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**RESEARCH PAPER**

## **China's Silent Conquest: South China Sea Flashpoint**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines China's operational behavior in the South China Sea from 2023 to 2026 which has reshaped the long standing norms of maritime governance in regional security dynamics which remained unsettled. During this period, China's expanding territorial claims and strategic activities have further altered the geopolitical landscape of the Indo Pacific. Existing scholarship discusses China's gradual militarization and increasingly assertive naval posture, as well as persistent regional resistance and legal push back. Yet, there is still relatively little focus on how recent Chinese operational practices intersect with mounting international legal pressure and evolving regional counter-measures. Using a qualitative geopolitical approach, this study draws on document analysis and process tracing of verified maritime incidents, diplomatic exchanges, and official statements. The findings suggest that intensified maritime presence, grey-zone coercion, and carefully calibrated diplomacy have consolidated de facto control over key maritime features while eroding the effectiveness of existing legal regimes and prompting diverse adaptive responses among claimant states.

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**KEYWORDS** South China Sea, China's Maritime Strategy, Grey-Zone Warfare, UNCLOS, Maritime Coercion, Indo-Pacific Security, ASEAN Response

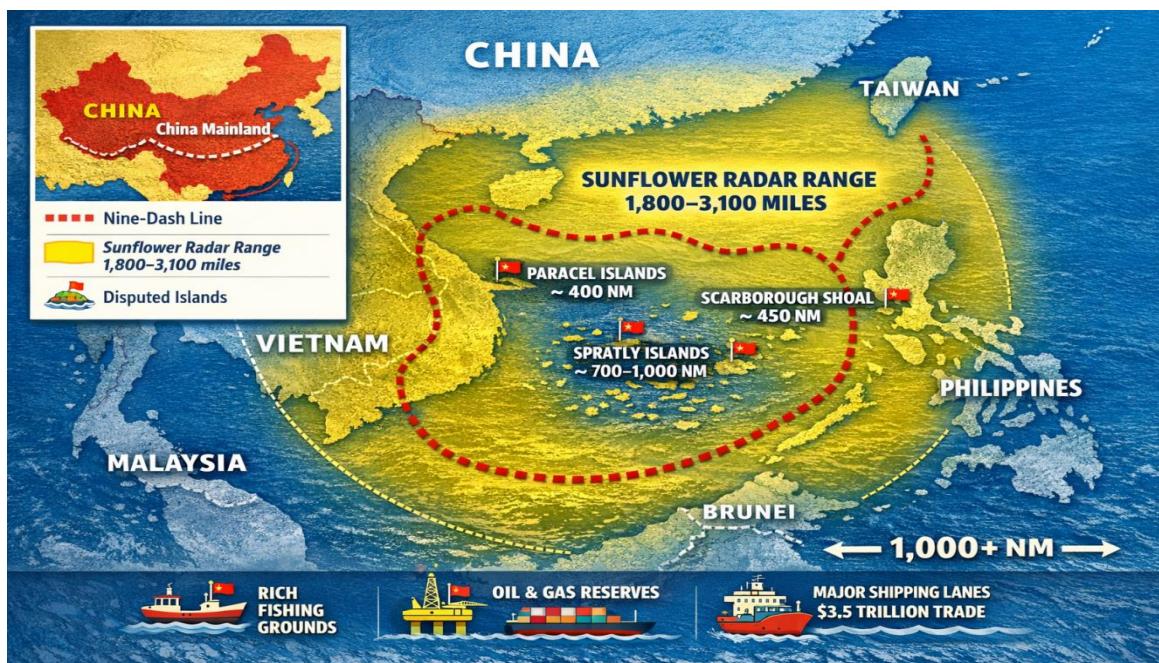
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**Introduction**

The South China Sea (SCS) has become one of the most significant arenas of 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitical competition, where the scope of Chinese claims conflict with the stakes on Southeast Asian countries such as Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia as well as the American strategic interests (Muzaffar, & Khan, 2021; Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). It hosts key maritime trade routes with an estimated value of more than three trillion of international validity of yearly commerce, making it an inseparable part of energy security, worldwide supply chains, and the sanctity of the international regulation, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Sasaki, 2025; Ain, Muzaffar & Yaseen, 2024). Much more than a regional geographical area, the SCS conflict summarizes wider conflicts over territorial control, state projection, and degradation of rule-making in the Indo-Pacific. More recent reports demonstrate a qualitative escalation, due to the aggressive actions of China, such as confrontations with its coast guards and the use of militias as well as irregular responses of the region and increased U.S. participation (Reuters, 2026). In addition to posing a threat to the freedom of navigation, these dynamics indicate a fundamental change in great-power rivalry, and its effects on international stability.

The core conflict that arises in the dispute is the historical nine-dash line of China over the SCS, a rough demarcation replying to over 90-percent of the region, based on the 1947 maps, and the EEZ claims of UNCLOS, admitting coastal states 200 sunflower radar miles of their baselines (China Institute for Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies,

2023). Other islands such as the Philippines draw on archipelago status and continental shelf rights, which have been confirmed at the international stage, whereas Beijing balances its position by a mix of ancient imperial history, national law such as the 2021 Coast Guard Law and historical physical presence using fishing boats and outposts. The 2016 permanent court of arbitration decision of the 2016 Philippines V. In the case of China, the rejection of the legal status of the nine-dash line was categorical, and clarified that it had no historical basis as defined under UNCLOS, and that it was Manila that had the rights to these key features as Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). China, however, labeled the decision as a farce and has since increased patrols in response, which can explain why the law-power dilemma in international relations remains permanent: decisions by *de jure* fail more frequently than *de facto* domination when supported by superior capabilities (Awan, 2023.). It has not been able to comply with this leading Beijing to consolidate its control turning disputed reefs into militarized bases.



The strategic evolution following 2023 involves the next stage of China in its manipulations moving beyond the 2013-2016 period of the massive land reclamation of 3,200 acres of land over seven features towards being more proactive. Gains on salami slicing are now imposed by the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) and the largest fleet of coast guard in the world and fixtures such as Mischief Reef, Subi Reef and Fiery Cross Reef has its 3-km airstrip, HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles, YJ-12 anti-ship armaments and advanced radar arrays (Ghani, Ahmed & Muzaffar, 2017; Newsweek, 2025). In 2025, pictures taken via satellites show more upgrades that include drone launch and electronic warfare suites and thus these specks are practically transformed into forward operating bases, able to extend air, and sea power into the SCS (Sasaki, 2025). These upgrades have effectively swung most of the local military force, and with its fleet at parity, the Chinese now can outmaneuver and outfire potential regional sails, and its blend of civilian and military is deliberately blurred to avoid escalation mechanisms and disarm conflict management (East Asia Forum, 2025). These grey-zone strategies will enable continued coercion of the claimants without escalating into active hostility, increasing the chances of miscalculation (Yaseen, Afridi & Muzaffar, 2017).



This coercion is represented through the high-profile flashpoints. The kind of violence demonstrated by the June 17, 2024, incident at Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal) consisted of eight Chinese Coast Guard ships using high-pressure water cannons, damaging Philippine Furnishing boats, injuring a sailor, and seizing seven rifles, which reminded violent gestures on the parity with the popular 2012 Scarborough standoff. Ramming attacks and laser blinding of airplanes continued until 2025 in a series of shoals maneuvers, which Manila used as an excuse to invoke its mutual defence treaty with Washington (Khan, Muzaffar & Mustafa, 2022; Reuters, 2025). This set of actions can be viewed as an example of calculated aggression by China: taking on several asymmetric costs with weaker competitors, and leaving opportunities to act jointly at a minimum. The reaction of ASEAN is still crippled by the internal disunity. Although Vietnam laments to the UN and reinforces her fleet, and the Philippines practice transparency by shooting videos of incidents and strengthening U.S. relations Beijing Belt and Road Initiative, Cambodia and Laos are more driven by economic appeals (Voice of America, 2023). The attempts to create a binding Code of Conduct that has been debated since 2002 have been left with nothing more than inspirational guidelines, which highlights the failure of the bloc to unite around economic reliance. In the meantime, U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) -14, in 2024 alone, confront excessive claims, which are supported by alliances, such as the Quad, AUKUS, and 500-plus planned U.S.-Philippine exercises in 2026, including live-fire drills during contingency situations involving Taiwan (Nguyen, 2025; YouTube, 2025). This heightens rivalry between the U.S and China, with a norms-based order against a sovereignty-oriented paradigm by Beijing. Simply put, the SCS 2023-2026 is an inversion point, as militarised insurrection, diplomatic disintegration and great-power interests challenge the characteristics of the international institutions. The academic analysis of these trends is crucial to the future predictions of Indo-Pacific security and the global processes of rules.

The current body of knowledge concerning the South China Sea (SCS) supplies much information on its historical development, legal complexities, and geopolitical implications, but it still has a significant gap in terms of orderly discussions of the 2023-2026 period that became the focus of attention (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). Over

the period, maritime conduct, such as increased grey-zone actions through the use of coast guard and militia force, combined with legal nonconformity and diplomatic intrigue actions by China, experienced qualitative amplification and not a continuation of the past trends (Sasaki, 2025; Newsweek, 2025). Current literature tends to view these developments as gradual, without paying enough attention to the fact that it is transforming de facto control and encounters involving coercion atoms such as Second Thomas Shoal alongside remodeled ASEAN reactions (Afzal, Yaseen & Muzaffar, 2020; Voice of America, 2023). In addition, existing literature studies legal aspects, military aspects, and diplomatic aspects separately, which resulted in the disaggregated understanding of how these components affect each other and how this process influences the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific strategy (East Asia Forum, 2025; Nguyen, 2025). This research fills this gap with a synthesis of evidence-based operational incidences, competition of UNCLOS, and regional diplomatic activities since 2023 up to 2026, which utilizes different materials in order to shed light on emerging trends.

## **Literature Review**

### **Contestation of Law & International Norms**

The South China Sea (SCS) case demonstrates a legal deadlock on the primordial level, with China remaining adamant in its refusal to abide by the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) of 2016 in Philippines v. China that abrogated its claim to the nine-dash line. The court has classified the awarded United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as simply unsuitable to its wordings within the statute arose (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; American Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 2026). The court explained that historic rights give way to more modern regimes of EEZ, and recognizes anyone seeking to claim such a feature as the Philippines its right to part, but the absence of power balance by Beijing and the rejection of the non-statistical dispute mechanism is crucial about the boundary of judicial enforcement (China Institute of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies, 2023; Hamid, 2025). This legislative authority gap has become prominent in recent scholarship: though the ruling has become normative, the continued practices of patrol and outposts in China indicate factual-priority over normative-committal, continuing the conflict without seeking to declare the necessity of complying with the norms of diplomacy, as it continues to pursue selectively active diplomatic action, such as ASEAN Code of Conduct negotiations aimed to avoid confrontation (Ali & Uddin, 2025; Sasaki, 2025).

### **Sea Power and Geopolitical Impact**

The SC control will provide China with strategic amplitude in the Indo-Pacific, allowing it to project power over first island chain chokepoints and control economic lifelines such as the Malacca Strait (Hamid & Abbas, 2025; Sasaki, 2025; Nguyen, 2025; Muzaffar Shah, & Yaseen, 2018). Since 2023-2026, Beijing has perfected a playbook now called grey-zone coercion using maritime militia posing as fishing vessels and coast guard rams-as occurred in the Second Thomas Shoal confrontation off and on June 2024-2025 to implement a salami-slicing benefits without armed confrontation limitations (Newsweek, 2025; Wikipedia, 2024). This leverage is reinforced by militarist artificial islands, which are equipped with missiles and radars and puts the scales of balance in their favor over regional fleets (Farooq & Uddin, 2025; Reuters, 2026). The conceptual gap identified in the literature is that legal analyses are not lacking; more of these analyses incorporate how these tactics generate coercive

benefits, avoiding penalties and naturalizing dominance (East Asia Forum, 2025; Awan, 2023).

### **Regional Recovery & the ASEAN Policy.**

The Chinese forcefulness is countered by institutional displays, such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties, though its failure to be effective remains a business issue due to continued disunity incorporated by economic interdependence (Voice of America, 2023; Uddin & Irfan, 2025). Philippines could be first in launching transparency initiatives as of 2023; and show public the videos of attacks with water cannon, invoking defense pacts with the U.S, triggering more than 500 bilateral exercises by 2026 (Yaseen, Muzaffar & Shahbaz, 2023; Reuters, 2025; YouTube, 2025). Vietnam emulates this through UN submissions and Lao and Cambodia prefer silent bilateralism. Research indicates that there is an analytical gap: the concept of adaptive ASEAN strategies is under-researched on the background of fragmented threat perceptions that research prevents tying mechanisms (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

Current studies theorize about historical-legal cycles or overarching geopolitics, whereas little aggregate examination focuses on the operational bursts of 2023-2026 (e.g., grey-zone advancements and island upgrades) and their miscellaneous legal-diplomatic-military cascades (Sasaki, 2025; Newsweek, 2025). This paper corrects that by integrating evidence of the period to shed light on the transformational changes.

### **Material and Methods**

The current paper has embraced an interpretive qualitative method which combines document analysis and tracing of processes to explain state behavior, incident sequencing, and strategic rhetoric to the South China Sea where quantitative analysis provides a poor measure of political and causal intricacy. The analysis, by concentrating on the process of the escalation between January 2023 and February 2026, emphasizes verified primary sources, i.e., the official incident, government, and legal-diplomatic documents of authoritative sources, though does not include unverified or partisan content to reduce bias in the process. The data contains around fifty triangulated materials such as peer-reviewed literature, documented sea accidents, governmental publications, and think-tank publications. The thematic coding of data on legal, military and diplomatic dimensions in NVivo and within-case process tracing were used to connect state action to its consequences including *de facto* control gains. The analytical rigor and credibility of the study are also enhanced by the cross-source validation and reliability tests.)

### **Results and Discussion**

**Operational Escalation/Maritime Behavior.** New features of Chinese maritime operations in the South China Sea (SCS) emerged in 2023-2026, when a massive forcefulness was evident, then replaced by active grey-zone policing based on interventions of coast guard forces, swarming by maritime militias and active maritime patrols (coastal) and air patrols (aviation) (Reuters, 2026; Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This pace of labour was at the most in the resupply of high-lots at besieged posts, when rather the especial care of the City of China to the value of diplomatic quietness than of physical abstinence was taken. The case of the 17 June 2024 watershed involving the Philippines Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal) where 8 China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels entered the Philippine boat and flooded it with high-pressure water

cannon shots, 1 Philippine sailor suffered injuries and the Philippine equipment was damaged in that bloody battle since 2012 since the Scarborough crisis (Wikipedia, 2024). It was not the first of a number of those incidents, as prepared to take a shrewd but uneven price and remain below the brink of armed conflict, since it was intended to insure Manila determination without having to necessarily take on mutual defense partnerships (Reuters, 2025). This was an opinion that was strengthened later. In the situation of February 2026, the Southern theater Command operation circumnavigated post-drill exclusion areas and implied that extrudies deterrence was unacceptable by conducting joint sea-air patrols in June 2025 to give direct warnings against the Philippines-U.S. security cooperation through larger Balikarna exercises (Reuters, 2025; Reuters, 2026). The supply of the militia was tracked on the satellite and the preeminence between the civilian and military lines was concentrated so that the presence would be natural. This led to the empirical rewards of the diminished Philippine of access to shoals besides augmented threats to functioning, relocating the pragmatic authority to the mold of Beijing (Newsweek, 2025).



**The Law and International Contestant Resistance.** The insistent confrontation of the government of China with the ruling of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) data-strike of the nine-dash line and in favor of the UNCLOS EEZ creates further issues of statute as china delivers old-time discourse against the new law (American Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 2026; China Institute of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Continued Studies, 2023). In the tribunal ruling in Annex VII of the UNCLOS, it was held that nothing historic is that which is priority to the EEZs yet the failure of the same by long-term presence is one of the illustrations of power over the law. Its recognition as a nature reserve in October 2025 contributed to the situation: the declaration anxious the protection of the environment, but administered claims to the realm management, forbidden Philippine fishing, demanded the visits of the local people, which only aggravated its pain and strives against attacks had already defeated the patrol forces (AP News, 2025). It is diplomatic objection: china is bound by UNCLOS (1996) but disregards the dispute provisions in favor of bilateral negotiations to the hope of exploiting

asymmetries. Three claimants to the ASEAN existed in 2023-2026 (Philippines: 10+, Vietnam: 5), however, Beijing did not grant permission to develop the Code of Conduct that weakened the normative deterrence (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). It has been termed as by the scholarly fraternity as forum shopping, or exploitation of weak venues and the avoidance of strong venues to help bring out the weakness of the institutions.

**Local Backplane and Diplomatic Gambling.** Outsourcing ambiguously, the response of ASEAN is one of diversification. The Philippines also launched a transparency campaign in the year 2023 (organized by Marcos Jr.), in which 200+ videos of conflicts were leaked and an international outcry backed those demands by Balikatan exercises taking place in the endemic-goes (YouTube, 2025; Wikipedia, 2025). Malaysian patrols of Vietnam and EEZ were discreet, and so were concurrent UNCLOS submissions and Soviet sub purchases under the previous regime. Nevertheless, Chinese rhetoric was reflected in Cambodia/Laos, where Cambodian and Laos counteracted the ASEAN stunts, and China used the opportunity in trillions of Chinese loans on its Belt and Road (Voice of America, 2023). The ASEAN talks of 2024 led to the creation of guidelines, which could never be put into practice at a gun point; this was toothless theatre. It succumbed to bilateral: deals between China and Brunei 2025 have fragmented the union due to avoiding the incorporation of the Spratlys (Australia Institute, 2025). The freedom of navigational opeartions (FONOPs) of the U.S (14 in 2024) and Quad exercises increased the claims and gave Beijing an answer of provocation (and must therefore fall into traps of spiraling entrapment, Nguyen, 2025).



This study supports the exegesis of the recent post-2023 behavior of China in the South China Sea as the calculated combination of three mutually supportive types of

warfare, namely: public opinion, legal, and military warfare, conducted in the grey-zone salami-slicing manner. This would allow Beijing to establish maritime hegemony without direct military conflict and beyond the conventions of UNCLOS-based maritime law. Instead of pursuing outright territorial conquest, the approach taken by China is to lock in de facto control by incremental coercion and legal revisionism and narrative control, thus provoking obvious apprehensions rooted in liberal institutionalist expectations about the successful PTMC of the great-power behavior (American Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 2026; Sasaki, 2025).

Empirical history of 2023-2026 depicts that the use of coercion in the South China Sea is becoming more of a non-linear and non-kinetic one. The actions of China prove that escalation does not necessarily presuppose the use of traditional military force; instead, it is pressurized with the denial of access, harassment of resupply operations, and continuous maritime presence, which increases the cost of operations of competing claimants. These higher practices indicate a deadly delusion in the deterrence reasoning: the lack of bombs or missiles does not amount to the lack of coercion. Quite to the contrary continuous low-intensity pressure involves strategic costs, of a cumulative nature, especially on less powerful maritime powers without escalation leadership.

The Philippine reaction is also a good demonstration of the constraints of unilateral resistance during an asymmetric environment. Although the transparency/pubblico approach adopted by Manila has worked to influence the international discourse, it has also brought domestic political prices and operational weaknesses. More importantly, the ongoing disunity of ASEAN has limited their ability to act as a bloc, which has permitted China to reconsider conflicts to bilateral patterns where power disparity is even stronger. The lack of strong regional consensus, as East Asia Forum (2025) observes, makes multilateral diplomacy a mere volume in symbolic positioning, but not a limitation, establishing another reason as to why China prefers to engage bilaterally.

The issue of the U.S. intervening into the strategies complicates the calculations. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) are not obligation measures as much as they are commitment measures. They confirm the right to navigation but never overturn the on-the-ground (or at-sea) advantages of China. Furthermore, the artificial island militarization, consisting of HQ-9 surface-to-air missile systems, sophisticated radar arrays, and tough infrastructure, has significantly reduced the time of the external intervention, and there are high stakes when it comes to escalation (Newsweek, 2025). These dynamics presume that presence will not be sufficient to combat embedded grey-zone tactics.

In theory, the results add to grey-zone literature by proving that ambiguity in itself is not just a facilitating situation but a weapon. It is not just that China has succeeded in blurring borders of war but it has made it a norm of its institutional culture to create ambiguity as a long-term strategic asset. This questions the old-fashioned dichotomies between peace and war and reveals the inefficiency of legal and deterrence theories founded on black and white violations and response.

Policywise, the findings are oriented towards a number of corrective directions. First, multilateral systems of coordination, e.g., Philippines-Vietnam-U.S. crisis hotlines, may alleviate the threat of escalating the situation and isolation policies. Second, countermeasures to constant presence strategies that are cost-effective include asymmetric capability investments (such as unmanned systems, undersea platforms, and

tools of maritime domain awareness). Third, operational strategies should be complemented with parallel legal strategies, which is a combination of litigation, norm-building, and reputational costs. Lastly a future ASEAN Code of Conduct should contain enforcement triggers, reflecting power disparities and not the rule of formal equality among actors. Making such asymmetry an institutional part of maritime governance is probably uncomfortable, yet key to rebuilding credibility in the regimes of maritime governance in the contest space.

## Conclusion

The dynamics of the South China Sea witnessed between 2023 and 2026 reflects a momentous shift in how China exercises its authority over the sea, their ability to control entry and operational blockades to prevent legal precedents by becoming consistent offenders to the established international norms. This paper demonstrates that the Chinese approach in this time had not been based on the abrupt intensification of pressure but on the careful management of thresholds- the regulation of when and how pressure could be exerted and how pressure could be countered by managing external resistance by buffering through a carefully balanced diplomatic activity and legal ambiguity (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Reuters, 2026). According to the current trends, such actions have increasingly shifted the status quo in the sphere of international law enforcement, undermining its deterrent impact and making the collective response systems more difficult. This paper can add a subtle insight to the existing body of literature on the interaction of power, law, and diplomacy in the modern grey-zone conflict through an integrated, period-specific analytical framework based on process tracing. The results demonstrate that the capacity of the PRC to separate military coercion, legal revisionism and diplomatic signaling enables it to shoot down opposition without trying to spark open conflict, thus undermining the traditional notion of escalation and enforcement in inter-oppositism in maritime disputes. The case over South China Sea therefore points out the augmented discordance between the legal power and actual power on the Indo-Pacific security region. These results lead to the suggestion that, to live in these conditions, new multilateral solutions are necessary, including the so-called opt-in system of binding arbitration, joint patrols, and institutional re-structuring in order to take the existing tension between legal norms and power imbalances out of the system. The existence of such measures is what the maritime governance regimes lose credibility until such measures are in place. To be able to expand the study to future research, one can evaluate the economic and operational worth of maritime militias, simulate the strategic interaction between the South China Sea contingency and the Taiwan contingency and the new peace layers which can be implemented to address the long-term grey-zone competition. These avenues together can offer avenues to the further expansion of the research of maritime and eventual policy interventions in an expanding contentious maritime space.

## Recommendations

For China, the long term stability of the South China Sea would have to be re-calibrated to include shifting the coercive control to managed coexistence. Beijing needs to give priority to instill binding rules on the operations of its Coast Guard and maritime militia, especially at the areas of flash-points like Second Thomas Shoal. Clear bans on hazardous operations like ramming, water-cannon firing in close range and seizure of equipment along with permanent crisis hot lines with the Philippines and Vietnam would go a long way in avoiding the risk of miscalculation. Although China might still reject the decision of the arbitrator of 2016, a reaffirmation of the behavior of operation

in the continuity of the principle of the UNCLOS and the freezing of the further militarization of the controversial features would help reduce the costs of image, as well as the balancing behavior of the regional and external forces.

For ASEAN claimant states, especially the Philippines and Vietnam, the emphasis should shift toward resilience rather than escalation. Strengthening maritime domain awareness, diversifying resupply methods through unmanned and redundant systems, and coordinating incident documentation can sustain presence without provoking direct confrontation. These measures should be complemented by sustained legal engagement under UNCLOS and coordinated diplomatic messaging, ensuring that operational realities are consistently translated into normative pressure.

In the institutional level of ASEAN, the chronic low effectiveness of collective action should be solved. The next Code of Conduct should not be an aspirational statement, should have explicitly defined banned behaviour, checking points and progressive enforcement points. In the absence of these provisions, ASEAN stands a risk of even more marginalization since conflicts will be resolved bilaterally but under asymmetric terms.

For the United States and its partners, including the Quad, military presence should be paired with crisis-management mechanisms. Freedom of Navigation Operations and joint exercises should be complemented by expanded de-confliction channels, capacity-building for regional coast guards, and standardized grey-zone response frameworks that emphasize proportionality and restraint rather than symbolic signaling alone.

Finally, international institutions and third-party actors can play a stabilizing role by supporting independent maritime incident review mechanisms and promoting cooperative arrangements in fisheries and environmental governance. These functional domains offer politically viable entry points for reducing day-to-day friction while broader sovereignty disputes remain unresolved. Together, these measures offer a pragmatic pathway to managing competition and preserving stability in an increasingly contested maritime environment.

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