

WPS QUARTERLY

Analysis on Maritime Asia

10 YEARS AFTER THE ARBITRAL AWARD

CHINA INTENSIFIES ILLEGAL PRESENCE
ON SCARBOROUGH SHOAL



Euan Graham

Manila's new ASEAN
Maritime Center will need
focus to move beyond
symbolism

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Tuned to perfection: China's
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Letter from the CEO

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Welcome to the inaugural edition of WPS Quarterly, our flagship publication on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Our focus rests on the South China Sea, but our lens is wider: we examine the forces increasingly entangled with maritime affairs—disinformation, cybersecurity, economics and other emerging challenges that shape governance and stability across our maritime region.

This year carries particular weight. It marks the 10th anniversary of the 2016 Arbitral Award, which found no legal basis for China's nine-dash line and reaffirmed international law as the foundation for the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes. A decade on, the Award's legal and normative force endures, yet the strategic environment keeps shifting, presenting states, institutions, and communities throughout the Indo-Pacific with new opportunities and new tests alike.

At the WPS Foundation, we remain committed to principled, practical, and inclusive approaches to maritime security and ocean governance. Informed dialogue, evidence-based research, and constructive engagement among stakeholders are, we believe, indispensable to navigating the complexities of today's global order. Through this publication, we hope to deepen understanding, spark meaningful discussion, and advance innovative policy in support of a free, open, and rules-based maritime order.

2026 is our most ambitious year yet. The Foundation has a series of major national and international initiatives: the National Workshop on Marine Science, Research, and Policy under the Expert Working Group on Marine Science Research; the National Symposium on the Law of the Sea and the West Philippine Sea and the National WPS Summit marking the 10th anniversary of the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award; and The Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea. Each is designed to strengthen collaboration among policymakers, researchers, maritime practitioners, and civil society, and to advance informed, forward-looking discussion on the issues that matter most.

We are also honored to host the 15th General Conference of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) in Manila. As the region's largest Track II network of research institutions and think tanks, CSCAP has—since its founding in 1992—complemented official ASEAN-led processes and helped shape strategic dialogue across the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. We assume this responsibility with renewed commitment to

Track II diplomacy, regional cooperation, and constructive engagement on the security challenges we share.

This ambition builds on real momentum. Last November, the Foundation convened the second iteration of The Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea—now among the largest and most influential gatherings devoted to the issue—bringing together more than 270 government officials, maritime practitioners, scholars, and policy leaders from over 25 countries and territories. In December, the Philippines–Taiwan Track 1.5 Dialogue carried that work forward, advancing pragmatic discussion of shared maritime concerns and surfacing concrete opportunities for cooperation. And earlier in the year, our Track 1.5 workshop in Cebu—convened with Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR)—gathered experts and other stakeholders from the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and other partner countries to counter the People's Republic of China's illegal and coercive maritime operations and cognitive-warfare activities. Those discussions charted practical paths toward greater regional resilience: stronger data-driven analysis, broader information-sharing, sharper strategic communications, joint research, deeper cyber cooperation, and carefully calibrated Track 1.5 and Track 2 engagement.

As maritime challenges grow more complex and interconnected, the need for trusted platforms for dialogue, data-driven research, and collaboration has never been greater. The WPS Foundation is proud to serve as a policy research and convening institution—one that bridges sectors, disciplines, and perspectives in pursuit of durable and principled solutions.

We invite our partners, stakeholders, and friends to continue and expand their collaboration with us. Your support allows us to strengthen our institutional capacity, broaden our regional reach, and deliver the credible, principled, and innovative initiatives that this moment demands. Together, we can help shape a more secure, stable, and cooperative maritime future—for the Philippines, the Indo-Pacific, and the wider international community.

Thank you for your continued trust and partnership.
Sincerely,

Jeffrey Ordaniel
*President & CEO, WPS
Foundation*

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10 YEARS AFTER THE ARBITRAL AWARD, CHINA INTENSIFIES ILLEGAL PRESENCE ON SCARBOROUGH SHOAL

Executive summary

A decade after the landmark 2016 Arbitral Award invalidated China's expansive South China Sea claims, Beijing has only consolidated its illegal presence at the Scarborough Shoal (Bajo de Masinloc). During the January–April 2026 period, China concentrated much of its maritime activity around the shoal – culminating in the installation of a new floating structure in May – while sustaining steady deployments across other key features in the West Philippine Sea, the portion of the South China Sea within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). At the same time, Manila held its position: continuing fisheries support and law-enforcement patrols, conducting a marine scientific research mission in the Kalayaan Island Group, and hosting an expanding roster of allied navies for exercises. Beijing's deployment of a “floating structure” at Scarborough Shoal defined the quarter.

This assessment draws on a quarterly monitoring report by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) based on AIS tracking, satellite imagery, physical monitoring, and maritime domain awareness patrols, corroborated where possible with open-source reporting from February through May 2026.



A historic ruling of an international tribunal in 2016 clarifies with finality the South China Sea maritime zones to which the Philippines and China are entitled under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Context: The Arbitral Award at 10 Years

An Arbitral Tribunal constituted in The Hague in accordance with Annex VII of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) issued its landmark ruling on 12 July 2016, finding that China's nine-dash-line claims had no legal basis and that Beijing had unlawfully interfered with Filipino fishing at Scarborough Shoal. As that ruling approaches its 10th anniversary in July 2026, the practical situation on the water tells a different story: China has maintained a continuous presence in the shoal since the 2012 standoff, and it expanded that presence in 2025 by declaring the feature a national nature reserve. The Philippines, for its part, has refused to concede the legal high ground, continuing to challenge China's presence and to assert its sovereignty over the shoal, and its rights under UNCLOS as confirmed by the 2016 Arbitral Award.

Scarborough Shoal: A Layered Area-Denial Posture

China continued to reinforce its claims over Scarborough Shoal during the quarter through a layered patrol strategy that strengthened its area-denial posture, particularly after Filipino fishing vessels resumed operations within the shoal's 12-nautical-mile territorial sea in February. Beginning in March, six to eight Chinese maritime militia

vessels maintained a persistent presence inside the lagoon, returning after their departure in mid-2025.

The quarter's most concerning development came in late May, when Philippine authorities discovered a "floating structure" inside the shoal's lagoon. Officials said the platform could be supporting unauthorized marine scientific research activities by China. In response, the Department of Foreign Affairs



The 1734 Murillo-Velarde map showing a feature called 'Panacot' which is also known as 'Panatag Shoal,' 'Scarborough Shoal,' or Bajo De Masinloc. Photo from Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

lodged a diplomatic protest against Beijing.

The discovery also raised concerns about the possibility of a more permanent Chinese presence at the disputed feature. Former Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio warned that the structure could represent a "precursor" to occupation in violation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Drawing parallels with China's earlier activities at Mischief (Panganiban) Reef in 1995, Carpio argued that the establishment of semi-permanent facilities would constitute the initial stages of occupation. "If they put up a platform there, that's occupation," he said.

Satellite imagery analyzed by commercial provider Vantor (formerly Maxar Technologies) and reported by Reuters further highlighted Beijing's efforts to tighten control over access to the shoal. The imagery showed that China installed a floating barrier across the lagoon's southeastern entrance between 10 and 11 April. According to Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson Rear Admiral Jay Tarriela, the barrier measured approximately 352 meters in length and was accompanied by four Chinese fishing vessels and a probable coast guard or naval patrol ship positioned outside the lagoon



Monitored floating structures in Bajo de Masinloc. Photo from Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), 2026

entrance. The barrier is the latest in a recurring pattern; a similar obstruction installed in September 2023 was cut and removed by Philippine divers on Manila's orders. Its reappearance came as the Philippines was again escorting fishermen with coast guard and fisheries vessels, and it signals Beijing's continuing intent to restrict access. Analysts have warned that the steady accretion of control measures by the Chinese keeps Scarborough among the most plausible flashpoints for armed confrontation in the region.

China Coast Guard Activity Nearer the Philippine Coastline

China Coast Guard (CCG) activity also extended closer to the Philippine archipelago. On 17 April, a CCG vessel bearing bow number 5303 was monitored 31 nautical miles west of Tambobong, Pangasinan, while a second CCG vessel was tracked 41 nautical miles west of Salvador Island, Zambales. The PCG responded by deploying an aircraft to challenge and warn off both vessels. These positions — well inside the Philippine EEZ and close to populated coastal provinces — represent a more assertive patrol footprint.

Philippine-Led Multilateral Activities

In contrast to its hardening posture at Scarborough, China notably avoided aggressive responses during humanitarian operations conducted by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) from January to April in support of Filipino fishermen. This restraint was most pronounced in February and April, periods that coincided with concentrated allied naval presence in Philippine waters. In February, the Philippines hosted two Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activities inside its EEZ — a trilateral exercise with Australia and the United States



Monitored Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) Vessel, CCG-5303 Northwest of Salvador Island, Zambales. Photo by PCG, 2026



Monitored People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Vessel, PLA-N 905 East Southeast of Bajo De Masinloc. Photo by: PCG, 2026

on 15–16 February, followed by a Japan–Philippines–United States activity on 20–26 February. April then saw the buildup to and opening of Balikatan 2026 (20 April–8 May), the largest iteration of the exercise to date, drawing more than 17,000 troops from seven active participants — the United States, the Philippines, Australia, Japan, Canada, France and New Zealand — with the multilateral maritime component conducted off Luzon's western coast. Beijing's measured behavior during these windows is consistent with some analysts' assertions that Manila's partnerships with like-minded states, characterized by the presence of substantial allied naval and air power, can deter Beijing's appetite for escalation.

Centralized, Reactive Escort Behavior

China has typically responded to Philippine government-vessel operations in the West Philippine Sea by deploying escort ships. In March, the movement of BFAR vessels prompted several CCG ships to leave their homeports and shadow eight Philippine vessels transiting from the Kalayaan Island Group toward Scarborough Shoal. The speed and coordination of this response suggest a centralized command

mechanism governing CCG deployments keyed to the movements of Philippine government vessels, rather than ad hoc local decisions by commanding officers.

Kalayaan Island Group: Steady Deployments and an Unusual Sighting

Elsewhere in the Kalayaan Island Group, Chinese military, coast guard and maritime militia deployments remained steady throughout the four-month period around strategically significant features including Second Thomas (Ayungin) Shoal, Thitu (Pag-asa) and Escoda (Sabina) Shoal.

One anomalous incident was recorded in early April. On 5 April, a Chinese pleasure craft — Wen Feng Shi Ye, a 32-meter Azimut Grande 105 superyacht — was observed 2.5 nautical miles west of Thitu, moving southwest. The vessel may have been operating under a charter arrangement carrying tourists, private guests or officials as part of a leisure-oriented or semi-official itinerary. While not a security threat in itself, the sighting underscores the normalization of Chinese civilian and quasi-official presence in waters Manila administers.

Multinational Marine Scientific Research Mission

In mid-March, the BRP Malapascua and M/V DA-BFAR ferried Filipino and foreign scientists — to Nanshan (Lawak), West York (Likas), Flat (Patag) and Thitu for marine scientific research activities. Chinese forces monitored the mission throughout but mounted no operational response.

The mission was an exercise of the Philippines' sovereign right to explore, exploit, conserve and manage the natural resources of its EEZ — a right fully sanctioned under UNCLOS, the 2016 arbitral award, and the Maritime Zones Act. China has no legal basis to interfere with or impede this work.

Energy Dimension: The Malampaya East Discovery

On 19 January, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. announced a significant natural gas discovery at the Malampaya East 1 (MAE-1) reservoir, located about five kilometers east of the existing Malampaya field off Palawan — the country's first major gas find in more than a decade. The reservoir is estimated to hold around 98 billion cubic feet of gas in place, with initial flow tested at

60 million cubic feet per day; the government projects it could power roughly 5.7 million households for a year. A second well, Camago-3, was announced on 26 March as part of the same Malampaya Phase 4 campaign, with first gas targeted for the fourth quarter of 2026.

The discoveries carry strategic weight beyond energy security, which has become acute amid a national energy emergency declared in response to Middle East-driven fuel price shocks. Although Malampaya itself lies firmly within the Philippine EEZ, the broader field sits within, or near, the area enclosed by China's illegal nine-dashed line — raising the prospect of future interference, coercion or attempts by Beijing to assert control over the surrounding waters as development accelerates.

Chinese Research and Survey Vessels

Chinese research and survey vessels were monitored operating in Philippine waters throughout the period. The most frequent and persistent presence was Tan Suo Er Hao (Exploration No. 2), an 87.25-meter advanced deep-sea research vessel operated by the

Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Deep-Sea Science and Engineering, with four documented instances between January and April. Independent monitoring group SeaLight, led by former U.S. defense attaché Ray Powell, tracked the vessel departing Sanya on 15 March and conducting what it characterized as unauthorized survey activity inside the Philippine EEZ from early April — first in the resource-rich Philippine (Benham) Rise east of the archipelago, then in the vicinity of Batanes.

During its latest documented passage in late April, Tan Suo Er Hao loitered approximately 93 nautical miles west of Burgos, Ilocos Norte — an area of strategic concern given its proximity to the Cahaya Malaysia subsea cable, a component of the Asia Submarine-Cable Express system linking the Philippines, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. The behavior may indicate surveillance, reconnaissance or positioning for future operations targeting this connectivity infrastructure.

Two other vessels — Shi Yan 1 and Yue Xia Yu Zhi 20033 — displayed prolonged low-speed transit and on-station patterns consistent with deliberate marine

scientific research rather than routine passage. While Shi Yan 1's remote-sensing capabilities could in principle support monitoring related to Balikatan 2026, the overall operational profile of both vessels pointed to a research-oriented primary mission in late April. Both may possess intelligence-collection capabilities, but observed behavior aligned more closely with research.

By contrast, Hai Yang Shi You 760, Xiang Yang Hong 03, Shen Hai Yi Hao and Hai Yang Dizhi Liu Hao appeared to transit Philippine waters through the Luzon Strait en route to the Pacific. They maintained standard passage speeds with no prolonged loitering, suggesting Philippine waters served as a transit corridor rather than an operational area.

Undersea Infrastructure: An Emerging Front

The recurring presence of survey vessels near the Cahaya Malaysia cable fits a wider pattern of concern. In early January 2026, the Philippine Navy confirmed it had begun developing means to monitor and protect submarine cables and



Monitored Chinese Research Vessel (CRV), Tongji. Photo by PCG, 2026



Philippine Navy personnel during a joint military exercise with Australia in 2025. Photo by Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), 2025

other critical undersea infrastructure, citing cable-cutting incidents in the Taiwan Strait, Red Sea, and Baltic Sea, and the recovery of suspected Chinese underwater drones in Philippine waters in recent years. Numerous cables crossing the Philippine maritime domain connect Southeast Asia to the United States, India, Japan and Hong Kong, carrying data vital to trade and communications. The loitering behavior of Chinese research vessels in the vicinity of these lines — whether for mapping, tapping or positioning — is increasingly treated by Manila as a national-security matter rather than a purely scientific curiosity.

Legal Assessment

The continued presence of Chinese vessels conducting activities in Philippine waters may constitute violations of both UNCLOS and the Philippine Maritime Zones Act. Both frameworks recognize the

Philippines' sovereign rights to explore, exploit, conserve and manage living and non-living natural resources within its EEZ and continental shelf, and both require a foreign state to obtain the coastal state's consent before conducting marine scientific research in that EEZ. China's enforcement measures at Scarborough Shoal — the floating barrier in particular — and its unauthorized survey activity remain inconsistent with the 2016 Arbitral Award and the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. It must be noted that before the establishment of Chinese presence in the Shoal in 2012, Filipino fishermen were free to conduct their livelihood devoid of harassment.

Outlook

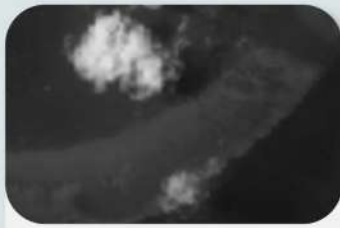
The quarter reinforced a now-familiar dynamic: China steadily tightens control of key features and probes Philippine resolve, while calibrating its conduct to

the presence of allied forces; Manila responds with sustained law-enforcement, transparency policy, and deepening multilateral security ties as a counterweight. With the 10th anniversary of the arbitral award in July, an expanding Balikatan footprint, accelerating energy development off Palawan, and growing scrutiny of undersea infrastructure, the conditions for friction at Scarborough and across the West Philippine Sea are likely to persist into the next reporting period.

Prepared as a quarterly West Philippine Sea situation report. Primary maritime observations are drawn from Philippine Coast Guard monitoring; external developments are corroborated with open-source reporting from February–April 2026, including Reuters, the Philippine Star, the Philippine News Agency, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and SeaLight.

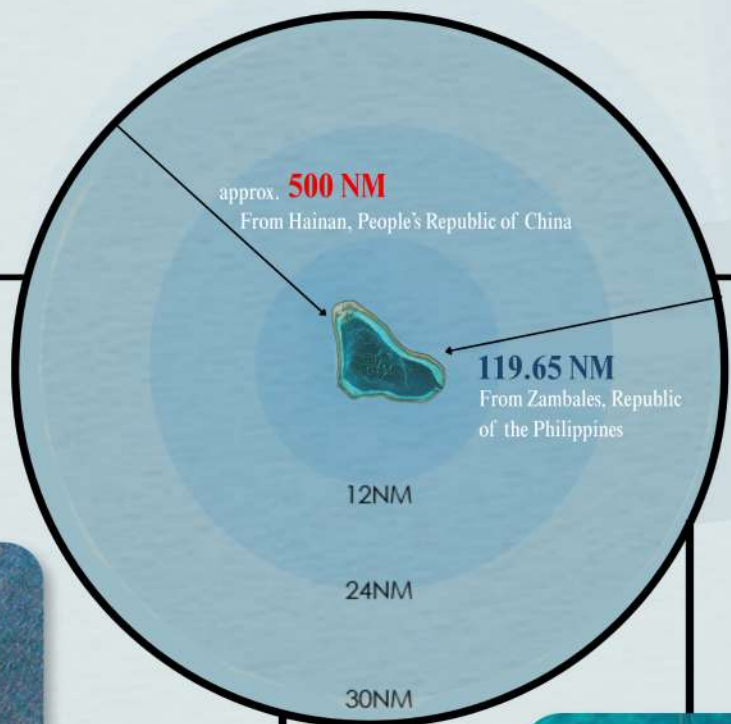
MAY 2026 FLOATING STRUCTURE IN SCARBOROUGH SHOAL

PANATAG SHOAL
BAJO DE MASINLOC
HUANGYAN DAO



May
20

Baseline. No man-made structure is visible at Bajo de Masinloc in available satellite imagery.



May
21

Chinese Research Survey (CRS) vessels YUE XIA YU ZHI 20028 and YUE ZHAN YU KE 6 are monitored at the southeast entrance of the shoal.



May
25

Satellite imagery captures an unusual square object near the southeast entrance — the first indication of the emplaced structure.



May
26

A BFAR MDA flight verifies the presence of the structure; one (1) person is observed aboard.

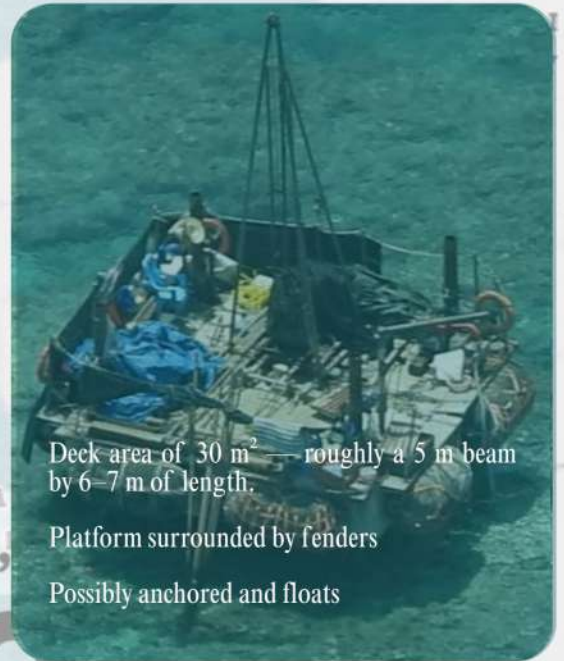
COURTESY OF THE PHILIPPINE COAST GUARD (PCG)



May 28 A PCG Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) flight confirms the structure and monitors a PLA helicopter operating in the vicinity.



May 30 A PCG MDA flight monitors six (6) personnel aboard the structure and an antenna newly installed on a rock near the entrance. A PLA fighter jet intercepts the PCG MDA flight.



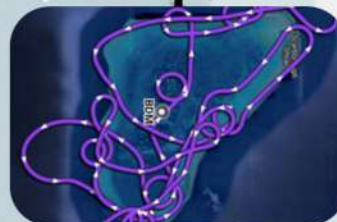
Deck area of 30 m² — roughly a 5 m beam by 6–7 m of length.

Platform surrounded by fenders

Possibly anchored and floats



May 29 A buoy is sighted on the northern part of the shoal. CRS vessels YUE ZHAN YU KE 06 and YUE XIA YU ZHI are observed operating inside the shoal.



May 31 Found a buoy, an unidentified floating object, and an antenna structure. The platform moved from the entrance to inside the shoal supported by two boats.

Euan Graham

ASEAN MARITIME MANILA'S NEW CENTER

WILL **NEED FOCUS**

TO MOVE BEYOND



SYMBOLISM



Speaking in Cebu in May 2026, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. of the Philippines announced his intention to establish a new ASEAN Maritime Center to be hosted in the Philippines. Manila currently holds ASEAN's annually rotating chairmanship and the timing suggests that the Philippines, as an archipelagic state that has long been at the sharp end of China's maritime expansionist tactics, intends to utilize the ASEAN chair role proactively. According to Malacanang, ASEAN has approved the initiative.

While it is fair to say that expectations for the new center's practical value are low, particularly among maritime security experts, it's worth considering what activities the new institution could usefully pursue, and how it should differentiate itself from other multinational maritime centers already established in Southeast Asia.

Beyond the President's address and an accompanying statement, details of the proposed new center remain sketchy. Marcos appeared to be equally at pains to outline what the proposed new center won't be doing, as much as what it will do, qualifying that its establishment "is about freedom of navigation in Southeast Asia – not the situation in the South China Sea". The President also stressed that "the ultimate reason for having this Maritime Center is not to confront or... push back on any single force or any single country". These caveats appear aimed at reassuring the Philippines' wary,



Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. during the 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu. Photo by: Malacañang, 2026

fellow ASEAN members that the new initiative will not embroil them in Manila's maritime disputes with Beijing. As such, they also underline inherent differences within ASEAN that are likely to constrain the effectiveness of the new center, beyond the symbolism of its location in the Philippines.

According to Malacanang, the new regional maritime center is intended to enhance coordination on "multi-dimensional" maritime issues in the



Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders during the 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu. Photo by: ASEAN, 2026



Monitored Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) Vessel, CCG-6108 near Bajo De Masinloc Photo by: PCG, 2026

region. More ambitiously, it is also meant to “consolidate the maritime operations of the 11 member states”, though what this means in practice is not further defined. Manila describes the initiative “as a product of Philippine efforts towards safe navigation between ASEAN nations”, in relation to the recently adopted ASEAN Declaration of Maritime Cooperation, as well as serving the general goal of “more secure cooperation and coordination between ASEAN member states”. Manila has left open the possibility that maritime stakeholder countries beyond ASEAN could become involved.

Despite Manila’s efforts to cast the proposed center’s remit beyond the South China Sea, one of its explicit aims is “to establish ease of trade in the South China Sea and avoid problems such as that experienced in the Strait of Hormuz”. This clear nod towards inter-state security tensions in the South China Sea may be welcomed in Washington, as the Philippines’ military ally, but it somewhat undermines Marcos’s assurance that the new center will not be focused on the South China Sea. Such contradictions add to the impression that the new center’s mission has not been deeply thought through beyond a desire to host some of ASEAN’s maritime institutional architecture in the Philippines.

One obvious challenge for the new center is deconfliction from two existing regional maritime security coordination centers, both located in Singapore. Indeed, Singapore frequently identifies

itself as Southeast Asia’s maritime ‘hub’, including hosting the ReCAAP Information Sharing Center, which concentrates on countering piracy and crimes against merchant shipping, set up in 2006 with support from Japan. Since 2009, Singapore’s navy has additionally hosted a multinational Information Fusion Center, with a broad-based remit to “to facilitate information-sharing and collaboration between its partners on such wide-ranging maritime security challenges as “piracy, sea robbery, maritime terrorism, contraband smuggling, illegal fishing and irregular human migration”. The IFC does not report on naval or other military activities, because of their obvious sensitivity – though it does serve as the secretariat for an annual meeting of ASEAN naval chiefs. While these are not ASEAN institutions, it is not clear how a new ASEAN Maritime Center in the Philippines would functionally add to the ISC and IFC, which already have a degree of overlap. Singapore will follow the Philippines as the next ASEAN chair, so securing its ‘buy-in’ will be helpful to the new center’s success.

Those skeptical of ASEAN’s various maritime declarations to date, and the glacial progress of the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct on the South China Sea process will have low expectations. Several of the Philippines’ ASEAN partners will equally suspect the initiative is intended to serve as an echo chamber for Manila to amplify its Coast Guard-led [transparency](#) campaign to publicize China’s malign behavior in the West Philippine Sea.

And yet, if there is an obvious reporting gap within the existing regional maritime architecture it is precisely in such inherently sensitive areas as China's coercive naval and paramilitary maritime activities. But achieving consensus on this within an ASEAN forum would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Equally, an operational coordination role feels like overreach. This would still leave some space for coordination on maritime environmental matters and other important, but low-hanging fruit.

Given the global prominence of the Filipino and other Southeast Asian seafarer community, and the rising profile of merchant shipping in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, this is another area where ASEAN could develop common policies and bolster the effectiveness of the International Maritime Organization in supporting the welfare of seafarers. Exploiting seabed energy resources is another potentially fruitful topic for intra-ASEAN cooperation, though one that rapidly runs into contending jurisdictional claims. Nonetheless, the steady accumulation of maritime boundary agreements among ASEAN members in recent years needs to be reinforced by joint commercial exploitation

wherever practicable. And this is a widespread interest among ASEAN members.

Beyond ASEAN's participation, Australia, Japan and the United States, should express their coordinated support for the new maritime center and, if invited by their 'Squad' partner, the Philippines, they should accredit representatives to it, even if this only means attendance by local diplomatic representatives to begin with.

The maritime center will go ahead in some form, but its role is at risk – like so much of ASEAN's architecture – of being symbolic. If hosting it helps to break down Manila's sense of isolation within ASEAN on the South China Sea, then that is still worth something. But this ambitious new initiative will need to develop a more focused agenda, and soon, if it is to move beyond symbolism.

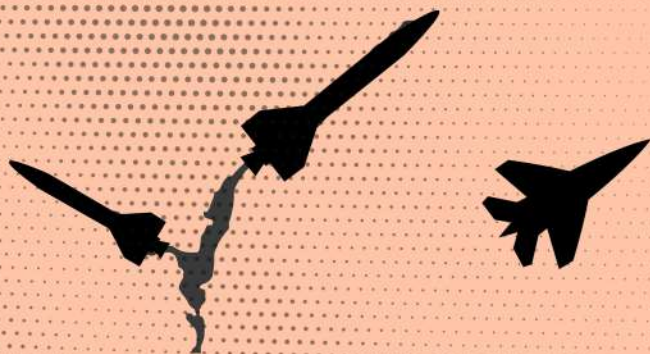
The maritime center will go ahead in some form, but its role is at risk – like so much of ASEAN's architecture – of being symbolic.

Dr. Euan Graham is an Australia-based commentator on Indo-Pacific security, who heads the consultancy Talisman Advisory Services and has affiliations with the Australian National Security College, the

Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Council on Geostrategy.



Joint Exercise between the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and U.S. Coast Guard. Photo by: U.S. Coast Guard / Marine Corps Sgt. Kevin G. Rivas, 2021



JA IAN CHONG

COMPELLENCE

AND EAST ASIA'S QUIET
STUMBLE TOWARD CRISIS AND
DISORDER



Late May and early June 2026 witnessed a flurry of activity over waters in the western Pacific Ocean east of Taiwan and the Philippines. Much as conventional wisdom continues to treat the East China Sea, Yellow Sea/West Sea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea as separate and distinct, these events underscore their interconnectedness. Sea lanes, air routes, and submarine cables carrying energy, goods, and data traverse and link these areas, while navies, air forces, law enforcement, and fishing vessels operate in relative proximity. A crisis in any of these waters may spillover into adjacent areas, affecting maritime and air traffic, data flows, and the supply chains they undergird. More frequent resort to compellence in East Asia's maritime domain can further undermining maritime laws, rules, and institutions and risks broader escalation.

On May 28, 2026, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. agreed in Tokyo to intelligence sharing and delimitating of their maritime boundaries in waters east of Taiwan. The People's Republic of China (PRC), which claims Taiwan and has maritime territorial disputes with both the Philippines and Japan, swiftly condemned the arrangement as "illegal and void" the next day. On May 31, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected the PRC's ability comment on Taiwan's waters and territory. Taipei also commended Japan and the Philippines for seeking to resolve differences "through peaceful dialogue and based on respect for international law" and indicated a willingness to work with both governments.

Then on June 1, the PRC Coast Guard claimed its conducted "rights-protection law enforcement" patrols east of Taiwan, although Taipei indicated that there were just two PRC Coast Guard vessels to its southeast, outside restricted waters. On the same day, media reported the People's Liberation Army-



PLAN naval flotilla attached to PLA's Eastern theater command during a combat readiness training in the East China Sea. Photo by People's Liberation Army, Yang Lei, 2026.

Navy aircraft carrier, Liaoning, and its battle group were conducting drills in international waters east of the Philippines between May 26 and May 28. Then on June 2, Taipei called on Tokyo and Manila to respect Taiwan's rights and indicated a desire for continued consultation. Tokyo responded by saying that delimitation would only "stipulate rights and obligations of Japan and the Philippines and therefore it would not be legally binding on any third party."

On one level, developments in the late spring and early summer of 2026 demonstrate an extension of ongoing disputes over East China Sea, Taiwan, and South China Sea and highlights their overlap. Taiwan sits geographically astride southern approaches to Japan and South Korea and northern approaches to the South China Sea and the Philippines. The Philippines, PRC, and Taiwan are among the South China Sea claimants while Japan, the PRC, and Taiwan dispute parts of the East China Sea. The PRC's claim over Taiwan further puts the



President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi announces Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Philippines and Japan. Photo by Presidential Communications Office (PCO), 2026



Japanese Protest over China's assertion in Senkaku Islands. Photo from Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain, 2010.

latter's waters under dispute. All are heavy users of these waters along with other actors across Asia and around the world. On their own, the South China Sea carries about one-third of global maritime traffic and the Taiwan Strait about half of global container traffic and much of the world's most advanced semiconductors.

On another, waters in the western Pacific contain the "first island chain" that has become a line of friction for major power ambitions. An ability to veto access to and use of these areas by rivals enables Beijing to project power into the Pacific and put pressure on what it sees as possible threats, notably Japan, to some degree, South Korea, and their ally, the United States. Denying Beijing this capacity allows for a restriction of PRC naval movements and even potential pressure on the PRC coast. Unsurprisingly, the arc from Japan and the Korean Peninsula through Indonesia feature increasingly in a more contested world of pronounced major power rivalry between the PRC and United States. Such characteristics may well persist beyond tactical efforts by Beijing and Washington to seek temporary stability and détente.

Disputes and rivalries are part and parcel of world politics. The major question is how to reduce the probability that these differences do not boil over into crises and, worse, conflict. Part of the

answer lies in effectively deterring aggression and escalation, which means an ability to credibly threaten and credibly assure simultaneously to discourage unilateral efforts at changing the status quo, especially through violence. No less important is restricting compellence. Like deterrence, compellence lies within the repertoire of coercive

diplomacy. The difference lies in that compellence calibrates threats and assurances to force a target to change behavior, including giving up. Recent events east of Taiwan extends a pattern of PRC behavior already seen in the East and South China Seas suggesting that compellence is a preferred tool for Beijing for pursuing its maritime claims.

Increasingly frequent and bold demonstrations of force to assert claims associated with compellence fuel fears of aggression more than the limited goals of deterrence. PRC military modernization, island building, militarization of the South China Sea, and aggressive patrolling make Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and others apprehensive and suspicious. This drives formal and informal security partnerships among these parties as well as their own military build-

ups. These conditions sharpen security dilemmas and create permissive conditions for accidents and unintended, uncontrollable escalation. Limited military and crisis communications add to the likelihood of such incidents. Add to the mix rising

Growing tensions and rising friction spell a demand for leadership, especially in preventive diplomacy but also crisis management and de-escalation. This means room for the vaunted ASEAN centrality and agency as well a middle power leadership.



One of China's controversial buoys, placed within China's Provisional Measures Zone in the Yellow Sea. Photo from Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN), 2026.

nationalism across the region, which complicates de-escalation.

Growing tensions and rising friction spell a demand for leadership, especially in preventive diplomacy but also crisis management and deescalation. This means room for the vaunted ASEAN centrality and agency as well a middle power leadership. Regional actors in Southeast Asia and beyond as well as ASEAN should demonstrate initiative. They can openly and jointly discourage, even censure, the use of threats and force to unilaterally change the status quo and encourage dialogue based on widely held interpretations of international law and norms. Such efforts help bolster the rules, laws, and institutions that ASEAN, its members, and others in the region proclaim to be so important.

Without more consistent and unequivocal regional insistence against compellence and on

negotiations based on commonly held views of international law, both unplanned escalation and the corrosion of existing international mechanisms are real risks. Given limited, even absent, formal and effective enforcement, international laws, rules, norms, as well as institutions depend on voluntary compliance for effectiveness—failing which the public identification of violations becomes more important. Lacking clear steps in these directions, there is less reason for states to stick with norms, rules, laws, institutions, and other agreements. Countries can more easily develop novel interpretations of laws or agreements and renege at will.

In East Asia, collectively highlighting attempts to force others to accept *fait accompli* and non-acceptance of international law, such as the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling under Annex VII of UNCLOS, are particularly key. The overall lack of appetite for such behavior in the region signals tacit acceptance of compellence in pursuit of disputes and deviations from established approaches to international law. A continuation of these trends sharpens existing regional political cleavages, including within ASEAN. Of course, each state possesses the absolute sovereign right to refrain from stepping up. Taken as a whole, however, such behavior encourages those who can, to arm themselves or take things into their own hands, and those who cannot, to accept capitulation, all while rules and order are left to atrophy.

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A Chinese JH-7 fighter-bomber intercepted a Japanese surveillance aircraft in East China Sea. Photo from Japan's Defense Ministry, 2025.

BEFORE SHIPS COLLIDE



NARRATIVES ALREADY HAVE

Lupita Wijaya



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.

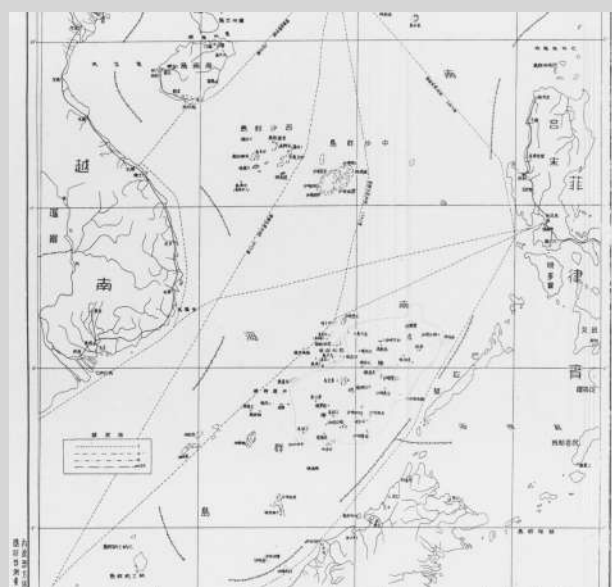
A search for “South China Sea” on YouTube today no longer leads only to mainstream news coverage. A quick review of the 50 channels most prominently surfaced by YouTube’s search system in mid-May 2026 shows a rapidly evolving information ecosystem where legacy news organizations coexist alongside niche 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



1947 Chinese map showing features in the South China Sea with an overlapping dash line. Photo from Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Figure 1: Videos with highest view count

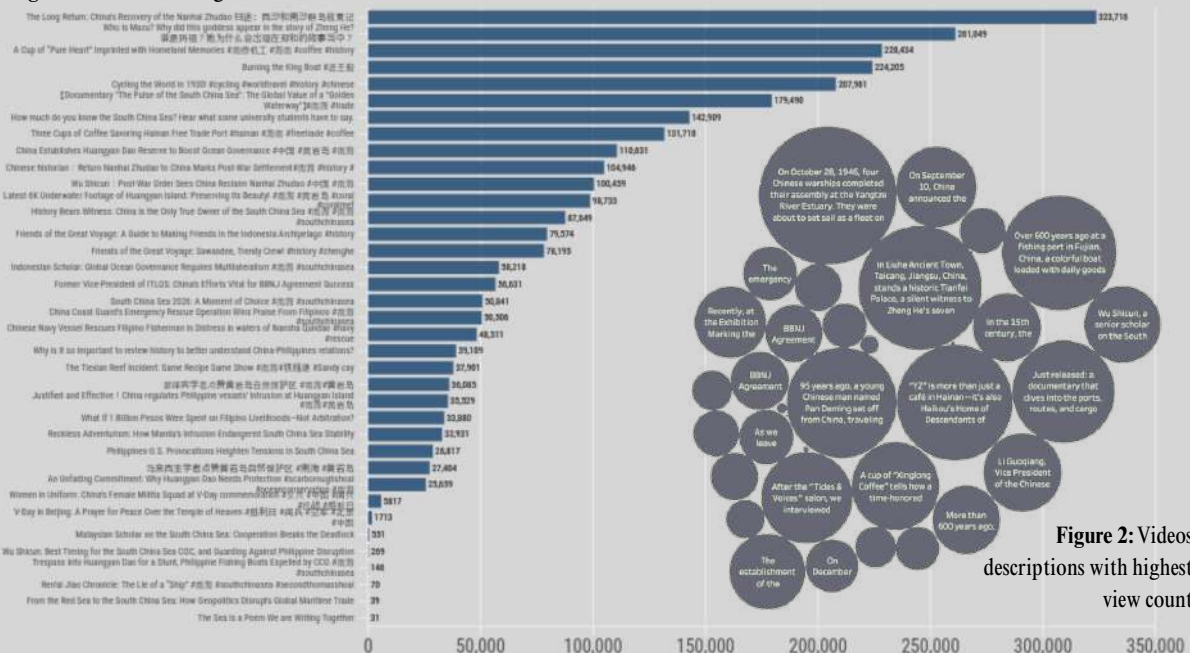
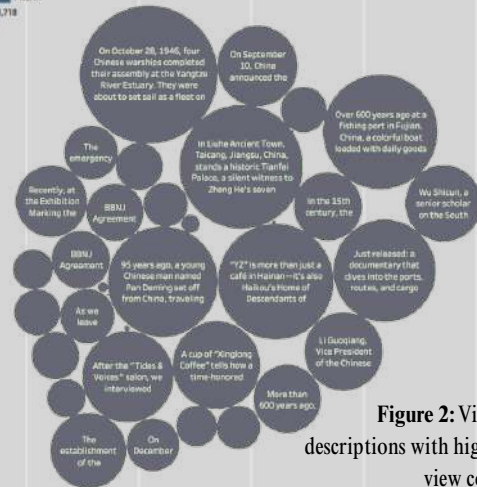


Figure 2: Videos descriptions with highest view count



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



An illustration of Ming dynasty era 'treasure ship' compared to Columbus' Santa Maria. Photo retrieved from southchinasea.org, When China Ruled the Seas, 1994

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.

This blending of soft cultural storytelling with hard geopolitical messaging reflects a more sophisticated form of strategic narratives designed for digital platforms.

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.

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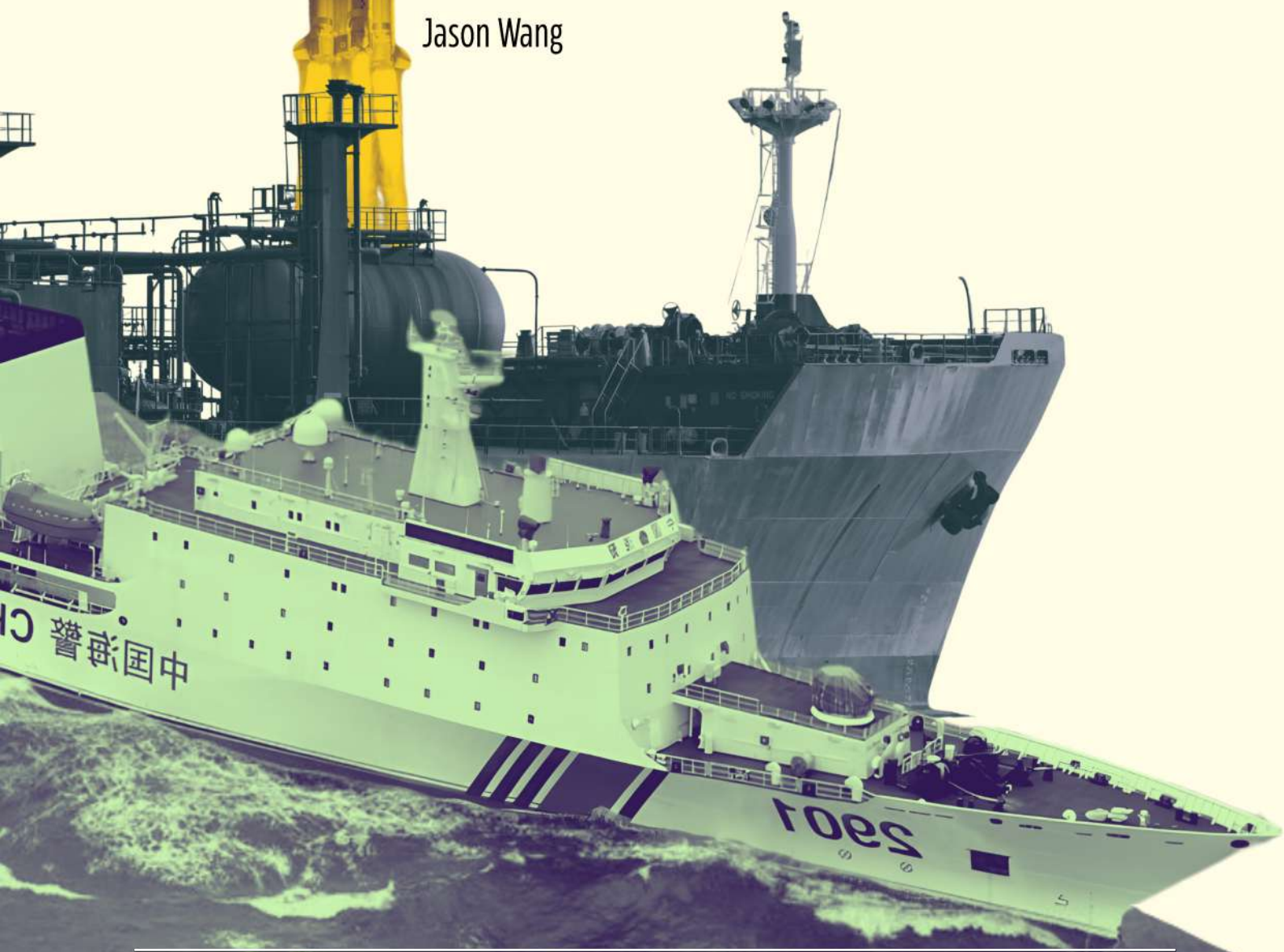
TUNED TO PERFECTION:

CHINA'S

IRREGULAR

WARFARE AT SEA

Jason Wang



China is sure to be among the keenest students of the Iran conflict. Iran's control of the Strait of Hormuz, even when met by a US counter-blockade, had a powerful impact on the rest of the world.

Beijing's ultimate goal of taking over the First Island Chain rests on controlling the seas and key waterways in the Indo-Pacific, which sit along some of the world's busiest commercial routes.

To that end, China is building dual-use seagoing forces that, even short of war, can strangle Philippines, Taiwan and Japan by cutting off vital lines of commerce and communication. The People's Liberation Army is innovating in irregular warfare. It deploys amphibious fighting vehicles using civilian vessels: roll-on/roll-off vehicle carriers and large deck cargo ships - not military "gray-hulls."

Decrepit tankers or cargo ships drag their anchors "accidentally" severing Malaysian and Taiwanese vital submarine communication cables. Multiple PRC Unmanned Underwater Vessels (UUVs) have washed up in Indonesia. Most recently, China has massed thousands of civilian fishing vessels organized by its People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia.

But how does China continue to be so successful? Simply put, the PLA's tactics are designed to fit between the bureaucratic seams of government operations, frustrating a rapid whole-of-government response not only in Philippines but across the First Island Chain.

War in the Seams

A prime example is the threat to the world's submarine cables. These cables are critical infrastructure. They enable high-speed financial trading, allow ASML to optimize the machines that



The Philippine Coast Guard approaches Maritime Militia vessels during the Whitsun Reef incident. Photo from Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), 2021.

produce the world's semiconductors, and, most of all, support the world's newest growth pillar: AI data centers.

China's irregular warfare strategy targeting submarine cable security is likely to be complicated by ministerial/agency/departmental jurisdictional disputes and political turf battles. Submarine power and internet cable owners, along with their insurers, argue that submarine cable security is a matter of maritime law enforcement. The Coast Guard's primary mission is maritime safety, and its mandate ends at 24 nautical miles. The Navy avoids involvement in an effort to prevent escalation.

All this bureaucratic back-and-forth gives the PLA room to shape the battlefield to its advantage



A glider-type UUV recovered by Philippine authorities inside Philippine's waters. Photo from Philippine National Police (PNP) Bicol, 2025.



China Coast Guard (CCG) vessel fires water cannon at a Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) vessel in Bajo de Masinloc. Photo from Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), 2023

with minimal effort. The result? China achieves short-term political gains by sowing confusion, helplessness creating conditions for long-term strategic gains without ever firing a shot.

Irregular Warfare Is Warfare

China's irregular warfare techniques, often called gray-zone warfare, are used to erode confidence and legitimacy. But let's call a spade a spade: irregular warfare is still warfare.

The only way to prevent war is to be prepared. Aggressively shining a light on these tactics is often the easiest and cheapest solution, especially compared with kinetic options. Enabling transparency through intelligence sharing is the cheapest form of asymmetric warfare. Intelligence shapes force posture and enables more efficient spending across all nations seeking to counter China's revisionist expansionism.

Remember: Irregular Warfare Succeeds Only If We Allow It.

Soberingly, calling for a whole-of-government approach is no longer sufficient. Given Beijing's "total war" strategy, the First Island Chain must find a way to work together - closely and quickly. The tyranny of distance requires the First Island Chain—Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, and others—to have the means to operate jointly and defend each other without support for at least 90 days.

This requires scale and, therefore, joint operations across nations. In practical terms, command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance must be integrated

across countries. The Armed Forces of the Philippines will need encrypted communications and operations across the First Island Chain. This capability must be exercised routinely and regularly, well before China moves to its next phase of irregular warfare: quarantine of key waterways.

Deterrence on the Cheap

Some argue that the necessary technology does not yet exist. But the technology to enable transparency above and below the waves is already available and in use today.

Japan and South Korea are leading the way by leveraging new commercial space satellite constellations that already deliver militarily relevant monitoring capabilities. High-resolution, wide-area synthetic aperture radar constellations that can see in the dark and through weather continue to grow in



Head of a SpaceX's Falcon-9 rocket carrying South Korea's reconnaissance satellite under the project known as "project 425." Photo from SpaceX



Chinese electronic warfare vehicles. Photo from Asia Times Jesus Roman, 2024.

number. Even the highly capable US military uses commercial constellations today to augment their national technical means.

Beneath the waves, distributed acoustic sensing, or DAS, can already turn the very submarine cables under threat into early warning sensors. Already deployed in the North Sea and the Baltic, DAS-enabled cables continue to monitor activity even if severed, providing vital intelligence.

On the sea surface, First Island Chain nations can extend national maritime domain awareness with 5G- and satellite-connected "smart masts" on their own fishing fleets, turning the tables on the PRC's Maritime Militia. Similarly, commercial aircraft video feeds from their safety systems can also be used to provide constant EEZ surveillance.

The software already exists to aggregate and share data resiliently across a single common operating picture, providing the transparency needed to counter irregular warfare. The cost? Even when aggregated, the sensors and platforms described above amount to only a fraction of the price of a single Patriot battery.

These systems are already mature and operational at scale. Corporations would support transparency monitoring of bad actors to ensure a

rules-based world order that they thrive in. No legislature on the planet could ignore such low-cost deterrence measures.

Beijing Fears Clarity

China has, for decades, successfully used bureaucratic morass to prevent a coordinated and rapid response. This is how PLA irregular warfare thrives.

Transparency is what China fears most because it cheaply negates irregular warfare tactics.

Transparency is what China fears most because it cheaply negates irregular warfare tactics. Claims of immature technology or insufficient budgets are merely excuses for inaction. Time is running out.

Building national intelligence capability is asymmetric deterrence without provocation. Moreover,

China's gray-zone warfare succeeds only if we allow it. The future of a free and open Indo-Pacific, and of the rules-based world order, depends on nothing less than political will.

Jason Wang is the Chief Operating Officer and national security research at ingeniSPACE, a Silicon Valley geointelligence firm

STOP THE WISHFUL THINKING:



THE PHILIPPINES AND
'JOINT DEVELOPMENT' IN
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Jeffrey Ordaniel

At a time when the Philippines faces mounting pressure in the West Philippine Sea, Manila has to be clear-eyed about what discussions on ‘joint development’ actually deliver, and to whom. The revival of oil and gas talks with Beijing is not a pragmatic solution. It is a strategic mistake.

We have been down this road before, multiple times, and the results have overwhelmingly favored China.

There was a time when an argument for trying could at least be made. If Beijing was serious about its long-held preference for bilateralism and for “shelving sovereignty disputes in favor of joint development,” the reasoning went, it had every incentive to build one successful case with the Philippines and use it as a model for its dealings with everyone else. Testing whether China meant what it said was, on its own terms, defensible.

That test has now been run, more than once, and the answer is in. Every attempt at joint development has either collapsed or worked to Beijing's advantage, and not one of them encouraged China's conduct at sea to comply with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The problem was never that the two countries picked the wrong formula or the wrong moment. The problem is that the fundamentals are irreconcilable, and no amount of goodwill on Manila's part can fix what Beijing has no intention of conceding.

Keeping the issue alive while China changes nothing about its behavior or its claims does not bring the Philippines closer to tapping its resources. It hands Beijing something it wants more than the oil itself — the appearance of cooperation.

Looking Back

Start with the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU). In 2005, the Arroyo administration signed a tripartite agreement with China and a reluctant Vietnam covering more than 55,000 square miles west of Palawan, over 9,000 square miles of which were undisputed Philippine waters measured from our own baselines. The deal was unconstitutional, per a decision by the Philippine Supreme Court in 2023. It let Beijing's state-owned oil company conduct surveys inside the Philippine exclusive economic zone without fully sharing critical data, and it gave Chinese vessels access to parts of the West Philippine Sea where they had previously kept little or no presence. Think of Recto Bank.

The JMSU was supposed to be a confidence-building measure under the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties and a test case for joint exploration. It failed on both counts. It was negotiated in secret, with a confidentiality clause that locked away the documents for many years, and it was directly tied to a \$904-million package of Chinese investment pledges that included the graft-ridden Northrail and NBN-ZTE projects, both of which were eventually cancelled. To get around the constitutional requirement that natural resources be developed under the full control and supervision of the State, the agreement avoided the words “joint exploration” altogether and used the words, “scientific research.” It became so unpopular that renewal was impossible, and it expired in 2008.

Then came Service Contract 57. In 2006, the Philippine National Oil Company moved to partner with the China National Offshore Oil Corporation for a 2,700-square-mile area off Busuanga in Palawan, notably outside the nine-dash line. The arrangement never moved forward. Philippine policy later shifted toward a more transparent and competitive process, and SC57 was reopened to



Malampaya gas field. Photo by Shell Philippines

other parties. CNOOC was no longer entitled to special treatment. If it truly wanted in, it could compete like any other company. The lesson is hard to miss: if a deal outside the nine-dash line could not proceed, there is even less reason to believe a more contentious arrangement inside it ever would.

The Duterte administration tried anyway. Between 2018 and 2022, Manila reopened the talks, signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2018, and lifted the exploration moratorium in 2020. After years of signaling flexibility, the process still collapsed in June 2022, because the core obstacles had not moved: Philippine constitutional limits, sovereignty concerns, and China's refusal to operate on terms consistent with Philippine law and the arbitral award. Once again, the promise of cooperation produced more illusion than outcome.

That is three failed attempts, and the result was the same every time. The Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs should know better by now.



Remains of the failed North Rail Project by NBN-ZTE in Bulacan. Photo from Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Keeping the issue alive only feeds China's propaganda machine

Here is the part Filipino officials keep missing. Despite the lack of any real progress, each of these episodes handed Beijing exactly what it wanted.

The fundamentals make this unavoidable. Any agreement with China has to pass two non-negotiable tests: it must comply with the Philippine Constitution, which reserves resource development to the State and to Filipino-owned companies, and it must be consistent with the 2016 Arbitral Award, which the Philippines' National Security Council has rightly declared non-negotiable. China rejects both. It has never accepted Philippine jurisdiction anywhere inside the nine-dash line, and it continues to reject the 2016 arbitral award outright. When

Beijing speaks of "setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development," its first premise is that "the sovereignty of the territories concerned belongs to China." That alone makes it a non-starter.

So what is left? Two theoretical pathways, both flawed. One has China bid as a contractor in a Philippine-led service contract inside Philippine EEZ. That was tried, and it never moved. It also raises a fairness question: why should the Philippines share lawful resources with a state that refuses to recognize its sovereign rights while harassing Philippine vessels elsewhere in the same sea? The other pathway is joint exploration in pockets of high seas inside the nine-dash line but outside the Philippine EEZ, which runs straight into Beijing's own claim of indisputable sovereignty. China would never agree to a framework that dilutes that claim, and the Philippines should not be the one to legitimize the nine-dash line for Beijing.

What China actually wants is joint exploration



China National Offshore Oil Corporation. Photo from Public Domain.

specifically within the Philippine EEZ, where it can use the language of cooperation to erode the Philippines' sovereign rights from within.

This is why the talks themselves, regardless of whether anything is ever signed, work in Beijing's favor. China has long used negotiations not to manage disputes, but to project an image of reasonableness while escalating coercion. The point is not the deal; the point is the optics. Renewed talks allow Beijing to soften international criticism, blunt domestic outrage in the Philippines, and flood the conversation with slogans about shared development and win-win cooperation, even as it intimidates Filipino fishermen, obstructs lawful Philippine Coast Guard operations, disregards UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award, and steals resources that belong to the Philippines.



Philippine fishing vessel F/B Gem-Ver's truncated stern after being rammed by a Chinese vessel, Yuemaobinyu 42212 in Recto Bank. Photo by Department of Agriculture, 2019

At home, the talks breed confusion, weaken national consensus, and plant the false idea that cooperation is possible without any meaningful change in Chinese behavior. Beijing gains propaganda value, diplomatic cover, and the appearance of progress — while surrendering nothing.

Every round of talks the Philippines agrees to becomes free publicity for China. Why, then, is the Department of Foreign Affairs helping manufacture that illusion?

Next steps: political will and Recto Bank

The way forward is not another round of talks with Beijing. It is political will at home.

The obstacle to developing Philippine offshore energy has never been a legal one. Recto Bank, also known internationally as Reed Bank, sits squarely

within the Philippine continental shelf and EEZ. The 2016 Arbitral Award settled the question: China has no lawful entitlement there, and the Philippines needs no one's permission to explore it. Service Contract 72, covering the Sampaguita gas field at Recto Bank and held by a Filipino-led consortium, has been ready for years. What has stopped it is not the absence of a deal with China. It is the presence of Chinese ships, and the absence of Philippine resolve to push through them.

That is what has to change. Manila should treat Recto Bank as a energy security issue, not a commercial afterthought, and back it with the full weight of the State. It should clear the regulatory path for SC72 and for any qualified contractor. It should partner with capable firms from countries that respect Philippine sovereign rights, not the one state that denies them. Manila should give Philippine survey and drilling operations the same naval and Coast Guard protection any sovereign state would extend to lawful activity in its own waters. If China interferes, the answer should be documentation, diplomatic exposure, and persistence — not a return to the negotiating table that rewards the interference.

Energy insecurity is real, and the country needs the gas. But the Philippines cannot afford another experiment in wishful thinking. At Recto Bank, Manila does not need Beijing's consent. It needs resolve.

Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel is lead convenor of The Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea and a tenured associate professor of international security studies at Tokyo International University.



BRP Rajah Sulayman, with BRP Jose Rizal in the background. Photo from Philippine Navy, 2026

WPS QUARTER IN REVIEW



Marine Science Experts Gather for National Research and Policy Workshop

A two-day National Workshop on Marine Science Research, Policy, and Practice, held in collaboration with the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, from Feb. 4 to 5, bringing together marine scientists from universities and research institutions in Metro Manila and other parts of the country.

The workshop aimed to bridge scientific research and policymaking by providing a platform for participants to exchange best practices in marine scientific research, discuss cross-border research challenges, and strengthen collaboration in support of marine development and a rules-based maritime order.

Discussions highlighted the importance of a coordinated approach between science and policy in addressing threats to marine ecosystems and maritime security. Participants emphasized that scientific data and analyses on marine biodiversity and ecosystem conditions can help guide policymakers and government agencies in developing measures and

legislation to protect marine environments.

Stronger collaboration among marine science researchers and policymakers is essential to advancing evidence-based strategies for marine conservation and sustainable development.

WPS Mural Festival 2026 Launches, Invites Artists Nationwide

The WPS Mural Festival 2026 was officially launched on Feb. 10 at Shangri-La The Fort in Bonifacio Global City, inviting Filipino artists nationwide to create public artworks centered on the West Philippine Sea.

Organized by WPS, the festival carried the theme “Kulayan ang Karagatan para sa Kalayaan” and sought to encourage public engagement with maritime issues through art.

The launch was attended by Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela, retired Supreme Court Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio, Metropolitan Manila Development Authority General Manager Nicolas Torre III, Director Baby Ruth Villarama, artist AG Saño, representatives from the Armed Forces of the Philippines, members of the academe, and media organizations.





According to organizers, the festival aims to raise public awareness of the West Philippine Sea while highlighting the role of art as a medium for expression and civic engagement.

Under the competition guidelines, participating artists were required to create murals measuring at least 15 square meters in public spaces and secure written permission from property owners. Artists below 18 years old were also required to submit parental or guardian consent. In addition, participants were asked to provide a canvas version of their mural design.

The competition will recognize 100 winning entries, with each recipient receiving ₱30,000. The top three entries will receive grand prizes of ₱1 million for first place, ₱500,000 for second place, and ₱350,000 for third place.

Registration opened on Feb. 10 and ran until April 10. The winners are scheduled to be announced in July 2026.

Legal Scholars and Officials Push Back Against West Philippine Sea Disinformation

Efforts to counter disinformation surrounding the

West Philippine Sea took center stage at the National Symposium on the Law of the Sea and the West Philippine Sea, held March 30–31, 2026, at the Marco Polo Ortigas Manila, as legal experts, academics, maritime specialists, and government officials gathered to mark the 10th anniversary of the Philippines' landmark arbitral victory against China.

The symposium commemorated the 2016 ruling of an international arbitral tribunal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which invalidated China's expansive nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea. China has consistently rejected

the ruling and maintains that it is unenforceable.

Organized by the WPS Foundation in partnership with media organizations, academic institutions, and government agencies, the two-day event aimed to strengthen maritime legal literacy, transparency, and public awareness in support of a rules-based approach to resolving maritime disputes.

A recurring theme throughout the symposium was the spread of disinformation and propaganda supporting pro-China narratives concerning the West Philippine Sea.

The event sought to promote informed public discourse and strengthen support for international law as the basis for



addressing disputes in the West Philippine Sea.

Experts Convene in Cebu for Workshop on Maritime Coercion and Cognitive Warfare

The WPS Foundation spearheaded the third iteration of the Track 1.5 Workshop on Countering Coercive Maritime Operations and Cognitive Warfare, which was held in Mactan, Cebu, on March 10 to 11.

The workshop brought together experts from the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom to exchange insights and develop recommendations aimed at strengthening collective responses to coercive activities at sea and malign influence operations in the information domain.

During the event, the WPS Foundation and Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to formalize their cooperation on maritime security research and efforts to counter coercive maritime operations and cognitive warfare.

Under the agreement, both organizations committed to collaborating on joint maritime security research, including analyses of regional defense and security developments. The partnership also sought to strengthen information-sharing initiatives and strategic communications efforts designed to address malign state influence operations.

The partnership reflected a shared commitment to advancing research, dialogue, and policy recommendations on emerging security challenges in the maritime domain and information environment.

WPS Delegation Visits Taiwan, Explores Maritime Security Collaboration

WPS President and CEO Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel led a delegation to Taipei and Kaohsiung, Taiwan, from May 19 to 22, engaging with key stakeholders to discuss mutual interests and collaborative opportunities.

In Taipei, the delegation convened with representatives from prominent think tanks and members of Taiwan's strategic studies community to prepare for the upcoming fourth iteration of the workshop jointly organized with the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), scheduled for August. In addition, the delegation received an invitation to participate in the Taiwan International Ocean Forum in July, an esteemed maritime policy and strategic dialogue that brings together experts and policymakers from across the Indo-Pacific.

In Kaohsiung, meetings took place with officials from Taiwan's Ocean Affairs Council, including discussions with Minister Kuan Bi-ling. These conversations focused on maritime security, regional developments, and potential avenues for future collaboration, emphasizing the necessity of strengthening dialogue and cooperation on

shared maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

The delegation also visited the Port of Kaohsiung, where they toured a Taiwan Coast Guard Administration vessel, gaining insights into its operational capabilities, maritime law enforcement functions, and critical role in safeguarding Taiwan's maritime interests.

WPS looks forward to enhanced engagement with partners in Taiwan through research collaboration, policy dialogue, and exchanges pertaining to maritime and strategic affairs. These initiatives reflect WPS's commitment to promoting deeper cooperation with like-minded institutions and stakeholders throughout the Indo-Pacific and contributing to informed discussions on regional security, maritime governance, and emerging strategic challenges.

"Exciting to explore innovative approaches to help facilitate functional maritime security engagements while working through existing constraints. In my view, regional peace and stability are better served by pragmatic and creative approaches to diplomacy — not overly rigid interpretation of certain policies designed to isolate 23 million people from the international community," Dr. Ordaniel noted.



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