

Abstract

This thesis aims to analyse how the differences in the Philippines government administrations of Presidents Aquino and Duterte foreign policy towards China have affected the dynamics of the South China Sea dispute. In this assessment period spanning from the year 2010 to date, the research aims to highlight the expression of power by small states through leveraging international law and foreign policy as a counter hegemonic force of power for States with otherwise limited powers in conflict. The analysis will be carried out using data collected from documented interview evidence, academic and media publications, unclassified government archives and foreign policy statements of the countries under study. The theories within International Relations of Structural realism and Neo-Classical Realism will form the theoretical framework used to analyse each foreign policy period and the resultant outcomes thereof.

The findings aim to reveal how diplomacy from small states with a weaker economic and military position within territorial conflicts invite the opposition's cooperation with the small state. These cooperative alliances may however expose small states to subsequent exploitation within newly formed alliances. These alliances, aimed at distracting from the addressing of grievances in the core dispute, offer in exchange temporary financial respite to the small state provided by economically and militarily stronger states. The assessment of this bi-lateral dynamic presents an opportunity for knowledge gain for small states in avoiding similar pitfalls through cogent policy formation and mapping out of bi-lateral partnership parameters in dealings with stronger states.

Ultimately however while the various events between the Philippines and China have not led to advances in the resolution of their claims in the SCS dispute itself, they have provided China with a platform to increase its regional strength and the Philippines with an opportunity to further stabilize and grow its economy through the China-Philippines joint energy exploration and the merging of the objectives of China's "one belt, one road" with Duterte's "build! build! build!" into an aligned infrastructure development agenda.