a program that has been going on for years based on the existing security cooperation with the United States. Ever since the independence of the Republic in the late 1940s, the Republic entered the Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, guaranteeing American protection in the case of invasion and some degree of security cooperation¹⁵⁰. Thus, this alliance and collaboration began to be revived in the aftermath of the conflict's reactivation. Aquino's administration repeatedly stressed that "The United States is the sole strategic partner of the Philippines," signaling a stronger orientation towards the US¹⁵¹. Following this line, they also openly pressed for more significant American commitments under the old Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT)¹⁵². This trend coincided with the American pivot to ASIA and an increasing involvement by the United States in the geopolitics of the region.

4.2.2. Aquino's Diplomatic Efforts

In addition, they have also attempted to negotiate to solve disagreements individually. Another way the administration tried to meet the challenge from China was by attempting to unify the ASEAN forum's views in the ongoing South-China Sea dispute Code of Conduct, or COC negotiations. 2002, the 10 ASEAN states signed the Declaration of Code of Conduct (COC). In this declaration, the parties all affirmed their commitment to UNCLOS and international laws as the guiding principles of jurisdiction. In addition, it will continue to work to adopt and establish a complete code of conduct or more comprehensive sets of rules for maritime disputes and activity.¹⁵³ Since the conflict's reignition, both parties have stressed peaceful conflict solution simultaneously as the clashes and other developments occurred. This effort can be understood as an effort to agree on a treatise that supervises and constrains state behavior in the disputed waters. One thing the Filipinos pushed for was to get the ASEAN states to agree on a Code of Conduct that would have the status of legally binding¹⁵⁴. As a result, the government traveled extensively and lobbied and advocated their views. The party that agreed with them the most was Vietnam, who also supported the same peaceful resolution given their similar quarrels with China¹⁵⁵. However, the Aquino administration's efforts were not sufficient to establish any form of agreement on this, and this was attributed to Chinese lobby efforts towards its closer partners Cambodia and

¹⁴⁸ Poling 2022: 230-232

¹⁴⁹ Vuvang 2022: 187

¹⁵⁰ Official Gazette of the Government of the Philippines 1951

¹⁵¹ Hong 2013: 8

¹⁵² Cruz De Castro 2020: 8

¹⁵³ ASEAN 2012

¹⁵⁴ Polling 2022: 190-200

¹⁵⁵ Jianwei 2014: 12

Laos¹⁵⁶. As a reason for this, they continued their effort by re-engaging with the US for security assurance and aid¹⁵⁷. In other words, there was balancing, but with inputs of caution in the earliest period. Therefore, it seems like this point was a turning point in the Philippine leadership.

4.2.3 Utilizing International Arbitration: Aquino

Following the escalation of incidents after the start of the 2010`s, in 2013, the Aquino administration submitted a case to the Permanent International Court of Arbitration in the Hague, for the alleged violations of the UNCLOS.¹⁵⁸ This development followed a few years of increasing tensions, and Philippine attempts to deal with the issues of Chinese incursions diplomatically. However, unlike the Vietnamese strategy of diplomacy and hedging, they did not have the same effect. The Filipino foreign secretary under Aquino in 2013 was quoted as part of the press conference following the case submission, stating that the ROP had “exhausted all possible initiatives, we feel the time to act is now.”¹⁵⁹The secretary also referred to other diplomatic negotiations previously attempted, hinting at a difference in Vietnam's and the Philippines' situations.¹⁶⁰The aim behind this intent can be understood as a signaling intent, alongside the stated wishes of clarifying the legality of the challenges and their sovereignty.¹⁶¹

This case was initiated to “achieve a peaceful and durable solution to the dispute over the West Philippine Sea (WPS”. The specific UNCLOS articles argued to be breached, was Article 287 and Annex VII¹⁶². These articles are the ones that reference that as part of disagreements under the convention, states are free to choose through “written declaration,” one of 4 mechanisms, where two involve international tribunal rulings. The result of the case was a ruling that the Chinese claims and activities in the SCS had no basis in international law. It also ruled that no artificial islands or rocks qualified as producing EEZ, making many of the manoeuvres used legally void¹⁶³.

Literature often emphasizes the intent of the PRC to deal with the issue bilaterally and prevent it from becoming a global issue¹⁶⁴. The PRC also imposed trade and tourism sanctions on the Philippines after the Scarborough standoff and the case-submission with demands that the case be dropped so that these could resume alongside standard diplomatic talks. Reports point to these sanctions costing the tourism industry over 2 million USD in lost revenue a month while these were in place¹⁶⁵. This is one reason why it can be said the Philippines are more assertive in their approach.

Thus, this maneuver can be said to be significant proof of this assumption. It is not cooperative in the sense of instead of trying to reach mutual agreements, this is abandoned

¹⁵⁶ Zhao 2001: 1-10

¹⁵⁷ Ibid 2014: 12-13

¹⁵⁸ Embassy of the Philippines in Japan 2013

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 2013

¹⁶⁰ Ibid 2013

¹⁶¹ Ibid 2013

¹⁶² Ibid 2013

¹⁶³ Peace Palace Library 2024

¹⁶⁴ Cruz De Castro 2020: 7-9

¹⁶⁵ Thayer 2012.

in favor of more forceful diplomatic and balancing measures. Because the PRC had issued a strong opposition to this and outlined their positions in a paper published online in 2014. Some of their arguments were that UNCLOS does not have “jurisdiction”, and that it violates former agreements made under the ASEAN Code of conduct negotiations and agreements made to negotiate bilaterally¹⁶⁶¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸. Thus, I argue this trend of more assertively responding to the dispute, has been a trend of the Filipinos in the SCS ever since its reignition with few exceptions. I argue this is the case, as I will demonstrate in chapter 5, the Vietnamese have taken a much more conciliatory and cooperative focused approach towards China¹⁶⁹.

4.2.4 Rodrigo Duterte and Changes in approach, 2016-2022

From the term of Rodrigo Duterte`s presidency, a shift in policy was occurred. Duterte was seen as doing a `rapprochement policy with China to increase its Foreign Direct Investment levels in the realm of increasing tourist traffic and securing more infrastructural investments through the Belt and Road Initiatives¹⁷⁰. Duterte also advocated publicly for shelving security cooperation with the US and reducing military contact¹⁷¹ .

In practice this policy played out in frequent visits and meetings with Chinese diplomats on several occasions. Duterte, through his rapprochement, secured lots of important investments which is argued in the literature has his primary motivation for rapprochement. In 2016, after a state visit to the PRC, they secured 24billion USD in trade and investment commitments. In addition, Duterte secured 1trillion new USD in investments for infrastructural projects outside the capital¹⁷². Other sources argue that his shift, was personally motivated by international critiques against his domestic policies on narcotics, leading to a personal motivation to ally with the counterparts of these states¹⁷³. This line however would not be sustained, and it wound up being mostly rhetorical, but still enough to provoke warnings and insecurity in the US and allies¹⁷⁴. Duterte significantly swept the issue of the ruling under the rug in favor of economic development¹⁷⁵. Duterte`s policy can thus be argued to have mainly changed from one of a US-centered balancing to a hedging policy with the aim extracting benefits more from both sides¹⁷⁶.

Another way this played out was after the Arbitration ruling in 2016. This ruling was announced two months into Duterte`s presidency, and at the following ASEAN summit September 2016, he denounced the issue as purely “bilateral” and insignificant¹⁷⁷. Duterte`s trend directly contradicted years of tradition in Filipino society, of assertively standing up for their claims in the SCS. Here he can be said to have been signaling a move

¹⁶⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2014

¹⁶⁷ Official Gazette of the Philippine Government Accessed 2024

¹⁶⁸ Polling 2022: 230-231

¹⁶⁹ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023

¹⁷⁰ Cruz De Castro 2020: 2

¹⁷¹ Poling 2022: 234-235

¹⁷² Poling 2022: 17

¹⁷³ Ibid 2018: 7

¹⁷⁴ Heydarian 2017: 15

¹⁷⁵ Heydarian 2022: 7-9

¹⁷⁶ Wu & Velasco 2022: 2

¹⁷⁷ Hendler 2018: 9-11

more towards China`s wishes of not globalizing the issue of maritime jurisdiction. All in all, his efforts failed in deterring Chinese gray-zone activities and were unpopular¹⁷⁸.

Towards the end of his term public opinion shifted against him, given that despite his cooperative and appeasing policies Beijing showed no signs of standing down their activity in the SCS. As a result, from 2020-2022 Duterte slowly started to acknowledge the decisions of the ruling in 2016, and reversed course on plans to reduce American influence in the country¹⁷⁹. He remained in power until 2021 when he lost the election in favor of the current president Ferdinand Marcos JR¹⁸⁰.

4.2.5 The Policies of Ferdinand Marcos JR, 2022 –2023

The presidency of Marcos has not yet received substantial covering in academic literature. Thus, this discussion will take the shape more of indications and attempting to launch arguments about what this can entail and to what degree it has continuity for the security responses and discuss contemporary developments.

Marcos won the elections with a substantial margin, winning around 60% of the votes in 2022¹⁸¹, and won on a platform of populist economic policies directed at lower prices and a large focus on crime elimination. Marcos jr is ironically enough the son of former Filipino dictator and for long it was discussed how his victory would impact the fragile democracy of the country¹⁸². There was also much uncertainty regarding if he would follow in the appeasement policies led by his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte towards China.¹⁸³ It was rumored that with the history of the Marcos family and autocracy, he would support closer ties with China. The family, however, has also a historical affinity with the western political allies and such this cooled worries in Washington¹⁸⁴. On the campaign trail Marcos often championed in his election campaigns the US alliance`s importance, the importance of closer ties with the western alliances, and a fondness for western culture¹⁸⁵.

In practice Marcos Jr surprised many of the initial speculations about his rule. He started his term by appointing reformists to the political cabinet and strongly emphasized an aim of achieving political unity amongst the political classes and civil society. Thus, there have been indications that he is committed to improving institutional resilience and fixing the country`s woes. Some indicators of this have been by appointing reformers to cabinet posts categorized by experience and background versus patronage ties. One example of this is his foreign minister who unlike previous administrations`s ministers who often were based on influence and patronage. His minister is a seasoned diplomat with long experience from the diplomatic apparatus, which is an unusual trend of Philippine politics. He also appointed

¹⁷⁸ Hendler 2018: 11-12

¹⁷⁹ Grossman 2023

¹⁸⁰ Dolven & Lum 2022: 1-2

¹⁸¹ Heydarian 2022: 3-4

¹⁸² Dolven & Lum 2022: 1

¹⁸³ Heydarian 2022: 3-6

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 2022: 13

¹⁸⁵ Heiduk & Wilms 2022: 4

several people to minister posts who served under the Aquino administration who is also argued to have been of a reform-oriented nature¹⁸⁶.

4.2.6 Stances and Actions on the South China Sea

Marcos began his term by making his stance on the dispute perfectly clear, whereas Duterte would undermine the significance of the conflict, Marcos vowed “Not to cede an inch of Philippine territory”, from the start¹⁸⁷. This also followed a sharp departure from the policies of Duterte. Since his inauguration Marcos has continued to increase and reapproach the United States¹⁸⁸. One key development from this was the strengthening of the already existing Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). Over the course of 2023 this would lead to the establishment of temporary garrisons of American soldiers and navy vessels under the MDT-treaty¹⁸⁹. Filipino and US ties have increased significantly as a result.

Another new development occurring during his tenure is the so-called publicizing strategy where the Filipino armed forces, including the navy and coastguard have taken to increasing their social-media presence. This means they have adopted a strategy of publishing videos and photographs of the standoffs or clashes that occur with the PRC. In this strategy the coastguard of the Philippines has the greatest role and posts photographs and videos frequently. The reasons for this were summarized by the guard-commander, stating that “I’d like to emphasize that the best way to address Chinese ‘gray zone’ activities in the West Philippine Sea is to expose it”¹⁹⁰.

Through this simple data, there is a presentation from the military about activities of the guard, here they detail some key factors of US-Philippine relations that is not sufficiently covered in academic literature. From following this activity through the Facebook page of the Philippine coast guard there are preliminary indications of continuing US Support for modernization of the Coast Guard and thus ensuring the country’s capabilities¹⁹¹. Over the later parts of 2023, there is also indication of increasing activity in naval exercises between the US and Philippines. November 23rd the two parties conducted a three-day maritime exercise in the west Philippine Sea¹⁹². This underlines some of the indications made about the early relevant years of Marcos` presidency. Following, at the end of chapter 4 I will briefly also discuss some indications about the developments through 2024. The next sub-chapter will discuss the way these two leaders have addressed the dispute`s elements, and to evaluate the threat-perceptions involved.

4.2.7 Rhetorical Analysis and Overview: Aquino and Marcos JR

In this sub-chapter I will present some elements of rhetoric I argue highlights the assertiveness and perceptions of Philippine presidents. Following this I will run an NVIVO auto-coding test for sentiments in a sample of statements to see if there is a noticeable difference in the sentiments used. If found in line with the assumptions of the thesis, of a

¹⁸⁶ Heydarian 2022: 8-12

¹⁸⁷ Heiduk & Wilms 2022: 5

¹⁸⁸ Grossman 2023

¹⁸⁹ Gomez & Knickmeyer 2023

¹⁹⁰ Gomez 2023

¹⁹¹ Philippine Coast Guard (2023)

¹⁹² Philippine Armed Forces (2023)

more assertive and negative language used by Philippine leaders, this will help validity towards the assertiveness.

In an interview with the New York times made in early 2014, former Filipino president Aquino was quoted as comparing the situation with China to the situation with the Czech Sudetenland on the cusp of the second-world war. In this interview he calls upon the world personally to "do more to support the Philippines in resisting China`s assertive claims to the seas near his country". He also underscores the dangers existing in "China`s military buildup and territorial ambitions"¹⁹³. Indications from these elements point to a high degree of urgency, and a view in the Philippines that the clashes is viewed as a large threat to domestic security and stability. It can be argued creates a strong self of urgency in Filipino leadership, emphasizing the facts and parallels from historical differences in world order, where the current state of the international peace is under threat. Aquino also frames the issue in such a way as he calls upon them Culminating, I argue that the Filipinos in the SCS dispute reflects a self-understanding of that their security need to protect the norms of the US-led political bloc, and international law. This then is stressed and articulated within the framework of staunch rhetoric, more bloc-focused political balancing, and appeals to the legacy of the word-war 2. It can be argued that the association to World War 2 is a key example as it underscores the gravity of the situation. In addition, by comparing the leaders of China to the nazi-regime of the second war, he also invokes powerful comparisons which can be viewed as serious and be viewed as provocative from China. I argue it underscores a perception of serosity to the situation and to just how dangerous the Philippine leadership views China`s incursions. It also underlines the trend of being more assertive because the statement was met with harsh remarks from the Chinese national news agencies ¹⁹⁴. This thus all argues for a significant threat-perception and a case for the issue as one of a securitized nature with a consistent trend of strong rhetoric.

Additionally, in the addresses sent to the Un General Assembly under the Aquino Administration they stressed that "there is a view that China is accelerating its expansionist agenda", and that the situations calls for UN action "It is in the interest of the international community to ensure that the rule of law is protected whenever confronted by forces that do not respect it. The international community must uphold the rule of law for the sake of global peace, security, and stability"¹⁹⁵. This underlines the relevant trends from of the Aquino term, consisting of balancing and a stauncher rhetoric on China. In these statements both leaders identify China`s actions as a direct threat to the security and sovereignty of the state, and by using words that support an assertive and staunch responses. This in total can be viewed as a securitization move as it paints a picture of China`s actions as something that threatens the state to such a degree that it warrants a change of action. In Buzan and colleagues` framework, this is important as it creates a legitimacy for the state to mobilize support in the society for drastic action, and strong threat-images like this qualify as securitization of issues¹⁹⁶.

¹⁹³ Bradsher 2014

¹⁹⁴ BBC 2014(b)

¹⁹⁵ Cabactulan 2014, Letter: 1-4

¹⁹⁶ Buzan et al 1998: 150-151

One key statement by President Ferdinand Marcos JR. given in February 2024 I argue also highlights the tendency of assertiveness. In this speech, which was given to commemorate diplomatic ties between the Philippines and Australia he makes references to historical memories of Filipinos fighting for freedom in the second-world war. "As allies we engaged actively in shaping the free world`s vision for the post-war order. We worked to ensure a new peace would respect the rights of all nations", further on the underlines "now, as in 1942, the Philippines finds itself on the frontline against actions that undermine regional peace, stability and success, and that we remain firm in defending our sovereignty, our sovereign rights and our jurisdiction"¹⁹⁷. In the later parts of 2023 Marcos also reiterated his stance in the dispute following a clash over the Second Thomas Shoal. Here he calls out and stresses "The country will remain steadfast in in the defense of its sovereignty amid China`s continued dangerous actions against our citizens", and that Chinese vessels have an "illegal", presence and that only the "Philippines have a legitimate right to operate in these waters"¹⁹⁸. This builds significantly on the sentiments and activities championed by Aquino before he lost the election to Rodrigo Duterte.

Marcos also announced the so-called publicizing strategy of showing Chinese ships` acts was another step in a re-orientation by Manilla "from fighting domestic insurgents, to prioritizing external defense to threats in the South-China Sea"¹⁹⁹. This follows a trend from Aquino`s term, with similar remarks being made and a more serious threat-perception of China.

Thus, by looking at this through the lens of securitization, I argue there is a significant case of a smaller securitization in the Philippines. In practice, this means that in both eras of policy the leaders routinely frame the issue of Chinese incursions as one of great threat to Filipino sovereignty. This is relevant because sovereignty is in practice the right to self-government and warrants and justifies assertive action to counter²⁰⁰. Both leaders have demonstrated wording that frames China`s actions as ones that threaten the survival and sovereignty of the Philippines, and the regional order in terms of compliance with international law. When state leaders securitize it is often aimed at an effort of mobilizing support, and or Diplomatic alliances, international arbitration, and armament. Protecting the functioning of diplomatic and liberal practices seems important and indicates a strong focus on this. Given the backgrounds and other circumstances, this makes sense as a tactic to justify popular support and increase support for Philippine security. Summarizing this can mean according to Wendt that the threat perceptions and more assertive measures all in all include that the Filipinos operate in a more Hobbesian-oriented perception of the world, in the light of their views on China meaning that they perceive the international system as more dangerous and this warrants strong assertion of interests and a more partisan balancing²⁰¹.

¹⁹⁷ Office of the President Philippines 2024

¹⁹⁸ Flores 2023

¹⁹⁹ Gomez 2023

²⁰⁰ Buzan et al 1998: 150

²⁰¹ Wendt 1999: 225-240

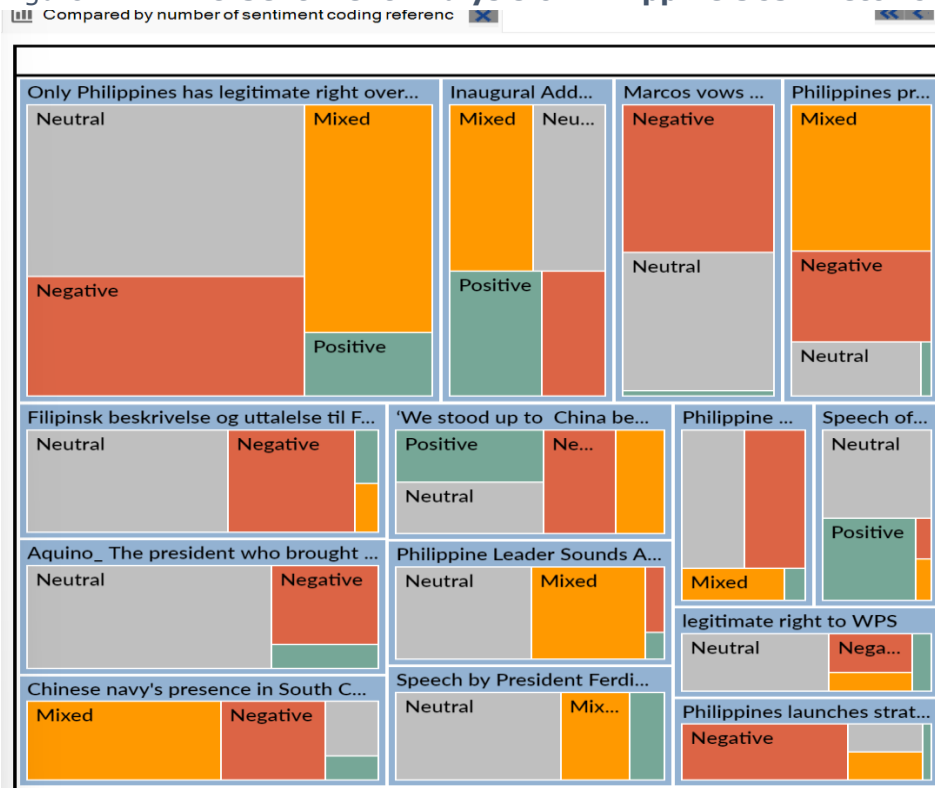
4.2.8 NVIVO Analysis

To further demonstrate the tendency of more assertive balancing, I ran a coding analysis using the in-built sentiment measures of NVIVO, a qualitative software utilized for coding data. Here I ran an analysis of in total 13 sources, including the ones quoted above, this includes news articles and political statements with quotes from the leaders, with an aim of analyzing if this trend of assertive rhetoric is present as a trend. They are concentrated around the two central actors in demonstrating assertiveness, President Aquino 3, and Ferdinand Marcos JR, and are all based around the times of high tensions, 2013-2015, and 2021-23. These sources are selected due to their nature of addressing the dispute, their contemporary relevance, and from the administrations of relevant presidents.

I used their in-built sentiment coding, which categorizes a text to degrees of positive, neutral, or negative based on certain words.²⁰² Given that I have demonstrated a significant degree of securitization and danger-perceptions, there are good reasons to believe that negative sentiments from the leaders further illustrate this tendency. In this case I asked the program to code according to sentences, which assesses if a sentence can be interpreted as negatively or positively loaded considering its context. It focuses on particular words, in conjunction with the context of the sentence. In this case a tendency of word usage like "danger", "illegal" and "expansionist" as examples in sentences would classify as negative. I argue if the examples I provided earlier constitute a tendency, this will show in the analysis as sources containing more negative than positive or neutral sentiment.

²⁰² Please see the Appendix for further details

Figure 7: NVIVO Sentiment Analysis of Philippine SCS Rhetoric



Source: Author`s compilation of coding work done in Nvivo.

The results are as follows, in the case of relevant Filipino leaders' statement, where the majority of these consists of statements given by Aquino 3 and Marcos JR, one can see that the sentiment of rhetoric is usually more mixed to negative than positive, while many also being more on the neutral side. This means that wording used to describe the dispute by these leaders, and its implications can be said to have more negative wording than not. I argue this illustrates the trend of strong danger-imagery and threats as a tendency from the relevant periods. I argue this illustrates the findings of the literature and the start of chapter 4.

The findings of the Philippines thus in my view underline that there is a stronger perception of danger, a more assertive approach which seems to be more willing to challenge China`s activity directly than in the Case of Vietnam. themselves and how this can form a proposition of the underlying factors in this.

4.2.9 Summary

From this can I argue there exists a significant larger commitment and military cooperation with the United States, and that the Philippines are acting more assertively than Vietnam, in balancing against China.²⁰³ From increasing defiance in the face of standoffs, to committing to larger military cooperation and performing tactical exercises and international lawsuits, the Philippines show a clear and resolute will to assert their sovereignty in the SCS. Now

²⁰³ Wu & Velasco 2022: 1-10

that I have described and built validity for the assumption of a staunch balancing policy, the next section will attempt to understand how the self-understanding of the Philippines is being reflected in this regard, considering their history and contemporary dynamics.

4.3 Understanding the Philippine Approach: Analysis

From the previous sub-chapter, I make the case that the Philippines act more partisan and assertively in defending their perceived sovereignty in the dispute. This chapter will be structured to discover the underlying understandings and dynamics of society that make up this response. Resultingly, the chapter makes the following propositions: that the Philippines act assertively due to a weak democratic legacy and a political legacy that views democracy as fragile. I also argue for an indication that this can be understood as an aim to consolidate stronger support from the U.S. and its allies by emphasizing a commitment to the defense of shared values.

Trying to study how the assertive balancing of the Philippines reflects their self-understanding of their place in the dispute is fundamentally attempting to uncover what shapes their reality. In practice, it means examining the ideas held in the country about who they are, what they should do, and how the dispute is viewed with its necessary priorities²⁰⁴. To do this, I argue studying national history is very important ²⁰⁵.

This section will thus be structured as follows: I will discuss the historical legacies of colonialism, its influences on political structure, and the legacy following the democratic revolution in 1986. Then, I will analyze this alongside contemporary data about which ideas the Philippine Republic confesses to uphold domestically and in external affairs.

4.3.1 The Relevance of Colonial History: An Overview

This section will give an overview of the relevant historical tendencies of the Philippines that I argue are relevant for understanding and shaping responses in the South China Sea. The Philippines has spent much of its history under the control of Western powers. First, the Spanish for 300 years, followed by American colonization by the Treaty of Paris in 1898, until 1946. This period is relevant, as in the US at this time, there were active policy debates as to how they should administer controlled regions like Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. One result of this was an emphasis on developing "local self-government," with local elections to legislatures, making up one assembly elected locally, and this would be regulated by another commission of locals appointed by the US President, alongside a Governor General. In one sense, the final executive authority was firmly controlled by the United States, but it did not segregate Filipino society from participating. Philippine citizens were also granted certain protections, such as rights to life, liberty, property, and due process of law, followed by freedom of speech and press. They also did not enforce language requirements in politics or communications and permitted local Indigenous cultural practices and autonomy in some regions²⁰⁶. Some elements of the rule can thus be said to include the ability to hold free elections and local rule under supervision from the US

²⁰⁴ Wendt 1999: 224

²⁰⁵ Ibid 1999: 223-227

²⁰⁶ Thompson 2002: 19-26

government²⁰⁷. From this, it can be said that the Philippines is a country that, because of its colonial heritage, has a close political influence imposed on it by American colonization. This early introduction can be argued set a precedent in society for how it is to be governed, as since this point the country has had various degrees of democratic governance.

4.3.2 The Modern State of Democracy

Today the Republic of the Philippines (ROP) is a semi-presidential two-legislature democracy. It is structured according to an American form of democracy with a Senate, Lower House legislature, and a president having significant authority to shape policy. The largest difference between their structure and the American structure lies in the administrative appointment authority of the Filipino president to cabinet posts, which allows for greater flexibility and less parliamentary control. In addition, the Filipino president has more authority to distribute the funds Congress grants. Unlike American presidents, presidents in the Philippines are limited to one single term²⁰⁸. This latter development was implemented with the constitution of 1935, which came at the backdrop of increasing local self-governance under US colonial rule²⁰⁹.

Today, Freedom House reports point to a sufficient degree of campaign freedom and political freedom in the country. One key feature noted is corruption and political structures often benefit political elites, narrowing the field in terms of who is eligible to run for election in the country and who ends up in cabinet posts. The country is rated high in civil liberties, freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. However, it still does not classify as an entirely free democratic state. They argue that this is due to the lack of limitations on political donations and the uneven distribution of where these come from. Thus, the country constitutes a ``partly free `` one, also stating a recurring trend of smear campaigns against journalists, corruption, and a significant disproportionate influence of the president in policymaking²¹⁰. Despite this, the Philippines was not always democratic in nature, despite its history of being democratically organized²¹¹.

Despite this, the country remains a free country, more like the United States and more than Vietnam. I thus begin to build the proposition that one way to understand the reality behind their responses is that they are motivated by an understanding of democracy and the rule of law as important, fragile and as a result, something that needs to be defended. This I argue, makes sense given what is argued ably a weak standing and understanding of democracy in the country²¹²²¹³. I will elaborate on these understandings in the next sections.

²⁰⁷ Regilme jr & Untalan 2015

²⁰⁸ Teehanke 2011: 2-4

²⁰⁹ Ibid 2011: 2-4

²¹⁰ Freedom House 2024

²¹¹ Teehanke 2011 4-7

²¹² Heydarian 2022: 1-10

²¹³ Laqui 2014

4.3.3 Philippine Democracy Turmoil

One other relevant factor for understanding assertiveness, I argue, is the period of autocracy. In 1972, martial law was put in practice, and democracy was in practice dissolved for 14 years under President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. During these 14 years, a new set of characteristics and ideas was sent from the political leadership. Legitimacy for this new rule was drawn from the social unrest occurring in the early 1970s, this new regime emphasized class struggle against the ``extreme right oligarchy`` and ``extreme left`` as responsible. In one way, this can be understood through the lens of economic turmoil and political instability. The autocratic rule based itself on a concept known as the ``new order,`` which drew upon these counterforces to dismantle the institutions and ideas that had previously characterized the country²¹⁴. Following the dissolution of this regime, the constitution was redrawn and based on the classic republic system of 1935, with some modifications that re-introduced, among some, the single-term limit of six years²¹⁵. This memory of autocracy, and the associated lack of democracy I argue is significant Filipino historical memory.

In 1986 the martial-law autocratic rule of Marcos was abolished in what is commonly referred to as the ``People Power Revolution`` in 1986 ²¹⁶²¹⁷. Historically, the Filipino republic has experienced political tensions on other occasions, but never to the extent seen in 1986. This is argued due to the influence of patronage in Philippine politics. One reason for this, is that the initial democratic organization of the Philippines initially afforded suffrage to the same demographics that covered the most influential social groups in Spanish colonial rule. Resultingly, this has created a political environment often dominated by a few influential clans and social groups, which continue to this date²¹⁸. Hedman and Sidel`s book thus argues that this patronage and lack of real influence from a plurality of the population has been boiling under the surface and surfaced at three junctions throughout the country`s modern history, with 1986 being the largest with Marcos Sr`s removal.²¹⁹

One key item facilitating this development was also argued to be the regime's repressive nature. A key opposition figure in the later years of the Marcos presidency was Benigno ``Ninoy`` Aquino, who had been active in pointing out and revealing large levels of corruption within the Marcos government, he also founded the movement that led the revolution, the People`s Power Movement. As a result, Aquino was frequently arrested and sentenced for various reasons since the mid-1970s; in one case, he was given a death sentence but was later released due to fears of martyrdom and strengthening the opposition. He thus went into exile in the US for many years. Later, the original fears of the regime were confirmed when they liquidated Aquino upon arrival in Manila in 1983, and the culprit was an undercover member of his security attaché²²⁰.

²¹⁴ Teehankee 2011: 6

²¹⁵ Ibid 2011: 2

²¹⁶ Hedman & Sidel 2000: 13

²¹⁷ Teehankee 2011: 6-7

²¹⁸ Hedman & Sidel 2000: 19-22

²¹⁹ Ibid 2000: 19-30

²²⁰ Nadeau 2020: 115-121

As a result, the opposition was invigorated further based on his popular appeal, and with the experiences of the regime combined with legacies of patronage, this was a powerful mix²²¹. Nadeau argues that this, given his popularity, was an emotionally invoking moment for a great number of Filipinos who experienced the repressive nature of the regime by close hand, and this ignited already existing tensions, leading to greater except for the protest movement²²². After the People`s Power Movement and the ousting of Marcos, the country began a slow path back to democracy with its own sets of challenges. I argue elements like this in a country`s history, contribute to collective memories and stories that have implications for policy formulation. This is relevant to discuss when mapping a country`s self-understanding behind its political actions in IR. Given the country's closer ties to the United States and its partners. The significance of this at the state level can be argued interacts in shaping a strong awareness of the importance regarding democratic structure. Still, to this day democratic loyalty appears not to be as strong among ordinary Filipinos, where surveys show that the trust in politicians is often low given the corruption and patronage²²³.

4.3.4 Challenges in Rebuilding

Aquino`s wife, Corazon, was a key player in the movement and the work of her husband, Benigno. Upon his assassination, she decided to run for president in the election post-Marcos and won successfully. Her mandate was based on fighting corruption and initiating the process of restoring a democratic government. Some key elements of her presidency included the Republic Act 7610, which decentralized authority to provincial governments, allowing for greater flexibility in local investments and a larger share of the region's collected tax revenues. She did, however, ensure a peaceful transition of power with the election of the next president in 1992²²⁴. Despite this, her reign was rocky and plagued by degrees of political instability highlighted by contentions with different factions of society attempting military coups.²²⁵. Another thing which does not facilitate stabile governance.

Political instability was long a trend in the Philippines, with large amounts of influence granted to wealthy conglomerates and uneven participation levels. There is not without reason that the literature often refers to Filipino politics as patronage-based²²⁶. Resultingly, today, the country is classified as "partly free" and not a full democracy by international measurements^{227 228}. After these years, there were many efforts to strengthen democratic aspects of the constitution and make the institutions more resilient, which was a trend following Corazon and her predecessors in the early 2000s. In this period, it was a common motto to state "never again", referencing the period of autocrat Marcos Senior. The term of President Aquino 3 also saw significant efforts to strengthen the democratic function of the country, by numerous anti-corruption measures and parliamentary control²²⁹. This legacy

²²¹ Nadeau 2020: 115-121

²²² Ibid 2020: 119-120

²²³ Heydarian 2022: 4-7

²²⁴ Nadeau 2020: 131

²²⁵ Dulay et al 2022: 10-20

²²⁶ Baviera 2012: 11

²²⁷ Freedom House 2024

²²⁸ Dolven & Lum 2022: 1-2

²²⁹ Pangalangan et al 2018: 10-15

can be argued to provide motivation to the efforts and strong stances of the leaders. One reason for this can be argued is the differences in political structure between China and the Philippines. It can be understood that this memory of trouble is interacting in the reality-perceptions and understandings of the state's role in the dispute with China, given the significant differences in political structure. With a troubled past, and its contemporary challenges, it can be discussed that this interacts in creating a strong awareness among Philippine leaders of the importance of working to preserve and invigorate democratic and a rules-based order. The memory of fragility and instability creates a stronger threat-perception and thus warrants a more stringent view on the reality, given the Authoritarian structure of the PRC.

4.3.5 Contemporary Ideas and Currents of Society

As a result of this, some sources also report that Filipino citizens lack confidence in democratic rule and leadership. This can be argued as a connection with contemporary and historical difficulties. This is also indicated in reported survey results showing that people would be open to the rule of so-called "benign autocrats", or good-willed autocrats, shown by survey results regarding the views Filipinos had of the dictatorship period under Marcos taken during the early days of the last Philippine election campaigns. This also shows that a surprising number of Filipinos have an indifferent view of this period, pointing to a lack of democracy²³⁰²³¹. It can also serve as an indication that democratic efforts and memories have had little effect. Other surveys also point to the fact that Filipinos, desire their country to be assertive in their fight against the SCS, and are skeptical of engaging more with China²³². Reported survey results done after the last presidential election stated that well over half of Filipinos in a survey still support this strategy and oppose closer alignment with China²³³. Looking at this from the self-perception concept, it can be argued that this becomes a priority in the priorities of Aquino and Marcos, as they seek support for their approach and desire to mobilize support²³⁴. While these findings are hard to come by, I do argue they have relevance considering the historical experiences of democracy and its history in the country.

4.3.6 Discussing a Constructivist Proposition.

In this section, I will attempt to integrate all the previous discussions and findings and generate a proposition about which national ideas, values, and processes are reflected in the Philippines' responses. This field is not the subject of extensive research, and thus my findings will have limitations, given that there is difficulty in summarizing cause and effect.

One key element in this discussion is the concept of collective memory. Here, I use the definition quoted by Dulay and colleagues (2022), defining it as "aggregated individual memories of members of a group."²³⁵. This concept is relevant as it can be argued to contribute to forming Wendt's concept of self-understanding. When looking at

²³⁰ Heydarian 2022: 4

²³¹ Dulay et al 2022: 1-3

²³² Laqui 2024

²³³ Galvan 2023

²³⁴ I have been unable to get access to the original results. Sources are based of news-reporting.

²³⁵ Dulay et al 2022: 4-5

understandings of state leaders, it can be viewed that some common memories contribute to policy formulation in a constructivist sense as a part of the societal, and cultural context as it arguably promotes certain domestic concerns and priorities²³⁶. This democratic deficit and post-Marcos troubles can be argued creates a domestic imperative to strengthen confidence in democratic rule, and in the South-China Sea dispute this comes through a direct balancing, staunch rhetoric which emphasizes the stakes in the dispute.

I argue this is shown through their more partisan and staunch balancing, because their closest partners highly champion democratic and rules-based values in their policies²³⁷. I argue this is also motivated by the increasing action room provided by the mutual defense treaty with the United States. This is relevant because, given the survey results and opinions, this course of action can be said to satisfy public opinion in terms of strong opposition towards China and Western engagement, as Filipinos, in general, are wary of engagement with China. As a result, it can be said that in this case, Filipinos who are neutral or indifferent to democracy's importance can be shown that democratic practice works by following people's wishes for stronger opposition to China and integration with the West. I argue that this demonstrates an assertion of interests at the cusp of Wendt's terminology, which is happening within the constraints of international norms and the democratic values of their allies in the United States given the security assurance.

It also falls under Wendt's anarchy culture, I argue, as a sign that, in their perception, the world is viewed more "Hobbesian.". Making the dispute with China almost takes on the shape of an existential battle, given the comparisons and uttered statements of the leaders²³⁸. The proposition is thus as follows: The Philippines assertively balance China's incursions due to a heightened awareness of threat given that China has an authoritarian system and their own consciousness of democratic problems. Additionally, I argue this is facilitated and less conciliatory due to stable security commitments from the United States increasing action-room. Furthermore, it can be indicated also as motivated by an effort to accumulate legitimacy, and solidify the support given from the U.S, and allies. Establishing the exact direction of motivation and effect here is challenging, and I argue these propositions warrant further research.

4.3.7 Summary:

In the Philippine Case, responses to the South-China Sea disputes reflect a potential trend of increasing democratic consolidation. This interaction between these efforts and foreign policies, I argue, warrants further research. The state leadership's tendency of strong assertiveness towards China and staunch rhetoric can be seen as an attempt to solidify their ideological alignment with important allies, like the U.S. I also argue that this is motivated by a strong threat-perception due to the differences in political system and structure between China and the Philippines. Finally, it can be argued such a stance is facilitated by a view that the international political arena is becoming more dangerous, and under the umbrella of a protective partner assertive action can be taken. The next section will be a summary of the outlook of Philippine responses from preliminary 2024 data, after this I

²³⁶ Wendt 1999: 190-210

²³⁷ The White House 2024

²³⁸ Wendt 1999: 230-240

begin chapter 5, which will similarly discuss and explore the Vietnamese leadership's approach in the dispute.

4.4 Outlook: Predictions on the Future Approach of the Philippines

This small sub-chapter is written separately from the main trend of analysis, given the scope of the thesis. My aim is to present a brief overview of how the Philippines will respond as the conflict develops. From this, over the course of 2024, there are also indications of increasing involvement of the Philippines in the Quadrilateral cooperation in the Pacific consisting of the United States, Australia, Japan, and India. This has been indicated by meetings and exercises between high-level defense staff from Japanese, Australian, American, and Filipino leadership²³⁹. Literature has also discussed this in previous years, but now it seems this activity is increasing. There have also been indications of increasing activity documented here of cooperation between the Coast Guards of the states, alongside one of the first trilateral maritime exercises in early 2024. Here, Australia, Japan, the US, and the Philippines participated in a naval exercise to strengthen their forces' response and coordinative ability in early 2024²⁴⁰. Later, In April 2024, the Philippine and American armed forces hosted one of their largest-ever bilateral naval exercises in the SCS, totaling around 16,000 participating servicemembers²⁴¹. This exercise comes against the backdrop of increasing trilateral cooperation being championed between the US, Philippines, and Japan, where the parties, in a joint statement dated early April, expressed "strong concern"²⁴² regarding Chinese activity in the South China Sea. In this statement, the leaders also commit to "advancing trilateral defense cooperation," stressing the recent maritime joint activities in the SCS and a further "coordination of US and Japanese support for increasing Philippine defense modernization priorities." All in all, there exists an indication of increasing activity and integration of the defensive forces of the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos Jr²⁴³²⁴⁴. It can thus be argued that Marcos Jr will further deepen this trend of being a stauncher in the balance against China. Thus, the future appears to present opportunities for further tensions and escalation given the country's closer ties with the United States and the increasing activity of US-China geopolitical rivalry.

5 Studying Vietnam in the Dispute

In this chapter, I will study the responses undertaken by the Vietnamese in the dispute; I will do so by first discussing the historical relationship between them and China, then by presenting a set of incidents happening in the seas between them and China in the intro section. Following this overview, I will discuss the main trends and lines of Vietnamese strategy from section 5.2. In section 5.3, I will attempt to propose how these actions reflect Vietnamese national self-understanding through examining history, culture, and rhetoric. The incidents have been selected based on the quantity of available data, relevance, and their argued significance in influencing Vietnamese policy. The rhetorical sources are presented in section 5.2.4 and are chosen by studying official statements given regarding

²³⁹ Armed Forces of the Philippines (2023)b

²⁴⁰ Mahadzir 2024

²⁴¹ US Embassy Philippines 2024

²⁴² The White House 2024

²⁴³ Wu & Velasco 2022: 6-9

²⁴⁴ Reuters 2024

Vietnam`s goals for the dispute, and their expressed views on Chinese actions. Finally, the table in Figure 6, presents a brief overview of these relevant incidents that I present from the waters, their locations and how Vietnam responded to them.

5.1.1 Historical Backdrop: Vietnam and China

The historical relationship between China and Vietnam has been turbulent. Historically Vietnam has a long experience of being under Chinese control. From ancient times and up until 1000AD. In recent decades, specifically in the wake of the Vietnam war, both countries found themselves in a tense relationship over Chinese rapprochement with the United States, and Vietnam`s close alliance with the USSR²⁴⁵²⁴⁶. This tension had begun with the Vietnamese invasion of nearby Cambodia in 1978, which was argued as a “self-defense” measure in line with a threat-perception of eventually becoming encircled by Chinese support for the pol-pot regime there. This is argued to have helped the pol-pot regime collapse²⁴⁷. This created a situation of tense relations between the two neighbors until the early 1990`s and the dissolution of the USSR²⁴⁸. In addition to this war, the two countries also had battles in 1974, 1978 and 1988 regarding islands in the South China Sea. In the latter case is what is often referred to as the Johnson South Reef Skirmish, which saw Vietnamese soldiers attacked by China²⁴⁹.

In 1991 this would change when the Vietnamese foreign secretary visited China as one of the first to do so since 1979. This visit followed months of serious negotiations between the two. The two states agreed in a joint statement from this meeting to resume exchanges and cooperation in “economics, trade, science, transportation, and technology and thus the process of diplomatic normalization. Another part of the joint statement was a commitment to settling boundary and territorial issues through peaceful negotiations and by November this year normalization was a fact²⁵⁰. Following this the countries also established working groups to solve the issues of border disputes, and disagreements on jurisdictions in the Gulf of Tonkin. The issue of Paracels and Spratly`s however remained unsolved²⁵¹.

Following these developments trade-ties between the two increased significantly, and the dependency of Chinese trade took for Vietnam became very significant as illustrated below in Figure 8. Vietnam`s role in Chinese trade also increased, as shown in Figure 9.

²⁴⁵ Guan 1998: 1

²⁴⁶ Nguyen 2023

²⁴⁷ Guan 1998: 2

²⁴⁸ Ibid 1998: 2-3

²⁴⁹ Guan 1998: 2-6

²⁵⁰ Ibid 1998: 3

²⁵¹ Ibid 1998 2-7

Figure 8: Vietnam`s Trade Dependence on China

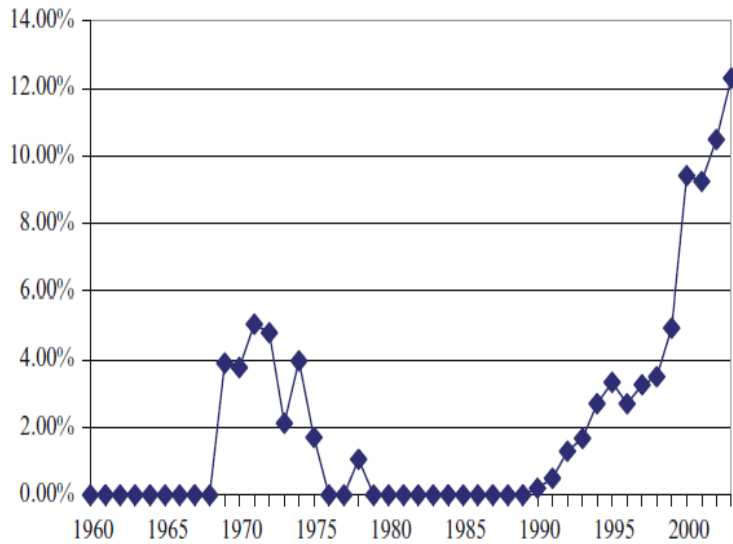


Fig. 3.9 Vietnam's trade dependence on China (1960–2003)

Source: Koo 2009, P53²⁵²

Figure 9: Chinese Trade Dependence on Vietnam

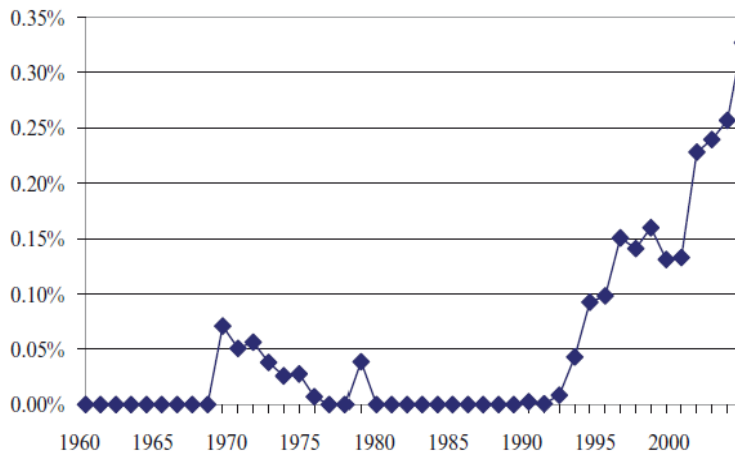


Fig. 3.8 China's trade dependence on Vietnam (1960–2003)

Source: Koo 2009, p53²⁵³

As shown in these graphs, the resumption of exchanges significantly increased activity between the two. One result of these developments was that at the end of the 1990s, the tensions in the Seas calmed down with the resolution of Tonkin-bay disagreements and agreements on declarations of the code of conduct negotiations for the South China Sea dispute. This was a commitment undertaken by the ASEAN states, including Vietnam and

²⁵² Koo 2009: 53

²⁵³ Ibid 2009: 53

China. Some essential principles agreed upon were a commitment to adhering to the UNCLOS and establishing consultation mechanisms in line with international law.²⁵⁴.

Thus, it can be said that the Chinese and the Vietnamese were able to successfully bridge their disagreements to some extent, and this stabilized relations. Given the economic dependence established and the effects of stability for a period, it can be argued this contributes to the attitudes of cooperative struggle adopted by the Vietnamese in the present times. Today thus these forms one of the underlying assumptions for the analysis, that the great significance, superior power of China, and the state understandings of Vietnam influences their approach to the dispute.

Figure 10: Overview of Relevant Incidents:

<i>Incident:</i>	<i>Where:</i>	<i>Actions:</i>
Cable Cutting Incident, 2011	Côn Co Island, 27km from mainland.	Vague diplomatic encouragement of respect ²⁵⁵
Chinese Oilrig, 2014	Within Internationally recognized EEZ of Vietnam.	Calls for respecting sovereignty, starting a policy of careful balancing, cooperative language ²⁵⁶ .
Interference in drilling activities, 2017	Various locations within internationally recognized EEZ of Vietnam.	Politburo green lights closer ties with the United States, upgrading infrastructure, still careful towards China ²⁵⁷

This table shows that there is a tendency of incursions by China into legally recognized Vietnamese waters, and a tendency of careful balancing in response to these threats. This chapter is thus working of an assumption that Vietnam`s responses follow the literary term of "cooperation and struggle", meaning that Vietnam is careful about defending themselves, while not taking actions that would escalate the situations and risk the political balance with China²⁵⁸. My analysis thus based of a proposition that the self-understanding and securitization reflected in these responses due to political struggles following the Vietnam war, the changes in relations to China, and a local cultural focus shaping behavioral norms.

5.1.2 2009-2011

After the events of 1970-1990`s, Sino-Vietnamese relations can thus be said to have stabilized for a while, as few or no significant clashes occurred. However, after the reignition of disagreement in 2009, activity increased.²⁵⁹. One such example regarding Vietnam is the so-called cable incident of 2011, where an alleged Chinese vessel started cutting cables for

²⁵⁴ Thao 2001: 11

²⁵⁵ Radio Free Asia 2012

²⁵⁶ Chapman 2017: 1-4

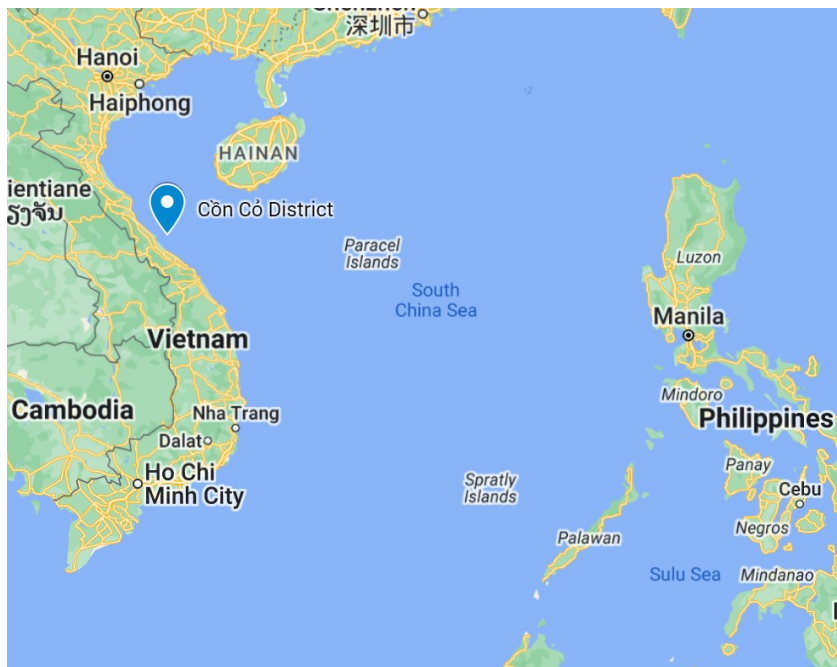
²⁵⁷ Vuvang 2022: 33

²⁵⁸ Thayer 2016: 1-2

²⁵⁹ Hai 2018: 2

seismic survey equipment from a Vietnamese ship. This ship was owned by the state company Petro-Vietnam, doing survey work in the waters near the island of Cồn Cỏ near the Vietnamese coast. One thing that characterizes the Vietnamese, in this case, is the careful response. Responses from the state-owned company, which can, given the structure of the Vietnamese state, be understood as an official line, stated: "China should let its citizens know the waters belong to Vietnam to prevent further incidents." In addition, to emphasize their "protest" towards the actions²⁶⁰. The figures below show an overview of the island's location and relationship to China and the Vietnamese mainland.

Figure 11: *Map of Cồn Cỏ Island in regard to the SCS*



Source: Own designed map based of Google Maps data, available in bibliography²⁶¹.

This map is designed by me in a Google geo-data tool designed for custom-maps; this is due to a lack of other available maps with a similar overview²⁶². The map thus shows that the incident occurred near the Vietnamese Coastline. Despite this, the rhetoric was cooperative and not retaliatory in response from Vietnam. The Cồn Cỏ incident is counted in the literature as part of the SCS conflict, given its similarities with how Vietnam approaches the SCS. One reason for this is that following the dispute, Hanoi focused significantly on defusing tensions and thus sent an envoy to Beijing to negotiate. This can be said to have fruitful results, resulting in an agreement between China and Vietnam on a set of principles for settling maritime issues. It opened three specific working groups that focused on further improving naval cooperation in the Gulf of Tonkin by promoting common-development

²⁶⁰ Radio Free Asia 2012a

²⁶¹ Google MyMaps 2024

²⁶² Ibid 2024

projects, environmental protection protocols, and search and rescue cooperation²⁶³. I argue that this is one of the first cases where I see traces of the Vietnamese trend of active efforts to negotiate and maintain stability in its political quarrels with China. It is also argued that Vietnam has historically attempted to solve disputes with China as “quickly as possible,” more so than other states in the area, indicating the high importance placed on the relationship with China²⁶⁴. Another reason for this being interesting is the significant rise in domestic protest after this incident; in Hanoi and many other cities, one saw considerable outcry. Some reports also point to these demonstrations being some of the biggest ones seen in the authoritarian state of Vietnam in modern history²⁶⁵.

5.1.3 Escalation

This pattern also occurred in 2014, when the oil rig incident occurred. The oil rig incident was where the Chinese oil rig Haiyang Shiyou 981 was placed inside the internationally recognized economic zone of the SRV. Reports state that the rig was accompanied by 80 ships, among many military ones, to ensure its safe operation. This sparked a response from the SRV, which dispatched 29 vessels to interrupt the rig's placement and establishment. However, the clash took more the shape of a standoff, with no aggressive maneuvers or such being taken.²⁶⁶ However, the standoff lasted 75 days and caused a significant recalculation among Vietnamese officials regarding their foreign policy. Even after, despite the realization that correction was needed, the Vietnamese ran an active diplomatic effort, trying to reach Beijing to discuss the situation.²⁶⁷²⁶⁸ One result was the withdrawal of the rig and the establishment of three more diplomatic hotlines between the two to ensure that tensions would be more quickly resolved.²⁶⁹.

²⁶³ Hai 2018: 11

²⁶⁴ Thao 2001: 6

²⁶⁵ Lim 2011

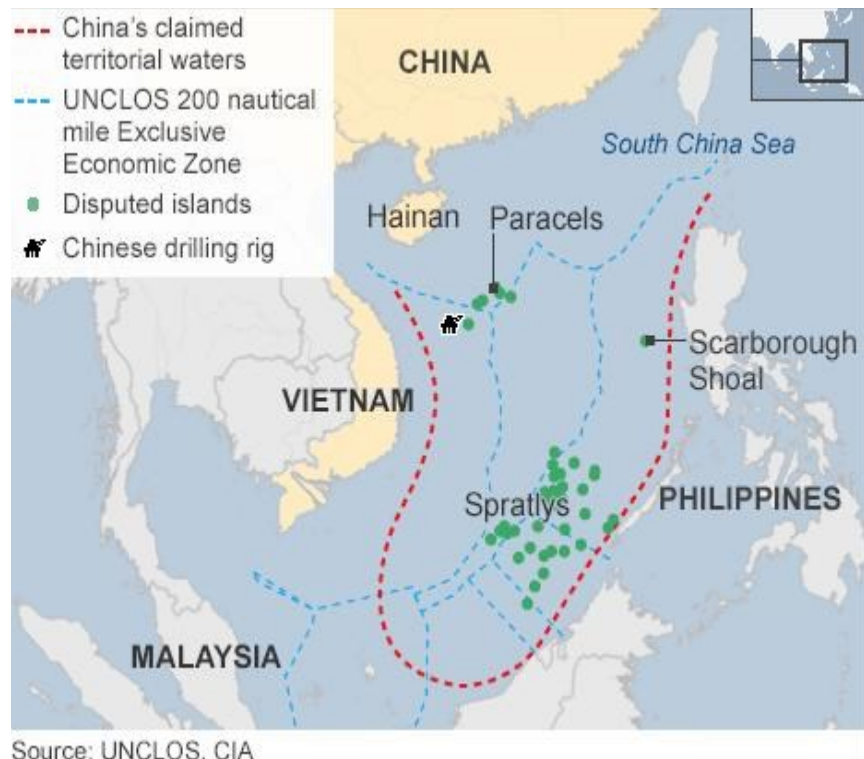
²⁶⁶ Polling & Bower 2014

²⁶⁷ Thayer 2016: 3

²⁶⁸ Vuvang 2022: 29

²⁶⁹ Hai 2018: 11-12

Figure 12: South China Sea map showing location of the Haiyang Shou



Source: Map published by BBC, after the incident²⁷⁰

Another key incident is the so-called hydro-carbon drilling incident In 2017, where Chinese vessels interrupted activity of Vietnamese drilling ships causing them to retreat and an economic loss of around 1billion USD. The aftermath of this incident pushed Vietnam further in towards the partnership with the United States, as it's argued the increasing Chinese activity was more threatening, which is something that also has been challenging for them, given the trauma of the Vietnam war²⁷¹. As I will later present Vietnam has stayed to its cautious soft-balancing strategy, and delicately balanced both sides.

These activities are common trends in the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, where Vietnam has experienced several disruptions by the Chinese, but responded with cautious defensive measures, and diplomatic dialogue. In the next sections I will present more examples of occurrences like this and discuss their ramifications. This is relevant as with more examples I can further examine and build validity for the literary definition and examine how this reflects their understandings of priority, goals, and rationale. Much like with the Philippines, there is indications of gray-zone tactics where the PRC desires to establish more extensive control over areas that are internationally recognized as within Vietnam`s EEZ. As a result of these challenges, the islands have received considerable attention in party propaganda, meaning that the dispute is prioritized highly by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)²⁷².

²⁷⁰ BBC 2014

²⁷¹ Vuvang 2022: 33

²⁷² Communist Party of Vietnam 2023

5.2 Post 2014 Developments: Cooperation and Struggle

So, what characterizes the Vietnamese in their policy actions towards China's activity, and has it had continuity? From the relevant period for the analysis one term that is used to describe Vietnam's approach in the literature, is Thayer's term of "cooperation and struggle."²⁷³ This means that Vietnam is making a careful balancing attempt to deal with and reduce the dangers of the PRC's behavior.²⁷⁴ As they do this, they are simultaneously calculating not to provoke or endanger their strategic and economic partnership.²⁷⁵ This is also often called a China-centered policy in which Vietnam continuously affirms its commitment to the partnership despite the difficulties.²⁷⁶ This chapter will thus present the different key elements in their approach to China in the time-period 2010-2023.

5.2.1 Land Reclamation

Despite the careful outset, the Vietnamese have not just resorted to diplomatic pleasing in their approach. The terms cooperation and struggle also entail a struggling part, meaning that efforts are made to resist the incursions besides the diplomatic. Reports by the South China Sea Strategic Probing Initiative show satellite imagery showing that the Vietnamese have started upgrading their land holdings in the South China Sea. This follows a trend that also occurred from the last period of strong tensions in the conflict, which resulted in the Chinese control of the Paracels and a subsequent Vietnamese territorial grab in the Spratly'. After this, the Vietnamese established surveillance posts and supply stations known as DK rigs.²⁷⁷ These rigs were initially a few sets of stations launched with the intent of being "sovereignty markers in the sea", and are mostly scientific survey stations, mixed with military infrastructure like helipads and often station soldiers²⁷⁸. The rigs are named after the Vietnamese word for "cụm Dịch vụ kinh tế - Khoa học kỹ thuật", which translates to: "economic services, science and technology clusters", or in this case DK-rig for shorts²⁷⁹. In total per the latest updates in early 2024, Vietnam controls 27 features (including islands, reefs, and rocks in the seas), in total they have expanded 8-10 of these rocks with infrastructure and new land²⁸⁰.

In addition, in 1989 and throughout the 90s, work was being done on many of the features they already occupied in the Spratly's. Many of these features are small land masses and reefs on which they have installed and started land reclamation. This includes expanding and developing infrastructure like runways, ship bases, and missile infrastructure. This is something that also has categorized China's approach to asserting sovereignty over the islands, Vietnam has also done this but to a much smaller degree²⁸¹. I see from reports that the Vietnamese were marginally expanded compared to the Chinese ones, until after 2009. Around this time, the Vietnamese started adding more military infrastructure and extending

²⁷³ Thayer 2016: 1

²⁷⁴ Ibid 2016: 1-4

²⁷⁵ Thayer 2016: 1-2

²⁷⁶ Zeberlein 2023

²⁷⁷ Qi 2021: 3-6

²⁷⁸ Vietnamnet 2012

²⁷⁹ Ibid 2012.

²⁸⁰ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2024

²⁸¹ Southerland 201: 1

some of their island holdings²⁸². Some of the most significant ones here is the Spratly Island and the Southwest Cay, in total in 2016 Vietnam had expanded features, but significantly less than China²⁸³.

One of the most significant features occupied by the Vietnamese is the Spratly Islands and Southwest Cay in the Spratly Island group, and these two I argue are two of their most important holdings. There is documentation that these features have seen significant upgrades in their societal and military infrastructure, this will be illustrated on the next page. Despite these efforts, there is no indication that Vietnam has built new features and artificial islands like China has done²⁸⁴. These expansions can be argued are an indication of consolidation and expansion on its current holding infrastructure-wise. Per 2016, Vietnam has, in total, reclaimed around 80 acres of land, or 320square meters, in the construction of new landmasses on existing holdings, vs. China`s 3000acres, or 12,000square meters, in 2016 thus consisting of new features and expansion of existing ones. ²⁸⁵. Thus, the total number is expected to be higher in 2024 but still much lower than that of the Chinese efforts. I argue from the Vietnamese side that this can be understood as a response to the Chinese efforts by ensuring their strategic response capability.²⁸⁶.

Photographs from Spratly Island and Southwest Cay show that after 2014, one of the years following the recent escalation of the conflicts, the island got new runways and marine bases. This same trend also applies to minor features, but I will focus on Southwest Cay and Spratly Island given their sizes and better availability of data.

²⁸² Thayer 2016: 1-2

²⁸³ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2024

²⁸⁴ Duong 2015

²⁸⁵ Ibid 2016: 1-3

²⁸⁶ Qi 2021: 3-10

Figure 13: *Developments of Vietnamese-controlled Southwest Cay*



Source: Published in Qi2021²⁸⁷

In this image we can see that the island has significantly expanded to include missile launchers, military administration, hospitals, and recreational elements to support what is argued a larger habitation of peoples. This island has also in total seen an expansion of around 27 acres of new land, or 109 square meters in extra land.

²⁸⁷ QI 2021: 22

Figure 14: *Developments of Vietnamese-controlled Spratly Island*



Source: Published in QI2021²⁸⁸

Like with Southwest Cay, on Spratly Island this image depicts an expansion of military infrastructure. From 2004 one can see what resembles a residential community, and in 2020 this has been expanded to coexist alongside a runway, radar equipment and missile launchers. All in all, this indicates a significance on expanding the military readiness of Vietnam in the seas. This feature has been expanded by almost 70 acres, or 283 square meters. In 2023, there are also reports that the Vietnamese have started to return to this strategy. Per December 2022, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative counted that since 2021 the Vietnamese had in total expanded features with 310 acres of land or around 1254 square meters. This information is published alongside documentation of on-going works at smaller features in 2023, there is thus reason to suspect even more is being done in the present day. One example of this is how the feature Barque Canada Reef, which previously saw little works has seen new buildings, and small maritime facilities appear. In total per the last AMTI count in 2022, the Vietnamese amount of land reclamation amounts to 750, or just shy of one quarter of the total 3000 acres built by the Chinese.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Qi 2021: 33

²⁸⁹ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023

Figure 15: Satellite photo taken of the Barque Canada Reef in 2023:



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023²⁹⁰

Under the umbrella term of cooperation and struggle, this can be understood as a way for Vietnam to ensure its ability to “struggle” while remaining cooperative and keeping the Chinese relationship afloat in other arenas. These islands are some of their grandest features in the disputed Spratly’s, and such have strategic relevance given the aim of China to establish control of the whole island group.

²⁹⁰ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2023

Figure 16 **Vietnamese DK rig in the Spratly`s:**



The DK1/15 rig on Prince Consort Bank was receiving supplies for the Spring Festival in 2021.

Photo: VNA

Source: Vietnamese People`s Army, published in QI2021²⁹¹

Thus, it can be made clear that the Vietnamese have operated diplomatically and cautiously developed their infrastructure in the disputed island groups and ensured operational capabilities to ensure sovereignty. This corresponds well to the platform of cooperation and struggle, as these expansions are insignificant.²⁹² This effort can be viewed as a way for the Vietnamese to be prepared for the potential outbreak of conflict and to have the infrastructure needed to mobilize military equipment. Upgrades have also been made to other minor features, like the Sand Cay, which has seen the addition of missile-launching capabilities and helipads²⁹³.

5.2.2 Diplomatic Efforts

In addition to the infrastructural developments, the Vietnamese have slightly rebalanced their foreign policies and relations to meet the Chinese challenge. One key feature that also coincided with the development of the SCS is the increasing diversification Vietnam has achieved in its political relationships. This has been a staple of Vietnamese politics since the early 90`s, influenced by economic and societal concerns.²⁹⁴After the Chinese increased

²⁹¹ Qi 2021: 16

²⁹² Southerland 2016: 1

²⁹³ Qi 2021: 29

²⁹⁴ Vuvang 2022: 5-10

their activity following the 2014 oil rig incident and other recurrent events, the Vietnamese started deepening their relationships with other states in what can resemble a balancing effort. Vietnam has historically followed a doctrine known as *doi-moi*, which focuses on the pragmatic development of political partnerships to increase economic benefit.²⁹⁵ One key feature of this has been upgrading their relationship with the United States.²⁹⁶ Vietnam can thus be argued to pursue a doctrine of hedging, known as multidirectional in the literature, meaning no close reliance on one specific partner and not alienating any potential partners. I argue this has been a critical element in their approach to China, given the importance of this relationship in ensuring they cooperate as much as possible. However, despite this, the PRC has not lightened up its challenges to sovereignty. As a result, Vietnam considers China its greatest “security threat” despite the importance placed on the relationship.²⁹⁷ Despite this, the state keeps a calm and careful approach, given the significance of the relationship.²⁹⁸ Another reason for this can also be argued to stem from the historical burden of being at war with the United States

Given Vietnam and China's history of conflict over territories in the South China Sea, one way the other parties have historically attempted to solve their differences is through dialogue between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and China. One such effort that both Vietnam and the Philippines have championed is the Code of Conduct negotiations, which all parties agreed to proceed with, but the talks have been challenging²⁹⁹.

5.2.3 Recalculating

One such example is a more careful policy of strengthening relations with the United States. In 2013, a year prior, the Vietnamese and US had already committed a significant rapprochement through the announcement of a “comprehensive partnership”, for advancing bilateral relations, this was viewed as a part of the Obama`s Indo-pacific pivot and resulted in a significant improvement in bilateral relations³⁰⁰. One key element of this was to give reassurance and diplomatic concessions to Vietnam, where one included was a firm promise of never another invasion from the US. It can be argued that the trauma of the Vietnam-war was very present in the minds of leaders³⁰¹.

In 2015, the CPV General Secretary, Truong Tan Sang, became the first Vietnamese party secretary to visit the White House. This came as consequence of the elevation of the US-Vietnamese relationship to a comprehensive partnership from 2013, and the visit was finally accepted in 2015 after Hanoi`s reluctance. Hanoi wanted to reassure Beijing by keeping a low-profile in this part. Not long after the partnership, Vietnam started to refuse Chinese investments in public infrastructure through the Belt and Road. However, Vietnam also remained part of the Belt and Road cooperation in some political forums to pay “lip service” and ensure the relationship with the PRC maintained somewhat of a standard economic

²⁹⁵ Chapman 2017: 1-4

²⁹⁶ Hai 2018: 11

²⁹⁷ Vuvang 2022:30

²⁹⁸ Ibid 2022: 34

²⁹⁹ Thao 2001: 1-3

³⁰⁰ US Department of State 2013

³⁰¹ Vuvang 2022: 30

state.³⁰² They also excluded Huawei from working on the national mobile network and chose Western companies like Nokia and Ericsson to help build the network. In one way, it can be argued that this constituted a “partial decoupling” from China after this turning point in 2014³⁰³. These policies, however, have been argued to follow a Vietnamese boundary often referred to as “bamboo” diplomacy or “the policy of the four no`s³⁰⁴, meaning that despite Vietnamese reproachment and diversification, stress that they will enter no military alliances like, for instance, the Philippines, no apparent alliance with one party over another party, no foreign basing of the military in any form on Vietnamese soil, and no use of force³⁰⁵. This principle is viewed in the country`s behavior in general and specifically in using different mechanisms to resolve SCS conflicts.

5.2.4 2013-2023: Strengthening ties with the United States

In the period 2017-2023, the Vietnamese undertook certain changes to their responses. This sub-section will detail these developments that include moving more towards a soft-balancing strategy towards China. Some examples of this will include the rapprochement with the US, increasing security assistance. This build on a development which began in 2013 with the comprehensive partnership and strengthening of bilateral relations.

In 2017, the Chinese fleet continued influencing and disrupting Vietnamese economic operations. In 2017, Hanoi had to scrap a contract granted to private entrepreneurs for hydrocarbon drilling within its own EEZ due to Chinese vessels interrupting and jeopardizing the operation. This, combined with the continuing island-building by China, led the CPV Polit bureau to green-light a plan to elevate the American relationship even further in 2018 to one of a comprehensive strategic partnership, which was announced as completed in 2023³⁰⁶³⁰⁷. The statement released by the White House is vague in describing the defensive commitments and the potential security implications. One relevant passage exemplifies this by stating: “The US is committed to continuing to assist Vietnam in developing its self-reliant defense capabilities in accordance with the needs of Vietnam.”³⁰⁸ This statement also stressed the party's strong support for peaceful resolutions of conflict, freedom of navigation, and the UNCLOS's role in resolving disputes in the South China Sea³⁰⁹. This formulation is arguably not explicitly directed at any party or specific Vietnamese sovereignty challenges. It is formulated in the generalized sense of China`s behavior because Vietnam wishes to balance its relations carefully. Regardless, they have accepted what is referred to as “security assistance, from the US State Department. In this, I see attempts to veil and not accept direct assistance because the Chinese side can view it as a provocative move. For instance, firearms and maritime capabilities have been exchanged to " support maritime security and domain awareness, capacity building efforts”³¹⁰. This has included the export of defense articles worth, in total worth 29.8 million USD in the realms

³⁰² Vuvang 2022: 31-32

³⁰³ Ibid 2022: 32

³⁰⁴ Vietnam Ministry of National Defense 2019: 20-25

³⁰⁵ Ibid 2022: 35

³⁰⁶ Vuvang 2022: 33-34

³⁰⁷ The White House 2023

³⁰⁸ Ibid 2023

³⁰⁹ Ibid 2023

³¹⁰ US State Department 2023

of electronics, firearms, and fire-control articles. One thing I argue is relevant here in line with the tendency of soft balancing is that these articles have been exported under a policy referred to as "Direct Commercial Sales" or DCS³¹¹. This is something defined by the US Department of Defense as "a sale of defense articles or services, made under a Department of State issued a license by U.S. industry, directly to a foreign buyer, and which is not administered by the Department of Defense through a foreign military defense sales procedure³¹². From the outset it can indicate that they wish to deter China more by self-armament, but not so that it appears as a provocation towards China.

This I argue is very in line with the trend of Vietnamese-China policy, which is cautious, and does not respond in a way that could risk the Chinese partnership. From these decisions, it can be understood that Vietnam desires support along the lines of an ally of the United States, but in a careful manner so as not to endanger the Chinese relationship. To what extent DCS sales are standard in such cases is unclear and warrants further research. However, it can be argued that the direct lack of department involvement constitutes a way to authorize these from the state level, while still avoiding allegations of dealing too directly with the US. It can be argued that it is another part of the cooperation and struggle umbrella for Vietnamese dealings with China.

This, however, follows a common trend in Vietnamese diplomacy, which is carefully centered around hedging and not getting too close to one party. This is also why, in later years, the Chinese and Vietnamese leadership have significantly cooperated and had more extensive diplomatic dialogue and connections, unlike the Philippines. In 2019, the policy of bamboo diplomacy, otherwise known as the "four no`s." with no direct association with foreign militaries, or uses of force, was slightly adjusted.³¹³ In the 2019 Vietnamese whitepaper on defense, passages quoting the changing geopolitical reality of the region and China`s increasing activity, with the reference stating: "Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries,"³¹⁴ followed by strict adherence to international law and mutual benefit. I argue that this signals a change in mentality, which could help explain the closer ties with the US, and an increasing will to be more assertive in their balancing.

5.2.5 2020-2024: Returning to China?

Despite the increasing emphasis on the US, the Vietnamese did not completely change their approach. In 2023 there is documentation that, Vietnam has continued to nurture its relationship with the PRC despite these developments. As late as 2023, despite all these developments, the leaders of the PRC, Xi Jinping, and CPV leader Truong, have reaffirmed a priority for good relations between the states. After the announcement of the Partnership, a high-level visit was conducted in Hanoi between Xi and CPV Secretary Nguyen Phu Truong. In late 2023, the two states signed and released a joint statement with a few themes; one was the elevation of the already existing partnership and a desire for the future to create a "community of shared future."³¹⁵ This statement included numerous agreements, some of

³¹¹ US State Department 2023

³¹² US Department of Defense 2023

³¹³ Zeberlein 2016: 1

³¹⁴ Vietnam Ministry of National Defense: 1-2

³¹⁵ State Council of the PR. Of China 2023

the relevance including “deepening mutual trust on security matters,”³¹⁶ They reference the SCS in the following ways: “The sides shall actively discuss and carry out more maritime cooperation projects and turn challenges posed by maritime issues into opportunities of cooperation.”³¹⁷ This tendency again underscores the trend of cooperation and struggle, where Vietnam delicately balances and prevents the tense clashes with China from escalating to force levels without antagonizing the PRC. Some would argue that Vietnamese diplomacy and policies resulting from the SCS tensions always view China as the more critical party. Thus, this differs from the Filipinos' view³¹⁸.

This, I argue, makes the term cooperation while struggle highly relevant. Vietnam has not pursued the strategy of publicizing and taking more decisive multilateral action to challenge the Chinese. Still, it has instead carefully approached the matter without decoupling and creating too much of a rift with the PRC. This can be understood given their geographic proximity, ideological similarities, and extensive economic and political ties.³¹⁹ This development makes sense given the tensivity of the dispute and the considerable significance of diversification in the doctrines guiding Vietnamese foreign policy. Thus, all these efforts resemble the traditional balance of the Philippines but are done to a much lesser degree and with much more emphasis on not endangering their political relationship with China. It can thus be argued that the trend of cooperative struggle is highly relevant as a description of the Vietnamese approach. Therefore, In the next chapter, I will explore how this reflects the understanding the state`s self-understanding and its priorities in the dispute based of history, and cultural traditions.

5.2.6: Rhetorical Analysis

Unlike Philippine leadership, statements from Vietnamese leaders have usually kept a more cool and neutral tone when addressing the clashes and standoffs in the dispute, compared to the Philippines. In addition, I find fewer direct statements from leaders than in the Philippine case indicating that in line with the findings that Vietnam does not wish to escalate the issue. In the aftermath of the first cable-cutting incident in 2011, the only rhetorical statement stressed a kind reminder to China “to let its citizens know the waters belong to Vietnam in order to prevent further incidents”³²⁰. In 2014, after the tense standoff relating to the oilrig being placed inside Vietnamese waters, the statements were more assertive, but did not reach the same level of assertiveness as with the Philippine leaders.

One example of this is that after the incident, the foreign ministry of foreign affairs released a press-statement: “All foreign activities in Vietnam`s seas without Vietnam`s permission is illegal and invalid, Vietnam resolutely protests them”³²¹. This is relevant compared to the Philippine leaders which use much bolder and powerful threat-images when addressing these standoffs. In 2015, general secretary of the CPV Nguyen Phu Trong was quoted in his statements at a meeting between him, and PRC president Xi Jinping, where he stated

³¹⁶ State Council of the PR of China 2023

³¹⁷ Ibid 2023

³¹⁸ Zeberlein 2023

³¹⁹ Ibid 2023:2-3

³²⁰ Radio Free Asia 2012

³²¹ France24 2014

wishes that China does not “not militarize the South China Sea, and to ensure that dispute do not damage the cultural, ideological, and economic ties between them”, in addition to wishing to realize more negotiation mechanisms, and solutions that both sides are ready to accept”³²²Further on, in 2016 prime-minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc went on record underlining the peaceful approach, by stating “Vietnam does not pursue a military buildup in the South China Sea, Vietnam pursues protecting our sovereignty, firstly with peaceful measures, diplomatic measures and even justice measures”, in addition he stressed that “Vietnam is a country that loves peace, and Vietnam resolves international and regional issues based on international laws in the spirit of not fusing force, and not using force to threaten each other”³²³. The latter is also mirrored in a statement quoted by Reuters after the so-called arbitration ruling in 2016 which was “welcomed”, and that “Vietnam supports the resolution of disputes in the South China Sea by peaceful means, including diplomatic and legal processes, and refraining from the use of force or threats in accordance with international law”³²⁴.

This trend also mirrored itself in recent years, where in 2021, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang at a press conference following an incursion by Chinese ships into the EEZ Of Vietnam. Here she reiterates a stance that “China must end its violation of Vietnam`s sovereignty in the East Sea”, and that “China must respect Vietnam`s sovereignty, implement the UNCLOS with goodwill and comply with other agreed upon measures”³²⁵. In 2022, the same foreign ministry spokeswoman was quoted at a press conference stating that “Vietnam requests China to respect, and to not violate Vietnam`s Exclusive Economic Zone, and continental shelf, and to not take actions to complicate the situation”³²⁶Finally, one statement regarding the dispute at the end of the high-level summit between the two states in 2023 is interesting, as the parties expressed a wish to: “The two sides should well control disagreements and properly handle issues at sea in the spirit of friendship, mutual respect, and in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).”³²⁷

This is all very interesting, as it underlines the continuous process of attempting to engage and sustain a close relationship with China despite the challenges. All notions of threats are addressed, but not in the dangerous and rhetorically loaded manner that characterizes Philippine leaders, meaning that the literature findings of the importance attached to China hold robust. All in all, the sentiment from these key statements appears to be explicit, but more leaning towards the constructive and positive side, meaning that it is a different form of securitization than in the case of the Philippines.

I would say these statements assert danger by explicitly referring to respect and prevention of violations regarding Vietnamese sovereignty. However, they are done in a relatively professional manner and not with the same loaded rhetoric as from Philippine leaders.

³²² Boudreau 2015

³²³ Gady 2016

³²⁴ Reuters 2023b

³²⁵ Communist Party of Vietnam Newspaper 2021

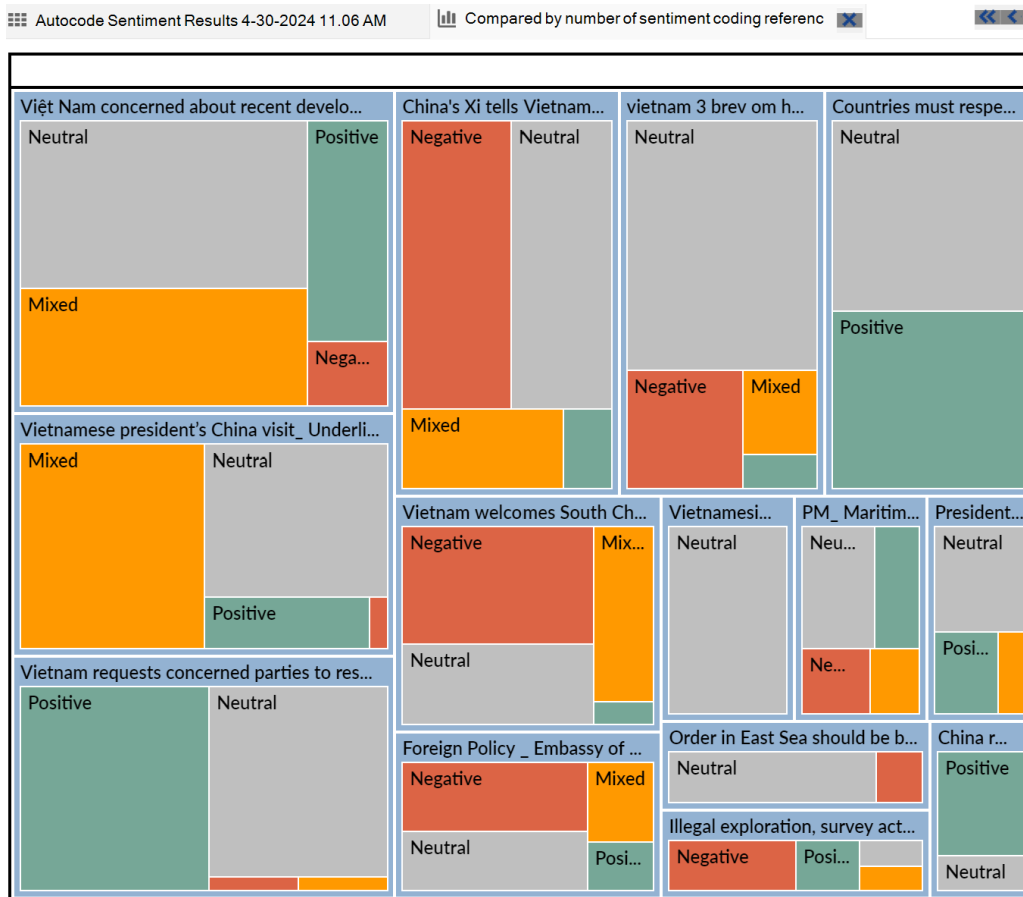
³²⁶ Communist Party of Vietnam Newspaper 2022

³²⁷ Vietnam Law & Legal Forum 2023

5.2.7 NVIVO Analysis

I also attempted, as with the Philippines, to examine this trend by sentiment-coding 14 text sources from officials in Vietnam, the majority are top leaders quoted in newspapers, and the majority are articles from the official gazette of the Vietnamese Communist Party. These contain various statements related to Vietnamese attitudes to the dispute, and their goals. In the analysis of Philippine leadership, I found a significant emphasis on negative, mixed, and neutral rhetoric, which underlines the trend of more stringent assertiveness in leadership. In the next sub-section, I will do the same to evaluate the Vietnamese.

Figure 17: NVIVO Sentiment Analysis of Vietnamese Rhetoric



Source: Compilation of Author`s own coding-work in NVIVO

As demonstrated in the Vietnamese statements regarding the disputes and rhetoric, there is a s larger degree of positive sentiment in the language utilized and more neutral language than in the Philippine case. This illustrates that the trend of cooperation and struggle holds robust. As with the Philippine statements, this is done by citing Vietnamese leaders stating things related to China, the dispute, and their views on appropriate action³²⁸. All in all, I

³²⁸ Thayer 2016. 1-6

argue this demonstrates that the Vietnamese are more cautious than the Philippines in their rhetoric, illustrating the difference. This, I argue, falls in line with trends proven by Dar and Thayer of cooperation and struggling simultaneously³²⁹³³⁰.

5.2.8 Summary

All in all, it can be argued that the Vietnamese are spearheading a more soft and delicate balancing response towards China³³¹. They are countering the threat to a calculated degree such as to not provoke or endanger their relationship to China, they are cautious in approaching other states for involvement, and frequently stresses constructive and cooperative language in their remarks about various elements of the dispute and general policy. In the next sub-chapter, I will analyze and attempt to make sense of this from a constructivist perspective.

5.3 Understanding the Vietnamese Approach: Analysis.

To understand how the Vietnamese response to the dispute reflects national characteristics, I will first begin by explaining two relevant lines of argumentation. Firstly, I will present and discuss experiences of economic and political struggle in the post-soviet world, other historical factors, followed by relevant cultural factors. This sub-chapter will form an understanding of how the Vietnamese understand themselves, and how this interacts in shaping their approaches to China in the SCS. A case can be made that the memories of struggle in a reunified state, and cultural elements from Confucian belief is relevant in shaping a reality where careful balancing through cooperation is the rational path to dealing with China.

Vietnam, officially known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), is a one-party communist state along the South China Sea. After the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975, the country was unified and attempted to pursue a classic socialist economic development path.³³²The war was a consequence of the country`s experience of colonialism and a struggle to be independent, and this makes for an argument that their independence process was harsher than the Philippines. Their strategy in the SCS disputes is often called "cooperation and struggle," meaning attempting to safeguard one`s interests while not risking injuries to political relationships.³³³ Vietnam`s policy in the South China Sea has been primarily focused on struggling against challenges to sovereignty where possible and cooperating with the Chinese on other occasions.³³⁴ At first glance, this approach may seem paradoxical: cooperating with a party challenging their sovereignty. However, considering the state's history and cultural context, I argue this strategy becomes more understandable.

³²⁹ Thayer 2016: 1-10

³³⁰ Dar 2023:1-5

³³¹ Selvarajah & Meyer 2020: 4

³³² Ho 2020: 1-2

³³³ Thayer 2016:1

³³⁴ Ibid 2016: 5-7

5.3.1 Experiences of Statehood: 1970-early 2000`s

Vietnam had a turbulent time in the latter part of the 1900`s, the country experienced several wars, and political disagreements with its neighbors. Vietnam was up until 1954 a fully French-colony, after an independence uprising around this time the country was divided with a communist north-government led by Ho Chi Minh, modelled, and supported by China and the Soviet Union. The remaining south-Vietnamese state maintained close relations with the US and the west, under a capitalist-style system. Eventually war broke out due to increasing tensions, and the United States was heavily involved in on the South-Vietnamese side, for this reason the war is referred to as the "American war" in Vietnam³³⁵. The war lasted until 1975 when the country was unified under the north-Vietnamese state and its communist style of government³³⁶. One consequence of this was severely strained relations with the US until 1995, when these were normalized, and in the early 2010`s Obama`s presidency in the US led a campaign to strengthen relations³³⁷.

After unification, the country also experienced wars with neighboring Cambodia and China, causing the relationship to China to sour. Moving into the 1980s, the communist model of centralized planning and subsidization failed to sustain the required economic development to help the state grow. As a result, the country had to diversify its economic and foreign policy thinking. Some key elements of this were a departure from a traditional worldview divided into two camps, communism and capitalism, and a more pragmatic approach to foreign relations, and experimentation with economic policy.

Examples include granting more considerable autonomy to production enterprises financially and allowing for sales activity outside the distribution systems of the state³³⁸. After a short period of capitalist reform, early in the 1980s, the party congress passed resolutions, ruling that the correct step was to return to socialist orthodoxy. This, however, was short-lived due the changes causing rapid increases in inflation, peaking at 774% in 1986³³⁹. This sparked a new reform debate and resulted in something referred to as the Doi Moi doctrine of 1986³⁴⁰. As a result, it took the name "Doi-Moi," meaning ``renovation``³⁴¹. This resolution marked an agreement within the party that the state needed to change its economic and political practices for good. Some critical changes following this agreement included transitions to a socialist-oriented market economy, increased international integration, and investments in upgrading infrastructure and production³⁴²³⁴³. This idea resulted from exploration, experimentation, and ideological debate regarding economic and political structure. I argue that this doctrine is one of the vital national ideas in shaping the Vietnamese approach to disputes. Primarily passed by the party congress of 1986 and reiterated at later congresses. Initially, for domestic economic purposes. However, it quickly

³³⁵ Spector 2024

³³⁶ Ibid 2024

³³⁷ Ibid 2024

³³⁸ Ho 2020: 3-4

³³⁹ Ho 2020: 4

³⁴⁰ Ibid 2020: 2-4

³⁴¹ Vuvang 2022:1-10

³⁴² Chapman 2017: 3-5

³⁴³ Vuvang 2022: 3-7

developed to encompass a change in how the Vietnamese state relates to its external environment³⁴⁴. Given the ideological composition of the Vietnamese state, it is also relevant to assume more continuity and relevance from such doctrines, given that you would not see the type of presidential influence or government change found in the Philippines or other democracies³⁴⁵.

5.3.2 Economic and Political Change

The era of doi-moi, as it was adopted by the sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in 1986 was thus a fact. The resolution was decided as a "grand cause"³⁴⁶ for the party moving forward in developing the state and the economy. This is essentially the development the state followed internally but with a nonlinear trajectory.³⁴⁷ This facilitated a change from the classic orthodoxy of Marxist-Leninist one-party economic and political practice, which coincides with weakening economic and political power of the USSR, Vietnam's biggest political ally following 1980³⁴⁸³⁴⁹.

This, at first, took the shape of modernization and industrialization through economic integration in the international community, the gradual implementation and development of Free Trade Agreements or FTAs. This was, however, done with a great degree of reluctance and internal political disagreement, given that parts of the party thought it to be contradictory given the founding political principles of Vietnam. Given the normalization and increase in economic connectedness and cooperation from the 1990's, sustaining the relationship with China can be argued critical in the spirit of renovation and doi-moi. Thus, these changes can be argued to have constituted a departure from orthodox socialism to a model with capitalist influences³⁵⁰³⁵¹.

In addition to this, doi-moi took the meaning of changes to the state's foreign policy. At the Sixth Party Congress, the Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) adopted Resolution 13. This document was a decree that established a more pragmatic dogma for the Vietnamese state's foreign relations. This was named a "multidirectional" foreign policy and emphasized diversification and mutually beneficial relations in the approach to the world³⁵²³⁵³. This ruling emphasized prioritizing economic development and safeguarding national interests in these relations, meaning that all political relations are to be pursued if they provide material benefits. This is also mirrored today in the official documents underlining the values of Vietnamese foreign policy, and in my view the approach to China.

Something significant about Resolution 13 is that it marked a departure from what can be called a Cold War-influenced view of the world, divided into two camps with capitalism vs socialism. Thus, the orders for social Subsequently, this led to a policy where the aims were

³⁴⁴ Vuvang 2022: 10-30

³⁴⁵ Rabena 2018: 3

³⁴⁶ Vuvang 2022: 4

³⁴⁷ Ibid 2022: 4

³⁴⁸ Guan 1998: 2-3

³⁴⁹ Ibid 1998: 1-6

³⁵⁰ Thayer 2016: 4-7

³⁵¹ Vuvang 2022: 4-8

³⁵² Thayer2016: 6

³⁵³ Vuvang 2022: 4

greater integration and modernization through closer ties with China and the United States-led international economic organizations³⁵⁴. Despite some internal disagreement, this view can be said to have won the debate in the Vietnamese State. Further on, at the seventh party congress in 1991, the multidirectional policy and doi-moi principle were reaffirmed. A vital element of this congress was a further solidification of the righteousness of the trajectory³⁵⁵. This can be also understood considering the normalization of relations and increasing economic dependence on China³⁵⁶.

5.3.3 Following the Doi-Moi

In the following years, these changes resulted in new developments in foreign policy. Some include a heavy increase in diplomatic relations, from 23 countries in 1985, to 163 other countries by 1995. Following the desired outcome of international integration, Vietnam also joined the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998, followed by an application for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001³⁵⁷. It later joined the organization in 2007³⁵⁸. These measures, along with the focus of the doi-moi on renovation, industrialization, and improvement, have subsequently led to Vietnam averaging an economic growth of around 6% in the last decades and significant improvement in living standards. The effect of this economic integration into the world was thus so crucial that at the later party congresses of 2001, the issue of multidirectional foreign policy was again lifted in importance. In a passage quoted in Chapman 2017, the party decided to reaffirm its commitment to international integration and renovation by placing greater emphasis on the "proactive integration into the international and regional economies is done to maximize the country's strength, autonomy, raising international cooperation, and to safeguard national interests³⁵⁹. In 2003, the party also passed Resolution 8, which changed the party's stated views on foreign relations regarding the identification of foes and enemies. Vuvang points out that a traditional norm of the party had been to view the world in two camps, considering the Cold War, a socialist one led by the USSR and a capitalist one led by the USA³⁶⁰. This sort of dichotomous thinking is called "friends vs foes," which describes how the party often was fractured over to what extent these integrative matters would be pursued to expand cooperation beyond basic trade agreements³⁶¹³⁶². It can be said that this approach was silenced with Resolution 8, which acknowledged that in a political relationship of the country, there could be "areas of cooperation and conflict simultaneously."³⁶³. This allowed for certain flexibility, like cooperating more closely with partners that did not necessarily have the similarities desired ideologically³⁶⁴. Placing this in the context of the SCS, means that it can be understood as a careful balancing act, where Vietnam places

³⁵⁴ Thayer 2016: 5-6

³⁵⁵ Ibid 2016: 6

³⁵⁶ Guan 1998: 2-3

³⁵⁷ Chapman 2017: 2

³⁵⁸ WTO 2024

³⁵⁹ Chapman 2017: 4-5

³⁶⁰ Vuvang 2022: 8

³⁶¹ Chapman 2017: 4

³⁶² Ibid2017: 4

³⁶³ Ibid 2017: 5

³⁶⁴ Chapman 2017: 4-5

itself close enough to China to not risk the benefits of the relationship, and not so far away as to risk further provocation. Vietnam thus changed its foreign policy doctrine to emphasize pragmatism and something more akin to hedging, attempting to always be on good terms with all states. This is reiterated in passages like in defense manifestos prioritizing peaceful beneficial cooperation³⁶⁵.

5.3.4 Significance Towards the SCS

The relevance of these developments is significant considering the SCS-dispute given that the state's relationship with political partners became more independent of ideology and solely based on pragmatic concerns of benefit, which is essential to the state. To summarize, I argue it entails a state of consciousness where the state cannot afford not to cooperate in the face of economic benefit. Simultaneously, they are cautious of being overly dependent on one party. Thus, it can be understood that this is a learned response from failures of previous economic doctrines and from a changing structure of the international system where power shifted in favor of an order based on free trade, international integration, and multilateralism.³⁶⁶ Vietnam has prioritized the latter, and because of this and the other doi-moi aspects of policy, it has achieved significant growth and a rise in living standards almost comparable to China.³⁶⁷ I argue that this constitutes an example of Wendt's passage, which states that "states often adopt the behavior of those they deem successful."³⁶⁸ In this case, Vietnam has observed what does not produce an excellent economic livelihood and societal welfare and adopted this strategy to ensure the state's prosperity. In conclusion, Vietnam's response to the disputes reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, economic considerations, and cultural influences. Despite the challenge posed by China, Vietnam prioritizes maintaining a cooperative relationship alongside economic growth. My argument is that this is also influenced by certain elements of Vietnamese culture, which I will discuss more in section 5.3.4 and onwards.

5.3.5 Ideological and Cultural Backdrop

In light with the developments in Vietnamese foreign policy following the doi-moi, I argue there are references to this thinking in state documents based on the experience of economic trouble. I argue this development interacts in shaping policy toward the SCS, alongside elements of Vietnam's Confucian cultural heritage. Vietnam's culture is predominantly based on Confucianism, and thus I argue by exploring key tenets of this teaching, one can understand Vietnam's cooperative struggle response better.

In Vietnam, Confucian thought was first argued to have been introduced around 0- 200 AD by Chinese occupation.³⁶⁹ This means there have always been elements of it in Vietnam, but this was solidified after the war with President Ho Chi Minh. The literature argues he influenced the revolutionary movement's ideological composition, and modern-day Vietnamese state, with a mix of Confucian thought and local traditions. Minh can be argued to have influenced the modern-day Vietnamese state with a mix of Confucian thought and

³⁶⁵ Vietnam Ministry of National Defense 2019: 1-10

³⁶⁷ Thayer 2016:6-8

³⁶⁸ Wendt 1999: 186

³⁶⁹ Selvarajah & Meyer 2020:1-2

local traditions, given his roots and a strict upbringing in the system. Some of these focuses include a strong focus on education, unity and social harmony which are tenets of Confucian thought³⁷⁰. Under these tenets, I argue some traces of

5.3.6 Origins of Confucian Thought in Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh`s Role

Ho Chi Minh`s thought and the political outcomes of the independence struggle are believed to be influenced by Confucianist and Taoist principles, albeit in a distinct Vietnamese fashion.³⁷¹ Confucian thought has a crucial principle often referenced here and in Vietnam, that is structuring the state to establish a "social order."³⁷² This principle is based on championing specific morals and values related to personal characteristics. Establishing a state is thus argued to be a way to motivate society to build a way of life that "respects people, the people, and the rest of peoples."³⁷³ In addition, this would include a firmer societal practice of hierarchy based on societal conformity and societal emphasis on virtue through acting respectable and with dignity. In leadership, this can be argued to create a norm of striving to be what is referred to as "a benevolent leader," meaning to follow the path of least resistance in organizational development, or consensus-building, and facilitating this to serve as an example.³⁷⁴³⁷⁵ In practice, traces of this in-state structure will strongly emphasize ideals of harmony, and consensus in decision-making and relationships. These trends are all relevant to an extent in Vietnam.³⁷⁶ This state`s political administration had traces of Confucianist thought but was distinct from that of the Chinese forms³⁷⁷³⁷⁸³⁷⁹.

One can thus argue, given the documented emphasis of Confucianism in Ho Chi Minh`s thought and the modern state, that some elements of it have interacted in shaping modern Vietnamese society. I will elaborate on how this is shown in Vietnamese policy statuettes in section 5.3.6.

5.3.7 Practical Examples in Vietnam

In Vietnamese society these traces can be found. One example is in its attitudes toward individualism, where in traditional culture it`s often emphasized that individuals are born as family members and have a natural connection to society in one way always emphasizing the surrounding relations and societies as important to ensure stability and treat with dignity. This includes an emphasis on striving for harmony and consensus regarding decisions affecting relations and society³⁸⁰. This is exemplified through villages often having consensus mechanisms to help ensure societal order through consensus about any new decisions. Finally, Gillespie and Nicholson argue that this one of the reasons why

³⁷⁰ Tram & Huy 2021: 4-5

³⁷¹ Sen & Tho 2020: 1-6

³⁷² Tram & Huy 2021: 3-4

³⁷³ Selvarajah & Meyer 2020: 3

³⁷⁴ Ibid 2020: 3-6

³⁷⁵ Selvarajah & Meyer 2020: 8

³⁷⁶ Hieu 2015: 6

³⁷⁷ Sen & Tho 2020: 1-2

³⁷⁸ Bui Ngoc 2010: 3

³⁷⁹ Selvarajah & Meyer 2020: 3-8

³⁸⁰ Gillespie & Nicholson 2005: 76-80

Vietnamese politics has seen fewer personal power struggles and weaker personality cults than socialist peers in China and North Korea.³⁸¹

One thing this has produced which I argue has relevance, is the face-saving relationship aspect, which is common in Vietnamese society. The emphasis on community over individualism and virtue and stable leadership is claimed to have contributed to a strong cultural focus on appearing trustworthy and, in one way, benevolent in one's life so as not to risk losing a reputation and being viewed with distrust³⁸². Vietnam struggling while also attempting to cooperate with a partner despite the antagonism, provide, in my view, an example of cultural influence from societal values being externalized in the formation of foreign affairs. It can be argued that it contributes to forming a consciousness of restraint and caution, as the most rational way to act given the importance placed on the relationship to China.

I also argue that traces of this cultural element can be found in principles underlined in Vietnamese defense and foreign policy. In sources published by the state, there are references to desires of ensuring "preservations of peaceful environments" and emphasis on "developing relations," following "principles of respect and non-interference," and a foreign policy line of "cooperation and development."³⁸³ This is also mirrored in their defense-policy which still reiterates the policy of the no's in regards to foreign military assistance, while also reiterating many of the same principles³⁸⁴ I thus argue that how they self-understand their place in the role seems to be significantly related to Confucian principles of dignity and stability, in addition to their experiences of struggling with economic and political sustenance in the post-soviet world. As the emphasis on harmony, saving face, and virtue seems to be relevant. Vietnam seeks to actively engage with China at every possible opportunity, not escalate any situation, and is cautious in its defensive efforts compared to the Philippines. This can be relevant to the theory, given that Wendt stresses state policies are made at the intersections of national perceptions and the dominant ideas of the political environment.³⁸⁵ The domestic concerns are thus the experiences of trouble and the wishes to never experience this, combined with strong influence from local culture. It can also be discussed that this response is due to their historical experiences with American invasion, as the partnership in the early 2010's came after American concessions being made.

5.3.8 Summary

It appears that the cultural influences in Vietnam related to ensuring consensus, harmony have interacted in shaping a cautious foreign policy, based of material and cultural concerns. A proposition to explain their response is thus. Vietnam acts cooperative towards China to ensure its own economic longevity, and due to cultural values influencing appropriate courses of actions. The doi-moi doctrine and its resulting effects is argued to have great effects on Vietnamese foreign affairs, and I see traces of this in the approach to China also as it highlights the core of the doctrine.

³⁸¹ Gillespie & Nicholson 2005: 80

³⁸² Ibid 2005: 76-83

³⁸³ Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2024

³⁸⁴ Vietnam National Defense Manifesto 2019: 1-9

³⁸⁵ Wendt 1999: 120

6 Discussion

This section will present the findings in sections leading up to this and discuss to what extent they differ and why this can be said to be the case, in line with Research Question 3. First, I will summarize the findings on each state, and afterward, I will discuss common factors to land on a proposition of why they are different. Thus far, I conclude that Vietnam is pursuing, in line with the literature findings, a more soft and cautious balancing policy that seeks to hedge both parties. The Philippines is more defiant in this way and do not place the same emphasis on its relationship with China. This means that they are both doing as they are, prioritizing the best to ensure the state's survival in its current form. Under Mills' method of agreement, it can be said that a process of agreement is the best option when one is studying different cases. The aim is to examine which factors exist to understand the production of a similar result among different cases.^{386/387388389390391}. Both have balancing policies, but they take different shapes.

6.1 The Relevant History of Vietnam and the Philippines

To begin with, in the historical background of the states, there are relevant elements that make them similar while simultaneously setting them apart. Both states have histories as colonized powers by Western states, respectively the United States in the case of the Philippines and Vietnam under France. Here, there is a critical difference in their treatment: the Philippines was granted more autonomy in domestic affairs than what can be documented in the Vietnamese case³⁹². This also culminated in differences in the independence processes. In contrast, Vietnamese independence was obtained through a series of upheaving wars and significant turmoil leading partly to the difficulties forming the reform period. Whereas, Philippine independence became more civilized, mainly because of domestic post-war pressure for liberation in the US³⁹³.

As a result, the Philippines' experience of liberation and continued support from the United States creates a different experience in regards to political affiliations.³⁹⁴ Through long-standing agreements like the Mutual Defense Treaty, they enjoy a sense of security related to increasing American interest in the region through the Indo-Pacific strategies and the Mutual Defense Treaties. The significance of U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific region ensures political security and a larger room for action, reflected in the empirical data. Despite the challenges facing Philippine democracy, its status as a democracy creates a compelling force for it to ally closer with other democratic states in the struggle against China, a stronger perception of threat, and is facilitated by these security commitments. This commitment is rooted in the strong threat perception and memories of unfreedom, and other elements emphasized in leader statements.³⁹⁵This indicates that the Philippine self-

³⁸⁶ Moses & Knutsen 2019: 100-103

³⁸⁷ Thayer 2016: 1-3

³⁸⁸ Trang 2021

³⁸⁹ Phan 2023: 1-4

³⁹⁰ Wu & Velasco 2022: 1.-5

³⁹¹ Cruz De Castro 2020: 1-2

³⁹² Thompson 2002: 19-26

³⁹³ Nadeau 2020: 86

³⁹⁴ Nadeau 2020: 86-87

³⁹⁵ Nadeau 2020: 85-88

understanding is centered on its identity as a democratic and free state and the importance of it. They promote a desire to uphold normative orders in world politics, which they view as under threat. The domestic history of instability and poor representation can also be argued to make this necessary. This arguably differs significantly from the Vietnamese case. In Wendt's culture, it can be said this constitutes a view of the world as increasingly "Hobbesian" and warrants more traditional balancing and security measures.³⁹⁶ Thus, in their case, the assertive and more direct challenging approach is the best manifestation of domestic concerns, ideas, and international realities.

Meanwhile, Vietnam there is documentation of turmoil and economic disruption following independence and reunification, creating a different experience³⁹⁷. The collapse of the Cold War order and changing international dynamics can be argued to have forced the state to reorient its ideological constraints in foreign relations and economic policy. There is a documented trend of communist regimes having difficult times simultaneously in this period. For Vietnam, given its close ties during this period to the USSR this can be argued relevant³⁹⁸. This trend can be said to exist in the cases of similar states like the Democratic People's Republic of Korea/North Korea (DPRK), which suffered increasing political isolation and economic challenges after the dissolution³⁹⁹. The changing world political situation and the recurring issues for Vietnam forced a solid reorientation to be more ideologically pragmatic in its relations with other states and prioritize economic and political benefits above all else. The result has also been good with increasing GDP and living standards⁴⁰⁰. The Confucianist culture with elements of virtue, and harmony can also be argued interacts in making their conciliatory approach the best mix of domestic concerns, ideas, and international realities.

Summarizing, Vietnam can be said to have had a more troubled and politically unstable past than the Philippines in this regard. Given that economic relations with China are essential for political cooperation, the state cannot risk decoupling over the dispute. Summarizing, this means that in Wendt's theory, this constitutes a self-understanding of high risks associated with de-coupling, influenced by an understanding of serious situations that previously harmed the country's economic and political well-being by having a different orientation. In the framework of cultures of anarchy, it can be understood that Vietnam also views the world more in the "Kantian" frame of Wendt's thought.⁴⁰¹ a Place where diplomacy and peaceful solutions are the only acceptable mechanisms, given the significant dependence attributed to China and a lack of perceived options⁴⁰². It can be argued that it is also due to the historically troubling relationship posed towards the United States, despite its rapprochement, that it is necessary to balance both sides carefully. This is mirrored in Vietnam's continuous emphasis on bilateral dialogue with China and its careful considerations in ensuring its viability. Vietnam is careful in addressing disputes, and it often courts China. Alongside this, they have also supported efforts in ASEAN for a binding

³⁹⁶ Wendt 1999: 233-240

³⁹⁷ Chapman 2017: 1-10

³⁹⁸ Vuvang 2022: 1-30

³⁹⁹ Lankov 2007: 186-190

⁴⁰⁰ Chapman 2017: 3-9

⁴⁰¹ Wendt 1999: 237-240

⁴⁰² Ibid 1999: 230-240

code of conduct, and routinely championed constructive problem-solving to the mechanisms⁴⁰³.

6.2 Comparative Conclusions

That explains the differences in approach, which can be said to stem from these experiences from the constructivist lens. Vietnam has a different memory of the effects of a more one-sided foreign orientation, mainly negative. Vietnam also lacks the long-term security commitments provided to the Philippines by the MDT. Thus, the differences, I argue, stem from a common factor of survival-mentality in the policies. It can also be argued that in Buzan and colleagues' framework, the Philippines view the South China Sea sovereignty as more of an existing threat to the Philippines than to Vietnam. This threat includes ones to democratic practice and international orders. I argue Vietnam's perspective is also based on a survival mindset, but more so that the dispute cannot afford to jeopardize the relationship with China, and this is done with an emphasis on their own survival.

My arguments for stating this are the following. In common, they both have issues with China's considerable material power and economic importance compared to them, and their opposition to China's claims. This, alongside both having memories of independence and other political woes. These are the most relevant similarities alongside their disapproval of China's claims and opposition to their incursions. This means both states are similar in that both have gained independence recently and have had difficulties afterward in ensuring economic longevity and societal stability. This results in the Doi-Moi doctrines and democratic woe, which appear to interact significantly in shaping state responses to the perceived importance of political partnerships and the appropriate approach to conflict. These actions can be argued to stem from a stronger sense of vulnerability impacting priorities in political relationships to different degrees. Both parties mainly prioritize one side in this case. I argue the common factor here is what I define as a survival-mindset, based in the vulnerability experienced in recent history.

In this case, Vietnam operates its approach in the SCS with a strong survival mindset, given its previous woes. It can be argued is shaping a policy understanding that no beneficial political partnerships can be discarded despite the circumstances, and this is to be sustained regardless of the trouble China causes. Vietnam also has a culture that significantly emphasizes peaceful interpersonal relationships and elements of maintaining social standing. I have not encountered any relevant similar factors to discuss in the Philippines.

On the other hand, the Philippines, being careful of the memory of their democratic turmoil and contemporary difficulties, view the dispute as a threat to the survival of their own democracy and system, this is based of a strong awareness of democratic woes and recent political instability. As a result, they carefully orient themselves around the interests, values, and political side of the United States to ensure the country's continued political support because this is facilitated through security agreements and consciousness of their own difficulties. This, I argue, also constitutes a survival mindset. In addition, it can be discussed that this brings benefits in security commitments, security assistance, and economic aid. I argue this can also be understood as a survival mindset, given the strong

⁴⁰³ Reuters 2023B

emphasis placed on the dangerous parts of China`s behavior and the significance of the dispute. It seems thus, that this difference in survival-mindset is differentiated from the strong Philippine security commitment from the US, which Vietnam does not have, and the Vietnamese culture is influential in making their approach different.

I name this survival mindset because it is derived from significant moments of the state`s vulnerability in material and political terms. Vietnam`s cautious balancing, is thus due to that they perceive themselves as so vulnerable in this sense that it chooses to have active reproachment policies with a party that is directly antagonistic towards them. The Philippines fall under this criterion in that they view themselves vulnerable also, despite their security agreements, but in the sense that it justifies and permits strong assertion both rhetorically, materially, and physically without the same effort to sustain good terms with China and partisanship. In this sense, the Philippines view themselves as vulnerable because they are betting more on one party for balance and protection.

To summarize, they differ because of different historical experiences, political relationships and cultural norms is my proposition. I argue they both pursue their respective balancing policies because of an emphasis on survival rooted in contemporary memories of societal instability. Both parties emphasize their survival strongly but in very different ways. Vietnam wants security through a hedging-approach with a focus on China and emphasizes solid economic prosperity. The Philippines emphasizes security through a closer alliance with the US and spearheads protection rules of law and freedom, as motivated by historical experiences of trouble. Thus, it can be argued that both states operate with a mindset of survival and a rationale where there is a strong need to act, resulting in different outcomes because of political alliances, different historical experiences, and culture.

I argue these propositions can serve as starting points for future empirical studies. One such case is studying the involvement of the US on the Philippines in more detail and exploring the cause-effects in their cooperation to a larger degree. The impacts of national ideas and political streams are an understudied topic in the case of the SCS in IR, but I argue my findings should serve as a starting point for potential research. Due to the scope and practice nature of structuring this thesis, if I were to proceed with research on this topic, I would like to dig deeper into aspects related to democratic confidence and its impact on external affairs of the Philippines given that it is also a multi-ethnic state. The topic of great-power politics in the region is also an interesting topic to study more in-depth, given the close involvements of China and the United States in the conflict.

7 Conclusion

In the case of this analysis, a constructivist analysis is relevant. As I argue, with an increasing amount of research being done on this, the academic community can gain a more extensive understanding of conflict dynamics in the region and subsequently better suited and equipped to tackle it. I argue my work contributes to an improved understanding of the region and its policy dynamics.

In line with RQ1 and 2. The proposition regarding Philippine responses to China in this dispute take the shape of a partisan, and assertive challenging approach to China. This appears to reflect a strong desire to protect themselves and threat-perception, asserted through consciousness regarding its state`s domestic problems, the values of its close partners, and facilitated by stronger cooperation with the US.

The proposition regarding Vietnamese responses in the dispute, take the shape of a cooperative struggle towards China. Meaning focusing on resisting aggression to the extent that it does not significantly impact the overall partnership with China. Meaning that the threat-perception is different. This is viewed in their cautious diplomatic approach. This appears to reflect pacifying cultural norms and a troubling experience with one-sided foreign policies. Thus, this warrants a response-oriented approach towards survival, not allowing the risk of souring the political relationship with China. This is seen through their more cautious US partnership, continuous diplomatic warming to China, and their lack of international arbitration rulings like the Philippines have done.

Both parties, I argue, have responses that reflect different understandings and priorities. However, looking together, it seems like they both operate from a survival mindset born in memories of vulnerability from political troubles. This I argue explains the differences and similarities in their approach. Precisely pinpointing the reason, the responses are different is a challenging feat. However, I argue in line with RQ3, for a proposition related to the close historical relationship between the Philippines and the U.S is one of the key variables, giving security commitments. The Vietnamese lack this historical security commitment and possess a culture that emphasizes peaceful and constructive cooperation more than what can be documented in the Philippine case. They both operate as they do from a mindset of vulnerability and survival, but this takes shape in different ways.

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APPENDIX:

To better illustrate and check validity I utilized NVIVO` s auto-coding to do a sentiment analysis. This means that the program automatically codes text files after certain criterion. NVivo sentiment coding is an automatic coding system that codes sentences, based on the sentiment of words used in them. In my case I utilized the sentence based one, meaning that the result is based on the totality of sentences and context of them. This means that the program analyzes the sentiment of the words in the sentence and makes an evaluation of if the word is positively loaded, neutral, or negatively loaded, with sentence context in consideration. Meaning that a sentence stating, "They are cutting vital and valuable resources, leaving the vulnerable and needy in even more sorry and dangerous situations", would be categorized as mixed given the use of positive and negative words such as "vital and valuable", combined with "dangerous".⁴⁰⁴ This means that I can more practically see how many types of sentences we see in each source, and make the verdict based off this.

NVivo here uses a scoring scale, which exemplified looks something like this. Meaning that words are evaluated according to this scale, and the context of the sentence they are found in. This thus gives an overview of how large portions of each data-file imported consists of positive, neutral, negative, or mixed rhetoric.



- The score for each word determines the sentiment node it is coded to.
- The score of words can change if they are preceded by a modifier (for example, *more* or *somewhat*) which intensifies the sentiment.
- Words with a score that fall within the neutral range are not coded.

Source: QSR international⁴⁰⁵

This means that a text will get a graphic display showing how large a portion of it is categorized as having negative, positive, mixed, or neutral sentiment. This is displayed visually as seen in Figures 10 and 5. The result thus is a classification of how large quantities of the sentences in each text-source that can be categorized as positive, neutral, negative, and or mixed.

Material selection:

Material selection has been made with an emphasis on newer statements and at the times In the dispute with the most activity. This means around 2014+/- 2 years, and 2021 +/- 2 years as around these periods there was documentation of increasing tensions, and developments. I argue thus that selecting around these periods holds the greatest relevance. In the case of Philippines there exists significantly more direct addresses pointed at the dispute and China, than in the case of Vietnam. With Vietnam most of my statements are fetched from the official newspaper of the communist party, as this can be said to be representative of the state`s views. Some of the sources will have some irrelevant words,

⁴⁰⁴ QSR international 2024

⁴⁰⁵ QSR international 2024

but in my view, they shall not impact the results too much as the results are largely in line with other developments in literature.

With Filipino statements I have concentrated around the same timeframe and used statements and sources that quote the presidents directly, in this case I focused on Aquino and Marcos Jr, as from my findings they seem to have the strongest and more assertive mindset. Given also that Duterte`s term consisting of appeasement had little impact on deterring further Chinese activity, it can be argued his shift mostly appeared to be rhetorical and in the diplomatic sense. This gives the findings of less positively loaded sentiment in sentences relating to them in the SCS relevance, as positive sentiments from Duterte I argue would not be very representative for actual policy.



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