



Recasting US Commitment in Southeast Asia

By Marvin C. Ott

The Strategic Landscape

The United States has found itself playing the role of international stabilizer and security guarantor. It is a burdensome, expensive, and often thankless activity—but a vital one in a world that perpetually teeters between civilized behavior and the law of the jungle. With finite resources and limited bandwidth, Washington is constantly required to determine which problem/threat will get priority attention. The calendar now reads 2024 and two wars—localized, but

intense and bloody, in Ukraine and Gaza—have forced themselves to the top of the immediate agenda. But, even as these conflicts consume the energies of senior officials across US security agencies, these same officials repeatedly affirm that America's most enduring and important strategic challenges lie in the Indo-Pacific. If pressed, those same officials will focus in on the Western Pacific and, most particularly, the South China Sea and Southeast Asia.



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This is remarkable in the sense that the United States has a history of strategic engagement with Europe, Russia, and Northeast Asia that is long and deep. The one major strategic encounter with Southeast Asia, the Vietnam War, turned out badly and left a bitter “never again” aftertaste. The American intervention in Vietnam was driven by the conviction that this nation had a vital interest in preventing the spread of communism into Southeast Asia (the “domino theory”). Now, sixty years later, an analogous judgment sees Southeast Asia and the South China Sea as the focal point for an already intense strategic rivalry with China, the one country in the world that is a credible peer competitor to America in the global security arena.

The [Pentagon refers to China as the “pacing challenge”](#) to the United States. There is no doubt that this threat/challenge is global and multidimensional from Djibouti to Europe to Latin America and from aircraft carriers to quantum computers to cyber to space. The Chinese economy ranks number one or number two in the world depending on the method of calculation. The Chinese [navy is already the world’s largest by number of surface combatants](#), and by a substantial margin. Navies, more than any other military service, are designed for power projection outward and over distance. President Xi Jinping’s speeches are a clarion call for a new international order, led by Beijing as a natural byproduct of the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.” In a thinly veiled swipe at Washington, [Xi calls](#) for countries to “reform global governance” and “stop others from ganging up to form exclusive groups and packaging their own preferences as global norms.”

Any country with China’s capabilities would be viewed with concern in Washington. But an increasingly wealthy, powerful, and influential China is not, by definition, a strategic threat.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with calls to reform global governance, including a diminution of American influence. Charles de Gaulle did it routinely.

In the early days of the Cold War, China’s challenge to the US-led world order was clearly threatening. Inspired by Mao’s doctrine of People’s War, communist-led guerrilla insurgencies challenged governments (colonial and post-colonial) across Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, Chinese and American armies clashed in a series of major battles on the Korean peninsula.

Communist movements soon produced two geopolitical earthquakes in Southeast Asia. In 1965, following a failed coup attempt in Jakarta by the 30 September Movement linked to the third-largest communist party in the world, Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), General (later President) Suharto seized control, established Indonesia’s New Order, and launching a wave of bloody repression. The decisive events in Indonesia culminated in a few weeks, but the other earthquake, the Vietnam War, lasted a decade. At the peak of US involvement, North Vietnam came under relentless US bombardment, while China (and the Soviet Union) provided major economic and military assistance that sustained Hanoi. By the time the last US forces withdrew from Saigon in 1975, America had been in direct or indirect conflict with China for nearly 25 years.

However, dramatic changes were coming. In 1972, Nixon and Kissinger made their history-altering visit to Beijing. In long conversations with Mao and Zhou Enlai, they sketched out the parameters of a new, less hostile US-China relationship. On New Year’s Day 1979, the United States and China exchanged formal diplomatic recognition. Mao had died over two years before. After a tumultuous three-year

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transition (“The Gang of Four”), a new paramount leader emerged in Beijing. Deng Xiaoping ruled China for nine years (1980–89) and in that time fundamentally recast China’s relationship with the outside world—including the United States and Southeast Asia. Domestically, he lifted China out of the poverty, backwardness, and instability that was Mao’s legacy. Internationally, he ended China’s self-imposed isolation and opened it to the world. In sum, he put China on a clear trajectory of prosperity and power (“rich country; strong army”).

The United States—its market, its technology, its capital investments—was critical to Deng’s drive to modernize China. In Southeast Asia, Deng wrapped up what was left of Mao’s communist insurgencies and replaced them with normal state-to-state relations. For Deng’s China, Southeast Asia was an economic partner—a nearby market, a source of investment, and an invaluable wellspring of advice from successful ethnic Chinese businessmen, most notably in Thailand and Singapore. For Southeast Asia, the change in China was as dramatic as it was welcome. Now China shared the same overriding objective as the governments in Southeast Asia—economic development and modernization. The stage was set for a range of positive-sum relationships; “we will all get rich together.” And they did.

Through the 1980s, 1990s, and the first decade of this century, the strategic landscape encompassing China and Southeast Asia was remarkably benign. For Southeast Asia, it was the best of all worlds; a globalized economy offering pathways to rapid economic growth while China, the colossus next door, wanted nothing more than mutually beneficial ties. Political leaders throughout Southeast Asia became deeply invested in the belief/hope that this halcyon era would continue indefinitely into the future.

However, among close observers of events in the South China Sea, there were reasons for doubt.

In 1946, a cartographer working for the Nationalist (Kuomintang) government in China had produced a new map showing an apparent boundary line encompassing about 80 percent of the South China Sea. He observed the rearrangement of international boundaries occurring after World War II and apparently decided that China should join the game. The resulting “U-Shaped” or “9-Dash” line was an audacious gesture. The South China Sea had never been claimed by any country. Since time immemorial, it had been, like the Caribbean or Mediterranean, an international commons accessible to all who sail the seas—and possessed by none. But, when the Nationalist government published the map in 1947, hardly anyone noticed.

When the People’s Republic took power, it adopted and republished the same map. Again, few noticed. Foreign governments did not challenge it; the PRC did not advertise it. For years, it was just there—with no impact on the activities of the myriad fishermen, merchantmen and navies that traversed the South China Sea.

There were, however, a few straws in the wind. The South China Sea is dotted with myriad small outcroppings (reefs, shoals, islets) with many grouped into two small archipelagos—the Paracels in the north and the Spratlys toward the center of the sea. When France colonized Vietnam, it claimed the Paracels as part of French Indochina. When France was forced to leave Vietnam, the newly created South Vietnamese regime, as the successor to French authority, claimed the Paracels—and established a small military outpost in the archipelago. In 1974, as the Vietnam War was nearing its climax, China [launched a surprise attack](#) on the Paracels and

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destroyed the South Vietnamese presence. This was the first tangible evidence that Beijing intended to enforce the U-Shaped line as a sovereign boundary. Amidst the other dramatic events in Vietnam at the time, virtually no one outside Vietnam took note of Beijing's actions. Hanoi, heavily dependent on Chinese security support at the time, was studiously silent.

In 1978, the Marcos administration in the Philippines laid claim to a swath of the South China Sea off the coast of Palawan Island. The Kalayaan claim was quixotic and as ahistorical as China's claim—but no matter. The sea area claimed by Manila was largely empty except for a few small atolls known to local fishermen. One January day in 1995, a Filipino fishing boat visited one of the presumably uninhabited outcrops, Mischief Reef. To the surprise of the crew, four platforms flying a Chinese flag sat atop the reef. In response to Manila's formal protests, Beijing responded that the facility was simply a life-saving station for fishermen in distress. But to Philippine observers, the structures and the armed men stationed there looked very military ([The original wooden platforms soon gave way to concrete emplacements](#)). Like other small episodes in the South China Sea, this one generated almost no international interest.

There were other signs that China's territorial ambitions in the South China Sea were real. One of them was the fact that Chinese maps showed exactly the same line encompassing the South China Sea and Taiwan. There was no doubt that the line around Taiwan was intended to denote a sovereign claim, and it had to denote the same for the South China Sea. During this same period, China was engaged in a huge national effort to modernize and upgrade its armed forces. As China's economy was growing at near double-digit rates, its defense budget

was growing even faster with the navy, air force and missile programs prioritized—with obvious implications for power projection.

During the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, none of this seemed to affect international relations in East Asia. America was preoccupied elsewhere, and Southeast Asian officials did not want to hear anything that cast doubt on the good news story of China as a benign neighbor. However, by 2009-10, China's relentless military buildup was beginning to generate uncomfortable questions in Southeast Asian capitals. What was China up to? Why so much? More important, Beijing was beginning to use its huge maritime security armada to strong-arm Southeast Asian fishermen accused of encroaching on "Chinese territory."

In 2010, the Asian Regional Forum comprising 27 countries, including all of Southeast Asia plus the United States, China and many others, convened its annual meeting of foreign ministers—this time in Hanoi. Vietnam, with US support, put the South China Sea on the agenda for the first time. It was a key moment, producing a tense confrontation between China's foreign minister and his ASEAN counterparts supported by Secretary of State Clinton. A few days later, China's Ministry of Defense issued a public statement that cut through years of obfuscation and ambiguity. China had "[indisputable sovereignty](#)" over [the South China Sea](#). That assertion was backed with "facts on the water." China's navy, coast guard and vast maritime militia regularly deployed throughout the South China Sea, including within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ's) of Southeast Asian littoral states—zones with restricted access under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In 2015, [President Xi proclaimed](#) that the South China Sea had been "China's territory since ancient times."

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As a matter of historical fact and international law, China's claim is a self-serving fantasy. That became a matter of legal record in 2016 when the International Tribunal on the South China Sea (ITLOS), meeting in the Hague, [ruled](#) that China's U-Shaped Line and the claims to sovereign territory that flowed from it, [had no legal or historical validity](#).

The facts and the law are important, but they have not altered Chinese behavior. Beijing pronounced the tribunal ruling "[nothing but trash paper](#)." China continues its systematic efforts to impose its claims by trying to deny access to the South China Sea to regional and international users from fishermen to navies. The result has been a series of "grey zone" encounters while Southeast Asian watermen have been forced out of many of their historic fishing grounds. Most consequentially, China has constructed seven artificial islands in the South China Sea by dredging up vast quantities of material from the seabed and depositing it on top of low-lying reefs. The [damage to the maritime environment](#) has been massive. President Xi in his first summit meeting with President Obama, [declared that China would "never militarize" the South China Sea](#). In fact, [China has built military bases](#)—replete with airfields, armaments, radars etc.—on all its new islands.

All this is occurring in a region of rapidly growing geoeconomic and geopolitical importance to the US. As a region, Southeast Asia's has a population of 675 million and a collective GDP of \$3.7 trillion. American corporations and banks have [invested more in Southeast Asia](#) than they have in China, Japan and India combined. Two countries in the region (Thailand and the Philippines) are formal defense allies and several others are close security partners with America. Singapore might be fairly characterized as a de facto ally. Moreover, Taiwan—under constant

Chinese military threat—has a coastline on the South China Sea. The commercial sea lanes that traverse that sea are the world's busiest, connecting the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia to Korea, Japan and the United States.

China has emerged as a credible strategic challenge to the American presence in Asia, and it is probable that, if the two great powers collide militarily, the arena will be the South China Sea and Southeast Asia.

China is in and of Asia. China's geographic advantage in any contest for influence and presence in Asia is obvious. For American strategists, this puts a premium on reliable access and local/regional partners. This applies equally to economic and strategic spheres. Maintaining access, building presence, cultivating partners have been the guiding principles of US policy toward Southeast Asia for decades. The result is a dauntingly complex geostrategic landscape. As China's capabilities and presence have increased, so have US-led countermeasures. These have included recent initiatives to expand and deepen America's security partnerships, including the Quad, AUKUS, and a significantly upgraded alliance with the Philippines, plus a cautious, yet significant, effort to upgrade security cooperation with Vietnam.

[The Quad](#) emerged conceptually out of an impromptu coalition of four countries—the Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—that formed to provide emergency disaster assistance to Indonesia in the wake of the massive earthquake and tsunami that devastated northern Sumatra in 2004. Subsequently, Japan's Prime Minister Abe proposed that these same four countries consider forming an ongoing security partnership. The (largely

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unspoken) rationale for that partnership was a shared concern regarding the growing security challenge posed by China. For Australia and the United States, that was largely about the South China Sea. For Japan, it also included the East China Sea and, for India, the Indian Ocean and India's contentious border with China in the high Himalayas.

It took over a decade to come together, but today the Quad hosts a regular schedule of foreign minister- and leader-level meetings as well as joint initiatives and a public goods agenda. In the process, the four governments have given the term "Indo-Pacific" real strategic meaning.

[AUKUS](#) is a shorthand label for an agreement between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom to enable Australia to build and deploy advanced nuclear submarines—probably the most potent weapons system in the South China Sea/Southeast Asia arena. It is a huge undertaking and will require years before fruition—but, in time, it will alter the military balance in Asia. The joint program will further solidify the already very close defense cooperation between Washington and Canberra, while facilitating Britain's reentry into Southeast Asia as a strategic actor.

The Philippines' alliance relationship with the United States has traced a remarkable trajectory over recent years. The roots of the alliance go back to the decades of American colonial rule plus shared sacrifice during Japan's World War II invasion and brutal occupation. Washington and Manila signed a Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951, and it remained the cornerstone of robust security cooperation for four decades. But with the end of the Cold War and rising Philippines nationalism, the alliance atrophied and the very large US military presence in the Philippines largely vanished.

However, the rapid growth in Chinese power and ambition produced growing concern in Manila. Then newly elected Philippines president, Benigno Aquino, moved energetically to revive the alliance in 2010. The Obama administration was receptive, and the result was a significant upgrade—the [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement \(EDCA\)](#), providing for a renewed American military presence. The EDCA did not mean a restoration of large US bases in the Philippines. It did mean that substantial numbers of American military personnel and their equipment would deploy to Philippines military facilities on a regular basis. At the same time, the Aquino administration initiated the ITLOS tribunal. The ruling came down just as Aquino (term-limited) was leaving office—fully vindicating the Philippines position vis-a-vis China in the South China Sea.

The Philippines election in 2015 produced a bizarre five-year detour in Philippines foreign policy and US-Philippines security relations. The new president, Rodrigo Duterte, was an eccentric anomaly. He held a deep animus toward the United States. In repeated visits to Beijing, [he offered to fundamentally reorient Philippines foreign policy](#) away from the United States and toward China. Bluntly put, Duterte offered to hand the Philippines over to China on a silver platter—in return for expected economic largesse (investments, trade, aid). Duterte's initiative was real and stunning, but Beijing never seemed to grasp its significance. Duterte's policy toward China never resonated with the public or the Philippines armed forces, which remained strongly pro-American. [Beijing never provided Duterte with the economic benefits](#) he needed to justify his radical reorientation.

In the presidential election of 2020, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. conducted a campaign long on theatrics, happy talk about national unity, and

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references to his famous family name—and little else. He won in a landslide and almost no one knew what he thought about Philippines foreign policy. Clarity came quickly. In his inaugural address to the Philippines Congress, he declared (to cheers and applause) that the Philippines [would not surrender “one inch” of its territory](#) in the South China Sea. His message to Washington was equally clear. The EDCA must be reaffirmed and strengthened.

The Biden White House responded with VIP visits producing [several new agreements augmenting American military presence and activities](#) in the Philippines. The driver behind these initiatives was clear—China’s challenge to Philippine outposts and claims in the South China Sea (“West Philippines Sea”). In recent weeks, that threat has been on vivid display as the Chinese navy and Coast Guard have [repeatedly tried to block Philippines resupply missions](#) to Second Thomas Shoal, a small, precarious military outpost north of Luzon and quite near Taiwan. This is of a piece with China’s larger effort to compel Manila to abandon its physical presence in the South China Sea. As of this writing, the Philippines is managing to hold on, but just barely.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the United States maintains active security partnerships that range from close (Singapore) to low-profile/arms-length (Malaysia, Indonesia). The US alliance with Thailand has been in a sort of maintenance mode for many years. Its principal strategic significance is Cobra Gold—the largest joint/multilateral military exercise in Asia, hosted annually by the United States and Thailand. Meanwhile, Chinese influence continues to grow in Thailand, and the real content of the US-Thai alliance is increasingly unclear.

Vietnam is another matter. Hanoi has an intricately complex relationship with its giant neighbor, China. For Vietnam, China is a vital economic partner, an ideological fellow traveler, and a multifaceted security threat. The Vietnamese have forgotten that China invaded Vietnam in 1979. In the South China Sea, Chinese maritime forces have coerced Vietnamese fishermen and threatened Vietnam’s efforts to prospect for petroleum within its own EEZ. A portion of Vietnam’s maritime boundary with China [remains hotly contested](#). Hanoi’s diplomatic relations with Beijing are nominally “friendly”—but popular antipathy toward China among the Vietnamese populace is widespread. All this, plus China’s rapidly growing military power has left Vietnam in a precarious security situation. Hanoi needs a great power partner/supporter and Washington is the only plausible candidate for that role.

Over five decades, the United States and Vietnam have travelled a remarkable road from bitter wartime adversaries to emergent security partners—highlighted by President Biden’s recent visit to Hanoi where he signed a formal declaration elevating the [bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#). In practice, this will mean an upgrade in [existing US support to Vietnam](#) including more naval ship visits, strategic dialogues, transfers of US patrol boats (18 so far) and Coast Guard cutters (2 so far) to Vietnam, other technologies for improved maritime domain awareness (ISR), cooperation in military medicine and disaster recovery—and more.

Vietnam is strategically critical given its location—a border with China and a long South China Sea coastline—and its growing importance as a security partner. In terms of strategic importance to America, Vietnam is a work in progress. But there is a “here and now”

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factor that gives Vietnam particular weight. For the Pentagon, looking for regional assets, a key question is whether any of the South China Sea littoral states are actually prepared to fight to preserve their maritime presence. Vietnam is the one country where that answer is a confident “yes.” Last year Vietnam hosted its first Defense Expo and US defense contractors were prominent participants. The event will be repeated this year. The day seems closer when Vietnam will become a serious market for advanced (and expensive) US defense technology, including fighter aircraft. In the meantime, Vietnam is watching growing US-Philippines security cooperation very closely.

Time to Reimagine US engagement in Southeast Asia

The South China Sea appears on the policy agenda as a complex arena hosting an increasingly intense strategic rivalry driven by China’s military capabilities and territorial ambitions. At its core, it is a contest between China and the United States, but one where each of the Southeast Asian states has a vital stake and which now involves a number of major actors from the wider region (such as the Quad). For the United States, the bedrock strategic objective is preserving the territorial status quo—in the South China Sea and in nearby Taiwan. To achieve that objective, the United States requires a military presence in the theater sufficient to frustrate, i.e., deter, China’s ambitions to control the South China Sea. That presence includes regular transit—freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS)—in the teeth of Chinese protests and harassment. Given China’s geographic advantage and its huge edge in the number of naval combatants, the American military presence must be supplemented and enabled by regional partners including the Quad and Southeast Asian countries—particularly the Philippines and Vietnam.




Marvin C. Ott is a Senior Fellow/Asia Fellow at the Wilson Center.

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027

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