

Cautious or Fearless: A Comparative Analysis of the Policies of the Nixon and Trump Administrations Regarding the Inclusion of the South China Sea Region in the Scope of the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America

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Abstract: Since the Philippines began to have disputes regarding the South China Sea's territorial sovereignty with China in the end of 1960s, it has engaged in a long-term game with its greater ally of whether the *Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America* applies to the region. The Nixon administration was regarded as the basic positioning period of the US policy on the US-Philippines alliance during the Cold War, holding a vague attitude. However, during the Trump era, Washington clearly offered the Philippines security guarantees for this region, indicating a significant policy-making shift. This article selects the Nixon and Trump administrations as cases, utilizing the theoretical framework of the "entrapment" dilemma in alliance management theory which aims to investigate into the reasons why the two administrations held extremely different attitudes towards whether to include the South China Sea region in the scope of the *MDT* and analyze the cost-benefit considerations of Washington in managing the Asia-Pacific military alliance. The conclusion is that in the Nixon era, the US tended to avoid being "entrapped" because it was not worth the deterioration in relations with China and other informal allied countries only to maintain its alliance with the Philippines. However, during the Trump administration, to enhance its military presence in this region, maintain and strengthen a series of Asia-pacific military alliances, the US is willing to bear the risk of "entrapment".

Keywords: United States' foreign policy, South China Sea disputes, US-Philippines military alliance

1. Introduction

In June 2022, Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. assumed the presidency of the Philippines, followed by a rapid improvement of US-Philippines relations. For one thing, the Philippines has strengthened the US-Philippines alliance and begun to cooperate with major powers (including the US, Japan and Australia) in the Asia-Pacific region to launch some military operations, actively integrating into the

US-led Asia-Pacific alliance system. For another, it has continuously escalated the crisis in terms of territorial disputes with China, including trespassing Renai Reef and the conducting joint military exercises with other regional powers in controversial areas. These signs mark the closeness of the US-Philippines military alliance to its post-Cold War peak.

In 1951, the two countries signed the *MDT*, establishing a bilateral military alliance, which has become the integral component of the US-led Asia-Pacific military presence. The treaty consists of eight articles, with the spirit of establishing a collective defense system between the US and the Philippines in the Pacific region. In the event of an armed attack on the territory or armed forces, ships, or aircraft in the Pacific of either party, the two sides will take appropriate action under the agreement to counteract the common danger [1]. The provisions of this treaty are relatively comprehensive, but there is still some ambiguity regarding its scope of application. From the perspective of geographic, the South China Sea region is indeed part of the Pacific Ocean. However, the treaty was signed in 1951, while the Philippines only started gradually to occupy territories in the South China Sea region in the end of 1960s. The issue of whether these islands and reefs are included in the scope of collective defense is not further specified in the treaty. In fact, since the Sino-Philippines territorial disputes erupted, Washington and Manila have been bargained about whether the *MDT* applies to the South China Sea region.

During the Cold War, especially since the Nixon administration, the US had strengthened its constraints on the Philippines by refusing to provide security guarantees for the South China Sea region to prevent direct conflicts with China or other countries. However, the Trump administration made significant adjustments to the policies towards the US-Philippines alliance and towards the South China Sea region starting in 2019 with the clear declaration that the *MDT* applies to the South China Sea region.

The US is the country with the most allies in the world today, which regards alliances as the foundation for its hegemony maintenance. As a major power in typical asymmetric alliances, the US faces the dilemma of “entrapment”. In its military alliance cooperation with small countries like the Philippines, the US needs to evaluate whether it is worthwhile being drawn into wars or conflicts for the interests of its small allies to maintain the existence of the alliance.

Previous studies have conducted analyses and research on the scope of application of the *MDT* as well as the alliance management theory. However, those circles mainly focused on the US policy during the Cold War, and failed to examine the significant policy shift in the Trump era. Moreover, there has been relatively little attention paid to the “entrapment” dilemma of alliance management. Therefore, this article attempts to compare the different attitudes of the Nixon and Trump administrations regarding the scope of application of the *MDT* with the aid of the “entrapment” dilemma of alliance management theory, and to explore the causes behind.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on the US-Philippines Alliance and the Disputes in South China Sea

Zhang analyzes and compares the US-Japan military alliances and that of the US and the Philippines in terms of scope, extent, willingness, and means of defense, coming up the conclusion that compared to that related to the Philippines, the US is more likely to be involved in military conflicts over disputed areas caused by Japan [2]. Guo, through analyzing recently declassified diplomatic documents from the US, points out that its attitude towards whether the *MDT* applies to the Spratly Islands has gone firmly adhering to be “neutral” to gradually abandoning this stance, and then to later actively intervening [3]. Ju investigates into how Washington’s factor influences the Manila’s policy towards the South China Sea region, drawing the conclusion that the US policy has undergone a transition from “neutrality and non-intervention” to “intervention without being entrapped” because

of China's threaten towards it in the South China Sea region, which leads to an intensification of the attitude of the Philippines [4]. He conducts research on the scope of application of the *MDT*, and specifically mentions that the US has declared clearly that the treaty applies to the South China Sea region since the Trump era [5]. Kim probes into the alliance commitments' applicability provided by the US to the Philippines and Japan in their territorial disputes with China, and argues that the interpretation of the applicability of the *MDT* is critically important for the dynamics of the disputes and the credibility of the allies [6]. Castro examines how the *MDT* between the US and the Philippines became the cornerstone by applying the principle of Goldilocks [7]. Winger analyzes the security needs that the Philippines, during its South China Sea territorial disputes with China, raised to the US as well as the attitudes and responses adopted by the Ford and Carter administrations [8].

Existing critiques have conducted analysis on Washington's attitude towards the military alliance with the Philippines and the South China Sea's strategic status especially during the Cold War. Most of the papers focusing on these issues were published before the United States Department of State officially declassified relevant documents, and the historical materials available for reference were very limited, which indicating that the attention paid to the Trump administration's attitude shift towards US-Philippines military alliance and South China Sea policy is nowhere near enough.

2.2. Previous Studies on Alliance Management

Previous studies on alliances have the following characteristics: Firstly, in terms of areas, previous papers have primarily focused on several typical large-scale alliances, including the US-Europe alliances represented by North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Asia-Pacific bilateral military alliances represented by the US-Japan alliance, and socialist alliances such as that between China and Soviet Union. Hoffmann probes into the Western camp, drawing the conclusion that the US and Western Europe have differences in five aspects of their worldview regarding the world, which are caused by differences in geography, history, domestic political demands, and political culture [9]. However, the conclusions of these studies can only be used to explain some certain alliances and are not universal. Meanwhile, it is also noteworthy that the attention paid to the military alliance between the US and the Philippines is also very insufficient.

Furthermore, some researchers study the mechanism of alliance management. For instance, Su and Tang propose that the power balance and intention matching between allies can affect the fate of alliances by exploring the dynamic mechanism of allies' interaction [10].

Still, there are scholars who tend to focus on certain aspects of alliance management. For instance, utilizing the theory of public goods to study the free rider problem within alliances [11], or focusing on external threats' important role in the alliances management [12]. Lastly, contradictions within the alliance, as a factor in alliance research of great significance, has received great attention. Wang focuses on several sets of contradictions within alliance management, including support versus restraint, dependence versus independence, and proposes that alliance members' tolerance to obstacles in pursuit of their interests is key to the continuation of the alliance [13].

After Glenn H. Snyder published *The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics* in 1984, the importance of the dilemma of "entrapment" and "abandonment" has increased [14]. However, few scholars have focused solely on the dilemma of "entrapment" itself.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Alliance Management Dilemma: "Abandonment" and "Entrapment"

The dilemma of "entrapment" and "abandonment" was first proposed by Michael Mandelbaum in 1981 [15], and later in 1984, Glenn H. Snyder probed further into this concept and developed it into a systematical theory in his research *The Security Dilemma In Alliance Politics*. "Abandonment"

simply means being betrayed by an ally (allies). There are various specific forms in which one can be named as being “abandoned”: an ally (allies) joining forces with the enemy; an ally (allies) breaking away from the alliance and abolishing the alliance treaty; an ally (allies) failing to fulfill its explicit commitments or failing to provide the expected support or assistance in unforeseen events. “Entrapment” means being dragged into conflicts over other allies’ interests that one does not share, or shares only partially [14]. “Abandonment” and “Entrapment” have a close and dynamic relationship. If one side is weakened, the other will be strengthened. If a country doesn’t want to be “abandoned”, it needs to adopt a cooperative strategy and adhere strictly to alliance commitments. However, in reducing the risk of “abandonment”, the country increases the risk of being “entrapped”. Conversely, if one wants to avoid being “entrapped” and adopts a relatively distant alliance strategy, the risk of being “abandoned” by its allies will increase [10].

The fear of two types of alliance dilemma also exhibits dynamic relationships, mainly reflected in the asymmetric alliance relations. The symmetry of an alliance primarily assesses the disparity in power between allies. If one member is significantly stronger than others in terms of material capabilities, then the alliance is considered asymmetrical. Therefore, it can be inferred that the US-Philippines alliance is a typical example of an asymmetrical one.

Smaller countries are more dependent on the alliance, thus the cost of “abandonment” is greater. The possibility of a smaller country being “abandoned” primarily depends on the degree of dependence and commitments of the great power in the alliance. Regarding the “entrapment”, the cost of this dilemma depends on the degree of interest disparity between allies and the expected cost of war, and the possibility of being “entrapped” depends on the intensity of conflict, small country’s confidence in independently handling the conflict, and the degree of commitments to the alliance. If a smaller country faces intense conflict with countries outside the alliance and lacks confidence in independently handling the conflict, the greater one that makes clear commitments in the alliance will be “entrapped”. Therefore, the fear of “abandonment” reflects, to a certain extent, the importance of the alliance to the country itself, whereas the fear of being “entrapped” reflects the alliance’s constraints on the country. “When the fear of “entrapment” surpasses the fear of being “abandoned”, alliance members will either relax their overall commitments to the alliance or reduce support in specific disputes between allies and opponents in the future [16].” However, major powers do not always seek to avoid “entrapment,” as when a country believes that the benefits of an alliance are worth the cost of fighting to uphold the interests of its allies, it is more likely to become trapped in an “entrapment” dilemma [14].

3.2. Research Methods and Case Selection

This paper adopts a methodology of case study, and selects cases based on the following criteria: Firstly, the cases should be representative. The Nixon era began the second period of détente of the Cold War with the decline of US hegemony, during which the administration made policy adjustments based on practical considerations, implementing a contractionary global strategy. According to officially declassified documents, the Nixon administration marked a fundamental period in policies towards the Sino-Philippines disputes in the South China Sea region [3], which indicated a more conservative and flexible attitude. However, during the Trump era, with China emerging as a rising power, it explicitly positioned China as the main strategic competitor and considered the South China Sea as a region of more strategic significance. Against this backdrop, the Trump administration included the South China Sea region within the scope of application of the *MDT*, signifying the strengthening of the alliance relationship with the Philippines, as well as an increased willingness to intervene in South China Sea affairs. Both cases represent reactions by Washington to major change in the global balance of power, thus marking a significant shift in foreign policy and as such are highly representative.

Secondly, there should be a certain degree of variation among the cases, which allows for comparison. Analysis of the policies of the Nixon and Trump administrations regarding whether or not to include the South China Sea region in the scope of the *MDT* reveals that the policy of the former administration was defensive, while the later one became more outward-looking.

Finally, the information related to the cases should be comprehensive and detailed in order to facilitate the exploration of the underlying logic and differences. In 2011, the United States Department of State officially released the *Foreign Relations Of The United States, 1969–1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, 1969–1972* [17]. The documents include telegrams and memorandums exchanged between high-level officials of Washington and Manila, covering the US policy in the South China Sea region and its efforts to expand military base usage and facilities construction in the Philippines under the framework of the *MDT*. *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge and Nuclear Posture Review* released in 2018 and *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness Partnerships, and Promoting A Networked Region* in 2019 repeatedly emphasized the military threat posed by China especially in the South China Sea region and the need to politically strengthen the guarantee of security for Indo-Pacific alliances and partners, as well as deepen relations with [18-20]. These reports were all officially released and provided sufficient information for studying the South China Sea policy and that towards China during the Trump era.

4. Case Study

In August 1951, the US and the Philippines signed the *Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America*, and in September of the same year, the US rallied 47 countries to sign the peace treaty with Japan in San Francisco. This treaty was primarily aimed at resolving the territorial and international status issues of Japan, a defeated country after the World War II. The treaty declared that Japan recognizes the independence of the Korean peninsula, relinquishes sovereignty over some islands including the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands [21]. Actually, the US had begun to consider the issue of post-war treatment of the South China Sea region before Japan's surrender in 1945. Departments in the US government at that time conducted extensive research and proposed many solutions. Yet they did not come to any definitive conclusion or decision on these issues. For one thing, the outbreak of the Cold War and the development of the progress of the Socialist Revolution in East Asia, especially in China, prompted the US to shift from its policy of weakening Japan in the early 1950s to seeking a separate peace deal with Japan. For another, the US did not fully appreciate the South China Sea's strategic importance at that time. Therefore, the *Treaty of Peace with Japan* did not specify the sovereignty of these islands. This also indicated the neutral attitude of the US towards the South China Sea territorial disputes during the Cold War, as it was uncertain which country these islands belonged to, and the US also had no intention of intervening in the issue. The following US administrations during the Cold War also maintained this stance.

4.1. Nixon Administration

In the late 1960s, the US hegemony was declining due to internal and external crisis. Domestically, the long-term exporting of funds and exorbitant military spending led to a deterioration of the US economy. The anti-war movement, "New Left" movement, and African-American civil rights movement caused social unrest, leading to the rise of "New Isolationism". Internationally, the Bretton Woods system collapsed and the balance of power shifted: The rise of Japan, Western Europe, China, and Third World countries posed a challenge to the US hegemony. After Nixon came to power, he implemented a foreign policy that reduced global obligations, emphasizing that countries in alliances

should take responsibility for their own safety instead of relying entirely on the US military protection, which laid the foundation for adjusting the US strategic deployments in Southeast Asia.

The Spratly Islands, since Tang Dynasty, have been China's territory. The Philippines did not dare to occupy China's islands early on, and formal occupation began in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, the territorial disputes regarding the Spratly Islands escalated. In January 1974, China successfully launched a counterattack in the Paracel Islands against the invading forces from South Vietnam, which drew high attention from the Philippines, which was concerned that China might take similar military actions against it in the future. Therefore, the Philippines proposed to the US, hoping that its strong ally could provide security guarantees to the South China Sea region. At that time, maintaining a "passive neutrality" attitude, Washington, when facing with Sino-Philippines dispute in this region, believed that it should not proactively invoke the treaty to make security commitments to the Philippines, as it did not want to encourage China to perceive itself as being able to attempt military actions freely, nor did it want to cause unnecessary panic among its allies. Subsequently, against the backdrop of the escalating Sino-Philippines territorial disputes, the Philippines repeatedly requested the US to make a clear statement, even connected it to negotiations on military bases to pressure the US, but still rejected, dealing a major blow to US-Philippines relations. Snyder proposes that when a country judges an alliance to be worth the costs of fighting in defense of its allies' interests, it is more likely to fall into the dilemma of "entrapment" [14]. Next, this framework will be utilized to analyze the cost and necessity of the US including the South China Sea region in the scope of the *MDT*, and explore the reasons why the Nixon administration made such conservative policy choices.

In terms of cost and risk, firstly, during the 1970s, a period of ease in Sino-US relations, the US even considered China as a "quasi-ally" in countering the Soviet Union. Under this circumstance, the US rash support for the Philippines' position on the South China Sea dispute could have an impact on the implementation of its strategic policy toward China. In order to achieve its goal of balancing the Soviet Union with the assistance of China, the US was committed overall to improving relations with China. If the US had announced that the *MDT* applied to disputed territories in the South China Sea region now, it would have damaged China's important interests and the Sino-US relationship. Considering China's possession of a strong nuclear arsenal, from the perspective of the US national interest, it was clearly evident that it would try to avoid direct military confrontation with China. However, besides China, the Nationalist Party authorities in Taiwan, South Vietnam, and the Philippines also attempted to involve themselves in the region. The US had allied relationships with the latter three, and if the US were to include the disputed territories in the South China Sea region within the scope of the *MDT*, it would cause dissatisfaction among other allies and affected the implementation of its Cold War strategy. Similarly, if conflicts were to arise between the Philippines and the Taiwan authorities or South Vietnam, the US would find itself in a dilemma. It is noteworthy that if the US explicitly includes the South China Sea region within the scope of the treaty but fails to fulfill its commitment when conflicts arise, it may face trust issues with its allies. This would have a significant impact on the US efforts to build a military alliance system.

Regarding the necessity of risking the "entrapment" dilemma to strengthen the alliance, it was not worthwhile doing so at that time. The US-Philippines military alliance is a typical example of an asymmetric alliance. According to Snyder's theory, the "abandonment" and "entrapment" in alliance management are closely related [14]. However, in asymmetric alliances, the fear of "abandonment" is greater for small allies, while major powers are almost only affected by "entrapment", as even if weak allies abandon them, the losses are acceptable. In reality, this is also the case in the US-Philippines alliance, with the Philippines being more dependent on the US, seeking help from the US actively in any crisis. Meanwhile, although the Philippine politics were very volatile, various political forces maintain a pro-US attitude, and the US was not worried about the Philippines leaving its alliance.

4.2. Trump Administration

In recent decades, the whole world has witnessed the rising of China's comprehensive national power. Since Donald Trump assumed the presidency in 2017, there had been a major adjustment in Washington's policy towards China. Between 2018 and 2019, the United States Department of Defense released three important government reports: the *Summary of the 2018 National Defence Strategy of the United States of America* [19], and the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* [20]. These three reports extensively portrayed China's military threat, assertive behavior and China's disruption of navigation freedom in the South China Sea region. This marked its clear positioning of China as its primary strategic competitor and its attempt to contain China in the South China Sea region. In March 2019, Mike Pompeo, then-US Secretary of State, made a public statement asserting that "As the South China Sea is a part of the Pacific Ocean, any armed attack launched against the armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft of the Philippines in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations in accordance with Article IV of the *MDT* [22]." The policy adjustment of the Trump administration on this issue went far beyond this. In July 2020, on the fourth anniversary of the announcement of the arbitration results in the "South China Sea Arbitration Case" unilaterally initiated by the Philippines, Pompeo issued a statement entitled *U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*. This statement not only openly declared that China's claims to most of the offshore resources in the South China Sea region are illegal, that the "Nine-Dash Line" lacks a legal basis, but also claimed that the US adopts a position consistent with the arbitral tribunal's ruling [23].

The cost of strengthening alliances for the US continued to be the possibility of being involved in conflicts with countries like China and Vietnam that have territorial claims on islands and reefs in the South China Sea region.

The necessity of the policy shift in the Trump administration are as follows: Firstly, the world pattern has undergone profound changes since the Cold War ended, with the center of power struggles gradually shifting towards the Asia-Pacific region. As an important component of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy", the strategic significance of the South China Sea region has risen significantly in recent years. The US and China are engaged in a competition in this region. Secondly, with the internationalization trend of the South China Sea affairs, it is no longer just a matter of US-Philippines alliance and China. External powers such as Japan and Australia have also started to intervene in the South China Sea affairs through some military operations. Therefore, incorporating the South China Sea region into the scope of application of the *MDT* is also a further strengthening of the US-Japan and US-Australia military alliances. Thirdly, the Philippine Duterte government has adopted a policy of distancing itself from the US and getting closer to China, questioning the reliability of the US as an ally and expressing a desire to downplay (or even abolish) its alliance with the US. While major powers may not be so fearful of being abandoned by smaller countries, the US would undoubtedly suffer some losses if it were to lose a close ally in a strategically important region.

5. Conclusion

Signed in 1951, the *Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America* established a close military alliance while leaving some controversies related to the scope of application. One of the main controversies is that the Philippines strongly demands that the US include the disputed territories in the South China Sea region in its collective defense. However, the US (especially since the Nixon administration) had held a very ambiguous attitude towards this issue for a long time. However, in 2019, the Trump administration completely overturned the cautious attitude towards this issue and clearly included it in the scope of the *MDT*, greatly strengthening its military alliance with the Philippines. This article explores the different responses of the two US administrations to the Philippines' request for a strengthened alliance in different historical periods,

using the “entrapment” dilemma theory in alliance management as the theoretical framework. Through analyzing the cost and the necessity of fighting for the weaker ally’s interest in order to strengthen or maintain the alliance, Nixon administration made a conservative decision, considering that it was not worthwhile risking worsening relations with China or even engaging in a conflict in order to protect a country that already had significant dependency on the US. However, during the Trump era, in order to compete in the South China Sea region, a key location for Pacific power struggles, and to maintain a series of military alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, the US was willing to bear the risk of “entrapment”. The military alliances of the US are widespread around the world, and the Asia-Pacific region has become one of the most important regions in power struggles as China’s comprehensive national strength rises. Studying the cost-benefit calculation logic of the US in dealing with a series of bilateral military alliance relationships in the Asia-Pacific region is of significant importance in order to better understand the regional situation.

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