

Advancing the Philippines-US Alliance for Conflict Resolution in the South China Sea: Policy Options from an Issues Approach¹

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom suggests that advancing the Philippines-US alliance is not conducive to resolving the South China Sea disputes because the United States is external to the conflict. This paper challenges that assertion and explores the range of policy options available to the Philippines and the United States that would contribute to conflict resolution in the South China Sea. The issues approach to international relations is employed to reveal the specific component issues of the South China Sea disputes and identify the direct parties involved and types of conflict resolution implied in each issue. Issue-based analysis affirms that the United States is a direct party to the issues of settling the extent to which coastal states may regulate the activities of user states and managing the risk of miscalculation associated with military operations in the South China Sea. This opens opportunities for Philippines-US cooperation on actual conflict resolution, conflict prevention, and conflict management. There is also an opportunity to cooperate on conflict transformation. The United States could support building Philippine military capabilities and its capacity to handle nonmilitary threats in the South China Sea. Together with the Philippines, the United States could also launch regional and international initiatives to combat common maritime threats in the South China Sea and beyond. Ultimately, sensitivity to the distinct legal, military, and nonmilitary issues that make up the South China Sea disputes could help Filipino and US policymakers appreciate the landscape of policy areas in which Philippines-US cooperation might make a positive difference.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom suggests that advancing an alliance with a third-party or external state amid an international conflict is not conducive to resolving that conflict. Doing so would only encourage counter-alliances and arms buildups between the conflicting states, increasing the likelihood of war. Therefore, the wisdom holds that conflicting states should avoid involving third-party allies, and conversely, third-party allies should refrain from interfering in their partners' conflicts.²

Applying this wisdom to the South China Sea disputes would mean that the Philippines should resist dragging into the fray its only ally, the United States—which is conventionally assumed to be a third party in the conflict—and the United States should resist being dragged. Advancing the Philippines-US alliance would only worsen the situation. The Philippines and the United States have only a few policy options, maybe even none, to contribute as allies to resolving the South China Sea disputes. Filipino and US policymakers should therefore concentrate on other concerns instead.

China's view of US involvement in the South China Sea disputes aligns with conventional wisdom. Indeed, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum Foreign Ministers' Meeting in August 2021: "The interference by countries outside the region has constituted the biggest threat to peace and stability in the South China Sea over recent years." He added that countries in the region should be vigilant against "abuse" of freedom of navigation by foreign military vessels in the waterway. Wang did not name any country, but his remarks unmistakably target the United States, which routinely conducts military operations in the South China Sea to assert freedom of navigation.³ In China's view, involving a third party, such as the United States, in the South China Sea disputes would only be counterproductive to conflict resolution.

Yet an analysis of the specific issues in dispute in the South China Sea reveals that the United States is not entirely external to the conflict, that it is not a total third party. Rather, the United States is properly a direct party—a disputant—on certain issues. On these issues, the United States should involve itself in the South China Sea disputes, and the Philippines should invite its ally. Even on issues on which the United States is undoubtedly a third party, advancing the Philippines-US alliance in the South China Sea disputes could still potentially improve the situation if appropriate policies are adopted.⁴

What policies, then, might the Philippines and the United States adopt as allies to help resolve the South China Sea disputes? An issue-based analysis of the South China Sea disputes reveals the disputants in the conflict and offers hints on how the disputants should go about resolving the conflict. The first hint is that resolving the conflict means dealing with the specific issues that make it up. Rather than attempt to come up with grand solutions to the South China Sea disputes, the allies should come up with targeted solutions for each specific issue in dispute. The second hint is that each issue in the South China Sea disputes implies different actions that could help resolve it.

The aim here, however, is not to offer detailed policy recommendations. Numerous works already offer well-founded proposals.⁵ Rather, the aim is to explore the range of policy options notionally available to expose the landscape of policy areas in which Philippines-US cooperation might make a positive difference. An issue-based analysis of the South China Sea disputes shows the most promise toward this aim.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the issues approach, which forms the theoretical basis for issue-based analyses of international conflicts. The framework is then deployed to illuminate the United States' standing—as a direct party or a third party—in the South China Sea disputes. The subsequent section extends the issues approach and applies it to conflict resolution. It then discusses issue-by-issue policy options for the Philippines and the United States.

Identifying Direct Parties in the South China Sea Disputes⁶

The issues approach to international relations can help clarify a state's standing in an international conflict. The issues approach builds on the insight that "different types of issue-areas elicit different sets of motives on the part of different actors in a political system."⁷ Contrary to realism, which assumes that states are always interested in amassing power, the issues approach acknowledges that a state's interests—and behavior—can vary depending on the specific issue in question. Thus, in analyzing an international conflict, one must first identify the specific issues that make up that conflict. Identifying the component issues of a conflict matters because "different system members are . . . activated in different issue-areas."⁸ The direct parties in a conflict vary depending on the specific issue in question: a state can be a direct party on one issue but a third party on another issue in the same conflict.

Therefore, to establish the United States' standing in the South China Sea disputes, one must first identify the component issues of the conflict. Disputed issues in the South China Sea may be grouped into three sets of issues: territorial and maritime jurisdiction, traditional or military security, and nontraditional or nonmilitary security.

Territorial and Maritime Jurisdiction Issues

The territorial and maritime jurisdiction issues include territorial sovereignty, maritime boundaries, and maritime rights. First, territorial sovereignty concerns the states that claim islets in the South China Sea. These islets are the Pratas Islands (claimed by China and Taiwan), the Scarborough Shoal (claimed by China, Taiwan, and the Philippines), the Spratly Islands (varying portions claimed by China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam), and the Paracel Islands (claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam). China and Taiwan also claim sovereignty over the Macclesfield Bank, but the feature is completely submerged. Under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), completely submerged features cannot be subjects of territorial sovereignty.

Second, maritime boundaries concern the same states involved in the territorial sovereignty issue (China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam) insofar as their claimed islets can generate maritime zones. Under UNCLOS, only features above water at high tide can generate maritime zones. Only a few features in the South China Sea are capable of generating maritime zones. At best, they are likely to generate only 12–nautical mile territorial seas, not 200–nautical mile exclusive economic zones (EEZs) or 350–nautical mile continental shelves.

Maritime boundaries also concern all South China Sea coastal states (China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia) insofar as their claimed maritime zones generated from their main coasts overlap with those of their neighbors. In Indonesia's case, the Indonesian EEZ and continental shelf generated from the Natuna Islands overlap with those of Malaysia and Vietnam and the dashed-line boundary claims of China and Taiwan.

In 2016, an UNCLOS arbitral tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration (Philippines v. China) ruled that China's nine-dash line boundary claim in the South China Sea is unlawful.⁹ China, as well as Taiwan, has the most expansive maritime boundary claim among the coastal states. Based mainly on "historic rights," China's and Taiwan's claimed boundaries enclose about 80 percent of the South China Sea—extending at one point nearly 1,000 nautical miles from their main coasts—and encroach on the EEZs and continental shelves of all the other coastal states.¹⁰

Third, maritime rights mainly concern the South China Sea coastal states and user states. The primary issue is the extent to which coastal states may regulate the activities of other states (so-called user states) in their maritime zones. The South China Sea user states are mostly the naval powers, whose vessels frequently transit the waterway. The United States is undeniably a user state because it regards the South China Sea as a vital sea lines of communication (SLOC) for accessing its bases and connecting with allies and partners in the western Pacific. Maritime rights are largely regulated by international law, specifically UNCLOS, and ultimately concern all states in the international community.

Traditional Security Issues

Traditional security issues in the South China Sea include territorial defense, sea control, and maritime power projection. Territorial defense concerns the same states involved in the territorial sovereignty issue, so they feel the need to fortify the islets they have occupied in the South China Sea. Similarly, sea control concerns the South China Sea coastal states, so they feel the need to increase patrols in their claimed maritime zones. On both issues, the disputants feel the need to build up their militaries, increasing insecurity and tensions, which could culminate in a violent confrontation.

China holds the largest and most advanced military outposts in the South China Sea and maintains the most persistent maritime presence among the disputants. It has reclaimed land on the islets it occupies and built airstrips and missile shelters. It has also deployed various types of government ships (navy, coast guard, survey, and maritime militia) to patrol within its claimed nine-dash line boundary.

Maritime power projection concerns the naval powers. Maritime power projection increases the risk of miscalculation between the projecting state and the target state. If managed poorly, miscalculations could spiral into a violent confrontation. In the South China Sea, the risk of miscalculation is most pronounced between the United States and China. The United States conducts freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to assert its maritime rights as a user state and challenge what it terms “excessive claims” to maritime boundaries and maritime rights of some coastal states, most notably China. China, for its part, has responded by attempting to expel US ships and aircraft from its claimed maritime zones. As these hostile interactions continue, the risk of miscalculation grows. Indeed, some states in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, have expressed concern that FONOPs may increase tensions in the South China Sea.

Nontraditional Security Issues

Nontraditional security issues in the South China Sea include maritime law enforcement, safety of navigation, maritime search and rescue, fisheries management, marine environmental protection, marine scientific research, and marine resource development. Although nontraditional security issues are nonmilitary in nature, the coastal states still compete to demonstrate effective control, increasing tensions in the South China Sea. They want to enforce their own maritime regulations and assert exclusive responsibility for combating crimes at sea and preventing and managing maritime disasters in their claimed maritime zones. They also want to assert jurisdiction for regulating fisheries, preserving the marine environment, and supervising scientific undertakings in their claimed maritime zones. Because contested areas in the South China Sea are effectively governed by different, competing national laws, these areas become places of no law and no governance, where threats such as maritime incidents; unauthorized marine surveys; illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and marine environmental deterioration can thrive.

Indeed, nontraditional maritime security threats are a growing concern among the South China Sea coastal states. Chinese vessels have collided with and have sunk Philippine and Vietnamese fishing boats. China has also been accused of undertaking unauthorized marine scientific research activities in the EEZs and continental shelves of the Southeast Asian coastal states. Most serious, China has contributed to the deterioration of coral reef ecosystems and the depletion of fish stocks in the South China Sea through land reclamation of its occupied islets and condonation of IUU fishing by Chinese fishers. Although these nontraditional security issues mainly concern the coastal states, they should also concern all countries in the international community as their impacts extend beyond the South China Sea and require regional and international coordination.

The sole exception is the issue of marine resource development, which concerns only the South China Sea coastal states—as long as exploitation is done sustainably. This issue is a potential flashpoint because of inequitable access to fishery resources and offshore oil and gas among the coastal states. China, for instance, has been subsidizing large numbers of fishers to harvest in the South China Sea, crowding out fishers from Southeast Asian countries. It has also attempted to intimidate its neighbors from exploring and exploiting hydrocarbon resources within their EEZs and continental shelves.

Policy Options for the Philippines-US Alliance¹¹

Identifying the component issues of a conflict through the issues approach matters not only to identifying the direct parties in a conflict but also to determining the types of conflict resolution best suited for each issue. Conflict resolution, which may be defined as the “practice of reduction in violence and enhancement of political processes for harmonizing interests,”¹² covers many types of actions. Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman identify four: conflict prevention, conflict management, actual conflict resolution (also known as conflict settlement), and conflict transformation.¹³ Conflict prevention “does not remove the conflict but puts a lid on its escalation”; conflict management refers to the “channeling of the conflict into political (non-violent) mechanisms”; actual conflict resolution results from a “specific decision to square the incompatibility” that produced the conflict in the first place; and conflict transformation relies on “replacing incompatibilities with ties of cooperation and interdependence.”¹⁴

Each issue in the South China Sea disputes requires a different type of conflict resolution. First, the territorial and maritime jurisdiction issues, which are largely legal disagreements that represent the root causes of the conflict, require actual conflict resolution. Second, traditional security issues require conflict prevention and conflict management. Conflict prevention would help avoid a violent confrontation between the disputants, while conflict management would help limit the spread of violence if a clash has occurred. Finally, nontraditional security issues require the disputants to coordinate their policies. Working together on issues of mutual concern can temper animosities, thus contributing to conflict transformation.

Because each issue requires a different type of conflict resolution, the Philippines and the United States should work together to help resolve the South China Sea disputes issue-by-issue.

Table 1 summarizes the framework. It shows the issues in the South China Sea disputes and the direct parties involved and types of conflict resolution best suited for each issue.

Table 1. Issue-based conflict resolution in the South China Sea

Issue	Direct parties	Type of conflict resolution
<i>Territorial and maritime jurisdiction issues</i>		
Territorial sovereignty	Brunei, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam	Actual conflict resolution
Maritime boundaries	Brunei, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia	Actual conflict resolution
Maritime rights	Coastal states, user states, all states	Actual conflict resolution
<i>Traditional security issues</i>		
Territorial defense	Brunei, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam	Conflict prevention, management
Sea control	Brunei, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia	Conflict prevention, management
Maritime power projection	Naval powers	Conflict prevention, management
<i>Nontraditional security issues</i>		
Maritime law enforcement, safety of navigation, maritime search and rescue	Coastal states, regional states, all states	Conflict transformation
Fisheries management, marine environmental protection, marine scientific research	Coastal states; interested states, international organizations	Conflict transformation
Marine resource development	Coastal states	Conflict transformation

Adapted from Edcel John A. Ibarra, "Issue-Based Cooperation on Conflict Resolution in the South China Sea: Roles for ASEAN beyond the Code of Conduct," *Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 9, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2022): table 1.

Resolving the Territorial and Maritime Jurisdiction Issues

On the territorial sovereignty issue, only the Philippines is a direct party. The United States is neutral on the question of ownership of the South China Sea islets, except maybe Scarborough Shoal, which, historical documents suggest, the United States once considered to be under Philippine sovereignty.¹⁵

Still, one option for the United States is to offer mediation, conciliation, or good offices. The United States may seem biased to its ally, the Philippines, but research suggests that states generally prefer biased interveners over supposedly impartial third-party states.¹⁶ The United States should assure the other disputants that although it remains firm to its commitment to defend the Philippines in case of an armed attack on its ally's vessels, it would prefer to avoid being dragged into a violent confrontation with any disputant and would readily support efforts to peacefully settle the territorial sovereignty issue. At the same time, the United States should assure its ally that it could broker enforceable agreements. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte had already questioned US credibility as a mediator by attributing the Philippines' "loss" of the Scarborough Shoal to the United States when it intervened in a standoff between Philippine and Chinese ships in 2012.¹⁷ The United States reportedly brokered a private agreement for both sides to withdraw their ships, but China reneged and has since gained *de facto* control of the islet.¹⁸

On the maritime boundaries issue, only the Philippines is a direct party, but the United States has explicitly aligned itself with the Philippines over the ruling in the *South China Sea Arbitration*, which the Philippines overwhelmingly won. The United States now openly rejects China's expansive nine-dash line boundary claim in the South China Sea, its claim to territorial seas over completely submerged features, and its claims to EEZs and continental shelves from unqualified islets.¹⁹ Therefore, the allies now share the same views on the maritime boundaries issue.

Capitalizing on these shared views, one option for the Philippines and the United States is to jointly promote the arbitral ruling and defend it from disinformation propagated by China. The goal would be to persuade as many countries as possible to side with the ruling, which could raise the diplomatic stakes for China for its continued noncompliance.

For the United States, in particular, offering mediation remains an option. Another option is linking the maritime boundary issue with another unrelated issue where the United States has leverage, for example, bilateral trade. Doing so could induce the Chinese government to offer or accept a settlement with the Philippines aligned with UNCLOS.

On the maritime rights issue, both the Philippines and the United States are direct parties, the former as a coastal state of the South China Sea and the latter, a user state. However, because this issue relates to upholding the rules-based order at sea, which concerns all states, the United States' other allies and partners are also direct parties that may be rightfully tapped for support.

In general, the Philippines and the United States could challenge China's self-serving interpretations of UNCLOS operationally and diplomatically with other US allies and like-minded countries. Operationally, the United States could continue conducting FONOPs in the South China Sea, and the Philippines could join those missions or conduct its own FONOPs. The Philippines and the United States could also convince other countries, especially other US allies and like-minded naval powers (e.g., Australia, Japan, South Korea, and maybe India), to join in FONOPs or conduct similar missions on their own. To assuage concerns about the risk of miscalculation in FONOPs, the allies should repeatedly

stress that the missions do not aim to project power in the South China Sea but merely to challenge unlawful maritime claims. The allies should also repeatedly stress that the missions would follow existing international rules and conventions on avoiding incidents at sea. The allies could consider using coast guard vessels instead to conduct FONOPs in the South China Sea as an alternative.

Diplomatically, the Philippines and the United States have two options. The allies could gather support from other US allies and like-minded countries to mount a coordinated diplomatic campaign to call out China's noncompliance with UNCLOS, including the ruling in the South China Sea Arbitration, in regional and international forums. Alternatively, a diplomatic campaign could aim instead to launch an international conference that includes China to review the law of the sea, especially to clarify ambiguities regarding navigational rights and freedoms. Ideally, this should happen through meaningful dialogue at the United Nations. Nonetheless, the disagreements could be settled first in a smaller forum, for example, comprising only the South China Sea coastal states and the user states. The outcome could be a joint statement or a regional agreement specifying a mutual understanding of the extent to which coastal states may regulate the activities of user states in the South China Sea. If successful, discussions at the regional level could inform future discussions at the international level.

Preventing and Managing Traditional Security Issues

On the issues of territorial defense and sea control, the Philippines is a direct party, but the United States is not. Nonetheless, one option for the United States is to help build its ally's self-defense capabilities. It could do so by supporting the Philippines' objective of attaining a minimum credible defense posture. Options include increasing cooperation to modernize Philippine military assets and enhance the country's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, providing training and capacity-building programs for Filipino military officials, and offering favorable arms sales or transfers. The United States could also increase combined naval and air exercises with the Philippines to improve interoperability. It could also repeatedly underline its commitment to come to the Philippines' aid in case of armed attacks against Philippine vessels. In general, US military assistance to the Philippines should focus away from counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief to external defense. Doing all or any of these may help deter, or at least dampen, China's military intimidation and aggressive acts short of war (so-called gray-zone challenges) in the South China Sea. Aiding the Philippines militarily should not exacerbate arms buildups in the region because the country still lags far behind its neighbors in terms of military strength.²⁰

Another option for the allies is to work on implementing the 2014 Philippines-US Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. The agreement allows the United States to pre-position its military assets and improves infrastructure in jointly agreed locations in the Philippines, but implementation has stalled under President Duterte, who has been ambivalent about the Philippines' alliance with the United States, preferring to forge closer ties with China instead.

On the issue of maritime power projection, the United States is a direct party, but the Philippines is not. Nonetheless, one option for the Philippines is to mediate or simply promote dialogue between its ally and China, especially while the Philippines enjoys relatively warm relations with China. The aim would be to ensure that encounters between their navies and air forces in the South China Sea, especially during FONOPs, do not spiral into a violent confrontation. Toward this end, the Philippines should encourage the two great powers to hold regular talks to review their implementation of existing bilateral agreements and international rules and conventions on avoiding incidents at sea. The Philippines should also urge the United States and China to enhance their bilateral crisis management mechanisms.

Transforming Nontraditional Security Issues

On most nontraditional security issues in the South China Sea, the Philippines is a direct party, and so, too, is the United States because the impacts of nonmilitary maritime threats often extend beyond the South China Sea. The Philippines and the United States could pursue two broad policy directions. First, the allies could jointly champion practical cooperative initiatives on nontraditional security issues at sea in regional and international forums. Such initiatives do not have to be specific only to the South China Sea but could also extend to larger sea areas in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. However, to maximize the benefits of conflict transformation, all disputants, including China, must be included; after all, the point of conflict transformation is to foster cooperation rather than competition among the disputants. Cooperation could occur on existing platforms that already include all the South China Sea coastal states, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum under the East Asia Summit.

Second, the United States could help its ally build sufficient capacity to address nonmilitary threats. The Philippines needs the most capacity for maritime law enforcement and maritime search and rescue. The country's coast guard fleet compares poorly with its neighbors, which affects the Philippines' capacity to apprehend IUU fishers and rescue fishing boats and commercial ships in distress. The United States could help its ally by providing assistance on maritime domain awareness, assisting in the coast guard's modernization, or training maritime law enforcement personnel.

Particularly on the issues of fisheries management, marine environmental protection, and marine scientific research, UNCLOS provides a framework for international cooperation. Article 123 obliges coastal states of semi-enclosed seas, such as the South China Sea, to coordinate policies on these issues among themselves or with other interested countries and international organizations. Three existing mechanisms covering the South China Sea may qualify as Article 123 cooperation: the Asia-Pacific Fishery Commission (APFIC), the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA), and the Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia (PEMSEA).²¹ Both the Philippines and the United States are members of APFIC, while only the Philippines is a member of COBSEA and PEMSEA.

The Philippines and the United States have three options to contribute to Article 123 cooperation in the South China Sea. First, the allies could use APFIC as a platform for promoting cooperative initiatives on fisheries management in the South China Sea. Second, although the United States is not a member of COBSEA and PEMSEA, it could still support these platforms through financial or technical assistance. Third, the allies could cooperate to launch a new initiative for joint marine scientific research surveys in the South China Sea, which could spill over into a subsequent initiative for regional marine conservation.

On the issue of marine economic development, the United States is not a direct party. Nonetheless, one option for the United States is to help its ally build capacity to sustainably develop marine resources. For example, the United States could help the Philippines improve its capacity to sustainably harvest fish by providing assistance in growing and modernizing its ally's fishing fleet. The United States could also help the Philippines build its capacity to sustainably extract offshore oil and gas resources in undisputed areas in the South China Sea. Extracting hydrocarbons from new sources in the South China Sea will be especially urgent for the Philippines as the Malampaya gas field—which supplies a large portion of the country's energy needs—nears depletion. With boosted economic capacity, the Philippines would be in a stronger position to negotiate and enter joint development agreements on fisheries or offshore oil and gas development in overlapping EEZs and continental shelves in the South China Sea.

Other Policy Options

Apart from the above issue-based policy options, another option for the Philippines and the United States is to cooperate on a cross-cutting issue: a future code of conduct in the South China Sea (COC) between ASEAN countries and China. The COC is likely to touch on the issues of maritime rights, traditional security, and nontraditional security. Although the COC is currently an ASEAN-China document, the repercussions extend beyond the grouping. China's proposed provisions, for example, would limit combined military exercises and joint marine economic partnerships with countries outside the region.²² The United States, then, should coordinate with the Philippines to ensure that the rights of user states are preserved in the final document. The allies should also come up with shared expectations for the COC and signal them to ASEAN countries and China.

On several issues, the Philippines and the United States are not alone. They could tap the network of US allies and partners in the western Pacific, such as Japan and Australia, and around the world, such as the United Kingdom. On the maritime boundaries and maritime rights issues, the Philippines and United States could enlist these countries to join a pro-compliance coalition to encourage China to abide by the arbitral ruling. On nontraditional security issues, the allies could tap these countries to help in conflict transformation by encouraging the South China Sea coastal states, including China, to join cooperative initiatives to combat common threats such as fish stock depletion and marine ecosystem deterioration. On issues where the United States could support the Philippines, it could also ask its other allies for assistance.

Taking on any of these options assumes that the Philippines-US alliance has the required capacity to do so. To improve coordination, the Philippines and the United States must strengthen inter-ally mechanisms, for instance, by institutionalizing existing bilateral dialogue mechanisms, such as the Bilateral Strategic Dialogue and two-plus-two meetings between their foreign and defense secretaries.

Conclusion

The case for US involvement in the South China Sea disputes is often couched in the language of interests. Certainly, the United States has vital interests in the South China Sea, but interests change over time. More important, the United States should be acknowledged not only as an interested party in the South China Sea disputes but as a direct party—a disputant—on certain issues as well. Indeed, an issue-based analysis of the conflict reveals that the United States is not a total third party in the conflict.

Even on issues on which the United States is undoubtedly a third party, advancing the Philippines-US alliance in the South China Sea disputes could still potentially improve the situation if appropriate policies are adopted. Rather than come up with grand solutions, the allies should focus on targeted solutions that would address each disputed issue in the South China Sea. Toward this end, this paper has explored the range of policy options notionally available to the Philippines and the United States for them to contribute as allies to resolving the South China Sea disputes.

However, the policy options identified in this paper are precisely that—options. It remains to be seen whether, in practice, Filipino and US policymakers could muster the political will needed to take on any of the options to bring about conflict resolution in the South China Sea.

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ENDNOTES

1. This article was originally written for the Pacific Forum's US-Philippines Next-Generation Leaders Initiative. It was first published in "Resilient Alliance: Moving the US-Philippines Security Relations Forward," edited by Jeffrey Ordaniel and Carl Baker, special issue, *Issues & Insights*, vol. 22, SR1 (March 2022): 38–44, <https://pacforum.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-22-sr1-resilient-alliance-moving-the-u-s-philippines-security-relations-forward>.
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13. Bercovitch, Kremenyuk, and Zartman, "Introduction," 9–10.
14. Bercovitch, Kremenyuk, and Zartman, "Introduction," 9.
15. Carpio, *South China Sea Dispute*, 203–5.
16. One reason is that biased third-party states can more credibly convey their motivations for why they are intervening in conflicts they are not a party to. In other words, supposedly impartial third-party states must prove their neutrality to the disputants, while biased third-party states do not have to. Owsiak and Frazier, "Conflict Management Efforts," 246–47.
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20. See *Asia Power Index* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2021), <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>.
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