

INCITEMENT, THREATS,  
AND LIES — THE TRUTH  
ABOUT EXTERNAL  
FORCES INTERFERING IN  
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA  
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## Preface

For a considerable period following the end of World War II, China's sovereignty and related rights in the South China Sea were widely recognized by the international community. Before the end of the Cold War, the United States did not explicitly challenge China's claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and reefs; rather, it refrained from backing its allies on this issue. It was only in the 1990s that the United States began to adjust its stance. As a responsible major country, China has consistently committed itself to safeguarding peace and stability in the South China Sea region through concrete actions, actively promoting the development and prosperity of the region.

In 2002, China and the 10 ASEAN member states signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). This document reflects the shared aspiration of China and ASEAN nations to safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea, playing a significant role in guiding and promoting regional stability.

However, the United States prominently announced its “pivot to Asia” in the second decade of the 21st century. As U.S. interference in the South China Sea intensified with growing interest and increasing disruptive maneuvers, this once tranquil sea has become fraught with undercurrents, beset by high winds and turbulent waves.

The United States has deliberately and skillfully managed to sow discord and undermine China's relations with countries within the region. From backing the highly politicized and biased so-called “South China Sea arbitration” initiated by the Philippines, to rallying regional states for joint military exercises that send misleading signals emboldening violations of China's territorial sovereignty, to pressuring South China Sea littoral states to “take sides” in China-U.S. competition, and establishing various multilateral mechanisms aimed at countering China, Washington's frequent interference in the South China Sea to maintain its hegemonic interests have been a key factor preventing long-term stability in the region.

The United States has systematically and strategically fueled an arms race

in the South China Sea. To transform countries like the Philippines and Vietnam into “forward positions” for confronting China, the United States has provided substantial military aid, upgraded military bases in these nations, promoted the development of a South China Sea surveillance network, lifted certain arms sales embargoes, and donated aircraft, warships, and other military hardware. The United States has also regularly launched joint military drills in the South China Sea. In 2024 alone, the United States dispatched large reconnaissance aircraft for nearly 1,000 sorties over the South China Sea, while spy ships operated in the area almost daily throughout the year. Under U.S. instigation, the breeze in the South China Sea has become increasingly permeated with the acrid scent of gunpowder.

The United States relentlessly wages cognitive and public opinion warfare against China concerning the South China Sea situation. Analysis utilizing big data tools by Xinhua News Agency reveals a clear anti-China bias in Western media coverage on the South China Sea. The United States employs initiatives such as “Project Myoushu” to fabricate deceptive narratives and engage in informational bullying against China. Furthermore, it mobilizes media and think tanks to strategically recast legal challenges initiated by individual claimant states in the region against China, presenting them as if they align with international rules, thereby tarnishing China’s global image. The United States’ smear campaign and disinformation against China regarding the South China Sea issue is a textbook example of 21st-century cognitive warfare.

In the modern history of humanity shaped by Western colonial dominance, Asia, Africa, and Latin America have repeatedly witnessed the same scenario: regions initially marked by relative stability and minimal discord are transformed into volatile powder kegs after Western powers intervene under the guise of “arbitration.” Areas of largely cooperation and mutual goodwill are swiftly turned into arenas for great-power rivalry. The volatile situation in the South China Sea is a direct consequence of the United States’ relentless efforts to perpetuate its script of great-power rivalry.

The erroneous actions of the United States to smear and contain China reflect a self-projection of a modern Western strategic outlook, centered on the contest and maintenance of hegemony. The United States’ rise followed the familiar path of hegemonic succession. Its understanding of the evolution of international

governance and the rise and fall of great powers adheres to an outdated mindset driven by the contest and maintenance of hegemony. Since the 16th-century Age of Discovery, this thinking has shaped the unequal interactions between Western powers and the rest of the world. Even today, the specters of “bloc confrontation” and “great power rivalry” continue to haunt American strategic decision-making. The United States mistakenly believes that China’s rise inevitably means it will establish a sphere of influence in the South China Sea, thereby posing an exclusionary threat to American interests.

The United States has fundamentally misunderstood China and gravely misjudged the current era.

President Xi Jinping, in his report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, underscored that “China has always been committed to its foreign policy goals of upholding world peace and promoting common development, and it is dedicated to promoting a human community with a shared future.” On the world stage, China steadfastly pursues an independent foreign policy of peace and a strategy of opening up for mutual benefit and win-win cooperation. It has always worked to safeguard world peace, contribute to global development, and uphold the international order. In its interactions with neighboring countries, China adheres to the philosophy that “harmony in the family leads to prosperity in all undertakings,” always rooting itself in and contributing to its periphery, and upholding the principle of fostering good-neighborliness and treating neighbors with sincerity.

Chinese modernization will usher in a new form of human advancement, leading humanity toward a new path of development that breaks the old cycle of hegemonic succession.

As the Global South gains increasing prominence, many political leaders from countries bordering the South China Sea, including Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, have explicitly voiced their desire to avoid “taking sides” and resist bloc confrontation. There is a growing shared understanding that instigating conflict and confrontation is a dangerous diversion, while pursuing win-win cooperation remains the correct and enduring path forward. The bright future of the South China Sea lies in the flourishing fisheries, sustainable marine resources, and the shared prosperity of its people, built on trust forged through good-neighborliness

and the bridging of differences, as well as collaboration aimed at building a beautiful homeland through deepened dialogue and communication.

## **Chapter One Instigator Undermining China's Relations with Regional Countries**

The South China Sea lies between China and Southeast Asia, where the Chinese people have engaged in navigation and fishing since ancient times. For a long time, China's sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and reefs, as well as its maritime rights in relevant waters, has been widely recognized by the international community. After the Second World War, with the independence of Southeast Asian nations and the discovery of abundant undersea resources in the South China Sea, some littoral Southeast Asian countries began to lay claim to the sovereignty of South China Sea islands and reefs, as well as related maritime rights. Despite this, China has consistently adhered to the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes through negotiations. Notably, in 2002, China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with ASEAN member states, jointly safeguarding the overall peace and stability of the region.

However, in recent years, non-regional forces led by the United States have launched “great power competition” targeting China in the so-called “Indo-Pacific region,” leveraging the South China Sea issue as a means to contain China. They have instigated relevant claimant states to provoke China, stirring up high winds and rough waves in the South China Sea.

### **I. Instigating Claimant States to Provoke China**

In recent years, certain non-regional countries, led by the United States, have accused China of conducting so-called “gray zone” operations to assert control in the South China Sea. The term “gray zone” was defined by Philip Kapusta, an official from the U.S. Special Operations Command, in a 2015 article as “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall

between the traditional war and peace duality.”<sup>①</sup> Similarly, a 2019 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) defined it as a “competitive realm between conventional political means and overt warfare.”

However, a closer examination reveals that the concept of “gray zone” is a narrative fabricated by the United States to tarnish China’s image. China’s claims in the South China Sea have always been open and transparent, and its actions are legitimate and lawful. If one were to follow the U.S. definition, it is not China that is engaging in “gray zone” operations, but rather the relevant claimant states and the non-regional forces, particularly the United States, that support them from behind the scenes.

Since 2023, the Philippines has repeatedly engaged in provocative actions against China in the South China Sea, repeatedly sending Coast Guard vessels to intrude upon Chinese islands and reefs in the South China Sea, thereby threatening regional stability and development. A notable incident was the prolonged stay of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel 9701 at China’s Xianbin Jiao. The vessel illegally lingered at Xianbin Jiao starting April 17, 2024. After more than four months of illegal presence, it weighed anchor on August 31 of the same year, continuing to maneuver and cause trouble within Xianbin Jiao Lagoon. China Coast Guard (CCG) vessel 5205, with law and regulations, took normal law enforcement measures, including verbal warnings and close monitoring. However, the PCG vessel 9701 deliberately rammed the CCG vessel in an unprofessional and dangerous manner, leading to a collision.

The prolonged presence of PCG vessel 9701 at Xianbin Jiao was an attempt to “duplicate” the 1999 grounding of the BRP Sierra Madre at Ren’ai Jiao, aiming to establish so-called “actual control” over Xianbin Jiao. This scheme ultimately failed due to the professional response of the China Coast Guard. As a result, PCG vessel 9701 withdrew from Xianbin Jiao Lagoon on September 14, 2024.

The Philippines’ repeated provocations against China are directly supported by the United States and its Western allies, who openly endorse the Philippines

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① <https://web.archive.org/web/20210914214101/https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2804/GrayZone.pdf>



whenever such actions are initiated. Following the aforementioned collision incident on August 31, 2024, the then U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Matthew Miller immediately issued a statement, asserting that the United States “stands with” the Philippines, accusing the Chinese Coast Guard vessel of “deliberately ramming” the Philippine vessel, and “condemning China’s dangerous and escalatory actions.” He also reiterated accusations that China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea are “unlawful” and pose a “threat” to freedom of navigation and overflight for all nations. He further stated that the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines applies to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft “anywhere in the South China Sea.”

This pattern extends beyond the Philippines to Vietnam. Following the 2019 China-Vietnam “Wan’an Tan Standoff,” the United States frequently voiced support for Vietnam through diplomatic and public channels. Claimant states engaged in gray-zone provocations on the front lines, while Washington provided backing and boosted their morale from behind the scenes. This approach has become a persistent feature of South China Sea disputes.

The United States and its allies have provided strategic counsel and support to claimant states in their provocations and confrontations against China. Since 2023, the Philippines has implemented a so-called “transparency policy,” aiming to leverage media narratives to portray China as a regional power that bullies smaller neighbors in the South China Sea. According to Filipino political commentator Herman Laurel, this strategy is part of the “Project Myoushu,” led by retired U.S. Air Force officer Raymond Powell. Several Western media outlets have joined this information campaign, dispatching reporters aboard Philippine vessels during their incursions into Chinese islands and reefs in the South China Sea, subsequently publishing reports that cast China in a negative light. A BBC report explicitly stated that allowing journalists to capture close-range footage of Chinese and Philippine naval encounters “was part of a deliberate strategy by the Philippine government to draw attention to China’s so-called ‘coercive tactics.’”

The 2016 South China Sea arbitration case is also a typical example. As early as June 2012, at the annual South China Sea Maritime Security Conference hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), then-U.S. Senator

Joseph Lieberman openly advocated for external interference in the South China Sea issue through multilateral frameworks, including arbitration and other means.<sup>①</sup>

In 2013, the Aquino III administration of the Philippines, with open support from the United States, initiated the South China Sea arbitration case unilaterally. Shunji Yanai, then-President of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, exercised his authority to form a temporary arbitral tribunal and appointed four of the five arbitrators in China's absence. Yanai was also the chairman of the Security Legislation Consultation Council, an advisory panel to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He had long advocated for Japan's constitutional revision and military expansion, claiming that Japan's islands were under "threat." Motofumi Asai, the former director of the China Division at Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who had worked with Yanai, stated that Yanai structured the arbitration tribunal based on considerations aligned with the intentions of the Abe administration.<sup>②</sup>

Moreover, the United States and its allies have frequently conducted "freedom of navigation operations" in the South China Sea, challenging China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights claims. They have also conducted joint military exercises in the South China Sea and its surrounding waters, demonstrating military force towards China. Additionally, the United States has used the South China Sea issue as grounds for economic pressure against China. In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Commerce placed 24 Chinese companies involved in island and reef construction in the South China Sea on its sanctions "Entity List."<sup>③</sup>

## **II. Pressuring South China Sea Littoral States to Take Sides**

To curb and suppress China's development, the U.S.-led Western countries have not only leveraged the South China Sea issue to sow discord between China and regional nations, but have also attempted to forge various exclusionary "small

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① Xinhua News Agency, "(Ten Commentaries on the South China Sea Arbitration Case) What Role Does Japan Want to Play in the South China Sea: Sixth Commentary on the South China Sea Arbitration Case and the South China Sea Issue."

② Xinhua News Agency, "(Exposing the Temporary Arbitration Tribunal II) Yanai and the Maneuverings Behind the Tribunal."

③ <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/3zd8nuJGQTO>

circles” in the region. They aim to force regional countries to “take sides,” placing significant external pressure on their normal foreign relations.

“If they have problems with China, they should not impose them on us. We do not have a problem with China.” On March 4, 2024, during the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim made this statement at a joint press conference with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. He affirmed that Malaysia remains a friend to the United States, Europe, and Australia but emphasized, “They should not prevent us from maintaining friendly ties with one of our most important neighbors, China.”<sup>①</sup>

This was not the first time Anwar refused to take sides between China and the West. Within a month of this statement, he publicly reiterated this position at least twice.<sup>②</sup> Anwar is not alone among ASEAN leaders in rejecting pressures to gang up against China. Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong,<sup>③</sup> Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto,<sup>④</sup> as well as former leaders such as former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong<sup>⑤</sup> and former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen,<sup>⑥</sup> have all expressed similar views during their tenure. The repeated statements from multiple regional leaders indicate their strong awareness of the intense pressure from the United States and its Western allies, urging them to choose between the U.S.-led West and China.

The U.S.-led Western countries have been building a multi-layered exclusive “anti-China bloc” in the so-called “Indo-Pacific region,” shaping a strategic containment network against China. The United States has spearheaded the establishment of multiple small multilateral mechanisms, including the U.S.-Japan-India-Australia, U.S.-Japan-South Korea, U.S.-Japan-Australia, U.S.-Japan-

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① <https://www.kankanews.com/detail/DgwMV9Y8Z2W>,  
[https://m.gmw.cn/2024-03/19/content\\_1303689655.htm](https://m.gmw.cn/2024-03/19/content_1303689655.htm), <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/4GsgALNneyA>

② [https://m.gmw.cn/2024-03/19/content\\_1303689655.htm](https://m.gmw.cn/2024-03/19/content_1303689655.htm)

③ [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_27328938](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_27328938)

④ <http://www.ozaobao.com/news/world/202405/1317891.html>

⑤ <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/42JGnDhX7W9>

⑥ [https://www.guancha.cn/international/2022\\_05\\_12\\_639409.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/international/2022_05_12_639409.shtml)

Philippines, and U.S.-UK-Australia alliances, which constitute the backbone of its Indo-Pacific alliance framework.

Beyond these initiatives, the United States has sought to incorporate as many regional countries as possible into its containment strategy by promoting agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Although the United States later withdrew from the TPP, citing economic disadvantages, its initial involvement and leadership aimed to create a regional free trade system that excluded China. Launched in May 2022, the IPEF serves as the economic pillar of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. Both mechanisms include Southeast Asian nations bordering the South China Sea, with the IPEF comprising over half of its members from Southeast Asia.

The South China Sea issue remains a critical tool for the United States to counter China's influence in the region. The United States and its Western allies consistently amplify this issue in various multilateral forums related to Southeast Asia and ASEAN, pressuring regional countries to take a stance against China collectively. The 2024 ASEAN-Australia Special Summit exemplifies such efforts.

As the host, Australia had reportedly planned to exploit the South China Sea issue. According to ABC News, Australia initially intended to include sensationalized content regarding alleged "Chinese militarization of disputed islands and reefs in the South China Sea" in the summit declaration and to call on all parties to abide by the 2016 South China Sea arbitration ruling, thereby openly supporting and endorsing the Philippines.<sup>①</sup> It was precisely against this backdrop that Prime Minister Anwar unequivocally declared a "no side-taking" stance, a sentiment that resonated with the vast majority of regional nations. Ultimately, Australia's ploy was thwarted by the opposition of regional countries.

In May 2022, the Biden administration convened the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit in Washington, announcing a 150-million-U.S. dollar investment in ASEAN, including a 60-million-U.S. dollar maritime initiative. As part of this program, the U.S. Coast Guard planned to establish training teams in the "Indo-Pacific region" to "assist partners in maritime training and capacity-building", a move evidently targeted at the South China Sea issue. However, in the days leading

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① [https://www.guancha.cn/international/2024\\_03\\_07\\_727563.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/international/2024_03_07_727563.shtml)

up to and during the summit, leaders and officials from Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam publicly voiced their commitment to maintaining independence and rejecting pressure to “take sides.”

### **III. Attempting to Reshape China’s Regional Security Environment**

The United States, as the principal non-regional force currently meddling in the South China Sea issue, seeks to sow discord between China and other claimant states and regional countries, driven by its strategic imperative to maintain its hegemony and by a narrow-minded, misguided perception of China.

After the Second World War, the United States, in leading the formulation of the postwar treaty with Japan, pursued a policy opposing “Communist China.” This stance contributed significantly to the historical roots of the South China Sea issue. According to the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation, “territories stolen by Japan from China” were to be returned to China, and the South China Sea islands occupied by Japan should have been included in this mandate.

However, the United States insisted on excluding the People’s Republic of China from the Treaty of Peace with Japan. Its proposal to invite the Taiwan authorities was met with opposition from the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and other nations, ultimately leaving China unrepresented at the peace conference.

Moreover, under pressure from France, which had attempted to seize South China Sea islands in the 1930s and continued its ambitions in the post-war era, the United States allowed French-controlled Indochina to participate as three separate nations. This decision enabled the then-South Vietnamese representative at the San Francisco Peace Conference to claim sovereignty over the Xisha Qundao and Nansha Qundao unilaterally.

During the drafting of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the United States, driven by strategic concerns of preventing “Communist China” from gaining territorial advantages, accommodated French requests by phrasing the treaty so that “Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands,” without specifying their rightful recipient. This omission created lasting

uncertainties and laid the groundwork for future disputes.<sup>①</sup>

The United States' stance on the South China Sea has consistently evolved in alignment with its strategic interests. From the 1970s until the end of the Cold War, Washington, driven by the need to counter the Soviet Union, maintained neutrality on sovereignty disputes, refraining from taking a position on territorial claims. Even for its treaty ally, the Philippines, the United States did not make any explicit commitment to supporting its territorial claims over the disputed islands and reefs.<sup>②</sup> Following the March 1988 Sino-Vietnamese armed clash at Chigua Jiao, the United States explicitly stated that it would not take a position on the dispute.<sup>③</sup>

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, U.S. policy began shifting from neutrality to limited involvement,<sup>④</sup> a transition spanning the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. Under the pretext of “freedom of navigation,” the United States began applying covert pressure on China regarding sovereignty disputes. During the 1995 Meiji Jiao Incident, the United States did not criticize the Philippine government's detention of Chinese sailors, but later issued a statement opposing “restrictions on maritime activities”<sup>⑤</sup> when China prevented the Philippine military from bringing journalists to the disputed reef.

In 1996, China issued the Declaration of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Baseline of the Territorial Sea, which established the territorial sea baselines for the Xisha Qundao. Shortly afterward, the U.S. State Department released Limits in the Seas No. 117: Straight Baseline Claims: China, criticizing China's straight baseline claims. However, throughout this period, the United States did not perceive China as a significant threat due to its relatively limited power. Additionally, after the 9/11 attacks, Washington shifted its strategic focus to counter-terrorism, requiring China's cooperation. As a result, U.S. policy

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① Li Guang, “The U.S. and the Handling of the South China Sea Islands in the San Francisco Peace Conference: Clarifying Several Issues,” *Chinese Borderland History and Geography Studies*, 2019 (3).

② *The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes*, p.220.

③ *The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes*, p.221.

④ *The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes*, p.222.

⑤ *The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes*, p.223.

toward China remained primarily cooperative, with only limited pressure applied over the South China Sea issue.

Starting from the Obama administration, the U.S. perception of China underwent a clear transformation, driven by China's rapid growth of comprehensive national strengths. Washington moved from "the pivot to Asia" and "Asia-Pacific rebalance" under Obama to the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" under the Trump and Biden administrations, increasingly framing China through the lens of great-power competition. Eventually, the United States designated China as its "number one strategic competitor" and identified it as "the greatest geopolitical challenge of the 21st century." In October 2022, the Biden administration's National Security Strategy stated, "China is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it."

As U.S. perceptions of China evolved, the United States intensified its efforts to contain and pressure China across multiple fronts, with increasingly escalated measures. Correspondingly, the South China Sea issue became a key component of U.S. strategy to shape China's regional environment, leading to a shift toward "active interference"<sup>①</sup> and an "increasingly anti-China stance."

In July 2010, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly declared at the ASEAN Regional Forum that the United States had national interests in the South China Sea, marking the beginning of a significant shift in U.S. South China Sea policy following the Cold War.<sup>②</sup>

By December 2014, the U.S. State Department released Limits in the Seas No. 143: China's Maritime Claims in the South China Sea, asserting that China's maritime claims in the South China Sea were vague and inconsistent.<sup>③</sup> The report also challenged China's dashed-line claims.<sup>④</sup>

In July 2020, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued the U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea, explicitly declaring that China's

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① The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes, p.237.

② The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes, p.231.

③ The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes, p.232.

④ The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes, p.238.

sovereignty claims over certain features in the Nansha Qundao and its broad resource rights claims were “completely unlawful.”<sup>①</sup>

To maintain its leverage over the South China Sea issue for meddling in China’s peripheral affairs, the United States has actively strengthened ties with claimant states, providing support to bolster their stance against China while expanding its military presence in the “Indo-Pacific region.”

The United States has increased its military bases in the Philippines from five to nine, with the new bases located near Taiwan and the South China Sea, a clear indication of its intent to target China. In April 2024, the United States deployed its “Typhon” mid-range missile system to the Philippines, specifically targeting China. In July 2024, during the U.S.-Philippines “2+2” Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue, the U.S. side announced “unprecedented” military aid of 500 million U.S. dollars to the Philippines, ostensibly to “strengthen” the latter’s capacity to deter so-called “illegal aggression” from China and other countries.<sup>②</sup>

Japan, as another major non-regional power, has primarily been motivated by strategic interests in countering China in the East China Sea and the Diaoyu Dao dispute. To this end, Japan has actively engineered the shift of the United States’ strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region. The so-called “Indo-Pacific Strategy” was initially proposed by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and subsequently adopted and utilized by the United States.

Japan has also been vigorously peddling the narrative of a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” positioning the South China Sea as a key area within this narrative, and repeatedly opposing China’s claims. During Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba’s visit to the United States this February, a joint statement once again singled out and opposed China’s “unlawful maritime claims,” “militarization” of relevant islands and reefs, and “threatening and provocative activities” in the South China Sea.<sup>③</sup>

To instigate claimant states in the South China Sea region to confront China,

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① <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2020/07/13/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>

② [https://www.guancha.cn/international/2024\\_07\\_31\\_743295.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/international/2024_07_31_743295.shtml)

③ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-japan-joint-leaders-statement/>



Japan has also intensified its support for them in recent years. In April 2023, Japan established the Official Security Assistance (OSA) mechanism, outside its traditional Official Development Assistance (ODA) framework, to help recipient countries strengthen their military capabilities.<sup>①</sup>

An examination of its bidding announcements and implementation projects for fiscal years 2023 and 2024 reveals that South China Sea claimant states, including the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, are primary targets for this aid. Assistance to the Philippines is particularly extensive, encompassing coastal surveillance radar and vessels, explicitly aimed at the South China Sea issue.<sup>②</sup>

Encouraged by U.S. and Japanese actions, and driven by their strategic interests, several other American allies have also actively interfered in the South China Sea issue. In April 2015, for the first time, G7 Foreign Ministers issued a separate statement on maritime security that addressed the South China Sea situation.<sup>③</sup>

From 2016 to 2018, the United States, Japan, and Australia issued joint statements for three consecutive years, expressing concern over the South China Sea issue and leveling accusations against China.<sup>④</sup>

In 2019, EU nations issued their first joint statement on the South China Sea, backing Vietnam in the Wan'an Tan Incident while implicitly criticizing China's countermeasures.<sup>⑤</sup>

The United States and its Western allies have frequently meddled in the South China Sea issue, transforming it into their strategic chessboard for “great power rivalry” against China.

## **Chapter Two Orchestrator Promoting the “Militarization” of the South China Sea Region**

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① [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/ipc/page4\\_005828.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/ipc/page4_005828.html)

② [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/ipc/page22\\_004170.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/ipc/page22_004170.html),  
[https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/ipc/pagew\\_004170\\_00002.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/ipc/pagew_004170_00002.html)

③ The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes, p.261.

④ The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes, p.262.

⑤ The Origins and Development of South China Sea Disputes, p.264.

The interference of extra-regional powers, particularly the United States, has significantly intensified the militarization of the South China Sea. In 2024, U.S.-led “South China Sea militarization” intensified, with the United States, Japan, and other extra-regional countries expanding their military presence and constructing multilateral security mechanisms, heightening tensions and uncertainty. The United States has frequently deployed carrier strike groups and other military assets to the South China Sea and conducted joint military exercises with its allies. Their deepening military interference not only exacerbates the militarization but also elevates the risk of unintended clashes, posing a serious threat to regional peace and stability.

### **I. Fanning the Flames: Supplying Military Equipment to Regional States**

The South China Sea was once a vital hub for trade and security in the Asia-Pacific region. However, in recent years, the United States has ramped up its support for South China Sea nations, particularly the Philippines, through military aid, joint exercises, technical cooperation, and personnel training. All these have reinforced the U.S. military presence in the region, deepened interference in South China Sea disputes, escalated regional tensions, and undermined the collective efforts of China and ASEAN nations to safeguard peace and stability.

In July 2024, during the U.S.-Philippines “2+2” ministerial meeting, the United States announced a \$500 million Foreign Military Financing package for the Philippines, primarily aimed at modernizing military equipment and upgrading bases. The United States has also provided the Philippines with P-8A anti-submarine patrol aircraft and MQ-9 “Reaper” drones to support the development of a South China Sea surveillance network. Leveraging satellite and radar data supplied by the U.S., the Philippine military has intensified its real-time monitoring of Chinese activities around maritime features. The funding has also supported the procurement of anti-ship missiles, patrol vessels, and personnel training, significantly reinforcing the Philippines’ military presence in the South China Sea and enhancing its capacity to counter China’s maritime rights protection operations.

In October 2024, the United States provided \$8 million in targeted assistance to the Philippine Coast Guard to strengthen its maritime patrol and law enforcement capabilities. By enhancing the operational capacity of the Philippines’ maritime “gray

zone” forces, this support has indirectly facilitated its provocative actions in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

The United States has gradually eased restrictions on arms sales to Vietnam and provided military assistance. In 2007, Washington amended its arms trade regulations. In 2014, it partially lifted the ban on weapons exports to Vietnam, allowing the sale of weapons and equipment pertinent to maritime security.

In May 2016, then-President Barack Obama announced the full removal of the arms embargo. Since then, the United States has donated decommissioned patrol ships and Challenger-75 patrol boats to Vietnam. On November 20, 2024, the United States delivered five T-6C “Texan II” trainer aircraft to Vietnam, which has placed an order for a total of 12 such aircraft, with full delivery expected by 2025.

Through military assistance to the Philippines and Vietnam, the United States aims to position them as frontline proxies in its strategic rivalry with China. By providing funding and equipment, Washington is deliberately fueling regional tensions to impede China’s development. In January 2025, the United States and the Philippines conducted joint military exercises in the waters of the South China Sea. The U.S. Navy deployed the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its strike group, while the Philippine side mobilized missile frigates and FA-50 fighter jets. This exercise was widely interpreted as a direct provocation against China. A month later, in February 2025, the United States, Canada, and the Philippines carried out a multilateral naval operation within waters that Manila claims as its “exclusive economic zone,” with intentions to invite additional Western nations to participate in similar future activities.

In addition, the United States and the Philippines regularly conduct joint air patrols, anti-submarine warfare training, and special forces interoperability exercises. These include multiple tactical coordination drills near Palawan Island and simulated island seizure operations conducted during the “Balikatan” exercises.

These joint military exercises have bolstered the Philippines’ military confidence, sending a clear deterrent signal to China and its neighboring countries in the South China Sea. Consequently, tensions have escalated in the region, thereby increasing the risk of regional conflict.

## **II. Playing with Fire: U.S. Warships and Aircraft Repeatedly Intruding**

## **Upon China's South China Sea Islands and Reefs**

To maintain its maritime military hegemony, the United States has long conducted so-called “freedom of navigation operations” in the South China Sea under the pretense of “defending international maritime rights.” Washington asserts that these actions aim to counter “excessive maritime claims” and uphold the freedoms of navigation and overflight enshrined in international law. However, the frequent deployment of U.S. military vessels and aircraft near China’s controlled islands and reefs lacks legitimate grounding in international law, disregards China’s maritime rights and claims, constitutes a blatant military provocation, and severely undermines regional peace and stability.

The U.S. Freedom of Navigation Program, implemented since 1979, seeks to challenge the maritime claims of other nations through military operations and diplomatic protests. In the South China Sea, these actions primarily target China, with the United States asserting that China’s maritime rights claims are “excessive.” Using this pretext, the United States routinely dispatches warships into waters surrounding Chinese-controlled islands and reefs. Since the USS Lassen incident in 2015, the United States has carried out more than 40 “island-penetrating” freedom of navigation operations by the end of 2024. During President Trump’s first term, these operations were marked by high frequency and a notable double standard.

The United States claims that its actions are grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and customary international law; however, this assertion has several flaws. First, the United States is not a signatory to UNCLOS; yet, it unilaterally interprets the Convention to justify its operations, an approach that lacks legal legitimacy. Second, its definition of “excessive maritime claims” remains vague and subjective, driven more by strategic interests than by established principles of international law. Moreover, U.S. “freedom of navigation operations” have drawn criticism for attempting to monopolize the interpretation of customary international law, using military maneuvers to dictate legal norms rather than adhering to the existing legal framework.

Regarding specific examples, the U.S. “freedom of navigation operations” targeting China mainly challenge the following three types of so-called “excessive maritime claims”: first, the requirement for prior authorization for “innocent passage of warships through the territorial sea”; second, the territorial sea claims over some

islands and reefs of the Nansha Qundao; and third, the straight baselines of the Xisha Qundao. The United States frequently sends warships into the vicinity of China's Meiji Jiao, Zhubi Jiao, Ren'ai Jiao, and other islands and reefs in the Nansha Qundao, attempting to negate China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. In addition, the United States has also attempted to expand the application of the illegal ruling of the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration to the Xisha Qundao and Zhongsha Qundao, further amplifying the international impact of the ruling.

These actions by the United States have had a seriously negative impact on regional peace and stability. Its militarized actions have significantly increased the risk of miscalculation and unintended clashes, disrupting regional peace and stability. Meanwhile, U.S. interference has weakened the central role of ASEAN in regional affairs and reduced the ability of regional countries to resolve their issues independently. Additionally, U.S. actions have eroded mutual trust among regional countries and increased obstacles to cooperation.

The U.S. "freedom of navigation operations" in the South China Sea are legally questionable and pose a significant threat to regional peace and stability. The geopolitical motives and unilateral approach underpinning these actions have raised serious concerns within the international community.

The international community should work collectively to uphold the maritime order centered on the UNCLOS and promote a peaceful resolution to the South China Sea issue.

### **III. Building the Blaze: Accelerating U.S. Military Deployment around the South China Sea**

Under the pretext of "maintaining peace in the South China Sea" and "countering the China threat," the United States has intensified its military presence in the region and reinforced its alliance network across the so-called "Indo-Pacific region." In 2023, the number of U.S. military bases in the Philippines increased from five to nine. These bases, located near disputed waters in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, are capable of hosting medium-range missiles, anti-submarine aircraft, and drone systems, thereby forming a strategic encirclement against China. In April 2024, the United States deployed the "Typhon" medium-range missile system in Luzon, with a strike range extending over the South China

Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and China's coastal regions, further strengthening its tactical deterrence against China.

Along the "First Island Chain," the United States has deployed stealth fighters and reinforced anti-ship missile positions at Futenma and Kadena bases in Okinawa. It is also planning to revive a naval logistics hub at Subic Bay in the Philippines. Along the "Second Island Chain," the United States is upgrading Andersen Air Force Base in Guam to establish a rapid strike radius targeting the South China Sea. These infrastructure enhancements are designed to facilitate the deployment of additional Marine Corps units and strategic weapon systems.

The U.S. Navy maintains a rotational deployment of carrier strike groups, ensuring that at least one group conducts routine patrols in the South China Sea at all times. The 2021 collision involving the USS Connecticut, a nuclear-powered submarine, underscored the normalization of U.S. reconnaissance operations in the region. In 2022 alone, U.S. surveillance aircraft conducted over 600 close-in sorties near Chinese maritime features in the South China Sea.

The United States has partnered with the Philippines to jointly test and develop counter-drone systems, while also planning the deployment of Patriot air defense missiles and HIMARS rocket artillery systems in the country. With tacit U.S. approval, the Philippine military has procured India's BrahMos anti-ship missiles to enhance its strike capabilities against maritime targets. In its 2025 defense budget, the U.S. Department of Defense allocated an additional \$128 million to upgrade base infrastructure under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) framework with the Philippines, aiming to strengthen the U.S. military's rapid response capabilities in the South China Sea.

Beyond bilateral initiatives, the United States has strengthened military cooperation with regional allies, deepening trilateral security ties with Japan and South Korea, expanding military collaboration with Japan and Australia, and advancing the AUKUS security partnership with the United Kingdom and Australia. The United States' NATO allies, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, have also repeatedly dispatched warships to the South China Sea and the broader Asia-Pacific region to flex their military muscle and even seek long-term deployments.

Since 2020, U.S. military support for South China Sea regional states has exhibited a systematic and multi-tiered approach, with the core objective of

strengthening allied military capabilities, constructing a strategic encirclement, and advancing the internationalization of the South China Sea issue to curb China's influence in the region. However, these actions have not only heightened regional tensions but also exposed certain claimant states as mere proxies, whose strategic choices remain subordinated to U.S. interests, placing their own security and economic interests at long-term risk.

### **Chapter Three Lie-Monger Fabricating Falsehoods to Smear China**

The United States possesses the most formidable capabilities in cognitive and public opinion warfare on a global scale. To safeguard its hegemonic interests, Washington has long engaged in extensive theoretical research, leveraging its dominant position in international discourse to fabricate false narratives, distort facts, and obscure the truth. As a result, misinformation has proliferated under the guise of authoritative reporting. In recent years, systemic flaws within the U.S. governance model have increasingly come to light, exposing its pattern of deception and slander. A growing number of people now recognize that, on the South China Sea issue, the United States has played the disgraceful role of a sheer lie-monger.

#### **I. Labeling China as a “Threat” through False Narratives**

Using Xinhua News Agency's Global Radar situational awareness system, journalists conducted a quantitative analysis of the media coverage and sensationalism in the United States and its Western allies regarding the Xianbin Jiao incident from May to October 2024. The findings reveal a clear lack of neutrality and objectivity, with reports exhibiting a distinctly biased stance.

A keyword search for “Sabina Shoal” (the term commonly used by media from the U.S. and its Western allies to refer to the reef officially named Xianbin Jiao in China) identified 1,138 news reports within the specified timeframe. Of these, 446 originated from U.S. outlets, while 692 were published by media in other developed nations whose GDP ranks among the top 50 in the world. A review of these articles shows a consistent pattern: Chinese actions are frequently labeled as “threats,” implicitly suggesting that tensions in the South China Sea are primarily attributable to China.

For instance, CBS News, in its coverage of the alleged “collision” of a Chinese vessel against a Philippine vessel in the South China Sea in September 2024, repeatedly amplified narratives such as,” Over the past two years, China has repeatedly rammed Philippine vessels and fired water cannons at them.”

These reports seek to portray China as an aggressive power that bullies smaller nations. Yet, they conveniently ignore the root cause of the South China Sea issue: the Philippine occupation of Chinese islands and reefs, as well as its role in fueling maritime boundary disputes.

Originally, there were no territorial or maritime delimitation disputes between China and the Philippines. However, following the publication of a 1968 research report revealing the South China Sea’s abundant oil and gas reserves, the Philippines, driven by territorial expansionism and resource exploitation, illegally occupied eight Chinese reefs and islands in the Nansha Qundao. This marked the emergence of territorial disputes over certain features between the two nations. The Philippines’ blatant armed seizure of Chinese territory in the Nansha Qundao violates the United Nations Charter and fundamental principles of international relations, actions explicitly prohibited under international law.

Wu Shicun, chairman of the Huayang Maritime Research Center and founding president of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, stated that the core of the South China Sea dispute between China and the Philippines stems from the Philippines’ violation of its obligations under the United Nations Charter in the 1970s, when it illegally occupied parts of China’s islands and reefs in the NanshaQundao, triggering territorial sovereignty and maritime delimitation disputes.

Since the adoption and entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of national jurisdiction over maritime zones has been enriched and expanded, leading to an escalation of disputes between China and the Philippines over the South China Sea.

Tracing the origins of the South China Sea dispute reveals that it is fundamentally a bilateral issue, with China as the victim whose legitimate rights have been infringed upon, and by no means the aggressor bullying its neighbors.

## **II. Mobilizing Media and Think Tanks for Cognitive Warfare against China**



The South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative, in its research targeting the United States’ “gray zone” competition, clarifies that due to its inherent advantages in technology, media, and discourse power, the United States has consistently played a dominant role in shaping international narratives on the South China Sea. Since the Obama administration, U.S. government agencies, think tanks, and media outlets have continuously promoted narratives such as “China seeks to control the South China Sea,” “China does not abide by international law,” “China is undermining the rules-based international order,” and “China is coercing its maritime neighbors.” These narratives, often based on selective or even distorted information, have been used to comprehensively stigmatize China’s policies and actions in safeguarding its maritime rights. In recent years, U.S. tactics in this regard have escalated, becoming increasingly direct and vociferous.

The United States and its Western allies, leveraging their dominance in international discourse, mischaracterize the intrusions and provocations by certain claimant states in the South China Sea as safeguarding sovereignty, while framing China’s legitimate rights protection and law enforcement as “hegemonic” actions of a powerful nation “bullying” regional countries. They deliberately exaggerate the so-called “military threat” from China in the South China Sea.

For instance, in 2022, Stanford University’s Gordian Knot Center for National Security Innovation launched the “Myoushu” project (now known as “SeaLight”),<sup>①</sup> which disseminates a daily stream of mixed factual and misleading situational data. The initiative focuses on tracking China’s maritime activities, fabricating rumors, and deliberately hyping the narrative of “Chinese maritime threat and expansion.”

Similarly, in 2016, the “China Power” research group at the U.S. think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) released a research report claiming that China has employed its coast guard vessels to “bully” ships from other nations in the South China Sea as a means of asserting its sovereignty over the region.

The report stated that out of a total of 45 sovereignty dispute incidents in the South China Sea region since 2010, the Chinese coast guard was “involved” in 30 of them, with China also deploying its regular navy in 4 additional instances for “law

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① <https://gordianknot.stanford.edu/sealight>

enforcement.” According to the report, out of a total of 45 sovereignty disputes that occurred in the South China Sea region since 2010, the China Coast Guard was “involved” in 30 of them, and China had even dispatched its regular navy for “law enforcement” in 4 additional instances.

In 2020, then-U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo warned China that its “bullying activities” to control the South China Sea were entirely unlawful, and that the world would not allow Beijing to regard the South China Sea as its “maritime empire.”

### **III. Negating China’s Legitimate Claims through Unlawful Arbitration**

To legally undermine China’s sovereignty over the islands and reefs in the South China Sea and its claims to related waters and historical rights, the United States and its Western allies instigated the Philippines to initiate the South China Sea arbitration case.

Rod Kapunan, a columnist for *Manila Standard*, remarked that former President Benigno Aquino III actively aligned with the U.S.’s so-called “Asia-Pacific rebalancing” strategy when initiating the arbitration case, deliberately misleading the Filipino public and inciting hostility toward neighboring countries. On the South China Sea issue, he argued, “The Filipinos are merely pulling chestnuts from the fire for the United States.”

From the very beginning of the Aquino III administration’s unilateral initiation of the South China Sea arbitration case, the United States was manipulating it behind the scenes. American lawyer Paul Reichler participated in planning the case, and some high-ranking U.S. government officials also supported the Philippines in filing the arbitration.

Yuri Tavorovsky, a professor at the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia, pointed out in an article published in Russia’s *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* that although the United States holds no territorial claims in the South China Sea, it seeks to act as the arbitrator in all negotiations.

Alberto Encomienda, former Secretary-General of the Maritime Center at the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, stated candidly that the Aquino III administration’s actions in escalating tensions in the South China Sea were orchestrated by the United States.” The Philippines does not have an independent foreign policy. It is always subject to the dictates of the United States. Aquino

III always talked about ‘rule of law’ and ‘legal framework,’ but these ‘laws’ are essentially determined by the United States.”

Diyaa El-Fiqy, an Egyptian expert on international issues, told Xinhua News Agency reporters that on the South China Sea issue, the Philippines had promised that the issue would be resolved through consensus-based consultations among the parties concerned. However, the United States instigated the Philippines behind the scenes, ultimately prompting it to submit the issue to arbitration. According to Fiqy, the U.S. interference in the South China Sea issue is aimed at maintaining its own hegemony.

The arbitration tribunal, dominated by the United States and its Western allies, misinterpreted the spirit and rules of the UNCLOS, almost completely denying China’s claims and labeling China’s legitimate actions to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea as “violating international law.”

Wu Shicun said that the arbitration tribunal had no jurisdiction over the South China Sea arbitration case, and any demands, rulings, or orders it issued to China have no legal effect. As a result, China faces no obligation to enforce the tribunal’s ruling. He believes that the Philippines’ forceful push for the South China Sea arbitration aimed not only to deny China’s sovereign rights and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea but also attempted to legitimize its own illegal claims through “law.” This was a “carefully planned political conspiracy disguised under the cloak of law.”

Therefore, the arbitration tribunal’s ruling is highly politicized, lacks basic fairness, and undermines the credibility of international law.

#### **IV. Smearing China through Hegemonic Thinking and Power Politics**

China adheres to an independent foreign policy of peace, with the noble objective of building a community with a shared future for humanity. On the South China Sea issue, China has always advocated for peaceful resolution through negotiation. While not proactively provoking trouble, China resolutely responds to provocations.

For China, maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea region best serves its interests. The United States and its Western allies have consistently

pursued hegemonism and power politics, with a notorious history of imperialist and colonial practices in their quest to seize and maintain hegemony. Their actions, marked by oppression of weaker nations and blatant disregard for international law, have left a lasting stain on their record.

The United States and its Western allies smear China's legitimate rights protection, law enforcement, and maritime activities in the South China Sea as "bullying small countries by a big power" and "hegemonism." They project their own psychology onto China, highlighting their deeply-rooted hegemonic logic and zero-sum mentality, pushing the region to the brink of danger.

Under the banner of "America First," the United States increasingly applies "international rules" selectively, using them when convenient and discarding them when not. It frequently withdraws from international agreements, often placing its domestic law above international law, abusing tariffs, sanctions, and long-arm jurisdiction, and resorting to any means to suppress the development of other countries, pushing the "law of the jungle" to its extreme. From congressmen "encircling and suppressing" TikTok to convoys stealing Syrian oil, the United States frequently "contributes" shockingly bullying scenes to the world.

The *New York Times* published an article stating that the United States has become "a selfish and bullying giant—a bully with grand delusions, but in reality, not nearly as formidable as the U.S. leaders imagine."

After the Cold War, the United States, having finally achieved global hegemony, has become even more blatant in displaying its wolfish culture to the world. It grabs whatever it desires; if it's not given, it takes by force; if met with resistance, it resorts to military aggression; if direct confrontation fails, it employs subversive tactics. The United States is well-versed in the tactics of maintaining hegemony, which fuels its suspicion that China will pursue global hegemony like the United States, resorting to similar tactics of "plundering, assaulting, and smearing."

## **Chapter Four Disruptor of Regional Peace, Stability, and Development**

The South China Sea is a treasure trove of resources, having provided abundant fishing yields for surrounding countries for centuries and a vital source of livelihood for coastal fishermen. It is also a crucial maritime thoroughfare

connecting East and Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean, playing a significant role in the foreign trade and economic development of regional nations.

The Asia-Pacific region has emerged as one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing economic areas in the world. A key prerequisite for this success has been the region's sustained peace and stability over an extended period. The stability in the South China Sea is undoubtedly a crucial component of this overall regional peace and security.

Yet today, extra-regional forces, with the United States at the forefront, keep stirring up issues in the South China Sea, sow discord between China and other claimant states, create tension in the South China Sea, and disrupt regional peace, stability, and mutually beneficial cooperation. These actions have led to heightened security risks, a deteriorating development environment, and erosion of mutual trust, with regional countries, particularly those bordering the South China Sea, ultimately bearing the consequences.

### **I. Disrupting Economic and Social Development of Regional Countries**

U.S.-led extra-regional forces have increasingly meddling in the South China Sea issue, inciting regional countries to confront China. Influenced by such inducements, some regional states have diverted substantial energy and resources toward provocative confrontations, heightening their exposure to potential conflict. This shift has come at the expense of their own's domestic economic and social development, disrupted foreign trade, investment, and cooperation, and inflicted adverse impacts on economic well-being and people's livelihoods.

Since 2023, the Philippines has launched a new wave of provocations against China in the South China Sea, accompanied by a sharp increase in military expenditures. According to the Philippine national budget for 2025, enacted at the end of 2024, the Department of National Defense is allocated ₱315.1 billion (approximately USD 5.53 billion)—a year-on-year increase of over 30%. This figure ranks third among all government departments and accounts for nearly 5% of the total national budget.<sup>①</sup>

In stark contrast, funding for social welfare and healthcare services for

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① [https://m.gmw.cn/2024-12/30/content\\_1303935657.html](https://m.gmw.cn/2024-12/30/content_1303935657.html).

impoverished communities has been significantly reduced. The ₱74 billion (approximately USD 1.3 billion) government subsidy initially planned for the state-run Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) has been entirely eliminated. Additionally, the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), a poverty alleviation initiative under the Department of Social Welfare and Development, has suffered a ₱50 billion (approximately USD 0.878 billion) budget cut.<sup>①</sup>

China is the Philippines' largest trading partner and a key investor in its infrastructure development. However, in the past two years, the Philippines' repeated provocations over the South China Sea issue have led to a deterioration in bilateral relations, negatively impacting economic and trade cooperation. According to China's General Administration of Customs, in 2023, China's total trade volume with the Philippines, as measured in U.S. dollars, saw significant declines of 16.0% in total trade, 16.3% in exports, and 15.3% in imports.<sup>②</sup> This downward trend continued with slight declines in 2024.<sup>③</sup>

In July 2022, the Philippine government halted three major railway projects funded by China, the Subic-Clark Railway, the PNR South Long-Haul Railway, and the Davao-Digos segment of the Mindanao Railway, citing the need for reassessment.<sup>④</sup>

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, China was one of the Philippines' most important sources of foreign tourists. However, due to worsening bilateral relations, post-pandemic recovery in Chinese tourist arrivals has been sluggish. In 2023 and 2024, the number of Chinese visitors to the Philippines was approximately 260,000 and 310,000, respectively, significantly lower than the 1.74 million recorded in 2019.

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① <https://philstarlife.com/news-and-views/313009-philhealth-to-get-zero-subsidy-2025-budget>, <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/davao/wegotmail-marcos-2025-budget-a-rizal-day-betrayal-unconstitutional-corrupt-anti-poor>, [https://www.guancha.cn/internation/2024\\_12\\_23\\_759845.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/internation/2024_12_23_759845.shtml)

② <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxzgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/5637259/index.html>

③ <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxzgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/6325065/index.html>

④ <https://www.flw.com.ph/thread-1209020-1-1.html>

According to reports from Thai media, the Philippine government acknowledged that its visa policies have deterred Chinese tourists and launched an e-visa program for Chinese citizens, only to cancel it abruptly, citing security concerns.<sup>①</sup>

In response to this, Rigoberto Tiglao, the former spokesperson of former Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo during her term, published an article in Philippine media criticizing, “This is not only the biggest mistake of his (current Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos’) presidency, but also the most destructive policy in our history, hindering growth and exacerbating poverty.” Meanwhile, Bank of America warned that escalating tensions in the South China Sea could further damage Philippine-China relations, potentially causing severe economic losses for the Philippines.<sup>②</sup>

Domestically, insightful figures within the Philippines have voiced concerns that the country’s continued provocations against China, encouraged by the United States, could drag it into military conflict. Former Philippine Senator Francisco Tatad publicly stated in an article that the South China Sea dispute should not define the entirety of Philippine-China relations. He criticized the United States and its allies for exaggerating the severity of the issue and portraying direct military confrontation as the only solution. He warned that “if the Philippines goes to war with China at the behest of the United States, it would be an act of suicide and sheer folly.”

In Vietnam, the escalation of the South China Sea issue has fueled a surge in nationalist sentiment, culminating in the anti-China riots on May 13, 2014. The unrest led to the looting, vandalism, and arson of hundreds of foreign-invested enterprises, resulting in hundreds of casualties. While businesses from the Chinese mainland were primary targets, companies from China’s Hong Kong and Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and other regions were also affected. In response, multiple countries and regions evacuated personnel from Vietnam and issued travel warnings. The deteriorating investment climate forced the Vietnamese government

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① <https://www.flw.com.ph/thread-1334189-1-1.html>,

[https://travel.china.com.cn/txt/2024-04/16/content\\_117129673.shtml](https://travel.china.com.cn/txt/2024-04/16/content_117129673.shtml)

② <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/234686/bank-of-america-warns-row-with-china-may-hurt-ph-economy>

to arrest suspects and compensate affected enterprises in an effort to stabilize the situation.

The South China Sea and its surrounding areas constitute one of the world's busiest maritime and air traffic corridors, with thousands of vessels and aircraft operating daily.<sup>①</sup> Any escalation of tensions in the region not only threatens navigational safety but also heightens the concerns of investors over security, negatively impacting the economies of neighboring countries. Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan has warned that "any escalation of tensions, conflict, or military action in the South China Sea will immediately harm and obstruct trade." A simulation study by the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) suggests that a war in the South China Sea could have devastating economic consequences, with Southeast Asian nations facing an average GDP loss of up to 11%.<sup>②</sup>

## **II. Eroding Strategic Trust among Regional Countries**

The interference of extra-regional powers, particularly the United States, has significantly intensified the militarization of the South China Sea, exacerbated sovereignty disputes, disrupted negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, weakened ASEAN's central role, eroded mutual trust among regional states, increased obstacles to cooperation, and diminished the ability of regional countries to resolve their own issues independently, severely undermining peace and stability in the region.

### **Escalation of Sovereignty Disputes**

The United States has further aggravated sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea by supporting unilateral actions by certain claimant states. The Marcos administration in the Philippines has notably shifted its South China Sea policy, provoking incidents in areas such as Ren'ai Jiao and Huangyan Dao, strengthening its

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① Report on the State of Navigation and Overflight in the South China Sea, [http://www.scspi.org/sites/default/files/nan\\_hai\\_hang\\_xing\\_ji\\_fei\\_yue\\_zhuang\\_kuang\\_.pdf](http://www.scspi.org/sites/default/files/nan_hai_hang_xing_ji_fei_yue_zhuang_kuang_.pdf)

② [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379105658\\_Economic\\_Relations\\_Between\\_China\\_and\\_Asean\\_The\\_Shadow\\_of\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea\\_Issue](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379105658_Economic_Relations_Between_China_and_Asean_The_Shadow_of_the_South_China_Sea_Issue), [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w28048/w28048.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28048/w28048.pdf)



military alliance with the United States, and actively engaging in security cooperation with the United States and its Western allies. This external backing has emboldened some claimant states to solidify their territorial claims through provocative actions, rather than seeking resolution through dialogue and cooperation.

### **Obstruction of Negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea**

The interference of the United States and other extra-regional countries has posed challenges and obstruction to China and ASEAN's efforts to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea. U.S. military provocations and diplomatic pressure have disrupted the negotiation process for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. This external interference has hindered consensus-building between China and ASEAN states, further complicating efforts to safeguard regional peace and stability.

### **Weakening of ASEAN's Central Role**

U.S.-led security cooperation frameworks exhibit exclusivity, exacerbating divisions among regional states and undermining ASEAN's central role in regional affairs. The United States has sought to introduce NATO and other military alliances into the Asia-Pacific, challenging ASEAN's leading role in regional affairs. This external interference has diminished ASEAN's ability to coordinate and its influence on the South China Sea issue, further weakening its central role in regional affairs.

### **Erosion of Mutual Trust Among Regional States**

The interference of extra-regional powers, particularly the United States, has significantly eroded mutual trust among regional countries. The escalating tensions in the South China Sea, coupled with foreign interference, have constrained China-ASEAN trust-building efforts, creating diplomatic deadlocks. U.S. interference has not only undermined trust among regional states but also increased obstacles to cooperation. Under the influence of extra-regional forces, the attitudes of some ASEAN countries towards China have become more complex, making it difficult for China and ASEAN countries to smoothly advance cooperation in marine collaboration, resource development, and other areas.

### **Decline in Regional States' Ability to Address Challenges Independently**

The interference of the United States and other external forces has led some

claimant states to be more inclined to resolve disputes through the support of extra-regional powers rather than dialogue and cooperation within the region. This dependence has weakened their ability to resolve disputes autonomously, further destabilizing the region. The change in the Philippines' South China Sea policy is largely a product of U.S. strategic competition with China. This external support has made the Philippines increasingly reliant on foreign powers, reducing its capacity to address South China Sea challenges independently.

### **III. Obstructing Regional Countries from Deepening Practical Cooperation**

The South China Sea issue has remained unsolved, and negotiations have progressed at a slow pace, largely due to the persistent interference of extra-regional forces. Consequently, some claimant states tend to perceive other parties' actions primarily through the lens of territorial and maritime disputes, thereby weakening mutual trust and hindering regional cooperation.

The interference of U.S.-led extra-regional forces in the South China Sea issue, especially their support for unilateral actions by certain claimant states, has encouraged these countries to rely on the United States and its Western allies to reinforce their vested interests, rather than seeking resolution through negotiation and cooperation. This approach has not only escalated tensions in the South China Sea but also complicated negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC). Since China and ASEAN signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002, both sides have repeatedly expressed their commitment to formulating a binding Code of Conduct (COC) based on this framework. However, despite the formal resumption of negotiations in 2013, following the 6th Senior Officials' Meeting and the 9th Joint Working Group Meeting, the COC remains unfinalized to this day.

At the press conference during the 2025 National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference sessions, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated explicitly that instability and security risks in the South China Sea primarily stem from extra-regional interference. China and ASEAN countries have long reached an important consensus on maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea. They are currently focusing their efforts on advancing negotiations for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. However,

under such circumstances, the United States and its Western allies continue to stir up tensions in the South China Sea. Under the pretext of “freedom of navigation,” they frequently provoke disputes in the South China Sea and sow discord at various international forums. China and ASEAN countries must overcome interference to push forward negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, striving to reach an agreement as soon as possible on regional rules that comply with international law, meet the needs of all parties, and are more substantive, practical, and effective.

The failure to finalize the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, coupled with the instigation by the United States and other external forces, has hindered the development of mutual trust among relevant countries. Heightened suspicion over each other’s actions has significantly complicated efforts to advance cooperation in the South China Sea.

China has enforced a summer fishing moratorium in the South China Sea north of 12 degrees latitude since 1999 to ensure the sustainability of fishery resources. However, this policy, intended to safeguard the marine ecological environment of the South China Sea, has not garnered support from neighboring countries. On the contrary, certain nations have seized the opportunity to expand fishing and other maritime activities in the region. Following the 2024 moratorium, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement condemning China’s fishing ban, claiming it “violates Philippine sovereignty and maritime rights” and “harms the interests of Filipino fishermen.”<sup>①</sup>

After the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 in 2014, many countries dispatched naval and air forces to the waters where the flight lost contact to participate in the search and rescue operation. However, territorial disputes in the region complicated multinational search efforts, as Malaysia and Vietnam’s overlapping jurisdictional claims created difficulties for coordinating the multinational search and rescue forces.<sup>②</sup>

According to Yan Yan, director of the Research Center of Oceans Law and Policy

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① <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/4IIAPagm0pq>

② Xinhua News Agency, “The Difficult Search and Rescue: Several Questions About the Search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.”

at the National Institute for the South China Sea Studies, geopolitical competition and territorial disputes have directly hindered maritime cooperation in the South China Sea. The situation in the South China Sea is becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted, with recurrent maritime conflicts and disputes. Parties to the regional disputes continue to face challenges in establishing deeper mutual trust, which has hampered the advancement and consolidation of various cooperative projects and institutional mechanisms. Certain extra-regional countries keep hyping up the South China Sea issue, fabricating and trumpeting the false narrative of “China threat in the South China Sea,” and instigate disputes and create frictions among claimant states, leading to continuous turbulence in the South China Sea and disrupting the favorable atmosphere for maritime cooperation among regional countries.<sup>①</sup>

## Conclusion

As the tide of the times surges forward with unstoppable momentum, the shifting winds in the South China Sea offer a fleeting glimpse of the global changes of a magnitude not seen in a century. In pursuit of its hegemonic ambitions, the United States seeks to turn the South China Sea into a “chessboard” to contain China, disrupting the prevailing trend toward regional peace and stability. Such misconducts, swimming against the historical tide, run counter to the aspirations of regional countries and the global community for peace, development, and cooperation, are doomed to fail.

The South China Sea issue should not, and must not, be the primary factor in defining relations among regional countries.

At this historical crossroads, the crucial decision facing regional states is whether to pursue short-term gains by acting as strategic pawns for U.S.-led extra-regional powers, at the risk of eventual abandonment, or to engage in negotiation to manage disputes and strive for common development. We are confident that the nations of the region will make the right choice. Numerous facts demonstrate that maintaining regional peace and stability, as well as achieving prosperity for all

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① [https://www.nanhai.org.cn/review\\_c/808.htm](https://www.nanhai.org.cn/review_c/808.htm)

countries, are the shared aspirations of Asia-Pacific nations.

As the world faces increasing uncertainty and challenges, recognizing the U.S.-led Western maneuvers of instigation, coercion, and division over the South China Sea not only deepens understanding of American hegemony, rooted in dominance and the deliberate fostering of instability, but also strengthens the resolve of all peace-loving and development-oriented peoples across Asia and beyond to unite in building a better world together.