



OBAMA, TRUMP, AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: NAVIGATING THE DIFFERENCES

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Introduction

1. Timeline and perceived inflection points, 2009-2018
2. Obama administration takeaways
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4. Differences and commonalities
5. Conclusion



Timeline and Perceived Inflection Points

2009

- May: Vietnam and Malaysia submission to the CLCS, and China's response
 - “Indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the SCS and the adjacent waters”
 - Accompanied by uptick in clashes and arrests at sea
- July: Obama administration signs onto Treaty of Amity and Cooperation





2010

- Secretary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, identifying peaceful resolution of sovereignty claims in SCS as a U.S. national interest
- First U.S. attendance at East Asia Summit (Sec. Clinton)



2011

- “America’s Pacific Century” and the birth of the Pivot/Rebalance to Asia
- Darwin troop rotation agreement with Australia
- Obama attendance at EAS





2012

- April: Scarborough Shoal standoff
 - Hard power aspect to Chinese assertiveness
- July: ASEAN leaders' joint communiqué failure in Phnom Penh
- September: Senkaku Islands dispute flare-up
 - Impact of disputes on MDT interpretation





2013

- January: Philippines files for arbitration against China
- November: Chinese Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea
- Late 2013: Land reclamation begins







2014

- EDCA signing
- HYSY-981 standoff
- Second Thomas Shoal blockade





2015

- Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative announced
- Senate Armed Services Committee hearing with Shear and Harris
 - First public discussion of FON and challenging of territorial seas around reclaimed features
 - Lassen FONOP confusion
- Xi and Obama meeting and Rose Garden pledge





2016

- February: Sunnylands meeting with ASEAN leaders
 - Some of the strongest language from ASEAN to-date
- July: Arbitral Tribunal award, Duterte admin pockets it
- Elections and leadership changes
- Major land reclamation in Spratlys concludes





2017

- Trump administration takes office
 - Withdrawal from TPP
- Early silence on SCS tied to NKorea
- Secretary Mattis returns FONOPs to regularized/routine operations
 - Mischief Reef non-innocent-passage FONOP; non-announcement of others
- Announcement of FOIP
- Revival of the Quad
- 2017 National Security Strategy
 - “Great power competition”





2018

- Perception of a greater U.S.-China strategic competition brought SCS back to the fore
- Xi Jinping's re-election
- RIMPAC 2018 dis-invitation
- October: VP Pence speech at Hudson Institute





Assessing the Administrations



Obama administration takeaways

- Pursuit of multilateral solutions
- Active strategic vision for region derailed by happenings elsewhere
- Failures of the Pivot/Rebalance
- Serious aversion to risk
- Outpaced by Chinese investment and initiative



Trump administration takeaways

- Strategy so far is harder to discern
- Lack of coordination between arms of government
- Greater appetite for risk and confrontation—but possibly seeing things through a lens of competition rather than cooperation
- Rhetoric is somewhat isolationist, but still working with security partners for greater partnerships throughout region
- Engagement with the region has suffered somewhat



Differences and Commonalities





Points of continuity show U.S. interests that transcend administration

- Freedom of navigation, for economics as well as military use
- Importance of the rules-based order
- Recognition of the value of Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century, and wanting to ensure America stays a part of it
- Recognition of importance of ASEAN centrality



Conclusion

- Where does the South China Sea go from here? If not a “Chinese lake”, how does the Trump administration envision the future of the SCS looking?
- Priorities for the Trump administration, short- and medium-term
- Code of Conduct negotiations