NIDS China Security Report 2027

China and the South China Sea

The Dynamics of Maritime Issues

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NIDS China Security Report 2027
***China and the South China Sea: The Dynamics of Maritime Issues* / SHOJI Tomotaka, IIDA Masafumi, and GOTO Yohei**

Published by
The National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan
5-1 Ichigaya Honmura-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-8808, Japan
Website: https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/

Translated by INTERBOOKS

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ISBN 978-4-86482-176-6 Printed in Japan

Preface

The *NIDS China Security Report* is a publication intended to introduce a broad readership to the findings of China-related security studies and analyses conducted by researchers from the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS). Each year's theme is selected based on its medium- to long-term importance for understanding Chinese security affairs, and the content extends beyond military matters to also encompass politics, economics, and international relations.

The theme of the *NIDS China Security Report 2027* is "China and the South China Sea: The Dynamics of Maritime Issues." China's maritime expansion has intensified in parallel with its economic rise and military buildup. Discussions have focused on such activities, coupled with the concerns they have generated among neighboring states and partner countries. Given the South China Sea's strategic and economic importance, and furthermore, the multilateral nature of the confrontation involving China and other states, the South China Sea dispute is one of the most critical security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. After China's rise rekindled the longstanding territorial dispute between China and Southeast Asian countries, the situation became increasingly complex amid great-power competition and remains highly uncertain.

In this report, three researchers specializing in China and Southeast Asia draw on their expertise to examine the history of the South China Sea dispute, how the dispute has unfolded amid Sino-U.S. strategic competition, the strategy and involvement of the People's Liberation Army Navy, the transformation of the China Coast Guard, and the responses of Southeast Asian countries. Prospects for the future are also discussed. We take pride in presenting this report, which offers comprehensive perspectives and strategic insights on this year's theme.

As stated above, the selection of themes and the analysis in the *NIDS China Security Report* are conducted independently by NIDS researchers based on their respective expertise. Therefore, the views expressed in this report are the authors' own and do not represent those of the Government of Japan, the Ministry of Defense, or NIDS. Responsibility for the content lies with each researcher.

The lead author of the *NIDS China Security Report 2027* is SHOJI Tomotaka, with contributions from IIDA Masafumi and GOTO Yohei. For details on each author's chapters and affiliation, please refer to the beginning of the report. Editing and public relations were handled by JINGUSHI Akira, OGUMA Shinya, YAMAGUCHI Akihiro, KANEKO Reito, and KATSURA Hirotaka.

We hope this report will stimulate discussions both in Japan and abroad on China-related security issues, while also contributing to broader dialogue and exchanges on security issues extending beyond China.

November 2026

SHOJI Tomotaka, Director of the Department of Area Studies

Editor-in-Chief of the *NIDS China Security Report 2027*

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Summary

Chapter One
The Sino-U.S. Confrontation in the South China Sea: The Dynamics of a Growing, Complex Dispute

The South China Sea dispute has historical roots in territorial claims of early modern states in East Asia. Following World War II, it evolved into a territorial dispute among sovereign states. The basic structure of the present-day confrontation formed between the 1970s and 1980s, and by the 1990s, the dispute turned into a security concern between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Around 2010, China's rapid rise and active maritime expansion aggravated the dispute once again, while U.S. involvement in the issue also increased. As a result, the South China Sea became one of the main arenas of military competition between the United States and China. This period saw a rise in territorial nationalism, which reinforced China's assertive posture and heightened alarm and resistance among ASEAN claimant states. At the same time, as intensifying Sino-U.S. confrontation placed further strategic primacy on the South China Sea, the confrontation between the two powers grew more radical.

In particular, China's construction and militarization of artificial islands in the mid-2010s quickly made the South China Sea dispute more acute. In response, the United States stepped up its countermeasures, which further heightened military tensions between the two countries. Since then, related incidents have continued to occur frequently, and tensions have become entrenched. The confrontation has expanded beyond the sea surface and airspace to the seabed, and its repercussions extend outside the claimant states and the parties concerned. Under these circumstances, the South China Sea has come to symbolize the strategic competition between the United States and China.

The United States has kept China in check through a comprehensive approach combining freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), bilateral exercises with allies, capacity-building assistance for ASEAN states, and criticism of China on the grounds of the 2016 arbitral award. This approach has largely remained in place across U.S. administrations. Under the Biden administration, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea became an integrated theater of operations, while coordination with allies also increased. Despite the second Trump administration's continued engagement under cooperation frameworks with allies and like-minded partners, China's activities have become more active. Amid intensifying great-power competition and shifts in the regional balance of power, an important focus of attention will be what new actions China pursues in the South China Sea.

(SHOJI Tomotaka)

Chapter Two
The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and the South China Sea

China's naval strategy has evolved in three phases. The first was "littoral defense and coastal defense" from the 1950s through the 1970s, focusing primarily on defensive operations in littoral and coastal waters near the Chinese mainland. The second was "near seas defense" from the 1980s through the early 2000s, whose purposes included conducting defensive operations within the "First Island Chain," securing sea lines of communication, and protecting maritime rights. Since the mid-2000s, China has pursued "near seas defense and far seas protection," whose objectives have expanded from "near seas defense" to also include protection of Chinese interests in far seas beyond the "First Island Chain" and participation in international cooperation. Since 2020, greater emphasis has been placed on "far seas protection" in response to Sino-U.S. strategic competition and other developments.

China attaches importance to consolidating and expanding its sovereignty over features and maritime rights in the South China Sea. Until the 1980s, China expanded its control over the South China Sea through the use of military force. Since the 1990s, it has placed maritime law-enforcement agencies at the forefront and altered the status quo by force. In 2016, China rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration's award that found no legal basis for China's "historic rights" claim in the South China Sea, describing it as "a worthless piece of paper." At the same time, China has applied military pressure on claimant states. Beijing has thus intensified its efforts to change the status quo by dismissing international law and relying on military and maritime law-enforcement capabilities.

The South China Sea is a key maritime area for China also in the context of reunification with Taiwan and confronting the United States. China has suggested the possible use of force as a means to achieve reunification and has intensified pressure on Taiwan, such as through repeated military exercises around the island. The South China Sea will become a critical theater for the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), in terms of imposing a maritime blockade on Taiwan or striking military outposts and cities in southern Taiwan. Furthermore, securing military superiority in the South China Sea is of vital importance to the PLA both for hindering U.S. military efforts to close in on China via the Pacific and Indian Oceans and for maintaining a nuclear deterrent against the United States through a reliance on submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

(IIDA Masafumi)

Chapter Three
The China Coast Guard: An Organization with Military and Administrative Functions and Its Roles in the South China Sea

China has tended to treat its disputes with other countries in the South China Sea as "internal matters." This appears to be rooted in China's perception of the South China Sea as essentially an extension of its land territory, a perception that has been reinforced through development of domestic legislation, selective application of international law, and unilateral maritime claims, including those associated with the "nine-dash line." The growing presence of the China Coast Guard (CCG)—an agency with a law-enforcement function—appears to reflect China's intention to establish the CCG as an entity "governing" the South China Sea and to justify its activities as law enforcement.

The CCG, as it exists today, is a product of the consolidation of maritime law-enforcement agencies in 2013, its incorporation into the People's Armed Police in 2018, and the enactment of the Coast Guard Law, which provides the legal basis for the CCG's activities, in 2021. The Coast Guard Law specifies the CCG's organizational structure, administrative responsibilities, and law-enforcement operations. It also provides for coordination and division of responsibilities with the PLA and other maritime administrative agencies. Therefore, the law establishes the CCG as an agency that combines both military and administrative functions.

The CCG has enhanced its capabilities through the construction of new vessels and acquisition of military-grade equipment. In addition, the CCG has promoted closer coordination with the PLA Navy (PLAN) through the development of a legal framework placing the CCG under the command of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the increased appointment of officers with naval backgrounds, and coordinated operations with the PLAN. Meanwhile, the maritime militia appears to receive operational direction and training from both the PLAN and the CCG. It also appears to engage in activities along with the CCG, including putting further pressure on claimant vessels, in coordination with the PLAN.

Recent revisions of China's maritime statutes have tended to stipulate the CCG's roles and authorities. The involvement of the CCG, including the exercise of administrative functions, has also increased at Scarborough Shoal, where China's dispute with the Philippines has drawn attention. Furthermore, the CCG has actively conducted maritime administrative activities in cooperation with other maritime administrative agencies and further strengthened its administrative function.

On the one hand, to reinforce China's control, the CCG seeks to strengthen its military capabilities, including coordinated actions with the PLAN and the maritime militia. On the other hand, to provide an appearance of legitimacy, the CCG conducts administrative activities presented as having a "peaceful character." The CCG thus appears to expand China's influence in the South China Sea through a combination of these approaches.

(GOTO Yohei)

Chapter Four
Divergence and Commonality among Southeast Asia's Responses

The three ASEAN claimant states—the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia—differ markedly in their responses to the South China Sea dispute, particularly in their relations with China. The Philippines under the Marcos administration adopts a clearly confrontational posture toward China, and bilateral tensions have escalated in recent years. By contrast, Vietnam, which has clashed with China in the past, places emphasis on managing confrontations. Likewise, Malaysia has consistently maintained a comparatively moderate and cooperative posture toward China. These policy differences reflect the varying conditions facing each country, including geographic proximity to China, history of relations with China, the extent of security cooperation with the United States and other major powers, and domestic political dynamics.

While their approaches toward China differ, the three countries also share commonalities. The Philippines, as a U.S. ally, has actively advanced cooperation with the United States. Vietnam and Malaysia have also steadily expanded their security cooperation with the United States, while showing consideration for China. Although concerns have been raised over whether the second Trump administration will maintain U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea, cooperation between the United States and ASEAN claimant states has continued in practice and, in some areas, even deepened. This suggests that, regardless of the character of the administration, the South China Sea and ASEAN continue to have important strategic value for the United States. For ASEAN states, placing emphasis solely on relations with China is not a realistic option. They share the view that maintaining proper relations with both the United States and China contributes to ensuring their strategic autonomy.

Meanwhile, negotiations between ASEAN and China over a Code of Conduct (COC) have yet to produce substantial progress. The underlying reasons include not only China's passive posture but also differences in opinion within ASEAN itself. In particular, ASEAN member states have not established a unified position on key issues, such as the geographic scope of the COC and its legal binding force. As COC negotiations continue to stall, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia are likely to further pursue their own approaches according to their respective interests and security environments.

(SHOJI Tomotaka)

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABMs	anti-ship ballistic missiles
ACSA	Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus
AI	artificial intelligence
AIS	automatic identification systems
AMTI	Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIWS	Close-in Weapon Systems
CMC	Central Military Commission
CMS	China Marine Surveillance
COC	Code of Conduct
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DOC	Declrataion on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
FLEC	Fisheries Law Enforcement Command
FMS	Foreign Military Sales
FONOPs	freedom of navigation operations
GAC	General Administration of Customs
GSOMIA	General Security of Military Information Agreement
IoT	Internet of Things
IPMDA	Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness
LCS	Littoral Combat Ships
LHD	landing helicopter dock
MAF	Malaysian Armed Forces
MDA	maritime domain awareness
MSA	Maritime Safety Administration
MSI	Maritime Security Initiative
NDMC	National Defense Mobilization Commission
PAFD	People's Armed Forces Department
PAP	People's Armed Police
PCG	Philippine Coast Guard
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
RAA	Reciprocal Access Agreement
ROE	rules of engagement
ROK	Republic of Korea
SLBMs	submarine-launched ballistic missiles
SOA	State Oceanic Administration
SOVFA	Status of Visiting Forces Agreement
UAVs	unmanned aerial vehicles
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement



NIDS China Security Report 2027

China and the South China Sea:
The Dynamics of Maritime Issues


(UIG/Jiji Press Photo)

Introduction

China's Rise and the South China Sea

SHOJI Tomotaka

China's activities have long been at the center of discussions on Indo-Pacific security. The country is now regarded as a global power that rivals and, in some areas, may even surpass, the United States economically, militarily, and technologically. Amid the intensifying strategic competition with the United States, China's international influence, underpinned by these capabilities, is shaping an order of its own that challenges the long-standing U.S.-led international order.

China's rise, driven by economic development, began to show signs in the 2000s and became increasingly evident around 2010. In the Indo-Pacific, this rise manifested itself in vigorous maritime expansion and the assertive posture that accompanied it. One of the main arenas of this maritime expansion is the South China Sea.

Connecting Northeast and Southeast Asia, the South China Sea is a semi-enclosed body of water covering some 3.5 million square kilometers. It adjoins the Gulf of Tonkin to the north and the Gulf of Thailand to the west. Viewed more broadly, the sea links the Pacific and Indian Oceans, giving it strategic importance for Indo-Pacific security. It is a rich fishing ground and is believed to contain vast reserves of natural resources, such as oil and natural gas.

This maritime area is vital for Japan as well. As Japan's trade route, particularly for energy imports from the Middle East, the sea carries clear economic significance. Furthermore, its geographic position—adjacent to Taiwan and connecting to the East China Sea—is directly linked to Japan's security. Considering the area's importance to Indo-Pacific security and to China and Southeast Asia, few would dispute that stability in these waters contributes to peace and stability in the region and, by extension, to Japan's own peace and stability.

Maritime boundaries in the South China Sea have yet to be delimited. Six coastal parties—China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan—are vying for sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Islands and for related maritime rights and interests. The sovereignty disputes date back to the 1950s, when the postwar international order was taking shape. By the 1970s and 1980s, all six present-day claimants had become involved, and by the 1990s, the disputes had emerged as a security concern between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China. While tensions temporarily eased in the 2000s, confrontation among the parties resumed around 2010 and has continued ever since.

Figure 0.1 Map of the South China Sea

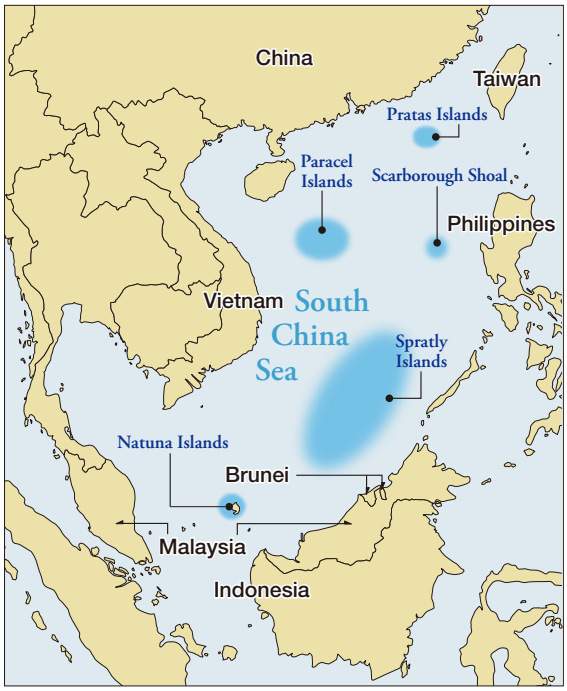


Table 0.1 The Status of Claimants' Occupation of Features

Claimants	No. of Outposts in the Paracel Islands	No. of Outposts in the Spratly Islands	Sovereignty Claims
China	20 (entire island group)	7	The entirety of the Spratlys and Paracels
Brunei	0	0	Parts of the Spratlys
Malaysia	0	5	Parts of the Spratlys
Philippines	0	9	Parts of the Spratlys
Vietnam	0	27	The entirety of the Spratlys and Paracels
Taiwan	0	1	The entirety of the Spratlys and Paracels

Source: Prepared by the author based on Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), "Island Tracker."

The main reason the South China Sea dispute resurfaced is vigorous and assertive maritime expansion by China. It used maritime law-enforcement patrol vessels to interfere with the operations of foreign fishing boats and harass resource exploration activities. These actions, together with China's rapid large-scale land reclamation and militarization on features under its control, heightened tensions across the South China Sea. Moreover, due to the area's strategic importance, the dispute evolved beyond a struggle for sovereignty between China and ASEAN states into a multilayered conflict of interests drawing significant attention of the United States and other major powers. Especially in recent years, China's land reclamation and militarization have prompted deeper U.S. military involvement. As a result, the point of contention has expanded beyond the territorial dispute between China and the ASEAN claimants to encompass a military confrontation between the two great powers, and

the dispute has entered a more serious phase.

China has traditionally been a continental power. However, as economic development expanded its rights and interests overseas, securing sea lines of communication has become an imperative for the country, particularly for trade and energy transportation. Therefore, Beijing has strengthened its naval and other maritime capabilities with a view to securing sea lines of communication and is in the process of transforming itself from a continental power into a maritime power. Furthermore, from the perspective of territorial defense, specifically, protecting economically advanced coastal regions, ensuring an overwhelming military presence along China's eastern seaboard—the Bohai Sea, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea—has acquired greater strategic importance amid the great-power competition with the United States.[1]

Among these "near seas," the South China Sea stands out in importance as the waters linking China with Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The white paper, "China's Security in the New Era," released in May 2025, refers to the South China Sea (and the East China Sea) alongside Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the context of territorial integrity.[2] China's ultimate objective in the South China Sea is to turn it into a de facto Chinese "inland sea" by excluding the military presence of the United States and other states and establishing complete control over the area.

To achieve this objective, China has built up its navy, maritime law-enforcement agencies, and maritime militia and has deployed them on a large scale in the South China Sea. It has skillfully exploited the latter two in particular to routinely conduct activities that are coercive and aggressive but remain below the threshold of military operations. In such "gray-zone situations," Beijing has pursued a "salami-slicing strategy" aimed at gradually expanding and consolidating its sphere of influence. This strategy is made possible by the extensively reclaimed and militarized features under Chinese control in the Spratly and Paracel Islands.

China has sought to control ASEAN states by linking security and economics. By creating trade-offs between China's economic cooperation and strategic interests in the South China Sea, ASEAN states with growing economic dependence on China have been dissuaded from standing resolutely against Beijing on the South China Sea dispute. As Sino-ASEAN economic ties deepened, China's leverage increased while ASEAN unity weakened. Although the ASEAN claimant states are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis China, they have—while accepting the overwhelming asymmetry between the two sides as a given—taken various countermeasures, such as seeking a collective ASEAN response and deepening cooperation with extra-regional stakeholders.

Based on the issues and assessment of the situation outlined above, this report analyzes and considers the outlook for the South China Sea dispute. Specifically, it examines the background of the sovereignty struggle and the increasing complexity of the dispute intertwined with great-power competition, as well as China's strategy, the buildup and deployment of China's forces, including the navy and maritime law-enforcement agencies, and ASEAN's responses. Given the importance of the South China Sea, the analysis presented in this report also has major implications for the security of

Japan.

Chapter One begins with a review of the history of the South China Sea dispute, followed by an analysis of China's rise and increasing maritime presence, confrontations with ASEAN claimant states, and the U.S. response in order to contextualize the dispute. Chapter Two focuses on developments within the Chinese People's Liberation Army, especially the navy. It traces the evolution of China's naval strategy and changes in military objectives before discussing the securing of sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea as well as responses to the Taiwan issue. Chapter Three analyzes developments in maritime law-enforcement agencies, particularly the China Coast Guard, which play a central role in China's salami-slicing strategy. This part assesses cooperation with the navy and maritime militia and the role these agencies play in maritime governance. Chapter Four looks at how Southeast Asian states have responded to China's efforts to impose its demands through power, including economic power. In addition to highlighting the range of national responses, the chapter considers ASEAN's attempts to address the dispute collectively and the challenges involved. The concluding chapter provides an overview of China's activities in the South China Sea, offers an outlook for the future, including the Sino-U.S. confrontation and China's relations with ASEAN, and presents implications for Japan's security.



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China and the South China Sea:
The Dynamics of Maritime Issues


(ABACA/Kyodo News Images)

Chapter One

The Sino-U.S. Confrontation in the South China Sea

The Dynamics of a Growing, Complex Dispute

SHOJI Tomotaka

Introduction

The South China Sea is arguably a flashpoint of military confrontation in the strategic competition between China and the United States. The bilateral contest is ongoing, with China attempting to gradually enlarge its sphere of influence in the South China Sea, while the United States intensifies military activities to prevent this. The area is now a site of frequent clashes between China and U.S. ally the Philippines, prompting Washington to extend substantial military and political support to the latter, which remains weaker than China in capabilities.

The disputes among the claimants in the South China Sea have a long history. The struggle for sovereignty dates back to the 1950s, during the formative period of the postwar international order. The six present-day claimants emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, the dispute manifested as a security concern between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the 2000s, tensions between the two parties temporarily subsided.

The situation changed significantly around 2010, as China once again stepped up activities in the South China Sea and became more assertive. Without concealing its territorial ambitions, Beijing boldly wielded its power to pursue its strategic interests and maritime rights and interests. Clashes with ASEAN claimants became frequent and deepened their anxiety over China's assertive posture.

The U.S. response to China's expanding presence in the South China Sea also marked a departure from its earlier approach. Washington, which previously regarded the dispute as a matter between China and ASEAN and showed no interest in involvement, presented itself as a stakeholder in the dispute. As a first step, it attempted to build a coalition critical of China in the diplomatic arena while simultaneously developing cooperative relationships with ASEAN claimants. China's land reclamation and militarization of features from the mid-2010s elicited the United States' military response, notably through freedom of navigation operations.

This chapter provides a historical overview of how the conflicts in the South China Sea grew from Sino-ASEAN sovereignty disputes into a Sino-U.S. military confrontation, creating complex dynamics with numerous stakeholders involved. The first section traces the history of the disputes through the 2000s and discusses how the present-day claimants emerged. The second section analyzes how China's rise and expanding presence in the South China Sea caused the disputes with ASEAN member states to resurface and deepened U.S. involvement. The third section examines specific U.S. policies, particularly military approaches, for China's assertive posture in the South China Sea.

The History of Sovereignty Disputes in the South China Sea

The Emergence of Claimants from the 1970s to the 1980s

The South China Sea has long served as a maritime trade route for vessels from various countries. From the early modern through the modern period, the Nguyen Dynasty of Vietnam, the Qing Dynasty of China, and later France and Japan made competing claims and conflicted over rights to the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Following World War II, the South China Sea became an arena of territorial disputes among nation-states. The State of Vietnam, later South Vietnam, claimed sovereignty over both the Spratly and Paracel Islands and began occupying the two archipelagos. China occupied part of the Paracel Islands, while Taiwan occupied Itu Aba Island in the Spratlys.[1]

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the six present-day claimants emerged as players in the contest for the South China Sea. The first was the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which was formed through the reunification of North and South Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War. In 1975, following reunification, Vietnam moved swiftly to take over South Vietnam's holdings in the Spratly Islands and expand its control there. In addition to occupying six islands held by the former South Vietnam, it dispatched forces to other features and occupied seven additional islands by 1976. Vietnam strengthened defenses on the principal features it occupied and sought to make its control a fait accompli, particularly on Spratly Island by constructing a 500-meter runway.[2]

The Philippines likewise emerged as a new claimant in the 1970s. Following the end of World War II, Manila had refrained from formally asserting sovereignty claims out of consideration for Taiwan. During the 1970s, however, the Marcos government began claiming part of the Spratly Islands in a change of policy. Between 1970 and 1971, the Philippine armed forces occupied three islands. They subsequently expanded the number of features under their control. The Marcos government named the area the Kalayaan Islands and proceeded to incorporate them into Philippine territory, notably by issuing in 1978 a presidential decree incorporating Kalayaan as a municipality of Palawan Province.[3]

Malaysia entered the struggle for sovereignty at the end of the 1970s. In 1978, it erected markers asserting sovereignty over Amboyna Cay, and in the following year, published a map claiming 11 features in the Spratly Islands. Malaysia then occupied five features and strengthened its control by establishing military and marine research stations and taking other measures.[4] Brunei, which gained independence in 1984 after having been a British protectorate, also joined the struggle, indicating in a map published in 1988 a maritime claim encompassing part of the Spratly Islands.[5]

The end of the Vietnam War brought greater regional stability, providing the backdrop for the intensifying territorial scramble in the South China Sea in the 1970s. A more direct impetus, however, was the prospect of undersea resources. From the late 1960s onward, surveys conducted by littoral

states and United Nations (UN) agencies suggested the possibility of substantial oil and natural gas reserves beneath the South China Sea, and the oil shocks of the 1970s further raised their value. Furthermore, the concept of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) became established in international law in the 1970s and was codified in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Thus, even a small feature that was difficult to inhabit could, if it qualified as an "island" capable of generating an EEZ extending up to 200 nautical miles, entitle the state possessing sovereignty over it to the exclusive exploitation of the resources within that zone. This further increased incentives for states to occupy features and assert sovereignty over them.[6]

Under these circumstances, China began its full-scale expansion into the South China Sea in the 1970s. It first moved to consolidate control over the northern half of the Paracel Islands, conducting surveys and developing ports in the early 1970s to strengthen its position. By contrast, South Vietnam's defenses were weakened by the war and the withdrawal of the United States, leaving the administration of the southern Paracels thinly stretched. China exploited this situation and launched an offensive in 1974. After a brief military engagement with South Vietnam, China seized control of the whole Paracel Islands.

By the late 1980s, China began advancing into the Spratly Islands. In 1987, it dispatched several survey missions to identify features that could be occupied. In January 1988, China sent naval units, including engineering units, and began occupying Fiery Cross Reef. Vietnam responded by sending troops to three reefs, including Johnson South Reef, and succeeded in occupying two of them. In March of that year, however, Chinese and Vietnamese forces clashed at Johnson South Reef. The better prepared, militarily more powerful China gained the upper hand, and Vietnam suffered more than 60 fatalities. Following this battle, China brought six reefs under its control by April and established a military advantage in the South China Sea.[7]

Development into an Outstanding Issue between China and ASEAN

The Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei claimed sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, making the South China Sea dispute a concern for all of ASEAN. The 1988 military clash between China and Vietnam signaled China's extending reach into the Spratly Islands, sending shockwaves throughout ASEAN. Moreover, diminished U.S. and Soviet engagement in Southeast Asia due to the end of the Cold War raised concerns across ASEAN about a power vacuum occurring in the region. These changes in the strategic environment drove ASEAN to pursue its own peaceful approach to the dispute.

For the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN took the approach of peaceful resolution through dialogue. As part of this approach, in 1990, ASEAN launched the track-two workshop on managing potential conflict in the South China Sea under Indonesian leadership, and China began participating in the following year. While Beijing had insisted on bilateral dialogue that gave it an advantage, it determined that continuing to reject ASEAN's request for multilateral dialogue would be counterproductive. ASEAN's distrust of China nevertheless deepened, as Beijing promulgated in 1992 the

Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, explicitly setting out its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. In July of that year, the ASEAN ministerial meeting issued the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea to keep China in check, emphasizing the peaceful resolution of disputes, restraint by all parties concerned, and the importance of a code of conduct.[8]

China, thereafter, demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with ASEAN, including by joining the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1994. Nonetheless, its opportunistic acts did not cease. In 1995, China occupied the Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef and constructed structures. Until then, Vietnam had been China's primary adversary. However, with China expanding into an area claimed by the Philippines, whose defense capabilities had weakened following the withdrawal of U.S. bases, China became a direct threat to ASEAN member states (Vietnam was not an ASEAN member at the time). For ASEAN, the Mischief Reef incident was more shocking than the 1988 military clash. Feeling alarmed, ASEAN convened an emergency ministerial meeting in March 1995. It issued a statement that criticized China's actions as posing a threat to regional peace and stability, albeit couched in indirect language, and reiterated ASEAN's call for a peaceful resolution of the dispute in accordance with the 1992 declaration.[9]

A Brief De-escalation of Tensions: Adoption of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties

In a marked departure from earlier tensions, calm returned to the South China Sea from the late 1990s through the 2000s. For roughly a decade, the confrontation between China and ASEAN over the South China Sea subsided, primarily due to China's shift in posture. During this period, Beijing sought to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN, particularly in the economic field. The circumstance underlying this was deteriorating relations with Western countries following the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, which had pushed China into growing international isolation. To break out of this predicament, it accelerated efforts to build relations with neighboring states. In this search for new friends, ASEAN was identified as one of China's promising prospective partners.

As Sino-ASEAN relations progressed in an amicable atmosphere, the formulation of a "code of conduct" (COC)—a set of rules to regulate the behavior of the parties concerned—emerged as a key issue in the South China Sea dispute. When ASEAN first proposed the COC, China was reluctant to adopt it, fearing that the code might constrain the country's claims and actions. However, China later began to engage in negotiations with ASEAN.

A factor behind China's agreement to participate in negotiations was the Taiwan Strait crisis from 1995 to 1996. Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States precipitated a rise in Sino-U.S. military tensions, driving China to repeatedly fire ballistic missiles in the Taiwan Strait. The United States responded by deploying aircraft carriers to the region. Chinese President Jiang Zemin therefore shifted course by decoupling the Taiwan issue from the South China Sea dispute and prioritizing a political response to the former. As the South China Sea dispute became a lower priority,

the South China Sea came to be viewed less as an area to be recovered by military means and more as an issue of securing access to resources. This shift created greater room for negotiations with ASEAN over the South China Sea.[10]

The conclusion of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the United States and the Philippines in 1998 further encouraged China's policy shift. Following China's occupation of Mischief Reef, the Philippines sought renewed U.S. military involvement, culminating in the VFA. Fearing that this agreement could facilitate U.S. military access to areas surrounding Taiwan and complicate China's Taiwan policy, Beijing attempted to improve its relations with ASEAN over the South China Sea and prevent closer U.S.-ASEAN military ties. Developments in the Taiwan Strait and changes in the U.S. military posture thus exerted a decisive influence on Beijing's South China Sea policy.[11]

China and ASEAN member states remained divided over two major issues regarding the content of the COC. The first concerned its geographical scope. Vietnam presented a draft that would apply to both the Spratly and the Paracel Islands, whereas other ASEAN member states took a more cautious position. The second concerned whether the COC would be legally binding. The Philippines proposed a legally binding treaty, while Malaysia and Indonesia advocated for a political document. Alongside these debates, China submitted its own draft that proposed excluding the Paracel Islands from the scope of the agreement and resolving the disputes in the Spratly Islands through bilateral negotiations. With U.S. involvement in mind, the draft also called on the parties to refrain from actions that might complicate the disputes and prohibited military activities, including patrols and joint exercises, around the Spratly Islands.[12]

To resolve their differences over the COC, ASEAN and China reached a compromise by deliberately leaving both the nature and the wording of the document ambiguous. At the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 2002, Malaysia proposed to make the COC not a legally binding instrument but a "declaration on the COC." This proposal was accepted by the other parties, effectively establishing the document as a political instrument. The parties also reached agreement on its scope by referring only to the "South China Sea" without naming specific islands. Following these adjustments, at the ASEAN-China Summit in November 2002, the countries signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) with a final provision that included an agreement to work toward the eventual formulation of a COC.[13] Although the question of a legally binding COC was deferred for future negotiation, a cooperative rather than confrontational atmosphere prevailed at this time, as illustrated by an agreement among China, the Philippines, and Vietnam to conduct joint resource exploration in the South China Sea.

The Resurgence of the South China Sea Dispute: China's Rise and Expanding Maritime Presence

After roughly a decade of de-escalation of tensions, the South China Sea dispute resurfaced around 2010. The immediate catalyst was China's expanding maritime presence. Beijing's South China Sea policy became more proactive and aggressive, and tensions in the region heightened once again. This shift was multidimensional, extending not only to the expansion of military and maritime law-enforcement capabilities but also to legal measures.

In the 2000s, China modernized the equipment available to its maritime law-enforcement agencies. The main agencies operating in the South China Sea were the China Marine Surveillance (CMS) and the Ministry of Agriculture's Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC). Both agencies built numerous large patrol vessels, including converted naval ships, and deployed them to the South China Sea. They also enhanced monitoring activities in these waters through the establishment of dedicated units and other measures.[14]

ASEAN member states, particularly the claimant states, bore the brunt of China's assertive behavior. FLEC patrol vessels began frequently detaining Vietnamese fishing boats operating near the Paracel Islands under the pretext of preserving fishery resources and maintaining Chinese sovereignty. Enforcement was ramped up from around 2007, and the number of Vietnamese fishermen detained rose sharply after 2009. Vietnam's resource exploration activities were also disrupted. In 2011 and 2012, incidents occurred in which Chinese vessels cut the cables of Vietnamese resource exploration vessels conducting surveys off the Vietnamese coast.[15]

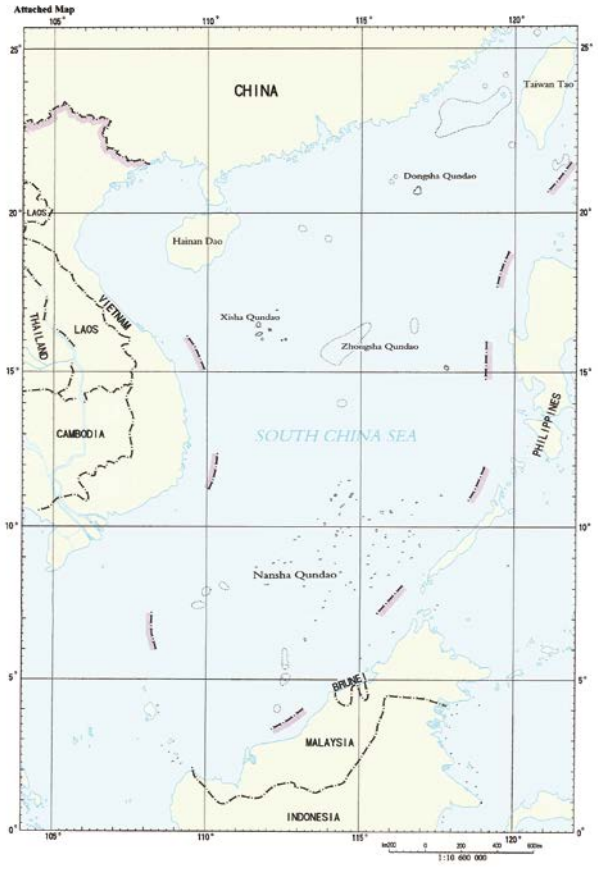
Vietnam was not the only country that faced China's aggressive actions. In April 2010, near Swallow Reef, which was under Malaysian control, three FLEC patrol vessels and two Malaysian naval frigates trained their guns on each other during a standoff that lasted 17 hours. In June of the same year, an Indonesian naval vessel detained a Chinese fishing boat near Indonesia's Natuna Islands, only to release it after coming under pressure from a FLEC patrol vessel that arrived in the area.[16] In 2011, a Philippine ship was intimidated by Chinese vessels while conducting resource exploration near Reed Bank, an area controlled by the Philippines.

Supported by annual double-digit increases in defense spending, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) also expanded and modernized its equipment, enhanced its capabilities, and displayed them to neighboring states. In July 2009, the PLA Air Force deployed its new J-10 fighter aircraft to the southernmost reaches of the Spratly Islands and refueled in-flight, demonstrating its ability to conduct operations across the South China Sea. In July 2010, vessels and aircraft belonging to the South Sea Fleet conducted a large-scale live-fire exercise involving multiple naval branches, during which numerous missiles were launched.[17]

In May 2009, Vietnam and Malaysia jointly submitted information on their extended continental shelves in the South China Sea to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, in accordance with the provisions of UNCLOS. In response, China immediately submitted a note verbale to the UN Secretary-General, arguing that the submission infringed upon China's sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in the South China Sea and requesting that the Commission not consider the submission.[18]

China attached to this note a map of the South China Sea, which represented the first official depiction of the "nine-dash line." The line, which places much of the South China Sea within the scope of China's "historic rights," has since become a source of conflicting claims between China and ASEAN member states. The line was depicted for the first time on a map officially published in 1948 by the Nationalist government and was inherited by the government of the People's Republic of China founded in the following year.[19] Yet, a detailed explanation of the nine-dash line's relationship to UNCLOS and other rules of international law was never provided.

Figure 1.1 The "Nine-Dash Line" Claimed by China



Source: Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, Note Verbale, CML/17/2009, May 7, 2009.

China's assertive posture reflected a shift away from its policy of cooperating with ASEAN. Beijing had prioritized cooperative relations with ASEAN, agreed to the peaceful resolution of disputes, and pursued joint development. Yet, criticism grew among Chinese experts and in the media that ASEAN member states were taking advantage of China's restrained posture to press ahead with their own resource development, resulting in China's failure to defend its sovereignty claims and maritime rights and interests. Meanwhile, on the legal front, trends in international law emphasized continuous and effective occupation more than the historic rights claimed by China, spreading concerns that acquiescing in the status quo would place Beijing at a legal disadvantage. Such assessments fueled China's increasing assertiveness.[20]

This shift was also underpinned by China's confidence in its great-power status and by rising nationalism. Economic growth and military buildup reinforced China's perception of itself as a great power as well as the view that it no longer needed to make concessions to the small and medium-sized states of ASEAN. Moreover, China continued to grow robustly, while the economies of the United States and Europe stagnated amid the global financial crisis of 2008. China consequently perceived that the national power gap between itself and the United States had diminished. China's foreign policy of *taoguang yanghui*—avoiding confrontation, keeping a low profile, and accumulating strength—ended, and a more active and aggressive approach was adopted. Furthermore, China's confidence as a great power enhanced patriotic sentiment and contributed to a rise in popular nationalism. Heightened nationalism prevented the government from compromising on territorial issues and put pressure on the government to take a tougher position.[21]

When China and ASEAN entered into a dispute over the South China Sea in the 1990s, the United States had little interest in the matter. For Washington, the sea had no importance beyond ensuring freedom of navigation in peacetime and securing logistical routes to the Pacific during a contingency. The United States maintained a neutral position on the sovereignty issue and believed that China and ASEAN should resolve the dispute through political channels. In other words, Washington did not regard Chinese military activities in the South China Sea as a major security challenge affecting U.S. strategic interests.[22]

By the time the South China Sea dispute reemerged around 2010, however, the landscape had changed considerably. China rose economically and used its economic power to pursue military buildup, posing a serious security challenge for the United States. The direct impetus for the U.S. involvement in the South China Sea dispute was a military incident between the United States and China. In March 2009, while sailing in the South China Sea near Hainan Island, the U.S. Navy ocean surveillance vessel USNS *Impeccable* was approached at unusually close range and obstructed by Chinese naval vessels.

Although the Obama administration's China policy was principally centered on engagement, Beijing's increasingly assertive posture in the South China Sea compelled Washington to respond. The United States' military concerns in the region were twofold. The first was the preservation of freedom

of navigation, namely, ensuring the freedom of operation of the U.S. Navy with hubs in allied and partner states, such as Japan, the Philippines, and Singapore. The second was China's rapid buildup of military capabilities that could challenge the United States in East Asia, particularly the so-called A2/AD capabilities. A2/AD capabilities refer to anti-access (A2) capabilities, intended to prevent an adversary from entering one's operational theater, and area-denial (AD) capabilities, intended to restrict an adversary's ability to maneuver once inside that theater. In other words, the sovereignty disputes themselves were less a matter of concern to the United States than a sign of the shift in the regional military balance.[23]

From 2010 onward, senior U.S. officials made clear that the United States intended to become involved in the South China Sea dispute. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates described the South China Sea as an "area of growing concern" and remarked that the sea was vital not only to the nations bordering it but also to all countries with economic and security interests in Asia.[24] At a press conference following the ARF Ministerial Meeting in July, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated, "The United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea." She further stated that the United States supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the territorial disputes and opposes the use or threat of force by any claimant.[25] At the ministerial meeting itself, the United States, ASEAN member states, and the European Union successively raised the South China Sea dispute and conducted heated exchanges with China.

Ultimately, the Obama administration's strategic response to the South China Sea dispute was outlined in the "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" concept. The strategic guidance document released by the Department of Defense in January 2012 declared, "we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region" and identified the Asia-Pacific as a region of highest priority. While the document acknowledged the importance of building a cooperative relationship with China, it cautioned that "the growth of China's military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intentions in order to avoid causing friction in the region." It went on to state that the United States would "maintain regional access and the ability to operate freely in keeping with our treaty obligations and with international law" and indicated an intention to strengthen its network of allies and partners.[26]

In relation to the South China Sea dispute, the U.S. military's pivot toward the Asia-Pacific under the "rebalancing" concept manifested through rotational deployment of U.S. Marines to Darwin in Australia and deployment of Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) to Singapore. It also reinforced alliance cooperation with the Philippines, including bilateral exercises in areas bordering the South China Sea.[27] The United States transferred Hamilton-class high-endurance cutters of the U.S. Coast Guard to the Philippines and commenced defense cooperation with Vietnam, including visits to the country by U.S. aircraft carriers and the holding of defense policy dialogues. It also became an active participant in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and other ASEAN multilateral

cooperation frameworks.

China reacted strongly against the United States' signaling of intent to involve itself in the South China Sea dispute and against the "Asia-Pacific rebalance." Beijing became increasingly suspicious that the United States had been instigated by the Philippines and Vietnam to deepen its involvement and to contain China.[28] In response, China reorganized its maritime law-enforcement agencies and strengthened interagency coordination. In 2012, the Chinese Communist Party established the Central Maritime Rights Protection Leading Small Group, which streamlined and integrated the command structure of maritime law-enforcement agencies. In 2013, the China Coast Guard was launched through the integration of maritime law-enforcement agencies, including CMS and FLEC. The Coast Guard deepened its coordination with the PLA Navy on operations and exercises at sea.

Chinese fishing vessels repeatedly operated in contested waters under the protection of Coast Guard ships, with naval vessels positioned in the background. Through this practice, China established and refined an approach of gradually expanding the areas under its de facto control. This "salami-slicing strategy" used methods that did not involve military force, such as unilateral establishment of administrative units and resource development. By incrementally expanding the geographical scope of China's fishing and other activities, the goal was to enlarge and consolidate the areas under China's de facto control without providing the opposing side with a justification for the use of military force.[29]

The South China Sea as a Focus of Great-Power Competition: The Entrenchment of Sino-U.S. Military Confrontation

China, perceiving that the United States was assisting ASEAN, escalated its assertive behavior, resulting in an intensification of tensions with ASEAN. Fierce clashes unfolded, particularly with the Philippines and Vietnam. In April 2012, a Philippine Navy patrol aircraft detected Chinese fishing vessels operating near Scarborough Shoal, approximately 200 kilometers off the coast of Luzon. The navy dispatched a frigate to the area and conducted an inspection. During the inspection, two CMS patrol vessels arrived and positioned themselves between the Chinese fishing vessels and the Philippine naval vessel. The ensuing standoff between Chinese and Philippine ships lasted for two months.[30]

Both countries initially aimed to resolve the standoff through diplomatic negotiations, but the talks soon came to a standstill. In the meantime, China applied pressure on the Philippines by economic means, such as restricting imports of Philippine bananas and discouraging Chinese tourists from traveling to the Philippines. Facing pressure from China, Manila sought assistance from its ally, the United States, which subsequently mediated discussions between the two sides. The Philippines

had understood that U.S.-mediated negotiations produced an agreement with China for both sides to simultaneously withdraw from waters around Scarborough Shoal. Nevertheless, even after the Philippines pulled its vessels out, Chinese patrol vessels and fishing vessels remained at the shoal and began preventing Philippine vessels from approaching the area. In this way, Scarborough Shoal came under China's de facto control.[31]

Realizing that diplomatic negotiations had reached their limits, the Philippines decided to turn to legal means. In January 2013, it initiated arbitration proceedings stipulated by UNCLOS to seek clarification of the legal basis of China's nine-dash line claim. China refused to participate in the proceedings, arguing that it had already agreed with the Philippines to resolve sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea through bilateral negotiations. As a consequence, arbitration proceeded in China's absence.[32]

China had an intense confrontation with Vietnam as well. In May 2014, China deployed a large oil rig south of Triton Island in the Paracel Islands and commenced resource exploration activities. Vietnam strongly objected, arguing that the rig was located within its EEZ, 130 nautical miles from its mainland baseline. Vietnam also claimed sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and argued that China's activities infringed upon Vietnamese sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. China pressed forward with its activities, asserting that the rig was within Chinese territorial waters measured from the Paracel Islands and within waters under Chinese jurisdiction based on the nine-dash line. The standoff lasted two months, with maritime law-enforcement patrol vessels of both sides engaged in a game of cat and mouse while their naval vessels remained in the background. When Vietnamese vessels approached the oil rig and demanded a halt to operations, Chinese vessels rammed and fired water cannons at the Vietnamese vessels. The incident heightened anti-China nationalism in Vietnam, triggering large-scale demonstrations and riots that resulted in fatalities in parts of the country.[33]

As the confrontation with Vietnam continued, China made bold moves to fundamentally alter the status quo in the South China Sea—land reclamation and militarization of features under its control. In May 2014, it was revealed that China was carrying out land reclamation at Johnson South Reef. The reclamation work had begun in December 2013. China first reclaimed approximately 0.1 square kilometers on a trial basis at each of four features in the Spratly Islands: Johnson South Reef, Hughes Reef, Cuarteron Reef, and Gaven Reefs. It then undertook larger projects extending over several square kilometers at the remaining three features: Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef.[34]



A Chinese vessel colliding into a Vietnamese vessel, June 2014 (AFP/Jiji)

Increasingly alarmed by the rapid pace of land reclamation, Washington called on Beijing for an immediate and lasting halt

to land reclamation.[35] China disregarded the U.S. demand and accelerated the pace of reclamation, announcing in June 2015 that the work "will be completed in the upcoming days."[36] In the end, China reclaimed a total of 13 square kilometers across all seven features in a year and a half.[37]

During his visit to the United States in September 2015, President Xi Jinping stated that China "does not intend to pursue militarization" of the artificial islands.[38] Despite this, China proceeded to develop infrastructure and military facilities after the reclamation work was completed. Ports, lighthouses, and radar and communications facilities were constructed on various features. Close-in weapon systems (CIWS) and antiaircraft guns were also installed. On Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef—the three features that underwent particularly extensive reclamation—runways approximately 3,000 meters long as well as aircraft hangars were built. At the same time, fortification work was also carried out in the Paracel Islands, especially Woody Island.[39]

The constructed and militarized artificial islands served as bases from which Chinese naval vessels, maritime law-enforcement patrol vessels, and fishing vessels carrying maritime militia personnel maintained a constant presence in the South China Sea. Together with radar-based surveillance, these deployments enabled China to exert further pressure on ASEAN claimant states. Chinese fishing vessels escorted by patrol vessels began to operate frequently in waters near Indonesia and Malaysia. Meanwhile, Vietnam's resource development activities off its own coast became subject to persistent Chinese harassment.[40]

For China, land reclamation and the arbitration proceedings initiated by the Philippines were closely intertwined. The primary reason China pressed ahead with reclamation and militarization was to strengthen the presence of its military and maritime law-enforcement agencies in the South China Sea, thereby limiting the activities of neighboring states and the United States and expanding and strengthening China's de facto sphere of influence. Behind this, however, was China's concern that an arbitral award could place it at a disadvantage under international law. In fact, China had even proposed suspending construction of the artificial islands if the Philippines dropped the arbitration proceedings.[41]

In response to China's rapidly expanding military presence in the South China Sea, the United States conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). These operations are carried out by U.S. naval and air forces to deliberately disregard another state's maritime claims when Washington deems them to be excessive. The first FONOP to protest China's construction of artificial islands took place in October 2015. In this operation, the guided-missile destroyer USS *Lassen* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef without prior notification, challenging China's requirement that foreign naval vessels obtain prior permission before transiting under innocent passage. In the fourth FONOP conducted in October 2016, the guided-missile destroyer USS *Decatur* navigated through the Paracel Islands, rejecting China's straight baseline claims around the islands. In the fifth FONOP in May 2017, the guided-missile destroyer USS *Dewey* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef in a zigzag pattern and simultaneously conducted a man overboard drill. The United States rejected the position

that the reef constituted an "island" under international law capable of generating a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea.[42]

In addition to carrying out FONOPs, the United States increased bilateral exercises with its allies. In April 2015, the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise included the largest amphibious operations training in 15 years. More than 11,000 U.S. and Philippine personnel participated in the exercise.[43] In October of the same year, the first FONOP was followed by the U.S. Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's bilateral exercise in the South China Sea, involving the aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* and the destroyer JS *Fuyuzuki*.[44]

The United States also began to make greater efforts to provide capacity-building assistance for ASEAN claimant states. The Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), which gained momentum in 2016, focused on strengthening maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities. Specifically, the scheme was designed to support the capacity building of countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia.[45]

In July 2016, the arbitral tribunal rendered its award in the South China Sea arbitration. The tribunal concluded that China's claims based on the nine-dash line had no legal basis and found that China's land reclamation at features was unlawful. Beijing reacted strongly, judging that the award was null and void and declaring that it would neither accept nor recognize it.[46] By contrast, the United States presented the view that, as provided in UNCLOS, the award was final and legally binding on both the Philippines and China. It also expressed hope and expectation that both parties will comply with the legal obligations arising from the award.[47]

The FONOPs, bilateral exercises with allies, capacity-building assistance for ASEAN states, and criticism of China on the grounds of the arbitral award comprised a package of U.S. measures to check China. This line of policy toward the South China Sea was largely preserved across changes of administration.

The first Trump administration explicitly identified China as a strategic competitor. The National Security Strategy released in December 2017 stated that the United States faced political, economic, and military competition from China, which it described as challenging American power, influence, and interests and attempting to erode U.S. security and prosperity. At the same time, it criticized China's construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea for endangering free trade, threatening the sovereignty of other nations, and undermining regional stability.[48] The South China Sea became a flashpoint of



Guided-missile destroyer USS *Dewey* conducting FONOP, May 2017 (AFP/Jiji)

military confrontation between the United States and China. Whereas FONOPs under the Obama administration had been conducted cautiously at intervals of once every three to five months, their frequency surged to approximately once every one to two months under the first Trump administration at the initiative of the Department of Defense.[49]

Under the Biden administration, the frequency of FONOPs declined to once every three to four months. In a new development, however, the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait came to be treated as a continuous theater of operations against the backdrop of tensions over Taiwan. In July 2022, for example, the guided-missile destroyer USS *Benfold* transited the Taiwan Strait after conducting a FONOP in the South China Sea.[50]

Furthermore, the United States began to collaborate with allies and partner countries more actively. In November 2021, the U.S. Navy conducted a bilateral anti-submarine exercise with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force in the South China Sea. In September 2022, the U.S. Navy carried out a bilateral exercise of surface action group operations with the Royal Canadian Navy.[51] The United States also engaged in minilateral cooperation. At the March 2023 meeting of the foreign ministers of Japan, the United States, Australia, and India (Quad), they strongly opposed any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo or increase tensions, keeping in mind China's activities in the South and East China Seas. They further confirmed their intention to launch the Quad Maritime Security Working Group, with a view to strengthening maritime security cooperation, and to implement the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).[52]

In January 2022, the Department of State published a report assessing the validity of China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea under international law. The report concluded that China's claims to sovereignty over features in the South China Sea, its establishment of straight baselines around the Spratly and Paracel Islands, its rights to their internal waters, territorial sea, EEZ, and continental shelf, as well as its historic rights were all inconsistent with UNCLOS and other rules of international law and criticized these claims for gravely undermining the international maritime order based on the rule of law.[53]

Although the second Trump administration is said to be further championing "America First" and to have a strategic orientation toward the Western Hemisphere, its official documents have expressed an interest in the South China Sea. The National Security Strategy released in December 2025 highlighted the importance of the South China Sea primarily from the perspective of economic security. It stated that "Given that one-third of global shipping passes annually through the South China Sea, this has major implications for the U.S. economy," and warned that "A related security challenge is the potential for any competitor to control the South China Sea. This could allow a potentially hostile power to impose a toll system over one of the world's most vital lanes of commerce or—worse—to close and reopen it at will. Either of those two outcomes would be harmful to the U.S. economy and broader U.S. interests."[54] At an informal U.S.-ASEAN defense ministers' meeting held on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth likewise

expressed concerns about China's coercive activity against other claimant states in the South China Sea and emphasized the importance of ASEAN states playing their respective roles in maintaining peace and security in the region.[55]

Under the current Trump administration, the United States has maintained its presence in the South China Sea by continuing to conduct regular minilateral exercises. Beyond the multilateral exercises centered on the Philippines, a U.S.-Australia-U.K. trilateral exercise took place in February 2025, followed by a U.S.-Australia bilateral exercise in October.[56] That said, FONOPs were conducted only twice in 2025, in May and August. In February 2026, the number of U.S. military patrols over the South China Sea reportedly dropped by approximately 30%, possibly reflecting the concentration of U.S. forces in the Middle East for the military operations in Iran.[57]

China, for its part, has stepped up its measures against a broad range of U.S. activities, including shadowing FONOPs, monitoring exercises, and interfering with U.S. and Australian patrols. China at times even conducts large-scale exercises coinciding with U.S. military exercises. For example, in July 2022, after the Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group was deployed to the South China Sea and conducted operational exercises that included joint air and maritime tactical training, China carried out a large-scale five-day exercise in the Paracel Islands.[58] Should the power balance in the region change, China may seize the opportunity by boosting its activities and seeking to expand and strengthen its sphere of influence in the South China Sea.

Having completed the reclamation and militarization of the features under its control, China is moving to the next stage for further securing and expanding that control. In December 2022, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs said it was "seriously concerned" about the report that China had begun reclamation at four previously unoccupied features in the Spratly Islands.[59] Additionally, China has increased its activities in the Paracel Islands, including by commencing full-scale reclamation work at Antelope Reef from late 2025.[60]

Conclusion

The South China Sea dispute originated from sovereignty claims made by early modern states in East Asia and evolved into a postwar struggle among nation-states in the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, it developed into a security concern between China and ASEAN. Around 2010, U.S. involvement in the dispute gained momentum, and the South China Sea became a flashpoint of Sino-U.S. military confrontation. In the early stages of the sovereignty disputes, the principal motivations of the claimant states lay in the economic value of the surrounding waters and features, particularly their natural resources. Territorial nationalism came to the fore more prominently around 2010, when the dispute began to reemerge, reinforcing China's assertive posture and prompting resistance from ASEAN

claimant states. At the same time, against the backdrop of Sino-U.S. confrontation, the strategic value of the South China Sea attracted attention, intensifying military confrontation between the two countries. The historical evolution of the dispute has revealed the multiple reasons for which the South China Sea is valued.

The dispute instantly grew more serious with China's construction and militarization of artificial islands. In response, the United States bolstered its measures against China, escalating the neck-and-neck race between the two countries. Since then, incidents have occurred with greater frequency, and tensions have persisted. The arena of competition has expanded from the sea surface and airspace to the seabed, and its repercussions have extended well beyond neighboring countries and the parties concerned. Sino-U.S. confrontation in the South China Sea has become entrenched, making the region a symbol of their strategic competition.

The United States kept China in check through a package of measures combining FONOPs, bilateral exercises with allies, capacity-building assistance for ASEAN states, and criticism of China on the grounds of the arbitral award. This line of policy toward the South China Sea has been largely preserved, even after the changes of administration. Under the Biden administration, the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait came to be treated as an integrated theater of operations, and cooperation with allies increased. Under the second Trump administration, U.S. engagement has continued on the basis of institutionalized cooperation with allies and like-minded partners. Looking ahead, attention will be paid to what new actions China will take in response to intensifying great-power competition and shifts in the regional balance of power.



NIDS China Security Report 2027

China and the South China Sea:
The Dynamics of Maritime Issues


(Xinhua/Kyodo News Images)

Chapter Two

The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and the South China Sea

IIDA Masafumi

Introduction

Since around 2010, China has intensified its efforts to alter the status quo in the South China Sea by force or coercion. These moves have prompted concerns among Southeast Asian claimant states and triggered confrontations with the United States, making the activities one of the principal sources of instability in East Asia's maritime domain. Contrary to common perceptions, however, China's maritime endeavors to expand its control in the South China Sea began no later than the 1970s. For over half a century, China has gradually advanced changes to the regional status quo through a reliance on force or coercion.

China's strategic objectives and conduct in the South China Sea have evolved over time, shaped by the growth of its national power and the international environment confronting Beijing. To understand China's present activities in the South China Sea, understanding these changes offers a starting point.

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has played a central role in China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea. This chapter traces the evolution of the naval strategy to shed light on how China's military objectives in this region have changed. It then seeks to analyze China's increasing military presence in the South China Sea and its objectives from two perspectives: securing and expanding territorial sovereignty over features and maritime rights; and resolving the Taiwan issue, which constitutes the "core of China's core interests" for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership.

China's Naval Strategic Transformation to the Far Seas

From "Littoral Defense and Coastal Defense" to "Near Seas Defense"

The PLAN marked its 77th anniversary on April 23, 2026. As part of the celebrations, more than 40 naval vessels were opened to the public in over 10 cities, reportedly drawing large numbers of visitors.[1] The PLAN was established in Baima Town in Taizhou, Jiangsu Province and has since grown significantly. Seventy-seven years after its founding, the PLAN is now a formidable force with the world's largest inventory of warships, surpassing the U.S. Navy. As the PLAN underwent considerable transformation, so too did its naval strategy.

The Science of Military Strategy (2013), published by the Academy of Military Sciences, the highest-level research institute of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), explains that China's naval strategy had evolved in three phases.[2] The first phase was the strategy of "littoral defense and coastal

defense" from the navy's establishment to the end of the 1970s. In the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), its maritime security agenda was mainly: 1) protecting sea lines of communication from Nationalist forces and other threats, 2) recovering Taiwan and achieving national reunification, and 3) preventing seaborne aggression by the United States and other countries. To carry out these missions, the PLAN gradually strengthened its organizational structure. By 1955, it was comprised of five branches: the Surface Force, the Submarine Force, the Naval Air Force, the Coastal Defense Force, and the Marine Corps. However, the navy was poorly equipped at this time, lacked the capacity to conduct independent operations, and could operate only in inshore waters in coordination with the army and air force. "Littoral defense" was supposedly no more than a limited extension of land engagements to the littoral region. From the late 1950s through the end of the 1970s, the PLAN's strategic mission shifted from the retaking of coastal features occupied by adversaries to the defense of the nation at sea, and progress was made in the indigenous production of weapons and equipment. As a result, the PLAN came to adopt a strategy of "coastal defense" premised on conducting independent maritime operations.

The second phase was the strategy of "near seas defense" from the 1980s to the early 2000s. In July 1979, Deng Xiaoping observed that China faced a "powerful navy of a hegemon" and noted, "Our strategy is near seas operations." Building on Deng's emphasis on the "near seas," the PLAN considered a new strategy under the leadership of Commander Liu Huaqing and formally unveiled the strategy of "near seas defense" at the end of 1985. This strategy consists of five main components.

First, unlike either far seas invasion or coastal defense, "near seas defense" was a strategy of zonal defense. Second, it was defensive in nature. This defensive orientation would remain unchanged even if the navy were to undergo modernization. Third, the PLAN's primary maritime areas of operations were the waters outside the First Island Chain as well as the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea within this chain of archipelagos. Fourth, the strategic objectives were to: 1) achieve national reunification, safeguard territorial integrity, and protect maritime rights, 2) prepare for limited wars at sea, 3) deter and defend against seaborne aggression by imperialist and hegemonic powers, and 4) preserve peace in the Asia-Pacific region. Fifth, the navy's strategic missions were differentiated between peacetime and contingency. In peacetime, its main missions were to: 1) achieve and maintain national reunification, 2) safeguard territorial sovereignty and maritime rights, 3) support the nation's foreign policy, 4) deter seaborne aggression, 5) prepare for limited wars that might arise at sea, and 6) participate in and support socialist construction. In wartime, its principal missions were to: 1) effectively combat an adversary's seaborne invasion, 2) ensure safe navigation on China's sea lines of communication, and 3) participate in nuclear counterattack operations.[3]

A New Strategy Encompassing the "Far Seas"

The third phase in the evolution of China's naval strategy was "near seas defense and far seas protection" beginning in 2004, according to *The Science of Military Strategy (2013)*. The new strategy

retained "near seas defense" and added the defense of the "far seas" that lie even farther from the mainland. This strategic shift was driven by the significant globalization of the Chinese economy. With the rapid expansion of international trade, the need to ensure safe navigation on the sea lines of communication connecting China and other countries became increasingly important. At the same time, as Chinese companies further expanded overseas, there was a growing need to protect their assets, together with the interests and safety of Chinese citizens working overseas. Professor Quan Jinfu at Nanjing Political College noted that the national interests that China must protect at sea have extended beyond the "near seas" into the "far seas," and, in order to protect those interests, the PLAN must have the capability to address military threats to those interests beyond the "near seas."[4]

The Science of Military Strategy (2013) states that China's "strategic front lines are gradually extending from the near seas into the far seas, where national survival and development interests are at stake," and therefore, "the construction of near seas and far seas battlefields must be planned in an integrated manner." It further argues that the PLAN, "while continuously improving its comprehensive operational capabilities in the near seas, should gradually shift toward far seas protection and enhance its far seas maneuver operational capability." It explains that the PLAN "must gradually construct a maritime defense system suited to the requirements for safeguarding the nation's maritime security and development interests, and thereby, actively deter and effectively respond to war threats coming from the maritime domain."[5]

Under the strategy of "near seas defense and far seas protection," *The Science of Military Strategy (2013)* lists the following eight missions that the PLAN should perform.[6]

(1) Participation in large-scale operations on key strategic fronts: This refers to securing victory in war and defending national unity through various operations, such as firepower strikes, maritime and air blockades, multidimensional assaults on features, and counterattacks against intervention by a powerful adversary, in close coordination with other services.

(2) Protecting the sovereignty of features and maritime rights: The strategy identifies that effectively protecting the maritime sovereignty and rights of China, along with preventing infringement of its interests by other states and ensuring China's maritime development activities, are enduring and important missions of the PLAN.

(3) Deterring and stopping military incursions from the sea: The coastal areas in China, including the capital, Beijing, host numerous political, economic, and transportation hubs and could become an adversary's priority targets for attacks. The strategy states that, to prevent long-range precision strikes by an adversary, the PLAN must deploy forces forward to strike the adversary and expand the depth of defense against the adversary's attacks to protect coastal cities.

(4) Ensuring safe navigation on sea lines of communication: More than 90% of China's trade in goods depends on maritime transportation. Furthermore, sea lines of communication, such as the Strait of Malacca, constitute lifelines for the country's development. Ensuring safe sea lines in both peacetime and wartime is essential.

(5) Protecting Chinese interests and ensuring the safety of Chinese citizens overseas: As Chinese companies and citizens grow their global presence, Chinese assets and citizens overseas are increasingly exposed to risk. The strategy states that protecting overseas assets and citizens has become an enduring mission of the PLAN.

(6) Participation in nuclear deterrence and nuclear counterattack: According to the strategy, the PLAN, a service that operates strategic nuclear-powered submarines, must actively conduct nuclear deterrence and counterattack operations in order to defeat attempts by an adversary to launch or threaten nuclear attacks.

(7) Supporting military conflicts on land: According to the strategy, in the event of a land war, the PLAN is required to contain the adversary through maritime operations.

(8) Contributing to international maritime security: The strategy suggests that playing a part in ensuring international maritime security demonstrates the fulfillment of China's international responsibilities as a major power with global influence.

A Further Emphasis on the "Far Seas"

To date, the PLAN appears to have retained "near seas defense and far seas protection" as its strategy. In recent years, however, discussions within the PLA have evidently placed greater emphasis on "far seas protection" than on "near seas defense." For example, *The Science of Military Strategy (2020 edition)* published in 2020 by the National Defense University, the PLA's highest institution of learning, observes that, as the Chinese government actively advances the Belt and Road Initiative, "the expansion of China's strategic interests into the far seas or even global waters is accelerating." It further notes that, to effectively safeguard maritime sovereignty, development, and security interests and actively extend the depth of maritime defense, "new and higher demands are placed on the navy's far seas operational capabilities." On this basis, the strategy calls for "a historic transformation from a navy oriented toward near seas defense to one oriented toward far seas protection."[7]

With economic reform and opening making significant progress, China's maritime interests have expanded further, while the country has become increasingly dependent on maritime transportation for foreign trade and energy imports. Against this backdrop, *The Science of Military Strategy (2020 edition)* states, "The safety of maritime shipping routes for oil and trade is of critical importance to China's development. The navy must ensure the safety of the nation's strategic waterways and push strategic forward-edge defense from the near seas into the far seas, where national survival and development interests are at stake." To that end, the PLAN will "shift from focusing on improving operational capabilities for near seas defense to focusing on improving operational capabilities for far seas protection."[8]

The Science of Military Strategy (2020 edition) argues that shifting to a far seas-oriented navy requires transforming the PLAN's force structure from one centered on conventional light capabilities designed for operations in the near seas, to a new structure built around carrier strike groups

and nuclear-powered submarines. The strategy maintains, for example, that accompanying vessels, aircraft, and logistical capabilities should be developed in a coordinated and systematic manner in line with the operational capabilities of major platforms, such as aircraft carriers. It further states that, in order to conduct integrated joint operations across domains, the PLAN must develop new operational capabilities in areas such as reconnaissance and early warning, long-range precision strikes, maritime strikes, and information operations. By establishing a multidimensional strike system integrating the subsurface, surface, land, air, and space domains and coordinating long-, medium-, and short-range capabilities, the PLAN should seek to overcome "the weakness of its far seas operational capabilities."[9] With regard to the specific equipment the PLAN should have, the document identifies aircraft carriers, large destroyers, strategic nuclear-powered submarines, large ocean-going replenishment ships, and long-range carrier-based aircraft, with a view to ensuring safe sea lines of communication in the far seas and enabling the PLAN to "develop an effective capability to deter and strike the maritime forces of a powerful adversary" in the far seas. At the same time, it stresses the need to develop equipment for near seas operations that is "mobile, flexible, fast, precise, and lethal" in order to address security threats in the near seas.[10]

As the PLAN places greater emphasis on its role in "far seas protection," *The Science of Military Strategy (2020 edition)* indicates seven specific capabilities that the PLAN should strengthen.[11]

(1) Sea-based strategic deterrence and counterattack capability: This refers to the ability to flexibly deploy strategic nuclear submarines carrying submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), conduct strategic reconnaissance and early-warning missions, and perform strategic strike missions. Combined with the ability to retaliate against an enemy first nuclear strike, these abilities are said to constitute critical strategic capabilities that could determine the outcome of a nation's political, diplomatic, and military struggles.

(2) Mobile far seas operational capability: This refers to the ability to control critical strategic waterways, protect sea lines of communication, safeguard overseas interests, deter military crises at sea, and contribute to the maintenance of world peace, building on the PLAN's mobile operational capability in the near seas. Mobile operations in the far seas, at considerable distances from the Chinese mainland, cannot rely on fire support or replenishment support from the shore. Therefore, the PLAN needs to strengthen capabilities in early warning and surveillance, the collection and analysis of information and data, operational decision-making on the battlefield, coordinated fleet actions, precision weapon strikes, and self-protection of fleets.

(3) Comprehensive near seas operational capability: This refers to the ability to coordinate multiple service arms and branches to perform missions in the near seas, such as homeland defense, protection of features, protection of sea lines of communication, and maritime strikes. Specifically, this includes reconnaissance and early warning capabilities, the ability to control the situation, the ability to respond to sudden incidents, the ability to strike against enemy targets, the ability to self-defend, and the ability to provide effective support to maritime areas of operations in the near seas. The

strategy states that the PLAN will use the near seas as the main training ground to conduct near seas defense effectively and build a "foundation for gradually improving practical capabilities in the far seas."

(4) Comprehensive sea control capability: This refers to the capability to effectively dominate areas of troop operations on, beneath, and above the sea, enabling the PLAN to seize and maintain comprehensive control over the main maritime areas of operations. Specifically, these capabilities are said to include comprehensive situational awareness in the battlefield; target discrimination; target tracking; high-speed, secure information communications through networks seamlessly linking the land, sea, air, space, and undersea domains; effective information interference, destruction, deception, and protection; and satellite navigation, meteorological, and hydrographical information support.

(5) Amphibious operational capability: This refers to the ability to project campaign-scale Marine Corps and special operations forces and reach the shore (features) from the sea. Amphibious operations are among the most complex military operations of modern warfare and are said to require substantial mobility, air support capability, maritime transport and support capability, and the ability to conduct effective assaults and strikes against an adversary.

(6) Comprehensive maritime support capability: This refers to information support, navigation support, logistics support, and equipment and technical support capabilities tailored to sea-based military operations. The PLAN, which performs a range of missions and faces complex battlefield environments, is required to improve its survivability in the maritime battlefield by developing information support capabilities, such as information collection, information transmission, information control, and information warfare. According to the strategy, the PLAN also needs to accelerate the construction of comprehensive repair ships, hospital and rescue ships, and large replenishment ships in order to strengthen its support capabilities for vessels and personnel in the far seas.

(7) Capability for military operations other than war: This refers to the ability to use naval power by means other than war for achieving political, economic, diplomatic, military, and humanitarian rescue objectives. Specifically, the strategy envisions the following operations: maritime rights protection, maritime counterterrorism operations, escorts in the far seas, rescue at sea, evacuation of Chinese citizens overseas, and participation in joint drills overseas. Regarding naval construction, the document continues to give priority to strengthening the core military capabilities required to prevail in war, but at the same time places emphasis on building up capabilities for military operations other than war.

For "near seas defense and far seas protection," *The Science of Military Strategy (2013)* stressed that the PLAN should "continuously improve its comprehensive operational capabilities in the near seas while gradually shifting toward far seas protection and strengthening its mobile operational capabilities in the far seas." By contrast, *The Science of Military Strategy (2020 edition)*, published seven years later, underscores "far seas protection" more than "near seas defense," urging the PLAN to "achieve a historic transformation from a navy oriented toward near seas defense to one oriented

Table 2.1 Evolution of China's Naval Strategy

Period	Strategy	Outline
1950s to 1970s	Littoral defense and coastal defense	Main area of operations: inland waters and littoral and coastal areas not far from the mainland. Main objectives: supporting land engagements, preventing enemy infiltration from sea, etc.
1980s to beginning of 2000s	Near seas defense	Main area of operations: Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea. Main objectives: prevention of enemy invasion, national reunification, safeguarding of territory, protection of sea lines of communication, protection of maritime rights, etc.
Mid-2000s –	Near seas defense and far seas protection	Main area of operations: far seas in addition to near seas. Main objectives: while maintaining and strengthening the near seas defense strategy, safeguarding China's interests overseas and being ready to counterattack with nuclear weapons, participating in international security cooperation, etc.
Beginning of 2020s –	Near seas defense < Far seas protection	While the "near seas defense and far seas protection" strategy is essentially maintained, there is a tendency to place greater focus on "far seas protection" driven by overseas interests, the need to ensure safe sea lines of communication, and intensifying competition with the United States.

Source: National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan (NIDS), ed., *China Security Report 2016*, NIDS, 2016, p. 7, table, adapted and modified by the author.

toward far seas protection." This shift appears to reflect events in the intervening period, such as the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative under Xi Jinping and the commencement of strategic competition with the United States, all of which increased China's need to protect sea lines of communication and overseas interests beyond the First Island Chain and deter U.S. military operations in waters farther from the mainland. This is not to suggest that *The Science of Military Strategy (2020 edition)* dismisses "near seas defense." The 2020 edition places emphasis on operational capabilities in the near seas, including the South China Sea, and amphibious operational capabilities. It should therefore be understood that the 2020 strategy retains the notion that the PLAN plays an important role in achieving national reunification, safeguarding territory, and protecting maritime rights. Given that strengthening "far seas protection" capabilities makes it difficult for hostile forces to approach the First Island Chain, it also contributes to bolstering "near seas defense."

One of the forces responsible for "near seas defense" in the South China Sea is the PLAN Marine Corps, a force that the PLA has been strengthening in recent years. In April 2017, the PLA enlarged the Marine Corps from two brigades to eight and established its own headquarters. As part of this reorganization, the PLAN sought to reinforce its air assault capability by creating a special operations brigade that incorporates the PLAN's Jiaolong Commandos special operations unit, along with an aviation brigade that operates transport helicopters. In April 2021, the PLAN commissioned *Hainan*, the first Type 075 landing helicopter dock (LHD). Displacing 40,000 tons and equipped with

both a well deck and a full-length flight deck, the Type 075 LHD is a large vessel expected to enhance the Marine Corps' ability to wage landing and invasion operations from both the sea and air.[12] The PLAN has since commissioned four Type 075 LHDs, and at the end of 2024, launched *Sichuan*, a Type 076 LHD equipped with an electromagnetic catapult.[13] Because the Type 076 LHD can operate unmanned aerial vehicles with reconnaissance, strike, and other capabilities, it is believed that the Marine Corps will be able to perform sophisticated operations employing unmanned aerial vehicles in the near future.

Sovereignty over Features and Maritime Rights

Expansion of Control Through Military Force

China is engaged in disputes with several Southeast Asian states regarding sovereignty over features and maritime rights in the South China Sea. With Vietnam, it contests sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands, and with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, it has overlapping claims in the Spratly Islands. For Beijing, it is an important national interest to secure an advantageous position in disputes over territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea and consolidate and expand those claims. Likewise, China's naval strategy discussed in the preceding section identifies the defense of territorial sovereignty over features and the protection of maritime rights as its key objectives. In practice, the PLAN has employed its capabilities to expand China's control in the South China Sea.

In January 1974, the PLAN attacked South Vietnam's navy and brought the entirety of the Paracel Islands under Chinese control. Located in the South China Sea approximately 300 kilometers south of Hainan Island, the Paracels consist of the Amphitrite Group in the north and the Crescent Group in the south, with China controlling the northern group and South Vietnam the southern group. After U.S. forces withdrew from Vietnam in March 1973, weakening U.S. support for the South Vietnamese military, China planted flags and otherwise sought to expand its presence in the Crescent Group. This led to a naval engagement between South Vietnam's naval vessels, which were dispatched to remove Chinese flags, and PLAN vessels. The clash resulted in more than 100 South Vietnamese casualties and more than 80 Chinese casualties. Ultimately, South Vietnamese naval forces were defeated, enabling the PLAN to occupy the Crescent Group.[14]

In March 1988, the PLAN launched an attack against the Vietnamese navy over the Spratly Islands. In February of that year, the PLAN constructed a marine observation station at Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratlys, which were under Vietnamese control. The Vietnamese navy responded by deploying forces to five features, including Johnson South Reef, bringing the two sides into confrontation. When a clash broke out on March 14, better-equipped Chinese forces sank two Vietnamese

vessels and overwhelmingly defeated Vietnamese forces, bringing all six features under Chinese control. More than 60 Vietnamese personnel are said to have died in the skirmish.[15] It is of note that since this sea battle the PLA has not fought combat with any foreign forces.

In February 1995, China erected an observation post on Mischief Reef, which at the time was under the de facto control of the Philippines. After discovering this, the Philippine government lodged a strong protest with the PRC government, but it refused to remove the structure, claiming that it had been built by local authorities to serve as a shelter for fishermen. While talks between their diplomatic authorities ensued, the PLAN dispatched vessels to nearby waters and ramped up military pressure, forcing the Philippine government to abandon its resistance. Thereafter, China gradually built more observation posts, deployed its forces, and consolidated its occupation of the reef. As the above illustrates, China pursued changes to the status quo in the South China Sea through the use and threat of military force and expanded its control over features from the 1970s through the 1990s.

The Emergence of Maritime Law-Enforcement Agencies and the Militarization of the South China Sea

From the late 1990s, China began to avoid confrontation with other claimant states and display a cooperative posture in the South China Sea. The plausible motivations include growing perceptions of a China threat among Southeast Asian countries and Beijing's policy of promoting regional cooperation in East Asia following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In December 2000, China and Vietnam reached an agreement on the delimitation of their territorial seas and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the Gulf of Tonkin. In November 2002, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) signed the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea."[16] By demonstrating a degree of compromise on the South China Sea dispute, which had impeded better relations with ASEAN member states, China was able to pave the way for signing a joint declaration on the "Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" with ASEAN in October 2003.[17] In March 2005, China, the Philippines, and Vietnam agreed to conduct joint resource exploration in the South China Sea.[18]

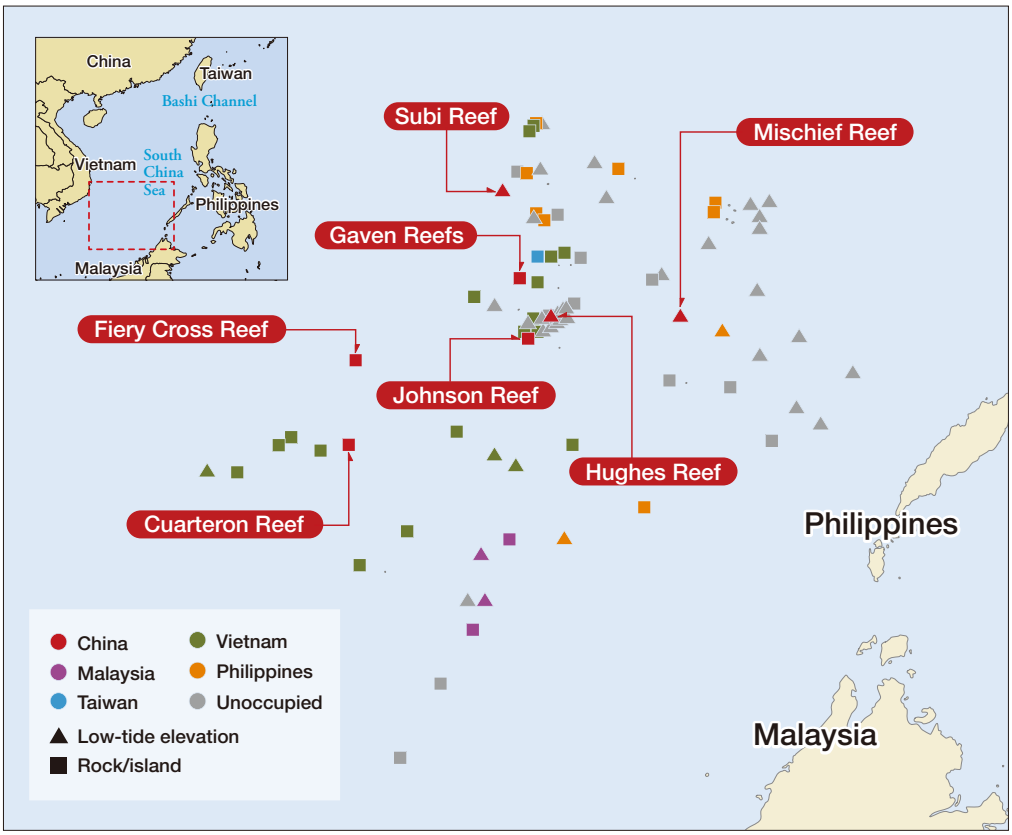
From around the end of the 2000s, however, China once again adopted an assertive posture toward other claimant states in the South China Sea. At the forefront were maritime law-enforcement agencies, such as the China Marine Surveillance (CMS) and the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC). In April 2010, a FLEC cutter approached Swallow Reef, which was under de facto Malaysian control, and a standoff erupted with a Malaysian military vessel and aircraft lasting several hours. In May 2011, CMS cutters approached a Vietnamese survey ship operating in an EEZ claimed by Vietnam, obstructed its navigation, and cut the exploration cables it was towing.

In 2012, Chinese maritime law-enforcement agencies turned to more assertive tactics. In April of that year, a Philippine aircraft patrolling over Scarborough Shoal, which was under de facto Philippine control, spotted Chinese fishing trawlers anchored in the waters of the shoal. A Philippine

Navy vessel conducted an inspection and found that the Chinese vessels had been engaged in illegal fishing. When Philippine authorities attempted to detain the vessels, two CMS cutters arrived at the scene and obstructed Philippine law-enforcement efforts. The incident triggered a standoff between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal. Government vessels from both sides remained in a standoff for roughly two months. During this period, Beijing intensified pressure on Manila by restricting imports of Philippine agricultural products and signaling the possibility of military clashes. Ultimately, in June, Philippine government vessels withdrew from the area, while Chinese government vessels stayed put, giving China de facto control of Scarborough Shoal. What this meant was that China had succeeded in altering the status quo in the South China Sea using maritime law-enforcement agencies. It subsequently integrated several maritime law-enforcement agencies and established the China Coast Guard (CCG), which has acted as a vanguard that attempts to change the status quo not only in the South China Sea but also in the East China Sea.

At the same time, the PLA, too, steadily expanded its presence in the South China Sea. From around 2014, China began to create artificial islands by undertaking large-scale land reclamation at seven reefs and rocks in the region. The United States and other countries expressed concern that these

Figure 2.1 China's Military Outposts in the Spratly Islands



Source: Prepared by the author based on Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), "Island Features of the South China Sea" and other sources.

islands would be used for military purposes, but during a visit to the United States in September 2015, President Xi Jinping affirmed at a joint press conference with then President Barack Obama that China "does not intend to pursue militarization" of the South China Sea.[19] Nevertheless, China proceeded to construct military facilities on the artificial islands. In particular, in Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef, runways approximately 3,000 meters long were constructed, as well as large-scale port facilities and other infrastructure. These features have since become important PLA outposts in the South China Sea.

The PLA's construction of multiple military outposts in the South China Sea appears to be aimed at strengthening its comprehensive sea control capabilities. Large-scale port facilities serve as operating bases for PLAN vessels and CCG cutters and give China an advantage in establishing sea superiority in the South China Sea. Long runways can accommodate a wide range of Chinese military aircraft, including fighter aircraft, and are expected to substantially improve the PLA's capability for aircraft deployment. It is also conceivable that the installation of radar-centered intelligence-gathering facilities on all artificial islands has boosted the PLA's situational awareness capabilities in the region. In line with its strategy of "near seas defense," the PLA, particularly the PLAN, has steadily strengthened its dominance in the South China Sea.

Increasing Military Pressure on Claimant States

As the PLA expanded its presence and strengthened dominance in the South China Sea, it also ramped up military pressure on rival claimant states over sovereignty, territory, and maritime rights. The Philippines, locked in a dispute with China over the Spratly Islands, instituted arbitral proceedings with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in January 2013, seeking a determination that the "nine-dash line" claimed by China was inconsistent with international law. The arbitral tribunal accepted the arbitration initiated by the Philippines. After considering the Philippine submissions, the tribunal issued its award in July 2016. Although China claimed historic rights in the South China Sea on the grounds that Chinese fishermen had operated for more than 2,000 years, the tribunal concluded that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the "nine-dash line."[20] China is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and has an obligation to comply with the arbitral award. Nevertheless, Beijing dismissed it as "a worthless piece of paper" and indicated that it would not comply. During a meeting with then President Donald Tusk of the European Council, President Xi Jinping reiterated, "China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea will not be influenced by the so-called award of the South China Sea arbitration case. China rejects any propositions and actions based on the arbitral award."[21]

Beijing made clear that it will not accept the arbitral award by intensifying military activities in the South China Sea. From July 19 to 21, shortly after the award was issued, the PLAN's South Sea Fleet conducted a large-scale confrontation drill in the region. Naval Air Force fighters reportedly flew

dozens of sorties and fired several hundred rounds of live ammunition. The fighter aircraft and surface naval forces conducted a confrontation exercise intended to improve their long-range strike capabilities.[22] On July 19, the PLA Air Force dispatched H-6K bombers to the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal to conduct a "combat patrol." The executive vice president of the China Institute of International Studies explained that such patrols constituted an important means of defending China's sovereignty and territory, and warned that "parties should not use the illegal South China Sea arbitration as a pretext to escalate infringements on China's rights or provocations."[23] In August, PLA Air Force bombers, fighters, airborne early-warning aircraft, reconnaissance aircraft, aerial refueling aircraft, and other aircraft conducted a "combat patrol" over the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal. Regarding these patrols, a PLA Air Force spokesperson stated, "The Air Force will conduct combat patrols in the South China Sea on a regular basis, advance real combat drills over the sea, and defend national sovereignty, security, and maritime rights."[24]

In April 2018, the PLAN held its largest naval review in waters south of Hainan Island in the South China Sea. With the participation of 48 surface vessels, including a *Liaoning* carrier fleet, 76 aircraft, and more than 10,000 personnel, the review showcased some of China's latest submarines, surface vessels, carrier-based aircraft, and patrol aircraft. After reviewing the parade, President Xi Jinping declared that becoming "a mighty navy is an important pillar of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and instructed "all-out efforts to become a world-class naval force."[25] A *PLA Daily* commentary on the review stressed that "building a mighty People's Navy has become more urgent than ever," noting that, as "the maritime security situation becomes increasingly severe and struggles over maritime rights intensify," it has become both "challenging and critical to defend the nation's territory, territorial waters, sovereignty, and maritime rights."[26] Arguably, one of the purposes of holding a large-scale naval review in the South China Sea was to exert military pressure on claimant states with competing sovereignty, territorial, and maritime rights claims.

In May 2021, China took action to exert military pressure on Malaysia. Sixteen transport aircraft made up of IL-76s and Y-20s belonging to the PLA Air Force flew southward in a trail formation over the Spratly Islands and approached the shore of Sarawak on Malaysian Borneo before turning back north. In response, the Royal Malaysian Air Force scrambled aircraft and monitored the formation. Given that the PLA transport aircraft passed near South Luconia Shoals and Swallow Shoal, which are controlled by Malaysia, as well as Thitu Island, controlled by the Philippines, and Itu Aba Island, controlled by Taiwan, some speculate that the flight may have been intended to rehearse an airdrop of troops onto these features.[27] Whatever its purpose, the flight constituted an exceptionally provocative action by the PLA Air Force against Malaysia.

In August 2025, a PLAN destroyer engaged in dangerous interference with a Philippine Coast Guard patrol vessel near Scarborough Shoal. When the Philippine Coast Guard patrol vessel *Suluan* approached the shoal to support Philippine fishing boats operating in the area, the PLAN 052D-class

destroyer *Guilin* began obstructing its navigation. The *Guilin* approached the *Suluan* at high speed from astern and overtook it on the starboard side at dangerously close range. Furthermore, when the *Guilin* crossed behind the *Suluan*, it collided with the CCG cutter 3104, which had also been pursuing the Philippine patrol vessel. The collision caused severe damage to 3104 and left it unseaworthy.[28]



A CCG cutter that collided with a PLAN destroyer, August 2025 (AFP/Jiji)

The incident raised questions about the ship maneuvering skills and coordination capabilities of both the PLAN and the CCG. More noteworthy, however, is that a PLAN destroyer directly interfered with the navigation of a Philippine Coast Guard patrol vessel. Since the late 2000s, China had placed maritime law-enforcement vessels at the forefront to exert pressure in the South China Sea, obstructing the navigation of government vessels, survey ships, and fishing boats belonging to other claimant states. The PLA, by contrast, conducted large-scale military exercises and supported CCG operations from the rear, but it did not directly interfere with the navigation of the government vessels of other claimant states. What the actions of the destroyer *Guilin* demonstrated is that interference with foreign government vessels had become a mission of the PLAN. The use of a warship to obstruct the navigation of a claimant state's government vessel is a dangerous and irresponsible act that risks escalation into a military confrontation. If such behavior by Chinese warships becomes recurrent, it will likely pose a serious threat to stability in the South China Sea.

Taiwan Reunification and Sino-U.S. Competition

Increasing Military Pressure on Taiwan

Taiwan is an island bordered by the East China Sea to the north, the Taiwan Strait to the west, the Pacific Ocean to the east, and the South China Sea to the south. It occupies a strategic position at the center of the First Island Chain, which extends from Japan's Nansei Islands to the Philippine archipelago. Since its founding in 1949, the PRC has never ruled Taiwan but seeks to achieve reunification with the island, regarding it as an inalienable part of Chinese territory. According to the white paper "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," released by the Chinese government in August 2022, resolving the Taiwan question and realizing the complete reunification of the

motherland constitute a "historic mission" of the CCP. The paper presents "peaceful reunification and one country, two systems" as the basic policy for resolving the Taiwan question, under which China has expressed its intention to achieve reunification through dialogue while preserving their differences in political, economic, and other systems. Yet, the white paper also states, "we will not renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all necessary measures," declaring that Beijing has not ruled out the possibility of using force to achieve reunification.[29] For the CCP leadership, military power remains a vital instrument for realizing reunification with Taiwan.

The South China Sea is an important maritime area for China to apply pressure on Taiwan for reunification. Taiwan exercises de facto control over Itu Aba Island and the Pratas Islands in the South China Sea. Itu Aba is the largest naturally occurring island in the Spratly Islands. The Pratas Islands lie in the northern part of the South China Sea near the Bashi Channel. Taiwan maintains de facto control over these islands by stationing personnel from its Coast Guard Administration. In recent years, however, Beijing has moved to challenge Taiwan's control over the Pratas Islands. From 2022, CCG cutters began appearing in their vicinity. By 2025, there was a surge in both the number of CCG vessels navigating within the territorial sea and contiguous zone surrounding the Pratas Islands and the number of days of activity. It has been noted that CCG vessels operating near the Pratas Islands have tended to make closer approaches to the islands, increase the frequency of their activities, and synchronize with PLA military exercises.[30] If China were to establish control over the Pratas Islands close to the Bashi Channel, it would become difficult for the U.S. forces to conduct operations in the South China Sea around Taiwan, according to some observers.[31] It is therefore necessary to pay attention to China's future moves.

By intensifying drills and exercises around Taiwan, the PLA has gradually stepped up its pressure on the island. In May 2016, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government of Tsai Ing-wen took office campaigning against Beijing's "one China" principle. Soon afterwards, in November 2016, PLA aircraft conducted their first circumnavigation flight around Taiwan. PLA H-6 bombers, Tu-154 intelligence-gathering aircraft, and Y-8 intelligence-gathering aircraft flew from the South China Sea through the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and Luzon, entered the Pacific east of Taiwan, and then flew between the main island of Okinawa and Miyakojima Island to the East China Sea. In the following month, H-6, Tu-154, and Y-8 aircraft flew from the East China Sea, passing between the main island of Okinawa and Miyakojima Island, entered the Pacific east of Taiwan, and then proceeded through the Bashi Channel to the South China Sea. Such circumnavigation flights around Taiwan were conducted several times by PLA aircraft in the following year as well. Regarding one of them in December 2017, a spokesperson of the PLA Air Force announced that its bombers and reconnaissance aircraft conducted a "patrol that circles the island of Taiwan" (*raodao xunhang*) and stated that the flight had improved the "ability to protect national sovereignty and territorial integrity."[32]

Following President Tsai Ing-wen's reelection and the inauguration of her second administration in May 2020, PLA aircraft began conducting a new pattern of flights around Taiwan that

September. On September 18, multiple fighter aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait into the Taiwan side. At the same time, bombers and fighter aircraft entered the airspace over the South China Sea between Taiwan proper and the Pratas Islands and penetrated Taiwan's air defense identification zone.[33] China has since conducted repeated flights of military aircraft in airspace over the South China Sea southwest of Taiwan. The PLA has deployed various aircraft models, including not only bombers and fighters but also intelligence-gathering aircraft, anti-submarine patrol aircraft, airborne early-warning aircraft, and unmanned aerial vehicles. It has also expanded the geographic scope of the flights beyond the Bashi Channel into the Pacific Ocean. By repeating these flights, China may have sought to increase pressure on the DPP government. Additionally, the flights may have been an attempt to secure air superiority in this airspace during a contingency, which would improve China's ability to carry out smooth military operations, for example, isolating the Pratas Islands, neutralizing the adversary's maritime forces, and striking military facilities and infrastructure in southern Taiwan.

Moreover, from 2022 onwards, the PLA began to repeatedly hold military exercises that encircle Taiwan. In August 2022, it carried out exercises around Taiwan on an unprecedented scale. It established six exercise zones that encircle Taiwan and conducted joint operations involving the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force, even firing live missiles. Notably, on August 4, the PLA launched a number of ballistic missiles into exercise zones established in waters north, east, and southwest of Taiwan. Several of these missiles landed within Japan's EEZ. In response, the Japanese government lodged a protest with the Chinese government, stating that the launches were "a serious issue concerning Japan's security and the safety of Japanese people."[34] During the exercises, more than 10 PLAN vessels reportedly conducted "joint blockade operations," "minesweeping and security operations in live-fire zones," and "reconnaissance and guidance in coordination with friendly forces" in waters surrounding Taiwan.[35] The PLA also established a large exercise zone in the South China Sea southwest of Taiwan. It is believed that the purpose was to enhance the PLA's ability to: 1) block sea lines of communication in the South China Sea that are vital to Taiwan, 2) confront Taiwanese forces resisting a naval blockade, and 3) strike the Zuoying Naval Base and cities such as Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan. The encirclement exercises that have been conducted repeatedly since then have consistently established exercise zones in the South China Sea. This suggests that the South China Sea is a maritime area of critical importance for the PLA aiming for reunification with Taiwan.

South China Sea as a Springboard for Confronting the U.S. Forces

Beijing initiated coercive actions toward the Philippines and other Southeast Asian claimant states and applied greater military pressure on Taiwan. This had the effect of heightening the United States' strategic wariness of China. The National Security Strategy released by the first Trump administration in 2017 characterized the PRC as a revisionist power challenging the existing international order and declared that an era of great-power competition with China had begun. It criticized China's building of military outposts in the South China Sea as undermining regional stability and raised concerns that

China's rapid military buildup was designed to limit U.S. access to the region.[36] The National Security Strategy released by the second Trump administration in 2025 highlighted the geographical importance of Taiwan, which is bounded by the East and South China Seas, as well as the importance of the South China Sea as a major sea line of communication, stating that "deterring a conflict over Taiwan … is a priority."[37] Amid growing U.S. military attention to the South China Sea, and given China's efforts to secure territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the region and reunify with Taiwan, there is a perceived need by Beijing to shift the military balance with the United States in China's favor and create arrangements that prevent the U.S. forces from operating freely in the South China Sea.

In practice, China has pursued various actions to obstruct U.S. military activities in the South China Sea. In March 2009, a PLAN intelligence-gathering ship, government vessels, and fishing trawlers interfered with the navigation of the U.S. Navy ocean surveillance ship *Impeccable*, which was operating approximately 110 kilometers south of Hainan Island. In December 2013, when the U.S. Navy cruiser *Cowpens* was monitoring exercises by the PLAN's *Liaoning* carrier formation in the South China Sea, a PLAN amphibious ship approached and crossed directly in front of the *Cowpens*, forcing it to maneuver to avoid a collision. In September 2018 as well, the PLAN destroyer *Lanzhou* made an unusually close approach to the U.S. Navy destroyer *Decatur* as it navigated in the South China Sea, prompting the *Decatur* to maneuver to avoid a collision. Thereafter, PLA interference with U.S. forces in the South China Sea continued. In December 2022, a PLA J-11 fighter conducted a dangerous intercept of the U.S. military's RC-135 electronic reconnaissance aircraft flying over the South China Sea, approaching within six meters of the U.S. aircraft.

China has also conducted test firings of anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) into the South China Sea. ASBMs are ballistic missiles that can strike large vessels operating far from shore and are dubbed "carrier killers." The PLA possesses the DF-21D and DF-26B. In July 2019, China launched six DF-21D missiles from the mainland toward waters north of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. This was China's first ASBM launch into the sea. In August 2020, the PLA again fired ASBMs, launching the DF-26B from Qinghai Province and the DF-21D from Zhejiang Province on the mainland toward waters north of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.[38] Most likely, these ASBM test firings into the South China Sea were intended to constrain U.S. naval operations in this maritime area by demonstrating China's willingness and capability to use ASBMs against U.S. Navy vessels navigating in the region.

The PLA's repeated exercises encircling Taiwan have consistently designated exercise zones near the Bashi Channel, south of the island. This can be understood as part of China's effort to tilt the military balance in the South China Sea in its favor vis-à-vis the United States. Regarding the August 2022 exercises, Meng Xiangqing, a professor at China's National Defense University, noted that the exercise zone established south of Taiwan constituted a "zone from which the Bashi Channel could be blockaded and controlled" and asserted that the designation of this exercise zone "sent a strong message to external interfering forces."[39] In all likelihood, China's objective is to blockade the Bashi

Channel and block U.S. military access to the South China Sea in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

Placing the South China Sea under Chinese control in a contingency and blocking U.S. military operations and access to the region would provide China with significant strategic advantages. First, it would enable China to ensure defensive depth for its coastal cities, one of the objectives of the "near seas defense" strategy. If China could deny U.S. forces the ability to operate in the South China Sea, it would be able to keep forward-deployed U.S. forces farther away from major cities and military outposts in southern China facing the South China Sea.

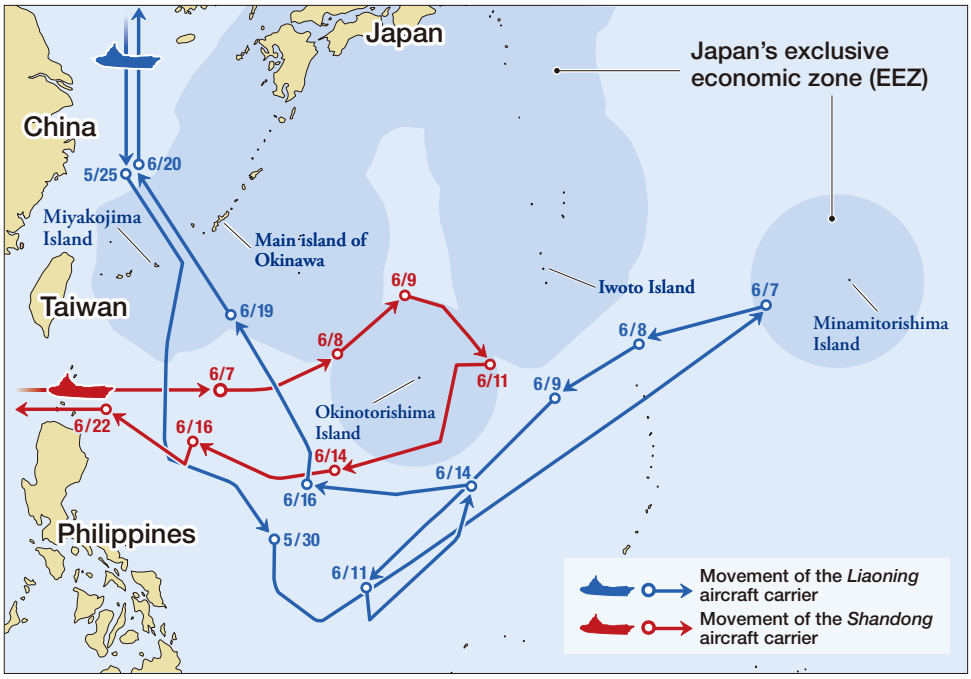
Second, it would make U.S. military intervention in a Taiwan invasion more difficult. If the PLA could blockade the Bashi Channel and establish superiority in the air and maritime domains south of Taiwan, it would be better positioned to invade southern Taiwan from the South China Sea. Further still, if China could maintain a favorable military balance in the central and southern parts of the South China Sea, it is expected that China could obstruct U.S. forces approaching from waters in Oceania or the Indian Ocean.

Third, control of the South China Sea could strengthen China's nuclear deterrent against the United States. The PLA has deployed six strategic nuclear submarines to Hainan Island, which faces the South China Sea. These SLBM-mounted submarines form a pillar of China's nuclear counterattack capability against the United States. If the PLA were able to control the South China Sea and deny U.S. military operations in these waters, Chinese strategic nuclear submarines would be able to safely operate in the region. China's strategic nuclear submarines are believed to carry the JL-3 SLBM, which reportedly has a range exceeding 10,000 kilometers. Operating in the South China Sea without interference from U.S. forces, Chinese strategic nuclear submarines would be able to strike the continental United States with nuclear missiles. In July 2026, the PLAN test fired an SLBM from a strategic nuclear submarine operating submerged in the South China Sea into the South Pacific. The missile flew approximately 7,300 kilometers, suggesting that the PLA's SLBM operational capability is steadily improving.



A ballistic missile fired from a Chinese submarine, July 2026 (Xinhua/Kyodo News Images)

Figure 2.2 Simultaneous Deployment of the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* Carrier Strike Groups to the Pacific



Source: Prepared by the author based on Joint Staff of Self-Defense Forces, Japan, "Press Release: Activities of Chinese Navy Aircraft Carrier (Kuznetsov-class CV 'Liaoning,' other)," June 23, 2025.

Achieving military superiority in the South China Sea and strengthening "near seas defense" would contribute to improving China's capabilities for "far seas protection" to confront U.S. forces in the Pacific beyond the First Island Chain. PLA vessels and aircraft enter the Pacific either from the East China Sea, such as through the Miyako Strait, or from the South China Sea through the Bashi Channel. Because Japan and the United States maintain a strong presence in the East China Sea, the use of the former route during a contingency could present challenges for China. In the South China Sea, by contrast, Beijing has made continued efforts to gain military superiority. If China were able to control the South China Sea, it could likely use the Bashi Channel to project military power into the Pacific more securely. From May to June 2025, the PLAN's *Liaoning* and *Shandong* carrier strike groups simultaneously entered and operated in the Pacific. Some have suggested that the two groups may have conducted a confrontation drill against one another.[40] If that is correct, the *Liaoning* group, which advanced beyond the Second Island Chain to as far as waters near Minamitorishima Island, may have simulated the role of a U.S. carrier strike group, while the *Shandong* group, which advanced to waters around Okinotorishima Island, acted as an opposing force. For the drill, the *Shandong* group entered the Pacific from the South China Sea through the Bashi Channel. It can be said that this is an example indicating the PLA's intention to use the South China Sea as a springboard for projecting power into the Pacific.

Conclusion

China's naval strategy has evolved from a focus on defense of littoral waters in the early years of the PRC, to a focus on defense of the near seas aimed at securing territorial sovereignty over features, safeguarding maritime rights, and expanding the defensive depth of coastal cities. As China's economic activities have expanded globally, its naval strategy has also placed further emphasis on the protection of the far seas, with the objectives of ensuring safe sea lines of communication and extending China's defensive depth against hostile forces. This outward expansion of China's naval strategy reflects both the broadening scope of China's national interests and the growth of its national power, and it is likely to continue in the future.

The South China Sea is a maritime area of exceptional importance in China's strategy of "near seas defense and far seas protection." For Beijing, the region has implications for not only territorial sovereignty and maritime rights but also ensuring safe sea lines of communication, realizing reunification with Taiwan, and the outcome of the strategic competition with the United States—vital issues that have bearing on the CCP's legitimacy and the durability of its rule. The CCP leadership will certainly make continued efforts to consolidate its control over the South China Sea, which is expected to remain a persistent source of tension in the East Asian maritime domain.



NIDS China Security Report 2027

China and the South China Sea:
The Dynamics of Maritime Issues



Chapter Three

The China Coast Guard

An Organization with Military and Administrative Functions and Its Roles in the South China Sea

GOTO Yohei

Introduction

It is widely recognized that the China Coast Guard (CCG) has become an increasingly important actor in discussions of China's maritime strategy. The CCG's sizable presence has been enabled by reforms of the maritime law-enforcement architecture undertaken in 2013 and 2018 and by the enactment of the Coast Guard Law in 2021.[1] The provisions of the Coast Guard Law indicate that the CCG is capable of possessing and exercising hard power, including force, while also being assigned administrative functions.

Against this backdrop, this chapter aims to explain the role the CCG plays in strengthening China's influence in the South China Sea. To this end, it is necessary to shed light on the CCG's institutional characteristics and how it cooperates with other maritime actors, such as the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the maritime militia.

Therefore, this chapter unfolds as follows. As a background to the CCG's expanding presence in the South China Sea, the first section explains China's perception of the South China Sea dispute as an "internal matter." With that understanding, the second section traces the institutional evolution of the CCG and its predecessor maritime law-enforcement agencies. It contends that the enactment of the Coast Guard Law established the CCG as "an organization combining military and administrative functions." The third section provides an overview of the jointness between the CCG and the PLAN and between the CCG and the maritime militia. Relations between the CCG and the PLAN are analyzed from three perspectives: legal provisions, personnel exchanges between the two organizations, and the current status of their operational coordination. After outlining the institutional framework of the maritime militia, the discussion turns to how it receives training from and conducts actual activities with the CCG and the PLAN and assesses the maritime militia's advantages and vulnerabilities. The fourth section focuses on the administrative functions assigned to the CCG under the Coast Guard Law. It reviews the revisions made to some of China's maritime statutes since the enactment of the Coast Guard Law. It argues that, as a maritime governance agency, the CCG cooperates with other administrative agencies and local governments to implement administrative measures and thereby enhances its de facto control over maritime areas, including disputed waters. The chapter concludes with a summary of the overall observations.

As this report focuses primarily on the South China Sea, this chapter principally draws on incidents that took place in these waters. However, examples from other maritime areas, including those whose precise location is unclear, are also referenced as necessary to understand the situation surrounding the CCG.

China's Perception of the South China Sea Dispute as an "Internal Matter"

China appears to treat disputes with other countries in the South China Sea as "internal matters." This reflects China's view of the South China Sea and other adjacent waters as essentially an extension of its land territory.

This notion is captured in the concept of "maritime territory" (海洋国土). In China, approximately 3 million square kilometers of surrounding waters—including areas in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Yellow Sea—are considered part of the country's maritime territory under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was adopted in 1982 and ratified by China in 1996. Chinese statutes, such as the Coast Guard Law discussed below, use not the term "maritime territory" but a similar term, "jurisdictional seas" (管辖海域).[2] In recent years, however, "maritime territory" has appeared frequently in policy documents. For example, the National Land Planning Outline (全国国土规划纲要) for the period from 2016 to 2030, unveiled by the Xi Jinping government in 2017, states that China has 9.6 million square kilometers of land territory and "3 million square kilometers of maritime territory"—the waters over which China claims jurisdiction.[3]

China has consolidated its claims over maritime territory through the development of domestic legislation. This trend gained traction particularly from the 1990s.[4] For example, Article 2 of the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone (hereafter the "Territorial Sea Law"), enacted in 1992, specifies Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, as well as the Pratas Islands, Paracel Islands, Macclesfield Bank, and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, as Chinese territory.[5] The Territorial Sea Law is key to understanding China's maritime views and actions. This is because, as per UNCLOS, the outer limit of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the continental shelf is determined from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured. Based on its sovereignty claims over these islands, China ratified UNCLOS in 1996, enacted the Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf in 1998 by applying its own interpretation of and invoking the provisions of UNCLOS, and delimits EEZs and the continental shelf pursuant to this law. China has also superimposed its "historic rights" within the waters enclosed by the so-called "nine-dash line" and refers to this broader maritime area as "maritime territory." Moreover, Beijing requires foreign warships to obtain prior authorization for passage through its territorial sea and restricts foreign military activities within its EEZ. These positions diverge from mainstream Western interpretations of the law of the sea.[6] Such interpretations of international law further suggest that China tends to consider maritime areas under its jurisdiction as an extension of land territory.

From the above perspective, China appears to regard the South China Sea dispute as one of its "internal matters." Even when external factors were involved, if an issue is deemed to affect China's sovereignty or security, the Xi Jinping government has shown a strong inclination to treat it as an

"internal matter" through the development and enforcement of domestic legislation.[7] The enactment of the Coast Guard Law was an extension of this tendency.

Similarly, the CCG's growing presence in the South China Sea should therefore be understood against the backdrop of China's maritime perception and the Xi administration's approach to employing law as an instrument of foreign policy. In other words, China views the CCG as an entity governing the South China Sea and seeks to legitimize the CCG's activities as law-enforcement operations that constitute the exercise of governance.

Institutional Evolution of the CCG

There were three turning points in the formation of the CCG as it exists today: 1) the consolidation of maritime law-enforcement agencies in 2013, 2) the incorporation of the former consolidated CCG into the People's Armed Police (PAP) in 2018, and 3) the enactment of the Coast Guard Law in 2021, which provided the legal basis for the CCG's activities. These developments, including the history before consolidation, are examined in order below.[8]

From a Fragmented Maritime Law-Enforcement Architecture to the First Consolidation

1. The Establishment of the State Oceanic Administration

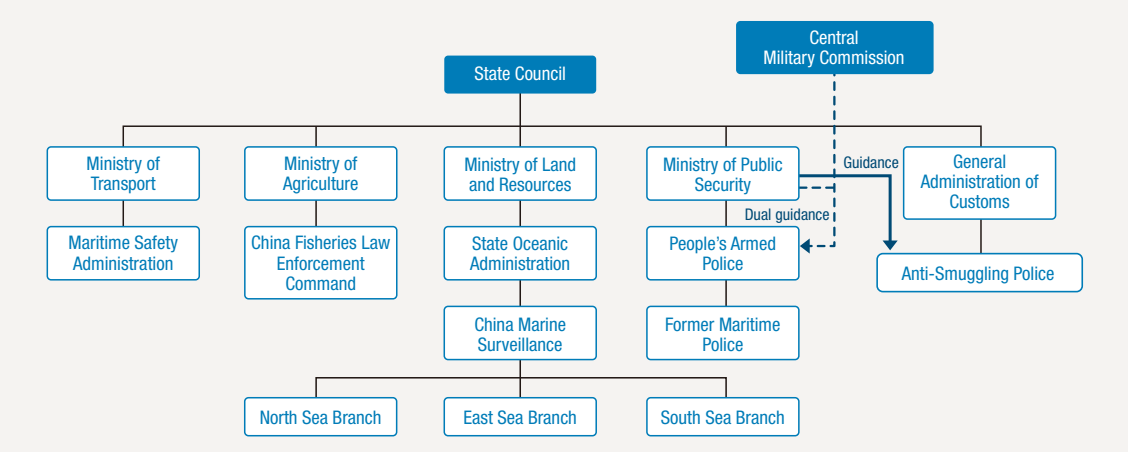
Aside from the PLAN, the maritime actor that long exercised influence over ocean policy in China was the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) launched in 1964. The SOA was established under the State Council by bringing together relevant departments and functions from the PLAN, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Central Meteorological Bureau, and other organizations, mainly to advance marine surveys and enhance scientific and technological activities.[9] At the time of its establishment, the SOA incorporated some of the PLAN's agencies, suggesting that it operated under the PLAN's influence to some extent. With the onset of reform and opening-up in the 1980s, economic development became a national priority, and the SOA was expected to contribute. Consequently, the SOA appears to have evolved into an agency independent from the PLAN.[10]

2. The "Five Dragons" Architecture

Following the launch of reform and opening-up in 1978, China began to promote the exploitation of marine resources as its economy developed. This trend was accompanied by the restructuring of the maritime administration system.[11] Apart from the SOA, several other maritime law-enforcement agencies were established by around 2000. The principal agencies included the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) under the Ministry of Transport, which was responsible for maritime traffic

safety and search-and-rescue operations; the China Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC) under the Ministry of Agriculture, which managed and oversaw fisheries administration; the Maritime Police under the Ministry of Public Security, whose personnel also held status within the PAP and which was responsible for combating ordinary crime at sea (hereafter referred to as the "former Maritime Police" to distinguish it from the present-day CCG);[12] and the Anti-Smuggling Police of the General Administration of Customs (GAC), which was responsible for combating smuggling. The SOA also established the law-enforcement force, the China Marine Surveillance (CMS), and regional branches for the North Sea, East Sea, and South Sea. The five principal agencies were collectively known as the "Five Dragons" (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 China's Maritime Law-Enforcement Architecture until 2013



Source: The figure in 後藤 [Goto]「『中国海権論』の研究」66頁 has been revised and expanded based on Masuda, "China's Maritime Strategy and Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies," p. 69.

China's Five Dragons and other maritime law-enforcement agencies were established to implement the maritime statutes developed from the 1980s onward. In the 1990s, the agencies existed in name but were far from being efficient in operation. Regarding the operations at the time, observers pointed out that their operational capacity had failed to keep pace with institutional development, noting that organizations under the Ministry of Public Security were using aging vessels and wooden boats. Problems were also identified with the excessively complex chain of command of China's anti-smuggling system involving the Ministry of Public Security.[13]

The fragmented system of law enforcement across several ministries and agencies also drew criticism from Chinese experts for its operational inefficiencies and overlapping jurisdictions. Among them, Jin Yongming, who researches the law of the sea at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, critiqued the fragmentation of the agencies and the ambiguity of their rights and responsibilities and called for the establishment of a comprehensive administrative body responsible for maritime affairs.[14]

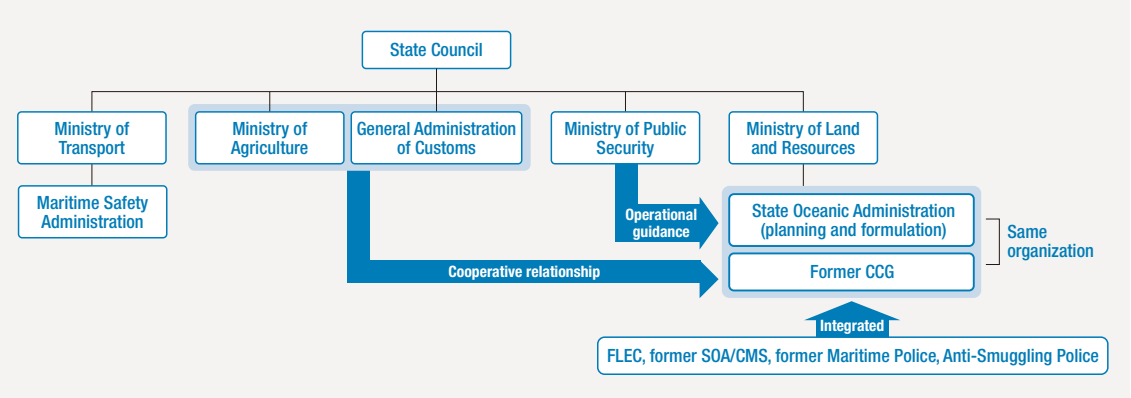
This system in which the Five Dragons were separately engaged in maritime administration

and law enforcement was not only inefficient but also ineffective due to inadequate equipment and other operational weaknesses.

3. Institutional Reforms in 2013: A Still Complex Chain of Command

Faced with the problems enumerated above, the call to "build China into a maritime power" made at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012 accelerated the consolidation of maritime law-enforcement bodies.[15] Inheriting the policy of his predecessor, Xi Jinping restructured maritime law-enforcement agencies in accordance with China's institutional reforms adopted at the National People's Congress in March 2013, which was held shortly after Xi took office. Specifically, an outline of the restructuring was provided in the "Plan of Institutional Restructuring and Functional Transformation of the State Council" issued in March,[16] and was further specified in the "Provisions on the Main Functions, Internal Structure and Staffing of the State Oceanic Administration" issued by the State Council in July of that year.[17] In the institutional reforms, four agencies were consolidated, with the exception of the MSA. As a result, an organization with two names—the State Oceanic Administration and the China Coast Guard (hereafter the "former CCG")—assumed responsibility for all maritime law-enforcement operations outside the jurisdiction of the MSA. More specifically, the SOA was responsible for maritime policy planning and formulation under the supervision of the Ministry of Land and Resources, while the former CCG conducted law enforcement under the guidance of the Ministry of Public Security. In other words, the SOA/former CCG was under the direction of both the Ministry of Land and Resources and the Ministry of Public Security (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 China's Maritime Law-Enforcement Architecture between 2013 and 2018



Source: 後藤 [Goto]「中国海警局と台湾海巡署」142頁.

While the consolidation of four agencies into the former CCG made it possible to streamline law-enforcement operations and concentrate resources, the organization remained inefficient under the command of two superior authorities, the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Land

and Resources. Furthermore, considering that some members of the former CCG from the former Maritime Police held status within the PAP, it appears that the former CCG was indirectly subject to the influence of the Central Military Commission (CMC).

Some previous studies have argued that the former CCG was already undergoing militarization, citing its incorporation of the former Maritime Police, which operated under the guidance of the Ministry of Public Security and comprised the PAP. Ryan Martinson, a researcher with the U.S. Naval War College, for example, notes that the recruitment information for prospective officers of the former CCG in 2014 stated that, upon completing a training course, candidates will be commissioned as officers of the PAP.[18] Lyle Morris, then at the RAND Corporation, observes that although the former CCG presented itself as a "civilian agency," in practice its uniforms and ranks were akin to a military's, while operations at sea were under the direction of commanders trained at the PAP.[19]

Incorporation into the CMC and the PAP

The 2018 institutional reforms were implemented in conjunction with the 19th National Congress of the CCP held in October 2017.[20] Two reforms are of note for the restructuring of the CCG. The first is the organizational reform of the PAP. As part of the reforms of Party and state institutions in 2018, the PAP was removed from the guidance of the Ministry of Public Security and placed under the unified command of the CMC. Second, the former CCG was reorganized into the Coast Guard Corps as a component of the PAP, while retaining the name China Coast Guard. Consequently, the restructured CCG was removed from the command of the Ministry of Public Security and its superior authority, the State Council, and placed under the unified command of the CMC, China's highest military command authority. In addition, the SOA's bodies responsible for scientific research, environmental protection, and related matters were incorporated respectively into three organizations: the newly established Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and the National Forestry and Grassland Administration. The MSA, another maritime law-enforcement agency, remained under the Ministry of Transport even after the institutional reforms.

There were two possible purposes for the 2018 institutional reforms. The first was to detach armed organizations, such as the PAP and the CCG, from the state bureaucracy and bring them under the unified control of the CCP and Xi Jinping, the ultimate decisionmaker in the Party and the PLA.[21] The second was to clarify chains of command rules of engagement (ROE). Following the 2013 institutional reforms, standoffs occurred between the CCG and the maritime law-enforcement agencies of claimant states and between the CCG and the United States, which often conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. As these encounters became more frequent, the CCG's equipment was strengthened to levels comparable to that of a military force. Yet because the former CCG was part of the SOA, a civilian agency, the chains of command and ROE were ambiguous. By reorganizing the CCG under the CMC and incorporating it into the PAP as a military organization, China sought to eliminate those ambiguities and, in turn, strengthen China's ability to

respond to the United States and to claimant states.[22]

The Enactment of the Coast Guard Law

Following the 2018 institutional reforms, the CCG underwent organizational restructuring, but no systematic legislation was developed to regulate its activities. This deficiency was also identified within China, primarily by researchers affiliated with the PAP. Zhao Xinshuang of the China Coast Guard Academy, for example, pointed to the absence of a specialized law for safeguarding maritime security, describing it as a major flaw in China's maritime legal system (as of 2018). He further argued that the legal basis was inadequate for the PLAN's involvement in the CCG's law enforcement for rights and interests protection (维权执法), creating a vulnerability in China's effort to safeguard maritime security and rights and interests.[23] Similarly, in an article published in 2018, Liu Lushuai of the China People's Police University identified weak legal operational capabilities as one of the CCG's shortcomings.[24] The Coast Guard Law enacted in 2021 was designed to address these challenges. The law consists of 11 chapters and 84 articles and has the following four main features.

First, the Coast Guard Law specifies both the organizational structure of the CCG and the law-enforcement operations it can conduct. Article 2 provides that the coast guard organization consists of the China Coast Guard Bureau and bureaus directly under it,[25] as well as local organizations comprising, in descending order, regional bureaus covering the North Sea, East Sea, and South Sea; provincial-level coast guard bureaus; municipal-level coast guard bureaus; and county-level coast guard work stations. Article 5 then sets out the CCG's missions, including safeguarding maritime security, maintaining public order at sea, and combating sea crimes such as smuggling. It also stipulates that the scope of the CCG's responsibilities includes managing and supervising activities relating to the development and utilization of marine resources, protection of the marine ecological environment, and marine fishery operations, along with combating illegal activities arising from such activities. Article 12 specifies these responsibilities in greater detail. It states, for example, that the CCG has administrative and supervisory authority over activities including marine mineral exploration, the laying and maintenance of submarine cables, and the use of nature reserves. It can be understood that the law granted the CCG extensive authority in maritime administration. Article 12 further provides for a division of responsibilities between the CCG and administrative bodies, such as the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Natural Resources. In addition, Article 15 stipulates that the China Coast Guard Bureau and its regional bureaus may conduct law-enforcement operations in coordination with the maritime law-enforcement agencies of local governments in coastal areas.

Researchers affiliated with the PAP and specialists in maritime affairs in China have echoed the view that the Coast Guard Law identifies the CCG as a maritime administrative body with policing and other responsibilities. Yang Limei and Hao Jie, researchers affiliated with the PAP, argue that, according to the Coast Guard Law, the CMC centrally determines and directs the assignment of the CCG's routine tasks, the command of its forces, and the development of its operational framework.

They point out that the CCG itself constitutes an important component of China's maritime administrative system and serves as an executive body for maritime management.[26] Li Zhiwen of Dalian Maritime University and Xiong Yicheng of Zhejiang Ocean University, both specialists in the law of the sea, contend that the Coast Guard Law defines the CCG as a distinctive institution combining both administrative and judicial characteristics.[27]

The law-enforcement operations performed by the CCG include the detention, forcible removal, and forcible towing of foreign vessels that "illegally" enter China's territorial sea and internal waters (Article 17), the forcible boarding and inspection of vessels operating in China's "jurisdictional seas" (Article 18), and the use of weapons under certain conditions (Articles 46–51).

Second, the law's provisions are marked by ambiguity. For example, "jurisdictional seas" in Article 3 are not explained precisely, leaving open the interpretation that "law enforcement" is allowed in waters contested with neighboring countries. Furthermore, the terms and conditions for the use of weapons and other coercive measures frequently mention "other circumstances," suggesting the possibility of discretionary application.

Third, Article 83 provides that the CCG shall perform "defense operations and other tasks" (防卫作战等任务) in accordance with military statutes, such as the National Defense Law and the People's Armed Police Law, as well as orders issued by the CMC. This implies that the Coast Guard Law affirmed the provisions of the National Defense Law and the People's Armed Police Law, which stipulate that the CCG falls under the command of the CMC, as discussed below.

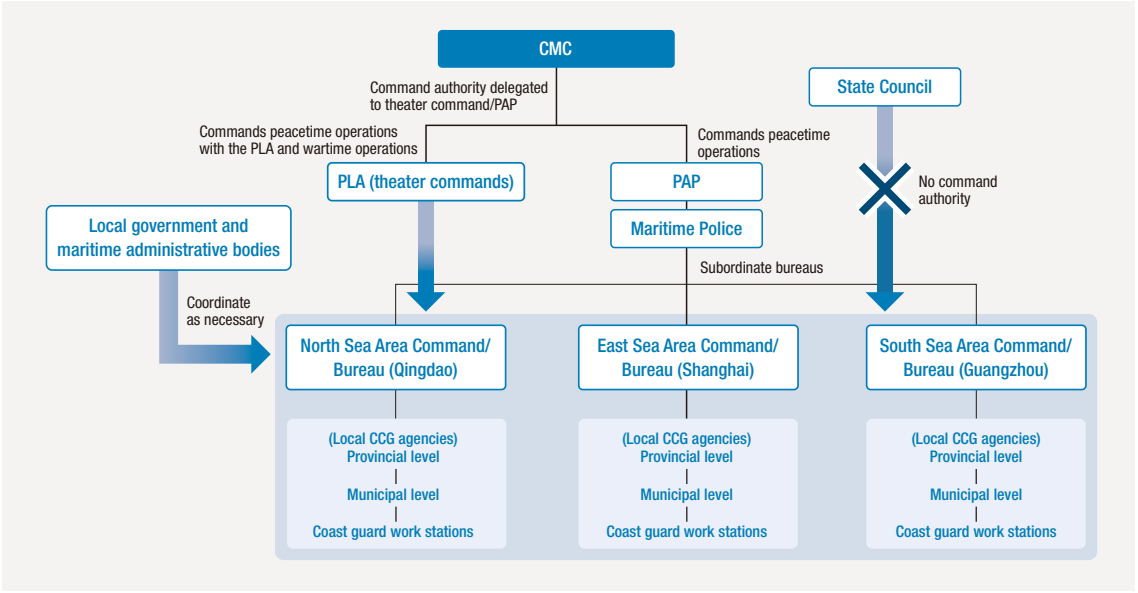
Fourth, Article 25 enables the CCG to delimit "temporary maritime security zones" (海上临时警戒区). According to this article, such zones may be designated when a coast guard organization deems them necessary for: 1) performing missions to safeguard maritime security, 2) combating crimes at sea, 3) responding to emergencies at sea, 4) protecting marine resources and the ecological environment, or 5) addressing other circumstances. Within these zones, the CCG may restrict or prohibit the passage or presence of vessels and personnel. It is thought that this article has allowed China to establish zones in which navigation may be prohibited in any maritime area it regards as "jurisdictional seas," including disputed waters.

Subsequently, subordinate regulations pursuant to the Coast Guard Law and related legislation were established in succession. The Regulations on Procedures for Handling Criminal Cases by Coast Guard Agencies, which stipulate the CCG's criminal procedures, and the Regulations on Procedures for Handling Criminal Reconsideration and Review Cases by Coast Guard Agencies, which stipulate procedures for the reconsideration of criminal cases, were established in May and December 2023, respectively.[28] In June 2024, the Regulations on Administrative Law Enforcement Procedures for Coast Guard Agencies (hereafter "Administrative Law Regulations"), which prescribe procedures for administrative law enforcement, entered into force.[29] According to the Administrative Law Regulations, when the CCG inspects vessels or personnel, it is not required to provide prior notice to the vessels or personnel (Article 29). The Regulations also provide that, when a foreign

vessel is suspected of violating Chinese law in waters under China's jurisdiction, the CCG may order the vessel to stop and collect evidence (Article 34). These regulations set out the CCG's law-enforcement powers in detail and appear to grant it significant discretion in their exercise. The regulations can be understood as the further articulation of the articles of the Coast Guard Law to provide legal justification for CCG activities as law-enforcement operations.

Figure 3.3 shows the organizational structure of the CCG and its relationship with other agencies following the 2018 institutional reforms and the enactment of the Coast Guard Law.

Figure 3.3 The Organizational Structure of the CCG and Its Relationship to Other Agencies following Institutional Reforms and the Enactment of the Coast Guard Law



Source: The figure in 後藤 [Goto]「中国海警局と台湾海巡署」144頁 has been revised and expanded based on the articles of the Coast Guard Law and other legislation.

Enhancement of Equipment, Including Platforms Shared with the PLAN

After the four maritime law-enforcement agencies were consolidated in 2013, the former CCG initially used equipment redirected from the former Five Dragons. Thereafter, however, the former CCG has boosted its material capabilities, such as by transferring equipment from the PLAN and strengthening its own shipbuilding programs, which has been actively promoted since 2016.[30] There has been a growing tendency to standardize the equipment used by CCG and PLAN vessels. In 2022, 22 missile corvettes were reportedly transferred from the PLAN to the CCG,[31] while CCG cutters are said to be equipped with 76 mm and 30 mm guns similar to those mounted on PLAN patrol vessels.[32] Recently, the CCG's two 10,000-ton class vessels were assigned to the East Sea and South Sea bureaus, respectively.[33] The CCG possesses 686 vessels according to *The Military Balance 2026*,[34] making it the

largest coast guard in the world in fleet size. The *Japan Coast Guard Annual Report 2026* estimates that the CCG operates 175 vessels with a displacement of 1,000 tons or more.[35]



A CCG vessel illuminating a military-grade laser beam at a PCG ship near Second Thomas Shoal, February 2023 (Courtesy of the PCG and AFP/Jiji)

Yang Tsung Hsin, a researcher affiliated with a Taiwanese military research institution, notes that, as part of the restructuring of the CCG, it introduced the Z-9 utility helicopter also used by the PLAN, alongside changing the status of CCG members from public servants to military personnel serving in the PAP.[36] He further notes that the CCG's new vessel models have been fitted with helicopter decks and hangars in recent years, and observes that the vessels are increasingly equipped with water cannons, lasers capable of impairing vision, and lethal weapons such as 76 mm guns.[37] Also noteworthy is the CCG's acquisition and development of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). In November 2023, the CCG's South Sea Bureau is said to have used the shipborne Feihong-96V reconnaissance UAV for the first time in combating smuggling.[38] It was also reported that the CCG deployed the Wing Loong-2 reconnaissance and strike UAV during the "Justice Mission" military exercise conducted around Taiwan in December 2025.[39]

In addition to these developments in equipment and capabilities, actions that can be described as violent have become pronounced in recent years. In February 2023, for example, near Second Thomas Shoal, a CCG vessel twice illuminated a military-grade laser beam at a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) ship, temporarily blinding Filipino crew.[40] In June 2024, during a standoff with Philippine military vessels near Second Thomas Shoal, CCG personnel brandished knives and axes and damaged Philippine military equipment. The confrontation also resulted in a Filipino serviceman losing his thumb.[41]

Relations with the PLAN and the Maritime Militia

The Degree of Jointness between the CCG and the PLAN

The PLAN and the CCG have fundamentally different organizational objectives. The former is a military organization, whereas the latter has been granted law-enforcement authority by statutes even after its incorporation into the PAP. Despite these differences, the two organizations have conducted coordinated activities mainly in the South China Sea. Furthermore, their cooperation or integration

is required under China's legal framework. As discussed in the preceding section, the PLAN's and the CCG's equipment are being standardized to some extent. This section examines the degree of jointness between the CCG and the PLAN from the perspectives of the legal framework, personnel arrangements, and actual force employment.

1. The Establishment of Legal Provisions Stipulating Military Command and Control

The National Defense Law, enacted in 1997 and revised in 2020, provides the basic principles of national defense as well as the rights and obligations of citizens. Article 22 lists "enforce maritime rights" (海上维权执法) as one of the missions of the PAP, suggesting that the CCG performs tasks as part of the PAP. The People's Armed Police Law (hereafter the "PAP Law"), enacted in 2009 and revised in 2020, governs the operations of the PAP. Article 10 contains the following provisions regarding the PAP's operations. In peacetime, the CMC exercises direct command over or delegates command authority to the PAP. When the PAP conducts joint operations with the PLA in peacetime, including "non-war military operations," commonly known as military operations other than war (MOOTW),[42] the PAP is commanded by the CMC or a theater command authorized by the CMC. In wartime, the PAP performs its missions under the command of the CMC or a theater command authorized by the CMC. Based on these provisions, it is understood that the CCG, having been reorganized as a component of the PAP, is likewise controlled by the CMC in peacetime. Involving the CMC may thereby facilitate CCG-PLAN coordination.

2. The Development of a Personnel System Promoting Integration with the PLAN

China has also made efforts to integrate CCG and PLAN personnel. One such effort is the appointment of CCG senior officers from the PLAN. Wang Zhongcai, who became the first director of the "new" CCG after 2018; Yu Zhong, who was appointed the second director in 2022; and Zhang Jianming, whose appointment as director was confirmed in January 2026, were all from the PLAN.[43] The CCG leadership is dominated by naval officers. According to Chinese reports, the first directors of the North Sea, East Sea, and South Sea regional branch bureaus—Du Zhengjun, Yu Zhong, and Tang Siming, respectively—were also all from the PLAN.[44] As these appointments indicate, senior CCG officers have been drawn so far from personnel with naval backgrounds. In the reverse direction, Wang Zhongcai was transferred from the CCG to commander of the Eastern Theater Command Navy in August 2022.[45] These developments hint that officers from the PLAN may command the CCG and draw on that experience upon returning to the PLAN, thereby facilitating closer coordination between the PLAN and the CCG.

Changes to the training system for CCG officers will facilitate further integration and coordination between CCG and PLAN personnel. In 2018, the CCG established the China Coast Guard Academy for training officer personnel, with a view to overcoming frictions between personnel inherited from the era of the Five Dragons—predecessor organizations with different institutional

cultures.[46] Against this backdrop, an official from the Military Education Bureau of the Training and Administration Department of the CMC announced that, beginning in 2025, the China Coast Guard Academy would stop directly recruiting new cadets. Instead, the PLA Dalian Naval Academy and the PAP Engineering University would assume responsibility for recruiting and providing the initial education of junior officers in the CCG's vessel command and law enforcement. The China Coast Guard Academy would continue to provide specialized training in the second half of the curriculum.[47] This new system indicates a shift toward the standardization of PLAN and PAP education from the stage of training junior officers, and in turn, the further integration and coordination between the CCG, the PLAN, and the PAP.

3. Deepening CCG-PLAN Cooperation in Unit Operations

What about CCG-PLAN cooperation in equipment and unit operations? Ryan Martinson identifies three indicators for evaluating the degree of jointness between the two services: 1) the establishment of decision-making mechanisms, 2) the frequency of joint exercises between the two services, and 3) the sharing of maritime intelligence. As an example of progress in the first indicator, he points to the regular formation of a joint patrol fleet comprised of CCG, PLAN, and fishing vessels in a naval district (水警区)[48] in the Paracel Islands. Based on its operations, he assesses that the PLAN is intended to respond to foreign navies, and the CCG to foreign civilian vessels. Regarding the second indicator, Martinson notes that the PLAN prioritizes enhancing joint operations with other PLA services, resulting in continued weak interoperability with the CCG. On the third indicator, he argues that intelligence sharing has improved since 2018 but remains inadequate due to the use of different communications systems between the CCG and the PLAN. Martinson contends that, while coordination mechanisms have been developed and improved jointness to some extent, these mechanisms are not fully utilized.[49]

At the same time, Chinese media have reported on joint exercises indicating improvement in the CCG and the PLA's ability to conduct coordinated operations. One example is an exercise carried out (the precise timing is unclear) by the Eastern Theater Command involving the PLAN, the PLA Air Force, and the CCG. The exercise reportedly included training in which naval forces responded to an adversary's missiles and aircraft and then supported CCG law-enforcement operations for the protection of maritime rights and interests. Chinese media stated that this was the first time the CCG participated in an Eastern Theater Command exercise.[50]

Thus, both Western experts and Chinese media have identified a degree of progress in operational coordination between the CCG and the PLAN. However, there has also been an incident that exposed a serious lack of cooperation. This was the August 2025 collision between a PLAN vessel and a CCG vessel near Scarborough Shoal. It occurred while the PLAN's 7,500-ton Type 052D destroyer *Guilin* and the 1,500-ton CCG vessel *3104* were pursuing a PCG vessel. The collision has been attributed to the *Guilin*'s large size, which made it difficult to detect the CCG vessel.[51] Lin Ying Yu, a Taiwan-based

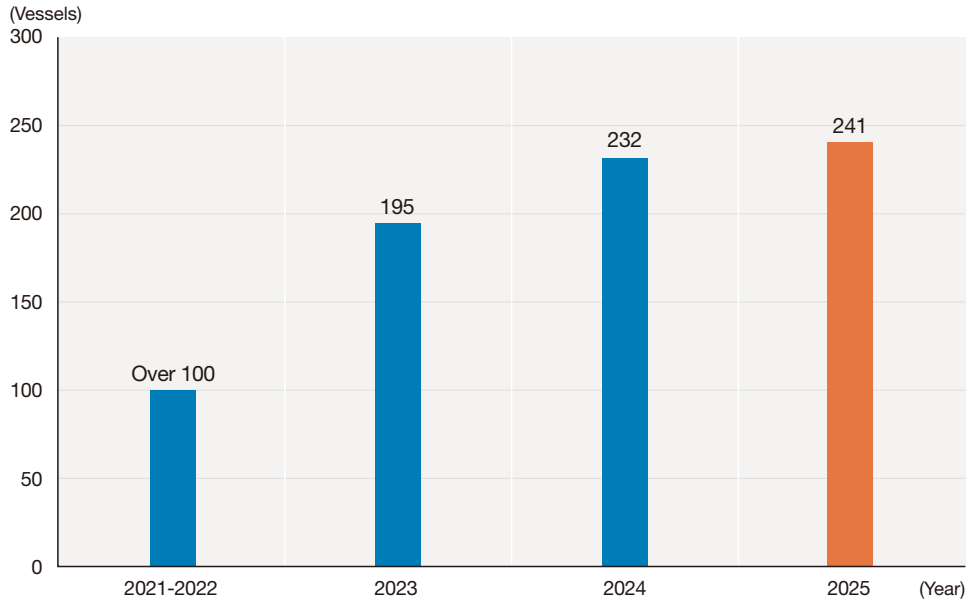
researcher specializing in Chinese military strategy, observes that the incident highlights problems in the chain of command between the CCG and the PLAN, as well as their limited vessel maintenance capacity. As evidence, he cites the April 2025 exercises around Taiwan, during which the CCG and the PLAN used different operational plans and code names.[52] Lin's analysis suggests that challenges remain in coordinating two organizations with different purposes of existence.

Relations with the Maritime Militia

1. Institutional Overview of the Maritime Militia

Alongside the PLAN and the CCG, another actor of note with respect to China's maritime activities is the maritime militia. Maritime militia has intensified its activities in the South China Sea. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 241 militia vessels were deployed on average per day in 2025,the highest level measured since AMTI began tracking in 2022 (see Table 3.1).[53]

Table 3.1 Average Daily Number of Maritime Militia Vessels Operating in the South China Sea



Source: Prepared by the author based on AMTI, "All Together Now."

Armed fishermen and fishing vessels have organized across a large area at sea since the Mao Zedong era, and the maritime militia has supported the regular military force even after reform and opening-up started.[54] Therefore, understanding the maritime militia requires understanding the broader militia system in China. China's militia is not an armed group voluntarily organized by citizens, as the term connotes. It is an armed group under the control of the CCP and predates the founding of

the People's Republic of China (PRC). Article 22 of the National Defense Law defines the militia as comprising the "armed forces" of the PRC, together with the PLA and the PAP. The article provides that, "The militia shall perform combat readiness service and carry out non-war military operations and defensive operations under the command of the military authorities," indicating that the militia is an armed group operating under the CMC. However, the militia differs from the PLA and the PAP in that militia members do not assume daily military missions and are principally engaged in production activities. This is apparent from the Regulation on Militia Work, enacted in 1990 and revised in 2011, which specifies the concrete missions and administration of the militia. Specifically, Article 2 defines the militia as "an armed organization composed of the people not released from their regular work under the leadership of the Communist Party of China."[55] Article 40 of the former Military Service Law divided militia members according to their military experience into two categories: primary militia, composed of veterans, personnel with military training, and those possessing specialized expertise; and ordinary militia, consisting of personnel meeting other criteria.[56] According to Article 37 of the Regulation on Militia Work, militia activities are financed by the state budget. In short, the maritime militia is a group of people engaged in maritime-related occupations who are organized into a militia by Chinese authorities.

As stated above, militia activities are funded by the state budget. Unlike regular forces, however, the militia's organizational structure, equipment, and skill level vary by unit.[57] How, then, are the militia, including the maritime militia, recruited and administered, and how do they maintain their skill level? On this question, a comprehensive study by Yeh Chih Wei, a researcher affiliated with the Taiwan Navy, serves as the principal reference for the discussion that follows.[58]

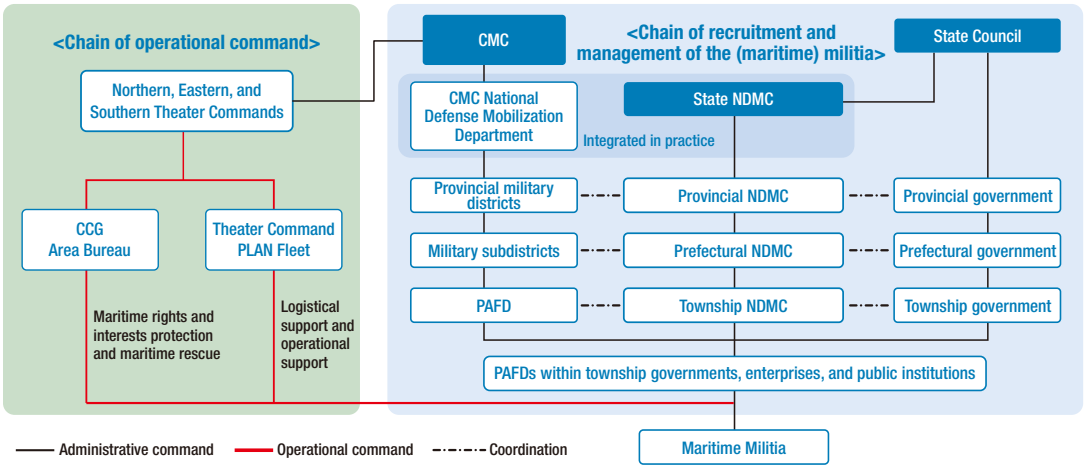
According to Yeh, the departments that recruit and administer militias are organized in a hierarchical structure corresponding to the levels of local government and the military. At the highest tier are the National Defense Mobilization Commission (NDMC) under the State Council and the National Defense Mobilization Department under the CMC. Below these central institutions, on the State Council side, are NDMCs at the provincial, prefectural, and township levels in descending order. Their military counterparts are the provincial military districts, military subdistricts, and the People's Armed Forces Department (PAFD), respectively. These organizations undertake militia-related responsibilities. At lower levels, PAFDs established within local governments, such as townships and villages, as well as within enterprises and public institutions, are responsible for the actual administration of militia. The military and governmental organs at each level exercise command over the PAFDs. The NDMCs and their military counterparts at each level are said to have a cooperative relationship. However, considering that Sheng Bin, director of the CMC's National Defense Mobilization Department, concurrently served as secretary-general of the state NDMC after the 2016 military reforms,[59] the State Council and military organs at the central level may have been integrated in practice.

In terms of the maritime militia's operational chain of command, CCG area branches and PLAN

fleets under the command of the northern, eastern, and southern coastal theaters exercise control over their respective militias. The CCG commands maritime militias in maritime rights and interests protection (海上维权) missions and maritime rescue missions, while the PLAN commands maritime militias in logistical support missions and operational support missions.

Maritime militia units are thus established by enterprises and public institutions in contrast with the structure of a regular military organization. Yeh observes that no uniform standards exist for the size or capabilities of the vessels employed by the maritime militia or for the composition of their personnel.[60] The relationships discussed above are illustrated in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4 Chain of Command and Management of the Maritime Militia



Source: Prepared by the author based on 弓野 [Yumino]「新型コロナ疫情をめぐる民兵の動員」63-68頁；葉 [Yeh]「由中共海上民兵訓練探討戦時運用浅析」96頁.

2. Training for the Maritime Militia by the CCG and the PLAN

The CCG and the PLAN place the maritime militia under their command, as discussed in the preceding section. The maritime militia also receives training from the two organizations. What kinds of training are provided? The training's components offer clues to the missions of the maritime militia. Drawing on Yeh Chih Wei's study cited above, the training conducted in the Southern Theater Command can be summarized as shown in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Components of the Maritime Militia Training Provided by the CCG and the PLAN in the Southern Theater Command

CCG	Maritime rights and interests protection, logistical support, live fire, obstruction of navigation and isolation, detention support, etc.
PLAN	Mine-laying, handling of small arms, nautical chart reading, seamanship techniques, damage control, amphibious landings, etc.

Source: Prepared by the author based on 葉 [Yeh]「由中共海上民兵訓練探討戰時運用浅析」100頁.

It can be inferred from the table that the CCG and the PLAN conduct training designed to enhance the maritime militia's ability to support their respective missions. Wang Hsiu Hung, a Taiwan-based researcher of Chinese military affairs, divides the maritime militia training provided by Chinese authorities into two categories: peacetime and gray-zone scenarios and wartime scenarios. Although Wang does not identify the organizations responsible for conducting training, the former includes harassment at sea, vessel escort, intelligence collection, surveillance, reconnaissance, and the construction of artificial islands. The latter includes mine laying, swarming tactics, maritime blockades, reconnaissance, tracking, deceptive activities, such as flying foreign flags, and interference.[61]

Based on these assessments in existing literature, it is thought that the CCG and the PLAN seek improvement in maritime militia capabilities, such as capabilities to support the two services, as well as the seamanship and self-defense combat techniques necessary to accompany and operate alongside CCG and PLAN units.

3. CCG-PLAN-Maritime Militia Coordination in the South China Sea

Ever since Xi Jinping came to power, China has adopted the policy of protecting maritime rights and interests through coordinated employment of the PLAN, the CCG, and maritime militia. These three components are collectively referred to in Chinese as "military-police/PAP-civilian" (军警民). This is reflected in the defense white paper, "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," published in April 2013 shortly after Xi took office, which states, "The militia takes an active part in … joint military-police-civilian defense efforts … in the border and coastal areas. Militia members patrol along the borders and coastlines all year round."[62]

How, then, does the CCG coordinate with the PLAN and the maritime militia in the South China Sea?[63] One study estimates that 48% of CCG collisions in the South China Sea occurred in coordination with the maritime militia.[64] An example of a military-police/PAP-civilian standoff with a claimant is the collision with Vietnam in 2014, shortly after the former CCG was established. This incident was triggered by China's installation of an oil rig and commencement of oil drilling in waters of the Paracel Islands contested with Vietnam. In response to the Vietnam Coast Guard's efforts to

obstruct the drilling, China deployed approximately 80 vessels, including PLAN vessels, former CCG vessels, and fishing boats that could have belonged to the maritime militia.[65] The Chinese vessels fired water cannons and rammed into Vietnamese vessels, resulting in injuries to Vietnamese personnel and damage to Vietnamese vessels.[66]



Debris from a Vietnam Coast Guard vessel rammed by Chinese vessels (Photo taken by the author in March 2026)

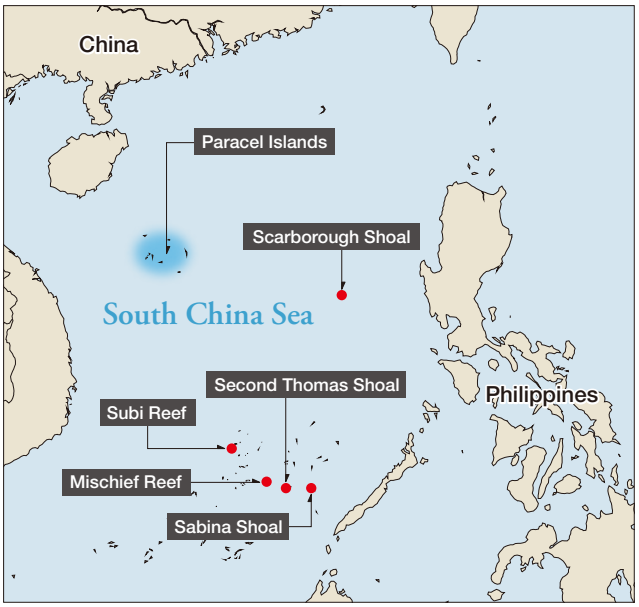
More recently, mainly in standoffs with the Philippines amid escalating tensions, the CCG, the PLAN, and the maritime militia have obstructed the navigation of Philippine vessels and intentionally rammed into them in a coordinated manner (see Table 3.3).



A CCG vessel (left foreground) and vessels believed to be maritime militia vessels (background left and right) encircling a PCG vessel (right foreground) near Second Thomas Shoal, March 2024 (Courtesy of the PCG and AFP/Jiji)

The cases discussed above illuminate three characteristics of military-police/PAP-civilian coordination. First, CCG vessels and maritime militia vessels have repeatedly been observed conducting coordinated maneuvers and ramming or encircling vessels from other claimant states, indicating a degree of operational control and coordination. Second, the maritime militia, which can assemble as many as 200 vessels, appears to exploit its numerical advantage to intimidate and surround vessels from other claimant states. Third, the PLAN does not necessarily operate at the forefront and provides support from the air or distant locations most likely to keep it from coming to the fore and escalating tensions.

Table 3.3 Major Recent Standoffs between the CCG and Claimant States Involving the Maritime Militia and the PLAN



Date	Nearby Feature	Claimant	Overview of Incident
October 2023	Second Thomas Shoal	Philippines	A CCG vessel collided with a Philippine Navy-towed supply vessel. On the same day, a maritime militia vessel came alongside and collided with a Philippine Coast Guard vessel.
February 2024	Mischief Reef	Philippines	Fifteen CCG vessels and 200 maritime militia vessels swarmed the area.
March 2024	Second Thomas Shoal	Philippines	Five CCG vessels, 18 maritime militia vessels, and eight PLAN vessels were deployed. Four CCG vessels surrounded one Philippine Coast Guard vessel, and China's water cannons shattered windows on the Philippine vessel.
August–September 2024	Sabina Shoal	Philippines	A Philippine Coast Guard vessel was rammed by a CCG vessel and surrounded by a total of eight CCG and PLAN vessels. A total of 40 CCG, PLAN, and maritime militia vessels surrounded a Philippine Coast Guard vessel and blocked its navigation route.
August 2025	Second Thomas Shoal	Philippines	Sixteen CCG vessels (including fast boats with mounted heavy weapons) and nine maritime militia vessels, supported by a PLAN helicopter and a UAV, attempted to approach the grounded warship *Sierra Madre*, which serves as a Philippine base.

Source: Prepared by the author based on news reports.

4. Advantages and Vulnerabilities of the Maritime Militia

What are the advantages and disadvantages for the CCG and the PLAN of employing the maritime militia? Put differently, what are the strengths and vulnerabilities of the maritime militia itself? The strengths include its range of activities, numerical scale, familiarity with the maritime environment, and the ambiguity of its status, which can be exploited to confuse adversaries. In particular, it may be difficult to determine from outward appearances whether a vessel is acting as a military asset or is simply a civilian fishing boat.[67] Under international law, if maritime militia vessels are regarded as auxiliary vessels of the PLA or the CCG, they may be attacked without prior warning. However, it is difficult to distinguish whether they are militia or simply fishermen. The employment of militia can therefore be understood as a means of exploiting this ambiguity.[68] The maritime militia's vulnerabilities include limited willingness among personnel, the low quality of the maritime workforce from which militia members are recruited, the lack of standardized communications equipment, insufficient training, and difficulties in ensuring discipline.[69] Another vulnerability may be the weakness of its legal protections under Chinese law. This is because provisions concerning the militia were removed when the Military Service Law was revised, as noted above, raising questions about the validity of the subordinate Regulation on Militia Work. This stands in contrast to the CCG, whose legal basis has been reinforced through the enactment of the Coast Guard Law and establishment of successive subordinate regulations. Chinese researchers have pointed to these vulnerabilities, with some publishing papers that propose building logistics facilities, ports, airfields, and other infrastructure for military-police/PAP-civilian joint usage, developing legislation, and establishing frameworks for information sharing among them.[70]

Against this backdrop, there have also been military-police/PAP-civilian efforts to improve information sharing mechanisms. In October 2021, an official associated with Guangdong Province's Coastal Defense Committee announced that coastal cities in the province, including Guangzhou, had introduced a system capable of instantly detecting and analyzing anomalies in waters using radars, automatic identification systems (AIS), UAVs, and other sensors. The official explained that the system allows for military-police/PAP-civilian common usage and is useful for both combating maritime crime and preparing for war.[71] In addition, in April 2025, the website of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region's NDMC published an article reporting that a company affiliated with the Institute of Laser Engineering of the Beijing University of Technology developed a domestically produced maritime security platform using artificial intelligence (AI).[72] The platform is said to have been introduced in Hainan and Jiangsu provinces as well. Such AI-enabled information systems may also contribute to improving military-police/PAP-civilian joint operational capabilities.

The CCG as a Central Actor in Maritime Governance

Adjustments of Maritime Statutes following the Enactment of the Coast Guard Law

As discussed above, the Coast Guard Law contains articles granting the CCG administrative and supervisory authority over some areas of maritime administration. In recent years, China has also revised existing maritime statutes by adding articles specifying the CCG's authority, perhaps to bring them into alignment with the Coast Guard Law. One example is the Fisheries Law, whose revisions were adopted by the National People's Congress in December 2025 and entered into force in May 2026. Article 54 specifies the maritime areas where the CCG is responsible for law enforcement, while authorizing the CCG to undertake law enforcement jointly with fisheries-related authorities and other agencies under Article 63.[73]

Furthermore, Article 35 of the Regulation on Nature Reserves, revised and promulgated in February 2026, grants the CCG authority to administer and inspect areas extending seaward from the coastline of nature reserves, as well as to combat illegal activities in those areas.[74]

The CCG's Involvement in China's Efforts to Strengthen Control over Scarborough Shoal

China has focused on strengthening its control over Scarborough Shoal, which is disputed with the Philippines and has been under China's de facto control since 2012. In November 2024, China established territorial sea baselines around Scarborough Shoal, further clarifying its intention to control the shoal as Chinese territory.[75] The reasons for China's emphasis on Scarborough Shoal are, by and large, twofold. The first concerns the expansion of sovereignty and jurisdictional claims in the South China Sea. China's Territorial Sea Law provides that the underwater Macclesfield Bank area, including Scarborough Shoal, is part of Chinese territory. Scarborough Shoal, however, has few rocks that are above sea level at high tide.[76] China refers to the shoal as an "island," which it calls Huangyan Dao, and asserts that territorial sea and EEZ can be established from the feature. In doing so, China seeks to create a legal basis for asserting its jurisdiction within the "nine-dash line" that it has unilaterally drawn in the South China Sea. The second reason is geopolitical. Specifically, if China consolidated its control over Scarborough Shoal, it would strengthen its influence across the maritime area surrounded by Scarborough Shoal, the Spratly Islands, and the Paracel Islands. Furthermore, in the event of an armed conflict over Taiwan, the shoal would serve as an important position for establishing a maritime blockade against Taiwan extending into the South China Sea.[77]

Consistent with China's view, CCG vessels, fishing boats believed to belong to the maritime militia, and PLAN vessels maintain a continuous presence around Scarborough Shoal. The CCG

frequently conducts "law-enforcement patrols," while the PLA carries out "combat readiness patrols." The CCG's presence has been particularly persistent. It is estimated that, in 2025, at least one CCG vessel was present near the shoal on 352 days of the year, with the total number of ship days reaching 1,099.[78]

Beyond patrol activities, China appears to be seeking to establish "governance" over Scarborough Shoal through administrative measures. An example is the establishment of a nature reserve at the shoal in September 2025. In connection with its establishment, at a January 2026 press conference marking the fifth anniversary of the implementation of the Coast Guard Law, Liu Dejun, deputy director of the Law Enforcement Department of the CCG, stated that "Huangyan Dao is China's inherent territory." He emphasized that China had established territorial sea baselines around the shoal, that the CCG conducts patrols in the surrounding waters, and that China has actively promoted environmental protection measures following the designation of the shoal as a nature reserve.[79] In August 2026, China established implementing rules on the administration of the reserve, the Management Measures for the Huangyan Dao National Nature Reserve. The measures specify the responsibilities of the CCG, administrative bodies including the Ministry of Natural Resources and the National Forestry and Grassland Administration, and the Hainan provincial government, which has jurisdiction over Scarborough Shoal under China's administrative division system.[80]

Liu also stated that the reason for the CCG's patrols around Scarborough Shoal was to combat illegal fishing practices using electric currents and toxic substances. In November 2024, the CCG had similarly referred to "illegal activities by some Philippine fishing vessels" and indicated that it would strengthen its patrols near the shoal.[81] Such activities can be interpreted as an effort to use "combating illegal activities" as a pretext for accumulating evidence of China's exercise of governance over Scarborough Shoal.

Furthermore, according to Philippine statements, in April 2026, the CCG, jointly with the PLAN and the maritime militia, installed a barrier at the entrance to Scarborough Shoal and removed it several days later.[82] China had erected barriers at the shoal in the past, but these had been removed by the Philippines. The fact that China itself removed the barrier signifies that it can now install and remove barriers at its own discretion. This, in turn, suggests the strengthening of China's control over Scarborough Shoal.

The Promotion of Maritime Governance through Cooperation with Other Administrative Agencies and Its Implications

The CCG actively engages in maritime administration activities in coordination with other agencies. Since 2020, for example, the CCG, in cooperation with agencies such as the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and the National Forestry and Grassland Administration, has conducted "Blue Sea" (碧海蓝盾), an annual large-scale patrol campaign for marine resource protection. At the press conference marking

the fifth anniversary of the implementation of the Coast Guard Law, Ding Yi, an official with the Law Enforcement Department of the CCG, described Blue Sea as a "flagship initiative" of the CCG's law-enforcement campaigns (海警的执法品牌). He stated that its monitoring and supervision covered comprehensive sea-area use, sea island protection, marine plastics, offshore oil exploration, submarine cables and pipelines, and nature reserves. He stated that the campaign also focuses on monitoring using remote capabilities, including aviation units, remote sensing, Internet of Things (IoT), and other technologies.[83] The 2026 campaign was launched in March. According to the CCG's announcement, its priority areas were revised to include the protection of uninhabited islands and their surrounding waters, environmental protection in key areas, changes in the coastline, protection of sea areas in key zones, new key marine projects, and underwater cultural heritage.[84] Comprehensive sea-area use, sea island protection, and nature reserves were removed beginning in the 2026 Blue Sea campaign, leaving a total of nine priority areas.

The CCG has not disclosed where the Blue Sea campaign has been conducted. Nevertheless, if such large-scale patrol campaigns were extended into waters disputed with other countries, they could provide China with further means to assert, domestically and internationally, that it governs those areas. As CCG officials have noted, Blue Sea also makes use of airborne platforms, which presumably include UAVs, as well as satellites. Such advanced technologies could facilitate coordination with the PLAN and the maritime militia during periods of heightened tension with claimant states, including contingencies involving armed conflict. It is possible that the campaign provides the CCG with an opportunity to develop operational familiarity with these advanced technologies.

Interestingly, the CCG conducts the Blue Sea campaign jointly with agencies that were separated when the former SOA was dismantled under the 2018 institutional reforms—namely, the three agencies other than the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. According to Yang Peidong, an international law researcher at Wuhan University, such joint operations are conducted not through a coordination framework but ad hoc.[85] Even then, it can be interpreted that, by cooperating with State Council departments following the enactment of the Coast Guard Law, the CCG is restrengthening the administrative functions it has possessed since the period of its predecessor.

Conclusion

Through the two rounds of institutional reforms in 2013 and 2018, the CCG took on characteristics of a military organization under the command of the PAP and, ultimately, the CMC. This shift is evident in the integration of the CCG with the PLAN in the legal framework, personnel, and equipment, as well as in its coordination with the maritime militia. A range of cases demonstrate that, in disputes with claimant states, the CCG has conducted coordinated operations with the PLAN and the maritime

militia, albeit with some limitations. Moreover, the enactment of the Coast Guard Law in 2021 legally affirmed the CCG's supervisory authority in maritime administration and its capacity to cooperate with other maritime administrative bodies. As a result, the CCG can be understood as having evolved beyond a mere maritime law-enforcement agency into "an organization combining military and administrative functions."

It appears that this comprehensive organization spanning both military and administrative functions has developed under the stated objective of "enhancing law-enforcement capabilities," as articulated in authoritative Chinese sources. *The Science of Military Strategy* argues that strengthening the CCG's law-enforcement capabilities requires capacity building in four areas: 1) flanking support capabilities, including efficient law enforcement, open seas rights protection, special operations, air support, and logistics; 2) informatization, including shipboard command and control, information processing, positioning, early warning, and electromagnetic-spectrum capabilities; 3) escalation control, including coordination with the PLAN; and 4) development of a legal framework governing maritime law enforcement.[86] The CCG's ongoing capacity building has been examined throughout this chapter and is broadly consistent with the recommendations in *The Science of Military Strategy*.

To frame the South China Sea dispute as an "internal matter," China seeks to position the CCG as a central actor in maritime governance by developing relevant legislation and assigning the CCG an administrative role. At the same time, as a means of reinforcing its control, China appears to be strengthening the CCG's operational capabilities through enhancement of equipment; deeper integration with the PLAN in personnel, legal framework, and equipment; and closer coordination with the PLAN and the maritime militia.

On the other hand, the CCG's coercive injury-causing actions can be regarded as serving the objective of denying a claimant state's territorial sovereignty over features or facilitating the seizure of another state's territory. Therefore, even if the actions are carried out by a maritime law-enforcement agency, they may constitute the "use of force" in international relations, depending on their purpose.[87] Against this backdrop, China's granting of administrative authority to the CCG can be understood as an effort to justify its activities as an exercise of "governance."

To reinforce China's control and provide the appearance of legitimacy, the CCG is likely to strengthen its military capabilities, while simultaneously expanding its administrative activities, including environmental protection and infrastructure preservation, which are presented as having a "peaceful character." Through this process, China will seek to expand its influence in the South China Sea. Such developments may also contribute to heightening tensions with neighboring states.



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The Dynamics of Maritime Issues



Chapter Four

Divergence and Commonality among Southeast Asia's Responses

SHOJI Tomotaka

Introduction

This chapter examines how three claimant states from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia—as well as ASEAN as an organization have responded to the South China Sea dispute, particularly their approaches toward China. Amid persistent tensions in the South China Sea due to the escalating Sino-U.S. rivalry, ASEAN member states, especially those that have competing territorial claims, have pursued divergent responses. These states are fully aware of the substantial asymmetry in national power between themselves and the United States and China and of the limited ability of ASEAN members to influence the situation. Nonetheless, they have devised and implemented measures to protect their respective strategic interests and regional stability. These measures are admittedly limited in their effectiveness. However, it is also true that the actions of these states, which are parties to the territorial disputes and have steadily expanded their international presence through economic development, are increasingly difficult for even the United States or China to ignore.

The responses can be broadly divided into bilateral approaches and multilateral approaches within the ASEAN framework. In light of each country's constraints and circumstances, including geographic position, the history of relations with China, economic imperatives, and the nature of cooperation with the United States, the three claimant states have selectively employed bilateral and multilateral methods in search of effective ways to deal with China. In this chapter, the responses of the three states are examined to shed light on the divergence of their measures and to identify commonalities across the countries. As for the responses of ASEAN as an organization, this chapter focuses primarily on its efforts to formulate a code of conduct. The chapter concludes that all three countries, albeit to varying degrees, have maintained diplomatic engagement with China while simultaneously advancing security cooperation with the United States. Although their circumstances differ, all have endeavored to preserve strategic autonomy while navigating the balance between the United States and China.

The Philippines: An Expansion of Alliance-Based Cooperation

The Philippine response to the South China Sea dispute has been characterized above all by significant policy changes between administrations. The Philippine president wields decisive influence over the basic direction of foreign policy. As a result, with each change of administration, foreign policy including security has shifted markedly, reflecting in part the personal preferences of the president.

In the case of the Aquino administration (2010–2016), the Scarborough Shoal incident prompted a confrontational policy toward China. The Philippines initiated arbitration proceedings while simultaneously strengthening cooperation with its ally, the United States. By contrast, the Duterte administration (2016–2022) distanced itself from Washington and showed little enthusiasm for cooperation in the South China Sea, preferring instead to cooperate with China, particularly in the economic field. Presidential preferences have thus contributed to dramatic policy reversals, insofar as incoming administrations reject the policies of their predecessors and adopt foreign policies based on a new position.

The Marcos administration (2022–present) has, for the time being, continued a confrontational policy toward China in the South China Sea. Clashes between the Philippines and China have occurred frequently at sea. For example, in March 2026, the Chinese Navy's missile frigate closed in on the Philippine Navy's landing ship tank near Thitu Island controlled by the Philippines and narrowly avoided a collision.[1] Other incidents against Philippine vessels have involved the use of water cannons, the illumination of lasers, the interference of Philippine patrol activities, and the mass presence of fishing vessels believed to be maritime militia. The Philippines controls Second Thomas Shoal, west of Palawan, where the Philippine Navy and Coast Guard regularly conduct resupply missions. The main objective of Chinese harassment is to interfere with these replenishment operations. However, Chinese interference has gradually grown intense, extending the clashes beyond Second Thomas Shoal and Thitu Island to Sabina Shoal and Scarborough Shoal.

The Marcos administration did not adopt a confrontational posture from the outset. In January 2023, six months after taking office, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. paid an official visit to China. During his meeting with President Xi Jinping, the two sides discussed a wide range of cooperation focusing on economic cooperation. They also agreed to establish a communication mechanism on maritime issues between their foreign ministries and to continue consultations on the joint development of oil and natural gas in the South China Sea. President Marcos commented that he was "very optimistic" about relations with China.[2]

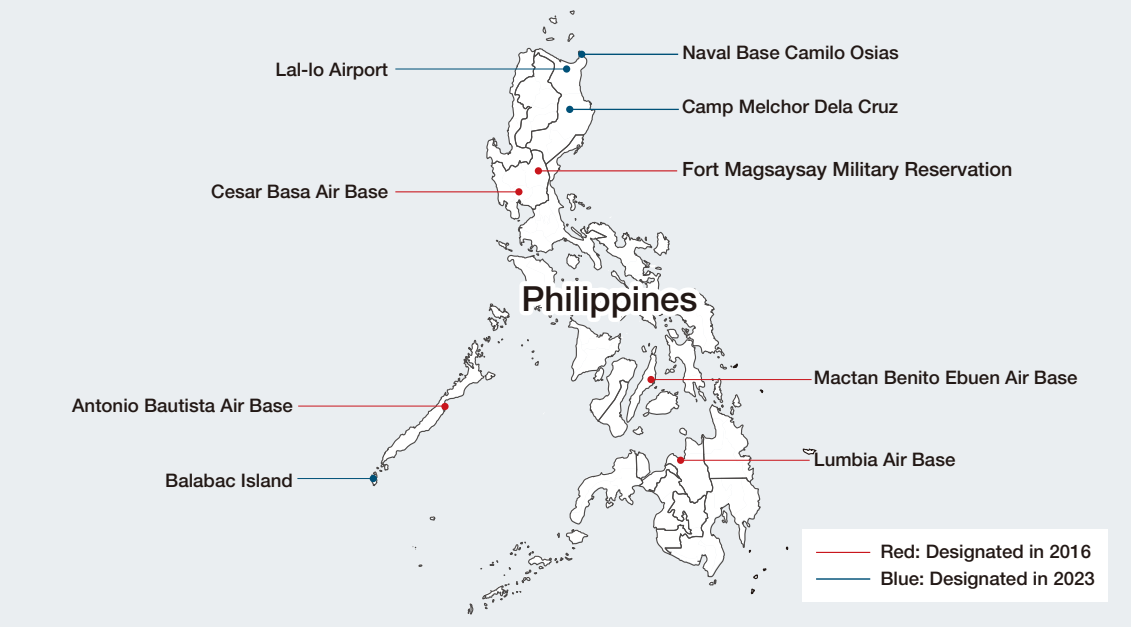
Following a subsequent laser illumination incident, however, the administration shifted from a policy of dialogue to one of confrontation. In February 2023, a China Coast Guard vessel directed a military-grade laser at a Philippine Coast Guard vessel navigating near Second Thomas Shoal.[3] As the incident occurred shortly after President Marcos' visit to China, it hardened his stance immediately. It was similar to the Aquino administration. Although it initially emphasized cooperation with China and sought a negotiated resolution of the South China Sea dispute, the Scarborough Shoal incident prompted a shift to a policy of confrontation.

The Philippines' confrontational policy gained momentum with support from the Biden administration. Washington's decision to enhance support for the Philippines reflected several considerations: a desire to restore U.S.-Philippines relations that had soured during the Duterte administration, the U.S. policy of strengthening ties with allies as part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the more

urgent issue of tensions in the Taiwan Strait. From the U.S. perspective, the strategic importance of the Philippines—located on the South China Sea and adjacent to Taiwan—had risen to an unprecedented level. In August 2022, shortly after the Marcos administration took office, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited the Philippines and stated that, under the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, the United States would come to the Philippines' defense in the event of a contingency in the South China Sea.[4] The following month, President Marcos traveled to the United States to attend the United Nations General Assembly session and held his first meeting with President Joe Biden. On that occasion, the United States reiterated its "ironclad commitment" to the defense of the Philippines.[5]

The convergence of the two countries' strategic interests translated into concrete advances in defense cooperation. In February 2023, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited the Philippines and held a meeting with Senior Undersecretary and Officer in Charge of the Department of National Defense Carlito Galvez. During the meeting, the two sides agreed to resume joint patrols in the South China Sea. With regard to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which was concluded in 2014 during the Aquino administration, the two sides agreed that the U.S. forces can access four new sites in addition to the five previously designated locations.[6] Three of the four new sites are located in Northern Luzon. They do not face the South China Sea and are situated closer to Taiwan, indicating that these locations were chosen with Taiwan in mind. In April 2024, the U.S. Typhon Mid-Range Capability missile system was deployed to Northern Luzon for the first time for use in a bilateral exercise, and the system has remained there even after the exercise concluded.[7]

Figure 4.1 The Nine Sites Accessible to the U.S. Forces under the EDCA



Source: Prepared by the author based on news reports.

Defense cooperation quickly became institutionalized. In April 2023, the third U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue was held in Washington, D.C. for the first time in seven years. In addition to holding the 2+2 meeting around once a year thereafter, the two countries launched a 3+3 meeting in April 2024, which brings together their foreign and defense ministers and national security advisors.[8] In May 2023, based on an agreement reached at the 2+2 meeting, the U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines were issued. Pursuant to an agreement in the guidelines to strengthen information sharing, negotiations were commenced with a view to concluding a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).[9] The negotiations proceeded rapidly, and the GSOMIA was signed in November 2024.[10]

The Philippines has been institutionalizing defense cooperation with other U.S. allies as well, such as Japan and Australia. In July 2024, the Philippines and Japan held their second 2+2 meeting in Manila, where they signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) designed to facilitate bilateral exercises and disaster-relief operations and to enhance interoperability between their forces.[11] At the Japan-Philippines summit in April 2025, the two sides agreed to begin negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in order to further strengthen operational cooperation, and the agreement was signed in January 2026.[12] The two countries are also holding negotiations toward the early conclusion of an information security agreement. With Australia, a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA) entered into force in 2012. In September 2023, the two countries established a Strategic Partnership and agreed to hold a defense ministers' meeting annually.[13] The Philippines signed SOVFAs with New Zealand and Canada in 2025 and with France in 2026. Aside from Japan and France, the Philippines has expanded cooperation with Sweden and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in equipment procurement and defense industry. Cooperation with India has also made strides. Besides procuring Brahmos missiles, the two countries established a Strategic Partnership during President Marcos' visit to India in August 2025, at which time they conducted their first joint patrol in the South China Sea.[14]

In this way, the network of U.S. allies and partners supporting the Philippines has continued to expand. Their support can be understood as motivated by a shared determination to uphold international norms, such as the rule of law and freedom of navigation, by assisting the Philippines, which finds itself at the forefront of the confrontation with China.

Bilateral cooperation with U.S. allies and partners has become networked, evolving into minilateral cooperation. In August 2023, for example, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States conducted joint exercises in waters and airspace around Manila. In April 2024, Australia and France participated for the first time in the Philippines-United States Exercise Balikatan, in which Japan, along with some ASEAN member states, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, India, New Zealand, and the ROK participated as observers.[15] Minilateral cooperation has also deepened politically. In April 2024, the first Japan-Philippines-United States summit was held in Washington, D.C.[16] The following month, an Australia-Japan-Philippines-United States defense ministers' meeting was held

in Hawaii, and in November, the first defense ministers' meeting among the four countries and the ROK took place on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Laos.[17]

Building on institutionalization, the momentum of bilateral and minilateral cooperation has continued into the second Trump administration. In March 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth visited the Philippines. During the visit, the two sides underscored the enduring strength of the U.S.-Philippines alliance and the importance of upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific. They reaffirmed that the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty applies to armed attacks against either country's armed forces, aircraft, and public vessels, including coast guard vessels, anywhere in the South China Sea.[18] Japan's Self-Defense Forces was a full-fledged participant in that year's Exercise Balikatan, which included the deployment of equipment. The exercise contributed to the realization of closer minilateral cooperation.[19] At the Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in February 2026, the two sides agreed to increase deployments of missile and unmanned systems to the Philippines.[20]



U.S.-Philippines co-hosted multilateral Exercise Balikatan, May 2024 (Daniel Ceng Shou-Yi/ZUMA Press Wire/Kyodo News Images

The Marcos administration, while advancing bilateral and minilateral military cooperation, has maintained channels for diplomatic dialogue with China. In March 2026, the 11th meeting of the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism was held in Quanzhou. At the meeting, the two sides took note of progress in areas of cooperation to increase confidence, including communication between their coast guards and ocean meteorology. They also held an initial exchange of views on the possibility of oil and natural gas exploration in the South China Sea.[21] As such, the Philippines has continued to search for opportunities to ease tensions with China.



U.S.-Philippines defense ministerial meeting, March 2025 (EPA/Jiji)

Vietnam: A Priority on Stable Relations with China

After the South China Sea dispute resurfaced, the most intense clash between Vietnam and China occurred over the oil rig incident in 2014 (see Chapter One, third section). The incident eroded Vietnam's political trust in Beijing and made it imperative to reduce economic dependence on China. Subsequently, the two countries made efforts to repair relations, and political stability was restored. In 2019, however, a new incident occurred near Vanguard Bank under Vietnam's control, where Vietnamese Coast Guard surveillance vessels and a Chinese survey vessel remained locked in a standoff for several months. At that time, Vietnam braced for the possible recurrence of the oil rig incident.[22]

In responding to the South China Sea dispute, Vietnam has practiced "omnidirectional security cooperation." As the term suggests, the policy aims to strengthen security cooperation with diverse partners in all directions. By its nature, it advances cooperation with the United States and other major partners, while at the same time working together with China in areas where cooperation is possible.[23]

In the aftermath of the shocking oil rig incident, Vietnam decided to prioritize the strengthening of omnidirectional security cooperation, particularly stabilizing relations with China. The logic was as follows: if Vietnam's geographic distance from its neighbor is unchangeable, and if it is unrealistic to control the economic ties that arise from their geographic proximity, it would be rational and consistent with Vietnam's national interests to stabilize relations with China and promote Vietnam's continued development by leveraging China's economic power.

This basic posture is embodied in the "Four No's" articulated in Vietnam's defense policy. The Four No's refer to: no partaking in military alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases in Vietnamese territory or using Vietnamese territory to counteract other countries, and no using force or threatening to use force in the settlement of disputes. In short, the tenets of these principles are non-alignment and the peaceful settlement of disputes. When it was first presented in 2010, the policy consisted of only the first three "No's." The fourth was added in the defense white paper published in 2019.[24] The incorporation of the peaceful settlement of disputes into the defense policy principles was an outcome of a reassessment, following the oil rig incident, of how to approach the South China Sea dispute, particularly China. At the same time, it also served as a signal to Beijing.

Vietnam's approach has so far proved effective. In recent years, there have been no noticeable clashes with China in the South China Sea. Bilateral relations have remained stable, and economic cooperation has continued, mainly in trade, investment, and infrastructure development. This result reflects a convergence of the two countries' interests. To Lam, who became general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam in August 2024 following the death of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, has set a goal of transforming Vietnam into a developed country by 2045 and an economic

growth target of at least 10% for 2026. To achieve these ambitious goals, it is essential to cooperate with Vietnam's neighboring economic power. This requires setting aside territorial disputes in the South China Sea and maintaining friendly and cooperative relations with China.

China, for its part, desires stable relations with neighboring Vietnam amid the Sino-U.S. strategic competition. Chinese firms have boosted investment in Vietnam to offset the effects of higher U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods, increasing Vietnam's economic importance to China. In this way, both sides are navigating an equilibrium by exercising restraint and avoiding clashes in the South China Sea.

The closeness of the Vietnam-China relationship is demonstrated by their summit diplomacy. To Lam visited China immediately after becoming general secretary. At his meeting with President Xi Jinping, General Secretary To Lam underscored that the relationship with China was the most important external relationship for Vietnam, stating that it consistently attaches importance and accords top priority to their good-neighborly relations, their Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, and the building of a community with a shared future that carries strategic significance. On maritime issues, he proposed that the two sides respect each other's legitimate interests and resolve their differences through peaceful means.[25]

In April 2025, President Xi visited Vietnam. Although Xi had just been there in December 2023, he visited again in an effort to pull Vietnam closer to China's side amid the internationally controversial tariffs imposed by the Trump administration and its announcement of a 46% tariff on Vietnamese goods. In the joint statement issued during the visit, the two leaders affirmed their commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea and to actively seek fundamental and lasting solutions acceptable to both sides.[26]

Bilateral security cooperation has deepened. In July 2025, the Vietnamese and Chinese armies conducted their first bilateral exercise. In March 2026, building on an agreement reached at the summit meeting in the previous year, the two sides held the inaugural 3+3 meeting that brought together their foreign, defense, and public security ministers.[27]

Vietnam shows significant consideration for China and takes pains to stabilize bilateral relations, all the while maintaining a policy of omnidirectional security cooperation. Vietnam's security cooperation has made progress not only with China but also with the United States. In June 2025, a third decommissioned U.S. Coast Guard cutter was transferred to the Vietnam Coast Guard.[28] Furthermore, in November, Secretary of War Hegseth visited Vietnam and paid courtesy calls on General Secretary To Lam and President Luong Cuong, demonstrating that Hanoi welcomed engagement with Washington. Secretary Hegseth and Minister of National Defence Phan Van Giang reaffirmed their intention to advance cooperation in the areas of addressing the legacies of the Vietnam War, defense industry, military medicine, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cybersecurity, United Nations peacekeeping operations, and multilateral security cooperation, including through the ADMM-Plus.[29] In December, the U.S. Navy's amphibious assault ship USS *Tripoli* and guided-missile

cruiser USS *Robert Smalls* made a port call at Da Nang.[30]

Vietnam also maintains cooperation with its longstanding partners, such as Japan, India, and Russia. In May 2026, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae visited Vietnam and held meetings with General Secretary To Lam and Prime Minister Le Minh Hung. At the meetings, the two sides concurred on working together to achieve resilient rare-earth supply chains in Vietnam as an economic security priority, as well as advancing security cooperation and concrete support for strengthening maritime law-enforcement capabilities.[31] In April 2026, prior to the prime minister's visit, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer *Asahi* conducted bilateral search-and-rescue and communication exercises with the Vietnam People's Navy off the coast of Da Nang.[32] With India, defense cooperation has surged across the services. For example, the two armies have conducted joint education training that contributes to United Nations peacekeeping operations. Naval cooperation has included port calls by Indian vessels and bilateral exercises, while air force cooperation has included India's provision of aircraft maintenance support. With regard to equipment, Vietnam is finalizing an agreement to acquire Brahmos missiles from India valued at approximately $700 million.[33] As for Russia, which had traditionally been an important supplier of military equipment, the aggression against Ukraine has prompted Vietnam to diversify its suppliers. Symbolic defense cooperation with Russia has nevertheless continued. In May 2025, their defense ministers met in Moscow and signed the Strategic Partnership Plan in defense for the 2026–2030 period. The plan listed areas of cooperation related to equipment technology and multilateral frameworks within ASEAN.[34]

Moreover, Vietnam has expanded steady cooperation with the Philippines, another ASEAN claimant state. For example, in August 2024, the Vietnamese and the Philippine coast guards conducted their first bilateral exercise. Later that month, Vietnamese Defence Minister Giang visited the Philippines and signed letters of intent to advance cooperation between the two defense ministries in humanitarian assistance, maritime search and rescue, and military medicine.[35]

Vietnam has skillfully managed its relationship with China, carefully striking a balance between the United States and China while continuing to cooperate with major powers and ASEAN member states. At the same time, however, Hanoi is acutely aware from experience that China's restraint toward Vietnam in the South China Sea reflects only a temporary convergence of interests, and that external factors or changes within China could cause it to shift to a more aggressive approach at any time. Indeed, Vietnamese attempts at new resource exploration in waters off its South China Sea coast face persistent Chinese interference to this day, while Chinese harassment of Vietnamese fishermen occurs sporadically. For this reason, Vietnam has focused on self-help efforts along with omnidirectional security cooperation. Interestingly, Vietnam's responses to the South China Sea dispute have at times emulated Chinese practices. One example is the establishment of a force modeled on China's fisheries surveillance force in 2013, under Vietnam's Directorate of Fisheries of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Land reclamation and maritime militia discussed below provide further examples.

In recent years, Vietnam has undertaken reclamation works on features under its control. It began reclamation in 2021 and created approximately 1.3 square kilometers of land by the end of 2022. By contrast, no more than 0.49 square kilometers of land had been created over the preceding decade. As this comparison shows, the reclamation works in this period of one to two years proceeded at extraordinary scale and speed.[36] In 2025, a new round of reclamation began. Dredging and landfill work commenced on five previously untouched reefs, while three other features underwent further expansion. As of March of that year, the total land created by Vietnam was estimated to be about 70% of the total land created by China. Munitions depots and airstrips have been built on the artificial features.[37] In 2026, Vietnam began reclamation on five other features, expanding reclamation work to all of the features under its control.[38] Vietnam's reclamation is approaching and could soon surpass China's reclamation in total land. While a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has voiced opposition, Beijing has conducted neither a large-scale campaign against the reclamation nor interference activities.[39] China appears to perceive that Vietnam's reclamation may help deflect international criticism of China's own reclamation, and that Vietnam's actions remain within the bounds of what is acceptable to China.

Figure 4.2 Before and After Reclamation on Barque Canada Reef

Before reclamation (photo taken on April 5, 2019)



Source: Google, Google Earth, Maxar Technologies, Landsat/Copernicus

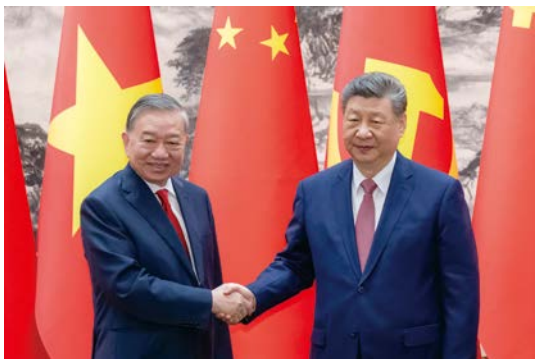
After reclamation (photo taken on August 1, 2025)



Source: AW3D Ortho © 2026 Vantor, NTT DATA Japan Corporation

Vietnam has strengthened its maritime militia as well. The country had maritime militia units, which were legally assigned the role of upholding Vietnam's maritime sovereignty and rights following the reemergence of the South China Sea dispute. In December 2019, the Party and government decided to establish Standing Militia Squadrons in 14 provinces. The first one was established in April 2021 in the southern province of Ba Ria-Vung Tau. Others were established in Kien Giang Province in southern Vietnam and in Quang Tri Province, Danang City, Quang Ngai Province, and Khanh Hoa Province in central Vietnam along the South China Sea, bringing the total to five provinces and one

centrally governed municipality as of writing.[40] Vietnam consistently champions adherence to international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Therefore, the activities of the maritime militia, which occupies an ambiguous position under international law, are not widely publicized. Available reports suggest that the Standing Militia Squadrons have steadily built up their equipment, including the delivery of two dedicated vessels to the squadron in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province in November 2021. More recently, in March 2025, four logistics-support vessels were delivered to the squadron in Kien Giang Province.[41]



Vietnam-China summit, April 2026 (Xinhua/ABACA/ Kyodo News Images)

In January 2026, the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam was convened, and To Lam was reappointed as general secretary. In April of the same year, he was elected president by the National Assembly, further concentrating power in the hands of General Secretary and President To Lam. Damaging relations with China is not an option for Vietnam if it is to achieve ambitious economic goals under the supreme dominant leader. In April, To Lam visited China for the second time since becoming general secretary to extend greetings to President Xi Jinping. During their summit meeting, General Secretary and President To Lam proposed that the two sides genuinely respect each other's legitimate rights and interests over the South China Sea and resolve their differences through peaceful means in accordance with international law, particularly UNCLOS.[42]

Malaysia: A Consistently Moderate Posture

The Malaysian government maintains that its position on the South China Sea is consistent and will remain unchanged. Malaysia holds the view that the South China Sea dispute must be resolved peacefully and constructively, in accordance with the universally recognized principles of international law, including UNCLOS, while committing itself unequivocally and firmly to protecting Malaysia's sovereignty, rights, and maritime interests in the South China Sea, as depicted in the 1979 map.[43] In truth, this stance has remained largely consistent from the Mahathir administration in the 1980s through the current Anwar administration.

Malaysia has adopted a moderate policy on the South China Sea, particularly toward China, based on the broader principles underpinning Malaysia's overall China policy. Economic cooperation with China is a top priority. Malaysia has thus taken a cautious approach to the South China Sea, ensuring that the dispute does not undermine the entire bilateral relationship, including economic

ties.[44] Geographic factors have also allowed Malaysia to adopt a moderate posture on the dispute compared to the Philippines and Vietnam. Because Malaysia is located farther from China than the other two countries, it was initially less impacted by China's maritime expansion, and no major frictions occurred.

To avoid direct confrontation with China over the South China Sea, Malaysia has pursued consultations through multilateral frameworks involving ASEAN and China, more than bilateral negotiations. Domestically, in order to prevent the South China Sea dispute from developing into a larger issue, the government has exercised tight control over official and media discourse. Information control has helped avert the kind of nationalist movements observed in the Philippines and Vietnam. As a matter of fact, sustaining stable relations with China was regarded as offering greater economic benefits to Malaysia and contributed to enhancing the legitimacy of past administrations.[45]

Like its predecessors, the current Anwar administration is focused on maintaining relations with China. This is most evident in Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's speech on the occasion of President Xi Jinping's visit to Malaysia in April 2025. Prime Minister Anwar implicitly criticized the Trump administration's tariffs and praised China as a defender of the free trade system, stating, "In these trying times, the world yearns for steadiness, reliability and purpose. We see this in China's conduct."[46] The speech indicated that the Anwar administration's diplomatic posture leaned toward China rather than the United States.

The Anwar administration's China-leaning policy reflects not only consideration for Beijing but also worsening anti-U.S. sentiment among the Malaysian public. Many of them have become increasingly critical of the United States over its handling of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The negative sentiment has been compounded by the Trump administration's tariffs. Through negotiations, Malaysia succeeded in lowering the tariff rate from the 24% initially announced by Washington to 19%. However, the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade, concluded during President Donald Trump's visit to Malaysia in October 2025, intensified domestic criticism of the United States, with critics arguing that Article 5 obliges Malaysia to align with U.S. economic sanctions and renders the agreement unequal.[47]

Malaysia has benefited from its geographic distance from China and amicable Sino-Malaysian relations. In recent years, however, improvements in China's capabilities have resulted in Chinese military and maritime law-enforcement agencies frequently appearing in waters near Malaysia. In May 2021, for example, a formation of 16 transport aircraft from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force approached the Sarawak coast, prompting the Royal Malaysian Air Force to scramble jets in response.[48] Chinese fishing vessels, maritime law-enforcement ships, and naval vessels have also begun to appear in waters near Malaysia to interfere with its resource exploration activities and demonstrate presence.[49] Against Malaysia, China does not incite high-profile incidents of the kind provoked against the Philippines or Vietnam. Even so, China continually tests how far Malaysia will concede to China in the South China Sea, taking Malaysia's China-oriented posture as a given.

The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) are cautious about China's activities. Following PLA aircraft encroachment, the Royal Malaysian Air Force issued its own press release while the Malaysian government remained silent.[50] The MAF have made a clear distinction with the government's moderate posture by quietly but steadily taking a number of measures. One was to expand cooperation with other countries, mainly the United States. Defense cooperation between the United States and Malaysia is comprised of three pillars: Foreign Military Sales (FMS), joint exercises, and education and training. With respect to joint exercises, approximately 14 bilateral and multilateral exercises are conducted each year.[51] In 2025, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the MAF conducted the command post exercise Bersama Warrior in June. The following month, the United States, Malaysia, and Australia held the trilateral exercise Keris Strike as part of efforts to strengthen readiness and interoperability. The Japan Ground Self-Defense Force participated as an observer. In December, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps and the Royal Malaysian Navy conducted the bilateral exercise CARAT, which carried out a range of maritime security operations, including maritime domain awareness.[52]

In contrast with its diplomatic performance, Malaysia has sought to further strengthen cooperation with the United States in the military domain. In October 2025, when Secretary of War Hegseth visited Malaysia to attend the ADMM-Plus, he held a bilateral meeting with Minister of Defense Khaled Nordin. During the meeting, the two sides reaffirmed their respective commitment to the South China Sea dispute. They also signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation, announced the renewal of an ACSA, and agreed to work toward finalizing bilateral agreements on communications, information sharing, and geospatial matters.[53]

While Malaysia shows considerable consideration for China, it has at times acted defiantly in accordance with its basic posture of protecting national sovereignty. In October 2021, for example, Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia and lodged a protest against the resource exploration activities of Chinese government vessels in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone off Borneo.[54] In September 2024, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested resource exploration activities in a maritime area that Malaysia considers part of its territorial waters, alleging that they infringed Chinese sovereignty. Prime Minister Anwar responded that Malaysia would continue its resource development activities despite Beijing's protests.[55] Nonetheless, Malaysia made sure to follow up with China. The following month, in October, at the inaugural vice-ministerial-level bilateral dialogue on the South China Sea dispute, the two sides agreed to advance practical maritime cooperation.[56] In this way, Malaysia has also engaged in the bilateral consultations sought by China as needed.

The Future of ASEAN and the Code of Conduct

Ever since the South China Sea issue evolved into a full-fledged conflict in the 1990s, ASEAN has worked toward the formulation of a Code of Conduct (COC) as a means of resolving the dispute. Despite continued discussions with China to reach an agreement on enforceable rules, the negotiations remained stalled for many years as China remained reluctant to create rules that would constrain its actions. Furthermore, ASEAN member states themselves could not arrive at a consensus on the geographic scope of the COC and whether it should be legally binding. ASEAN's only political achievement was the adoption of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002. ASEAN subsequently continued consultations with China to transform the DOC into a COC, but these negotiations produced few tangible results.[57]

A turning point was the arbitral award issued in the Philippines-China arbitration in July 2016. The award fully rejected China's territorial claims from the standpoint of international law. Following the award, China began to actively engage in the COC negotiations, seeking to demonstrate to the international community that China and ASEAN were capable of peacefully settling the South China Sea dispute. At the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in August 2017, the two sides endorsed a framework for the COC. At the same meeting in August 2018, they endorsed a single draft negotiating text.[58]

However, the COC negotiations instantly lost momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two sides continued consultations online, but the discussions made little headway. While in-person negotiations eventually resumed, desired progress was not achieved. It took as many as four years to complete the second reading of the single draft negotiating text.[59]

Indonesia, which assumed the ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, accelerated the discussions. Spurred by Indonesia's initiative, the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2023 adopted the "Guidelines for Accelerating the Early Conclusion of an Effective and Substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea."[60] Perhaps as an outcome of the guidelines, the third reading of the single draft negotiating text was completed in a year and a half.[61] Nevertheless, it remained unclear how many more rounds of readings would be required and whether exhaustive readings would resolve the disagreements over geographic scope and legal binding force in order to agree on an enforceable COC.

Malaysia assumed the ASEAN chairmanship in 2025. As if burdened by the weight of the COC, Foreign Ministry Secretary General Amran Mohamed Zin stated on the occasion of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in January 2025, "To say that we will have a solution immediately [on the South China Sea] is going to be very ambitious."[62] He cautioned against placing excessive expectations on Malaysia's ability to conclude the COC as the chair. In actuality, the COC negotiations did not achieve progress. The Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Summit in October of that year once again underscored the completion of the third reading of the single draft negotiating text. The

statement made no reference to concrete progress and stated only that ASEAN "encouraged continued positive momentum" on the draft COC.[63]

The Philippines holds the ASEAN chairmanship in 2026. President Marcos identifies "Peace and Security Anchors" as the foremost priority on ASEAN's agenda for 2026. In light of the tensions between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea, he also pledged to vigorously engage in the COC negotiations. However, even reaching agreement within ASEAN remains difficult, let alone securing China's consent.[64]

Conclusion

The three ASEAN claimant states examined in this chapter differ significantly in their approaches to the South China Sea dispute, particularly in how they manage relations with China. The Philippines under the Marcos administration adopts a clearly confrontational posture toward China, and bilateral tensions have intensified. By contrast, Vietnam, which has clashed seriously with China in the past, has avoided confrontation with the country, while Malaysia has consistently maintained a conciliatory posture toward China. These differences stem from the distinct circumstances facing each country, including their geographic proximity to and history of relations with China, the nature of their security cooperation with allies and other major powers, and their domestic politics.

Yet, the three countries also display some commonalities. In addition to the Philippines, which is allied with the United States, both Vietnam and Malaysia have steadily deepened their cooperation with the United States while continuing to show consideration for China. Concerns have emerged over whether the second Trump administration will remain engaged in the security of the Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea. At the working level, however, cooperation between the United States and ASEAN claimant states has continued and, in some areas, even deepened. This suggests that the South China Sea and ASEAN have strategic importance for the United States irrespective of the administration in power. For ASEAN states, too, even as they contend with the uncertainty surrounding the Trump administration, maintaining relations only with China is insufficient. For ASEAN states, it is undeniable that striking a workable balance between the United States and China contributes to preserving their strategic autonomy.

Negotiations between ASEAN and China on the COC have not made progress, hindered in part by China's position on the COC and ASEAN's lack of consensus. The issues surrounding the geographic scope of the COC and its legal binding force remain unresolved even among ASEAN member states. Given ASEAN's slow approach to the COC, the three claimant states are anticipated to further pursue national approaches to the South China Sea dispute based on their respective circumstances and constraints.



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China and the South China Sea:
The Dynamics of Maritime Issues

Conclusion

China and the South China Sea

Past and Future

SHOJI Tomotaka

More than 15 years have passed since China's rise and its increasingly active maritime expansion rekindled the South China Sea dispute. The longstanding territorial disputes have shown no signs of abating. If anything, they have become more complex and serious in the face of shifting dynamics in the international community and the Indo-Pacific region. Developments involving the major powers include intensifying Sino-U.S. confrontation, mounting tensions over Taiwan, and the United States' transformation under the Trump administration.

Both strategically and politically, the United States is the only actor that can singlehandedly challenge China in the South China Sea. After the dispute resurfaced, the United States has sought to check China through military and diplomatic measures, including freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), expanded cooperation with allies and partners centered on joint exercises, capacity-building assistance for member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and criticism of China grounded in the 2016 arbitral award. The United States was actively involved in the South China Sea dispute. The reason was that, amid China's rise and the resulting changes in the bilateral balance of power, the United States wanted to maintain an effective military presence and alliance network in the Indo-Pacific. At a more normative level, the motive was to uphold the rule of law and freedom of navigation. This line of policy has been basically inherited by the second Trump administration.

China, by contrast, has skillfully employed a salami-slicing strategy in the South China Sea, expanding its sphere of influence incrementally and without provoking outside military intervention. This strategy has been supported by the reclamation and militarization of features under Chinese control, and by the substantially strengthened People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the reinforcement of maritime law-enforcement agencies under Xi Jinping.

A review of China's naval strategy and military developments shows that the PLAN has clearly shifted its emphasis from "littoral defense and coastal defense" to "near seas defense" and then to "far seas protection." The "near seas defense" strategy until the early 2000s focused primarily on protecting waters along China's coastline. Subsequently, China put forward the "far seas protection" strategy, which extends the reach beyond the First Island Chain, and has been expanding the PLAN's sustained operational capability in distant waters. Based on the "far seas protection" strategy, China has placed emphasis on strengthening strategic deterrence and counterattack capabilities in the maritime domain, while enhancing its integrated operational capability across multiple arms and branches.

In pursuit of the objective of the naval strategy—safeguarding sovereignty over features and maritime rights—the PLAN used force in 1974 and 1988 to expand control in the South China Sea. Through the construction and militarization of artificial islands, which began in earnest in 2014, China has strengthened its ability to exercise comprehensive control over these waters. As the South China Sea is also a strategically important maritime area for China's Taiwan policy, Beijing has shown signs of challenging Taiwan's administration of the Pratas Islands. Furthermore, China has repeatedly conducted exercises aimed at blockading the Bashi Channel south of Taiwan in a contingency and

gaining a military advantage over the United States.

One of the key actors in China's South China Sea policy is the China Coast Guard (CCG). China considers the South China Sea dispute as an "internal matter" and positions the CCG as a body responsible for enforcing domestic law. Following the consolidation of maritime law-enforcement agencies into the CCG in 2013, it was incorporated into the People's Armed Police in 2018, and the Coast Guard Law was enacted in 2021. These institutional reforms were undertaken in parallel with improvements in the CCG's equipment. The incidents that could be described as violent involving the strengthened CCG have occurred primarily in encounters with the Philippines.

The CCG has deepened its coordination with the PLAN on command and control, personnel, and unit operations. The two organizations also jointly train the maritime militia under their command. In the South China Sea, the CCG, the PLAN, and maritime militia have acted in concert, increasing pressure on vessels from other claimant states. Concurrently, the CCG carries out activities aimed at protecting the environment and promoting proper utilization of marine resources. In this way, the CCG has developed into an organization combining military functions with administrative functions related to maritime law enforcement and ocean governance.

The ASEAN claimant states have taken different approaches to the South China Sea dispute, particularly toward China. The Philippines under the Marcos administration makes no secret of its confrontational posture underpinned by its alliance with the United States. The Philippines has steadily deepened cooperation with like-minded countries centered on U.S. allies, and this cooperation is increasingly taking on a networked form. Vietnam, weighing its security strategic interests against its economic interests, has opted for a moderate approach for the time being. Malaysia has long remained silent on the South China Sea dispute, prioritizing stable relations with China. This approach has not changed across administrations. Meanwhile, the Philippines maintains diplomatic channels with China, while Vietnam and Malaysia carefully continue their security cooperation with the United States to avoid provoking China. ASEAN as an organization has sought to reach an agreement with China on a Code of Conduct. That effort has run into difficulty, however: consensus on the substance and nature of the code has proved elusive not only between ASEAN and China but also within ASEAN itself.

Today, tensions persist between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea. Yet clashes have not escalated into full-scale military conflict. Nor have there been major clashes between China and Vietnam in recent years. In this regard, China and the Philippines, as well as China and Vietnam, have exercised restraint in their respective encounters. Whether this precarious equilibrium between China and the ASEAN claimant states will continue remains to be seen. The skirmishes between China and the Philippines constantly carry a risk of escalation through miscalculation. As for China-Vietnam relations, concerns also remain as to how the expansion of China's de facto sphere of influence will affect the features Vietnam controls and how far China will tolerate Vietnam's reclamation and militarization. Vietnam is expected to proceed cautiously. Nevertheless, as each side presses ahead with its

own construction work in the South China Sea, contradictions between their sovereignty claims will increase, which will further destabilize their relations.

What, then, will China aim to accomplish in the South China Sea in the foreseeable future? Following the Scarborough Shoal incident, China has shown no indication of seizing features claimed or controlled by other claimant states, such as the Philippines or Vietnam. Any attempt to acquire a feature controlled by another state would vastly increase the risk of a full-fledged military conflict, regardless of how militarily inferior the state is to China. Beijing appears to judge that it need not take such risks under present conditions, in which it continues to reclaim and militarize the features under its control, coordinate operations of its military, maritime law-enforcement agencies, and maritime militia, and steadily expand China's sphere of influence in the South China Sea.

Beijing will therefore likely continue pursuing a salami-slicing strategy to further expand its sphere of influence without triggering a military response from other states. The reclamation and militarization of the Paracel Islands, all of which are under Chinese control, demonstrate this most clearly. In the Spratly Islands, there is always the possibility that Beijing will undertake similar activities on features not controlled by another state. Alongside militarization of features, China is anticipated to continue strengthening and expanding the deployment of its military, maritime law-enforcement agencies, and maritime militia, progressively turning the South China Sea into an "inland sea" without engaging in direct conflict with other claimant states. Ultimately, China will strive to eliminate U.S. military influence in the area as much as possible.

The South China Sea is vital to Japan's security and economy as well. Even if outward calm is maintained between China and claimant states other than the Philippines, the stability rests on a fragile equilibrium. In order to oppose any unilateral attempt by China to alter the status quo through force or coercion, prevent China from acting even more boldly, and uphold the rule of law and freedom of navigation, it remains essential for Japan to maintain a presence in the South China Sea through alliance cooperation, expand minilateral cooperation with U.S. allies such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and strengthen engagement with ASEAN centered around the Philippines. At the bilateral level with ASEAN member states, capacity-building assistance aimed at enhancing maritime security, especially maritime domain awareness, is likely to remain an effective area of cooperation coinciding with the expectations of member states. The same applies to defense equipment and technology cooperation, mainly in the provision of radar systems, patrol vessels, and other equipment.

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