

BEFORE SHIPS COLLIDE, NARRATIVES ALREADY HAVE

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A decade after the South China Sea arbitration ruling, the dispute is no longer contested only at sea or in tribunals. At an alarming pace, it is increasingly fought through information warfare on social media platforms, where algorithms dictate visibility and mis/disinformation travels far beyond the disputed waters themselves.

A search for “South China Sea” on YouTube today no longer leads only to mainstream news coverage. A quick review of the 50 channels most prominently surfaced by YouTube’s search system in mid-May 2026 shows a rapidly evolving information ecosystem where legacy news organizations coexist alongside niche geopolitical commentary channels and highly politicized content creators competing to shape how maritime tensions are understood online.

Among these 50 channels, the top three channels with the highest subscriber counts were the South China Morning Post (4.32 million subscribers), 南海观察 SCSR (37,700

subscribers), and PrOgReSziVe FiLiPiNaS (13,700 subscribers). The dataset suggests that YouTube’s search ecology around the South China Sea is not dominated solely by legacy news media, but also by smaller geopolitical commentary channels.

One notable example is 南海观察 SCSR, a channel whose self-description reads: “Everything About the South China Sea :)”. Although the channel was newly established in June 2025, it had already published 37 South China Sea-related videos, with total views of almost 3 million by the time of collection. Some videos gained significant traction within a relatively short period. For example, [a video](#) uploaded on 29 January 2026 documenting a China Coast Guard rescue operation involving Filipino crew members near Scarborough Shoal accumulated more than 50,000 views. The video framed the incident not as a maritime confrontation, but as a humanitarian rescue mission in which Chinese authorities protected Filipino sailors and received gratitude from the Philippines.

However, beyond individual incidents, the broader discursive pattern of the content relies on historical memory, legal discourse, and war narratives to construct legitimacy around China's position in the South China Sea. Rather than presenting maritime disputes merely as contemporary geopolitical disagreements, the videos repeatedly reposition them within longer narratives of anti-colonial struggle, wartime sacrifice, post-war order, and national restoration.

Two dominant themes appear repeatedly in the 37 video descriptions: law and war. The channel also uses international legal history selectively. Several videos reference the Cairo Declaration and Potsdam Proclamation to argue that the post-World War II order already settled questions surrounding the South China Sea. In these narratives, Chinese sovereignty is presented not as an ongoing dispute, but as an established historical and legal fact that is being unfairly challenged by external actors. It becomes a narrative instrument selectively used to legitimize state action, delegitimize opponents, and claim moral authority in the information warfare.

Equally significant is the recurring use of “war” and war-related historical memory. The dataset repeatedly invokes the “Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression,” the “World Anti-Fascist War,” wartime sacrifice, militia mobilization, and the post-war recovery of maritime territories. Videos celebrate the “recovery” of the Paracel and Spratly Islands after World War II and frame wartime anti-fascist victory as the historical foundation of present-day maritime sovereignty. With this, the South China Sea is transformed from a contemporary territorial dispute into an extension of unresolved historical justice.

The charts suggest that the most amplified South China Sea content on YouTube is less about direct military confrontation and more

about history, culture, and civilization. Many of the most-viewed videos build a long historical connection between China and the maritime region through references to Zheng He’s voyages, “600 years ago”, heritage, folklore, and memory. Together, these narratives present China’s presence in the South China Sea as something longstanding, natural, and deeply rooted in culture rather than recent or expansionist.

The narrative also reflects what leading [South China Sea expert Gregory Poling said](#) as the tendency within Chinese strategic narratives to deny the independent agency of Southeast Asian claimant states by framing their actions primarily as sources of “trouble” or external manipulation rather than legitimate expressions of national interest.

Importantly, the dataset does not rely exclusively on overtly militaristic rhetoric. Many videos combine war memory with softer narratives about marine environmental protection, humanitarian rescue, cultural exchange, Zheng He voyages, maritime heritage, and Southeast Asian connectivity. Videos discussing Indonesian songs, Filipino proverbs, Vietnamese poetry, or wartime overseas Chinese communities operate alongside videos about coast guard confrontations and territorial disputes. This blending of soft cultural storytelling with hard geopolitical messaging reflects a more sophisticated form of strategic narratives designed for digital platforms.

The observation illustrates how mis/disinformation in the South China Sea cannot be understood solely through fabricated content or false claims. Much of the persuasive power comes from strategic narratives, selective historical narration, affective storytelling, and repeated discursive associations between legality, morality, and war memory. On platforms such as YouTube, these narratives are further amplified by algorithms that reward emotionally charged,

visually engaging, or easy to watch. As a result, maritime disputes are increasingly mediated not only through diplomacy and naval operations, but also through platformized information ecosystems where legitimacy itself becomes borderless contested terrain.

Another greatest challenge in understanding contemporary strategic narratives and mis/disinformation is that they rarely operate through a single identifiable source. Instead, they emerge through [sporadic patterns](#) scattered across individual accounts, commentary channels, reposts, and algorithmic recommendations. Their influence accumulates through visibility and repetition rather than through one dominant actor/influencer, making them significantly more difficult and laborious to identify.

Now, disinformation and strategic narratives overlap, but they are not the same thing. Treating them as identical can actually weaken analysis of the South China Sea information warfare.

Disinformation refers to false or deliberately misleading information intended to deceive. The key issue is factual accuracy. [AFP's 2024](#) investigation is a good example of disinformation: bogus Facebook and YouTube networks circulated misleading claims, fabricated images, and AI-generated articles to generate clicks and advertising revenue. Strategic narratives, however, operate differently. They do not necessarily depend on falsehoods.

Meanwhile, [strategic narratives](#) are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics. They organize facts, history, symbols, emotions, and interpretations into a coherent story that advances political objectives. The key issue is framing rather than fabrication.

That is why the South China Sea information warfare cannot be understood simply through fact-checking. What is at stake is not only factual accuracy, but also the struggle to shape how maritime conflicts are emotionally experienced and politically interpreted.

The South China Sea is no longer contested only at sea. Strategic narratives matter as much as factual claims. “Law” is being used as a narrative instrument. Historical memory and “legacy” are central. Southeast Asian agency is often delegitimized. Lastly, the tribunal anniversary is not only a legal milestone, but also a strategic narrative battleground.

ANNEX



China Coast Guard's Emergency Rescue Operation Wins Praise From Filipinos #南海 #southchinasea

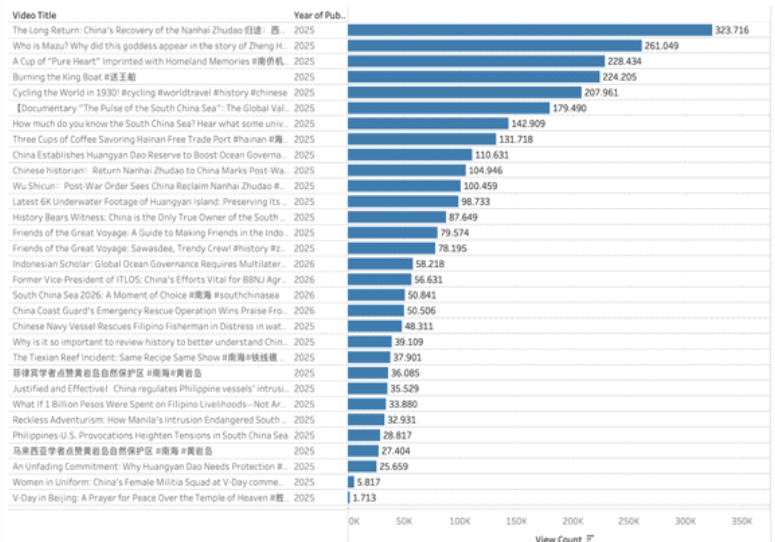
南海观察 SCSR 37.7K subscribers Subscribe 4 Share Save Download ...

Screen capture of the video by the SCSR, 2026

Video descriptions with highest view count



Videos with highest view count



Visualizations created by the author in Tableau, 2026



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