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Continuity and Change an Analysis of the Biden Administration's South China Sea Policy

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Abstract: Since the Trump administration took office in 2017, American's policy toward China has exhibited highly assertive characteristics. In terms of the South China Sea issue, Washington began to exert more pressure on Beijing. Recently, the Biden administration has continued some of the Trump administration's approaches by conducting freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, reinforcing U.S. military presence, and stigmatizing China's activities in the region. Simultaneously, the Biden administration has shifted to rally South China Sea claimant states to harshly confront China over the South China Sea issue. In this sense, the Biden administration's measures to the issue are a response to the fulfillment of U.S. national interests, the restoration of American's international credibility, and the maintenance of domestic support amid heightened political polarization. These approaches are likely to prompt some claimant states to undertake more assertive and risky actions, affecting the resolution of the issue, and leading to the linkage of the South China Sea issue with other matters.

Keywords: Biden Administration; Trump Administration; South China Sea; South China Sea Policy

1. Introduction

Since the United States launched its Indo-Pacific Strategy, both the Trump and Biden administrations have shown significant interest in the situation in the South China Sea. Due to the abundant natural resources and its crucial geopolitical value of the region, the U.S. has consistently attempted to challenge China's stance on this issue. This effort has become more pronounced within the overarching framework of strategic competition with China that defines the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Following this trend, several scholars have thoroughly reviewed the recent approaches of Washington to the South China Sea issue. In general, Cường Nguyễn Anh believed that the South China Sea issue remains a significant element when the Biden administration interacts with Beijing. Chen Xiangmiao and Zhang Shu described the escalation of the "coalition strategy" employed by the Biden administration. They argued that the Biden administration is repairing the relations between

Washington and its close allies regarding the South China Sea issue, as well as emphasizing non-military cooperation like maritime law enforcement with its allies. Similarly, Luu Van Quyet and Nguyen Thi Anh Nguyet discovered a closer cooperation between Washington and Hanoi after Biden is in charge, with deeper security cooperation and diplomatic engagement. Zheng Xianwu, Wang Tengfei and Xue Liang interpreted Biden administration's policy through the strategy of integrated deterrence, stating that the Biden administration is intervening in the maritime dispute with diplomatic, military and economic measures. Wei Zongyou and Zhang Xinwei analyzed the Biden administration's policy through three aspects, namely military presence, rules-making and order-making, revealing the zero-sum and confrontational logic behind its policy. Wang Sen studied the perception of the Biden administration toward the South China Sea issue, arguing that the Biden administration views the South China Sea as a region that maintains its "rule-based maritime order" and an arena that enables Washington wield the power.

These recent studies offer a detailed picture about how the Biden administration involves in the South China Sea issue. Based on these recent studies, this paper seeks to further compare the South China Sea policy between the Trump administration and Biden administration. From Trump to Biden, the U.S. policy on the South China Sea issue has not undergone significant changes in its overall direction. Both administrations aim to expand U.S. national interests by intervening in the issue to contain China's development. Does this mean that the Biden administration's South China Sea policy is a complete continuation of Trump's policy? In reality, Biden has to some extent continued some of Trump's approaches to the South China Sea issue but has also introduced new approaches of intervention based on its predecessor's measures, consequently complicating the issue.

2. From Trump to Biden: U.S. Response to the South China Sea Issue

The South China Sea issue was an important tool for both the Trump and Biden administration to compete with China. The Trump administration chose to project military power in the region and use tough languages over China's activities in the South China Sea, but it failed to maintain benign relations with its allies and partners in Southeast Asia, especially with the Philippines. After Trump left the office, the Biden administration decides to intensify the pressure exerted on China by continuing and expanding the military, political, and diplomatic measures adopted by the Trump administration regarding the South China Sea issue. In sum, key military measures taken by the Biden administration encompass conducting freedom of navigation operations and boosting military presence across the region. Non-military actions include using political rhetoric to comment China's actions in the South China Sea and advocating for decoupling from China. Furthermore, diplomatic efforts by the U.S. primarily focus on uniting specific claimant states and allies to challenge China.

2.1 More Operations and More Troops

Under the Trump administration, the freedom of navigation operation played a crucial part in the

American's South China Sea policy. According to General Joseph Dunford, the National Security Council was no longer involved in the decision-making process of such operations when Trump was in office, which streamlined the conduction of these operations. In total, the U.S. Pacific Fleet carried out 28 freedom of navigation operations between 2017 and 2020, as documented by the Congressional Research Service. In the South China Sea, the majority of maneuvers was executed by destroyers of the U.S. Navy, although missile cruisers and littoral combat ships were involved in several occasions. Randall Schriver, a former U.S. official, once highlighted the operations for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as the most significant compared to other similar endeavors.

The Biden administration has continued the conduction of freedom of navigation operations. The Congressional Research Service revealed that by April 2023, the Biden administration had carried out 11 freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Following this development, the Biden administration has significantly escalated the political aspect of freedom of navigation operations. The Biden administration has heightened the profile of its operations in the South China Sea by disclosing extensive details and employing critical language in reports about China. On the other hand, the Biden administration has actively sought to legitimized its freedom of navigation operations within multilateral mechanisms and call for international support. Biden even mentioned freedom of navigation every time when he attended the United Nations General Assembly in 2021, 2022, and 2023, but Trump had never addressed it in his speeches at the UN General Assembly.

Besides freedom of navigation operations, increasing the presence of U.S. troops in the region is another measure favored by both Trump and Biden. When Trump was in office, the Third Fleet had launched an initiative called "Third Fleet Forward" since 2017. This involved aligning the Third Fleet's maritime operations with those of the Seventh Fleet across the South China Sea and the wider Asia-Pacific area. In May 2020, the Trump administration deployed a submarines force in Western Pacific for a so-called "emergency operation" to deter China. In the meantime, the Trump administration carried out several military drills in the South China Sea, explicitly designed to oppose China's regional actions. One such exercises took place in July 2020 in South China Sea with 2 carrier strike groups participating.

The Biden administration has further augmented its military footprint in the South China Sea. Responding to maneuvers by Chinese vessels in the region, April 2021 saw the deployment of both a U.S. Navy carrier strike group and an amphibious ready group to the region for military exercises. In April 2023, over 17,000 individuals participated in the biggest military exercise ever held in the South China Sea, conducted jointly by the U.S. and the Philippines. The drill included amphibious operations and intelligence sharing, with a notable element being the use of live ammunition to sink a target vessel. The objective of this drill extended beyond improving coordination with U.S. allies; it also aimed to dissuade China by destroying a target ship. Additionally, the Biden administration has introduced fresh operational strategies for the U.S. military in the South China Sea. In April 2021, the U.S. Marine Corps introduced a manual on Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) and

planned to spend two years testing and refining its content. EABO, as an expeditionary combat concept, requires the U.S. Marine Corps to establish a series of temporary bases at sea or on land and form a network of these bases. This network is used to perform tasks such as sea denial and area control, ultimately enhancing the U.S. military's power projection capabilities. A U.S. military officer commented that EABO could counter enable U.S. forces to carry out airstrikes and offensive operations in South China Sea.

2.2 Political Rhetoric and Decoupling

Instead of making ambiguous remarks, direct commentary on China's actions became common, a practice that was increasingly employed during the Trump administration. The Trump administration significantly shifted the somewhat unclear position previously held by the U.S. government regarding the South China Sea issue to a clearer one that denies China's rights in the South China Sea, according to a statement issued by then Secretary of States Mike Pompeo in July 2020. Secondly, the Trump administration aimed to reassess China's actions in the South China Sea, labeling them as "security threats" in an official document. The Trump administration even used terms such as "provocative and coercive military and paramilitary activities" to characterize these actions, indicating the attempt by the Trump administration to frame China's activities in a militarized context, providing justification for tougher actions from Washington. Lastly, the Trump administration consistently urged China to adhere to the South China Sea Arbitration Ruling, deliberately labeling Beijing as a "disruptor" of the global order for not accepting the ruling result.

After taking office, the Biden administration has continued using political rhetoric when referring to China, but with new terminologies. In a report, the U.S. Department of Defense highlighted an escalation in the so-called "hazardous and unprofessional" operations conducted by China in the Indo-Pacific area, continuing from 2021 into 2022. In 2022, the document referenced an engagement between Chinese and Australian planes in the South China Sea as "hindering the legitimate operations of the United States and its regional allies". Similarly, 2023 China Military Power Report used terms like "unsafe" and "unprofessional" to describe China's activities. In contrast, the China Military Power Report issued during the Trump administration did not label China's actions in the South China Sea as either "unprofessional" or "unsafe". These new narratives under the Biden administration are to justify American's military activities in the region and sway global public opinion in its favor. Moreover, the Biden administration marked the anniversary of the South China Sea Arbitration Ruling on July 11, 2021 by releasing a statement acknowledging the ruling's anniversary, emphasizing that China is legally obligated to abide by the decision. In the following years, the Department of States released identical statements on corresponding dates. These proclamations of "commemoration days" are woven into Washington's rhetoric strategy regarding the South China Sea issue and underscore its unwavering position concerning the arbitration outcome.

On the other hand, decoupling from China has become a highly popular policy option in U.S. politics. The usage of decoupling by the Trump administration in the context of the South China Sea

issue suggests that these separation tactics have now permeated the realm of security. In May 2018, the Trump administration decided to exclude China from the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military drills scheduled for that year. Such a move indicates that decoupling from China is expanded to security issues in order to isolate China from other regional actors. In August 2020, the Trump administration sanctioned Chinese entities and individuals engaged in building projects in the South China Sea to restrain their activities with the U.S. In January 2021, the Trump administration once again levied sanctions against several Chinese nationals and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

The Biden administration has opted to adopt the decoupling measure over the South China Sea issue, utilizing an excuse known as "Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing" (IUU fishing) for imposing sanctions on Chinese firms. In June 2021, President Biden instructed the Department of Defense and other pertinent bodies to work alongside allies to develop a system for sharing intelligence about fishing activities and to improve the American's awareness of maritime domains within the Indo-Pacific area. While not specifically naming China, this move evidently aimed at Chinese fishing practices in the South China Sea, given that fishing rights are a central part in the maritime dispute. In the same year during October, the Biden administration unveiled a document called National Five-Year Strategy to fight against Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing, highlighting the classification of IUU fishing as a "maritime security issue". The document called for more in-depth research on China's fishing activities and timely assessment of the effectiveness of relevant sanctions. Two months later, the Biden administration imposed sanctions on two Chinese fishing firms, Dalian Ocean Fishing Co., Ltd. and Pingtan Marine Enterprise.

2.3 Winning Claimant States Back

The Trump administration is famous for the poor handling of relations between Washington and its allies around the world. In Southeast Asia, even though the Trump administration remained connected with Southeast Asian states in terms of security cooperation, it was unsuccessful in effectively managing the relations between Washington and Manila, despite the Philippines being the sole U.S. treaty ally among the South China Sea claimant states. The Philippines has frequently voiced worries over the ambiguity of U.S. defense promises in relation to the South China Sea issue, but the Trump administration kept its stance regarding the specific nature of U.S. support for the Philippines unclear. In February 2020, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared that the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the U.S., which is crucial for the U.S. military operations and bilateral military drills in the Philippines, would be terminated. The Trump administration failed to persuade Duterte to retract his decision to terminate the agreement. In the meantime, President Trump personally had a strong aversion to multilateralism, leading ASEAN to be a secondary platform for regional issues. Trump's personal absence from multilateral mechanism meetings within the ASEAN framework raised doubts among ASEAN member states about American's commitment to the organization and the region.

For the restoration of U.S. global reputation, the Biden administration chose to mend relations with its allies, and the Philippines has become a crucial target. In July 2021, the Biden administration successfully persuaded Manila to rescind its decision to terminate the VFA, with the Malacañang Palace indicating that this move was a gesture of gratitude for the COVID-19 vaccine assistance offered by Washington. Following the anti-American figure Rodrigo Duterte finishing his term of presidency in June 2022, his successor, "Bongbong" Marcos, exhibited a more favorable attitude towards the U.S., serving as a catalyst for ameliorating U.S.-Philippines relations. In February 2023, the United States and the Philippines jointly declared their decision to broaden the scope of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). This entails the establishment of four additional military sites in Manila for American to use, along with U.S. support in enhancing the facilities at these locations. Washington and Manila have also decided to reinstate their cooperative patrols in the South China Sea, resuming an arrangement that had been halted during Duterte's presidency, which realized on November 21, 2023 with a three-day cooperative patrol in the South China Sea by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the Philippine Armed Forces. Amidst improving ties, President Biden repeatedly reaffirmed the defense pledge to the Philippines, emphasizing its applicability to the South China Sea issue and underscored America's backing for upgrading the Philippine armed forces.

Other than Manila, Washington and Hanoi advanced their bilateral ties to the level of a strategic partnership in September 2023. Later, in November 2023, the Biden administration elevated the relationship between the U.S. and Indonesia to a comprehensive strategic partnership, addressing issues such as the South China Sea arbitration ruling and the importance of freedom of navigation amidst regional issues. While Jakarta and Washington may not share the same views on these issues, their inclusion in the statement signifies Washington's intention to obtain support from the claimant states. Furthermore, in a discussion with Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary in September 2023, President Biden affirmed the U.S. backing for ASEAN's initiatives, particularly in progressing the Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea issue resolution.

The Biden administration even actively promotes the involvement of key allies such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Australia in the South China Sea issue, advocating for their engagement through navigational endeavors and collaborative military drills. The Biden administration is also keen on facilitating collaboration between certain claimant nations and its allies outside the region. During the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2023, defense leaders from the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines discussed about the feasibility of joint patrols within the South China Sea. In April 2024, the Philippines, the U.S., Australia, and Japan deepened their cooperative ties through a joint military exercise in the South China Sea.

3. Motivations Behind the Biden Administration

External environment and domestic factors both shape the Biden administration's policy towards the South China Sea issue. Similar to its predecessor, the Biden administration views curbing China's growth as essential for achieving American's national interests. The Biden administration recognizes

the urgency of mending ties with allies that were strained during the Trump era. Moreover, China is one of the few topics that can unify public opinion and bipartisan consensus in a politically polarized U.S., which the Biden administration leverages to maintain its public support.

3.1 Competition with China

The Biden administration still regards competing with China as a fundamental aspect of U.S. foreign policies. In its National Security Strategy published in 2022, the U.S. recognized the necessity to surpass China in competition due to the fear that the growth of China would jeopardize American's national interests.

The Biden administration, guided by this perception, would naturally aim to curb China's influence in the South China Sea. Washington worries that its warships could face restrictions while navigating in the South China Sea. Consequently, the Biden administration has publicly criticized China's actions in the region to uphold America's military supremacy in the Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, the South China Sea serves not only as a significant military zone but also as a crucial passage for global commerce. Each year, this maritime route facilitates the transport of goods valued in excess of $5 trillion, with products worth approximately $1.2 trillion linked to either the exports or imports of the United States. Over the past few years, problems related to transportation within the global supply chain have grown more visible. The South China Sea is critically important for the international supply networks, making it imperative for Washington to remain engaged in this key area.

3.2 U.S. Credibility Restoration

It is essential for the Biden administration to rebuild trust with its allies and coordinate a united front to address the South China Sea issue. The Trump administration, averse to the expenses associated with global governance and defense obligations to allies, pulled out of several international agreements. Such an attitude severely undermined the credibility of the United States on the global stage. The "hub-and-spoke system" established by the U.S., which involves military alliances with various Asia-Pacific nations, is the critical foundation for extending its influence across the Asia-Pacific by enabling the direct presence of U.S. military forces in the region. The Trump administration's lack of robust bilateral ties with Manila led to skepticism among Southeast Asian nations about the U.S.'s dedication, and other claimants in the South China Sea issue grew uncertain about how Washington would response to their positions.

The Biden administration has utilized the South China Sea as a stage to showcase its commitment to supporting its allies. It stands with the Philippines, Vietnam, and other claimant states, showcasing the U.S. commitment to assist them. The Biden administration has reaffirmed its dedication to its allies and partners in the context of the South China Sea issue in exchange for their backing of its China policies. This collaboration promises reciprocal advantages for both the U.S. and its partners. Lindsey Ford, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, emphasized that American's

deterrence capabilities in the Indo-Pacific hinge critically on deepening partnerships and alliances. The U.S. cannot face the complex and interconnected challenges of the region alone. Without restoring U.S. credibility, it would be hard for Biden to rally its allies to align with its China policies. The Philippines appears to be the most responsive South China Sea claimant state to U.S. efforts after the Biden administration amended their relations. As a result, the Biden administration has successfully expanded U.S. access to military bases, thereby boosting its power in the region, and enhanced the U.S. military presence in the region by collaborating with Manila on coordinated patrols.

3.3 Formation of Bipartisan Consensus

Last but not least, President Biden utilizes the South China Sea issue as a means to unite various political factions within the United States, fostering bipartisan agreement to mitigate political instability. Political polarization is a fundamental trend in U.S. domestic politics, with Trump elected as the President in 2016 being a significant indicator of severe domestic political divisions. The South China Sea issue, however, can unify public opinion and garner bipartisan support, providing the Biden administration with a means to bolster its political standing amid a deeply divided domestic landscape.

In the U.S., despite growing internal disagreements, there remains a significant common ground regarding China. A Pew survey conducted in March 2023 reveals that around 83% of Americans have unfavorable opinions towards China. Regarding U.S.-China relations, only about 6% of Americans see China as a partner, while around 90% have a negative perception of the bilateral relations. Gallup's survey further illustrates how supporters of both U.S. political parties converge on China-related issues. In its 2023 survey, only 6% of Republican voters and 17% of Democratic voters view China positively. Furthermore, a mere 1% of Republicans and 8% of Democrats hold the view that the military capabilities of China do not represent a substantial threat to the United States. Clearly there is an overall consensus among the American public on China. If the Biden administration decide to soften the hardline approach toward China that was set during Trump's term, especially by conceding in the South China Sea issue, it might probably jeopardize its approval rate. Given that Biden's approve rate is already at a low level, this would undoubtedly be detrimental to his political life. Therefore, the Biden administration opts to uphold a tough position in the South China Sea issue to prevent any potential drop in the approval rate.

In the U.S. congress, China-related issues are similarly one of the few topics on which both parties can reach a consensus. Although there are differences among legislators regarding the specifics of China policies, the current U.S. Congress generally favors "hawkish" measures, calling for strengthened deterrence against China and restricting China's access to various U.S. resources. Some American academics have noted that the bipartisan consensus on China began to take shape around 2017-2018, leading to the bipartisan support of several legislative bills targeting China. One clear example is that regarding the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), members of both parties expressed in a joint letter that there is a bipartisan consensus on addressing the so-called "threat" posed by China to U.S. national security. They urged for stricter languages in the NDAA to limit

investments in sensitive technology sectors flowing to China. To secure congressional support, the Biden administration needs to reach some level of agreement with the Republicans, and maintaining a tough stance on the South China Sea issue is one way for the Biden administration to realize this goal. Otherwise, the Biden administration is likely to face criticism from Republicans, creating new obstacles for bipartisan agreements on other issues.

4. Implications of the Biden Administration's Policy

The increasing intervention from the Biden administration in the South China Sea issue will have multiple effects in the region. Firstly, it promotes riskier behaviors among certain South China Sea claimant states. Secondly, it may complicate the process of making a resolution for the issue. Thirdly, it creates connections between the South China Sea issue and unrelated issues that are complicating the situation.

4.1 Aggressive Action of Claimant States

The Biden administration's renewed engagement with South China Sea claimant states will likely lead to more aggressive and risky activities by them. Michael Beckley suggested that a state providing firm defense commitments to its allies may embolden them to take more assertive actions than they otherwise will do. This type of more assertive actions is particularly evident in the case of the Philippines. The Philippines has frequently received defense commitments from the Biden administration, and even though these commitments remain ambiguous, they are sufficient to encourage the Philippines to undertake more assertive actions.

Overall, the Philippines has intensified its militarization activities. In June 2023, the Philippine military completed a modernization upgrade for the Western Command (WESCOM), deploying new South Korean-made missile frigates and British AW159 Wildcat helicopters. The Western Command was equipped with anti-submarine capabilities for the first time through this upgrade, integrating the new technology into their patrol operations in the South China Sea. Later on, in a significant demonstration of their strategic alliance, the Philippines and Australia jointly patrolled the South China Sea for the first time. This three-day maritime exercise, conducted in November, underscored the growing military cooperation between the two nations. In a speech delivered later in the year of 2023, President Marcos affirmed that the Philippines would persist in working with global allies regarding the issue, and he profoundly thanked the U.S. and other expanding partners for their steadfast support.

Meanwhile, U.S. supportive stance towards Hanoi in terms of the South China Sea issue encourages Hanoi to take more assertive actions. In a statement released together in September 2023, both Washington and Hanoi emphasized their dedication to ensuring the continued freedom of navigation within the South China Sea. Although the Biden administration did not explicitly support Vietnam's maritime claims in this statement, the reference to freedom of navigation was clearly against China. Like the Philippines, Vietnam is capitalizing on the chance to involve other U.S. allies

more deeply in the South China Sea issue. In November 2023, Vietnam and Japan elevated their diplomatic ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Tokyo expressed its intention to provide military equipment to Vietnam through the Official Security Assistance (OSA) program to strengthen Vietnam's defense capabilities. Beyond the OSA, they decide to cooperate on intelligence sharing and joint training. In terms of military capabilities, Hanoi has increasingly focused on building its maritime militia since the 21st century. The U.S. considers this militia force as a stabilizing force against Chinese influence in the area. In the meantime, the U.S. has often overlooked the land reclamation efforts by Vietnam in the South China Sea. A report by an American research institution indicates that from 2012 to 2022, Vietnam reclaimed around 120 hectares of land in the South China Sea. This reclamation effort accelerated significantly between December 2022 and November 2023, with an additional 330 hectares of land reclaimed in a faster speed. Its silence on Vietnam indicates an intention to use Vietnam to counter China in the maritime dispute.

4.2 Increasing Uncertainties to the Solution

The actions taken by the Biden administration have added more ambiguity to settling the South China Sea issue. At present, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are in discussions to establish a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. In a joint commitment made in September 2023, China and the ASEAN nations decided to fast-track their discussions, aiming to conclude the COC negotiations within a three-year timeframe. Finalizing this agreement is anticipated to greatly improve regional stability. However, the Biden administration's involvement introduces uncertainties into the consultation process. On the one hand, the U.S. has affected the Philippines' willingness to continue participating in the COC negotiations. In November 2023, Philippine President "Bongbong" Marcos articulated his idea of bypassing China to negotiate a separate COC with other regional actors. Marcos argued that the ongoing COC negotiation process was too slow, and thus, the Philippines had begun discussions with Vietnam and Malaysia to draft a new COC. Marcos hoped that other ASEAN member states could join this China-excluded COC. This proposal is closely linked to the continued support from the Biden administration to Manila. Vietnam and Malaysia did not respond positively to Marcos's new idea, as his actions are unlikely to contribute to the final resolution of the South China Sea issue. Instead, it may undermine the existing foundation of cooperation.

On the other hand, the Biden administration has actively engaged in the discussions surrounding the COC itself. In May 2022, President Biden convened a summit with leaders from ASEAN, where the COC was prominently featured on the agenda. The U.S. and ASEAN members together expressed support for the anticipated development of a Code of Conduct (COC) that would be in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Biden administration is worried that the terms describing freedom of navigation in the COC may not match how Washington interpretates it. Therefore, the specific mention of the UNCLOS in the joint statement reflects the Biden administration's desire for a COC that is aligned with the American's interpretation. This

approach might exacerbate regional tensions and internal divisions, causing obstacles for future negotiations of the COC.

4.3 Complicating the Issue

The Biden administration has interwoven extraneous matters into the South China Sea issue. Presently, this includes attempts to connect the Taiwan question with the South China Sea issue. The Philippines, due to its strategic location near Taiwan and improving relations with the U.S., has become a key player in this development.

The EDCA between the Biden administration and the Philippines requires Manila to open four new military bases for Washington. However, the EDCA serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it facilitates American's efforts to involve Manila over the South China Sea issue. Secondly, the geographical location of these bases can be a deterrent against China concerning the Taiwan question. President "Bongbong" Marcos even suggested that these EDCA bases could be useful "in case of a terrible situation" happening toward the Taiwan question and requiring Manila to evacuate its citizens there. Despite Marcos' subsequent denials about these bases being used against China, their location inadvertently exposes American's effort to link the Taiwan question with the South China Sea issue. The location of the joint patrol conducted by the U.S. and the Philippines in November is also noteworthy. The Philippine military reported that its air force, along with the U.S. Air Force, conducted a joint patrol operation near Batanes Province, which is only about 200 kilometers from Taiwan. This action again highlights the Biden administration's intent to connect the Taiwan question and the South China Sea issue together. While the Marcos administration has been trying to thread a fine line regarding the Taiwan question, the linkage created by the Biden administration is bound to add more complexity to the South China Sea issue.

5. Conclusion

Biden administration's approach to the South China Sea issue has kept several measures adopted by the Trump administration, but it also introduces some fresh components. In terms of the military aspect, the Biden administration continues to conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, while increasingly emphasizing the political implications of these operations. The South China Sea has also seen a reinforced deployment of American military personnel and the frequent conduction of military drills as part of Biden administration's efforts to enhance regional militarization. Besides that, the Biden administration continues to comment China's regional activities with negative languages, drawing on the rhetorical strategy adopted by the Trump administration with new terminologies being utilized. Both administrations consider decoupling from China regarding the South China Sea issue as a powerful measure, while the Biden administration emphasizes more on the so-called "IUU fishing". A main policy difference is about the relations with allies and partners involved in the South China Sea issue. Unlike the Trump administration, the Biden administration has

significantly prioritized collaboration with them, strengthening bonds with claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam, so as to unify these countries in exerting collective pressure on China.

The Biden administration's South China Sea policy is ultimately associated with its policy to compete with China and preserve its global status. Additionally, its South China Sea policy is shaped in response to the internal political environment within the United States. As far as concerned, the actions taken by the Biden administration in the South China Sea show no signs of contributing to the resolution. The Biden administration is actually implementing a policy of imposing costs on China. In the future, the South China Sea issue will remain a critical topic for careful management. All parties should engage in the reasonable and effective risk management effort to collectively promote the peaceful resolution of the issue.

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The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

None.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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