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Nine Dashes, Many Disputes: China and the Struggle in the South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea has become a major centre of maritime competition in Southeast Asia. China's nine-dash line overlaps with maritime claims and EEZs asserted by several Southeast Asian states. The dispute has increasingly moved from diplomatic and legal contestation to repeated encounters involving coast guards, maritime militia, fishing vessels, survey ships and naval forces. This paper examines how the nine-dash line is reshaping the maritime order of Southeast Asia. It applies a Maritime Resilience and Security Framework based on strategic geography, trade connectivity, energy security, maritime governance and maritime security capacity. Five research questions examine the evolution of the nine-dash line, maritime skirmishes, international law, economic and energy interests, and regional security. Recent evidence shows that Chinese coast guard activity increased in 2025 while becoming more concentrated around Scarborough and Sabina Shoals. Activity around Scarborough increased further during the first half of 2026. Maritime militia activity also remained at record levels. The analysis shows how China combines legal claims with persistent maritime presence and controlled pressure. The resulting order remains rules-based in law but increasingly presence-based in practice. The study finds that the regional maritime order remains legally rules-based but increasingly depends on sustained maritime presence in practice. It therefore calls for stronger crisis communication, maritime transparency and practical regional cooperation.

KEYWORDS: *Nine-Dash Line; South China Sea; China; maritime security; maritime skirmishes; ASEAN; grey-zone strategy; UNCLOS; maritime governance; Southeast Asia.*

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INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea has become one of the most contested maritime spaces in Asia. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei have overlapping claims in different parts of the sea. Indonesia is not a claimant to the Spratly Islands, but China's maritime claims overlap with Indonesia's EEZ around the Natuna Islands, although Indonesia does not regard itself as a claimant in the South China Sea disputes. The dispute involves territory, maritime rights, fisheries, oil and gas, shipping routes, strategic access and regional security.

At the centre of this dispute is China's nine-dash line. Although the paper retains the established term 'nine-dash line', China's 2023 standard map depicts a ten-dash line, with an additional dash near Taiwan. China uses the line to support claims over a large part of the South China Sea. Its precise legal meaning has remained contested. Other states argue that maritime rights must be based mainly on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The difference between these positions has created a continuing conflict between historical claims and modern maritime law.

The dispute has also changed in character. It is no longer limited to diplomatic protests, legal arguments and competing maps. Maritime confrontations have become a regular feature of the dispute. Chinese coast guard vessels have blocked, followed and used water cannons against vessels from other claimant states. Maritime militia vessels have operated around disputed features. Chinese survey vessels have entered waters claimed

by Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. These activities have created repeated confrontations without producing a conventional war.

The Philippines-China relationship provides the clearest example. The Second Thomas Shoal has become a major site of confrontation because the Philippines maintains a military outpost on the grounded BRP Sierra Madre. China has repeatedly attempted to restrict Philippine resupply operations. On 17 June 2024, Chinese personnel physically confronted Philippine personnel during a Philippine resupply operation, causing injuries and damaging equipment. The incident demonstrated how quickly a maritime confrontation can move from obstruction to physical contact without becoming an armed clash.

The pattern has since shifted. After an arrangement reduced some tensions around Second Thomas Shoal in July 2024, Chinese coast guard activity became increasingly concentrated around Scarborough Shoal and Sabina Shoal. Analysis of automatic identification system data found that China Coast Guard patrol activity across six monitored locations rose from 1,939 ship-days in 2024 to 2,183 ship-days in 2025. Scarborough Shoal alone increased from 516 to 1,099 ship-days, while Sabina Shoal increased from 139 to 405 ship-days. Activity at Second Thomas Shoal declined from 288 to 131 ship-days.

The pattern continued into 2026. During the first six months of 2026, China Coast Guard activity around Scarborough Shoal reached 933 ship-days. This was already close to the full-year 2025 figure of 1,099. The same dataset recorded 112 days of observed interaction between Chinese and Philippine law-enforcement vessels during the first half of 2026. These figures indicate that Scarborough Shoal has become a major centre of maritime pressure.

The maritime militia adds another layer. Satellite-based research recorded an average daily presence of 241 Chinese maritime militia vessels in monitored areas during 2025. This was the highest annual level recorded by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. Yet militia activity did not follow exactly the same pattern as coast guard activity. The highest concentrations remained around Mischief Reef and Whitsun Reef rather than Scarborough Shoal. This difference suggests that China uses different maritime instruments for different strategic purposes. These developments raise a wider question. Is the South China Sea mainly a dispute over territory and maritime rights, or is it becoming a struggle over the regional maritime order?

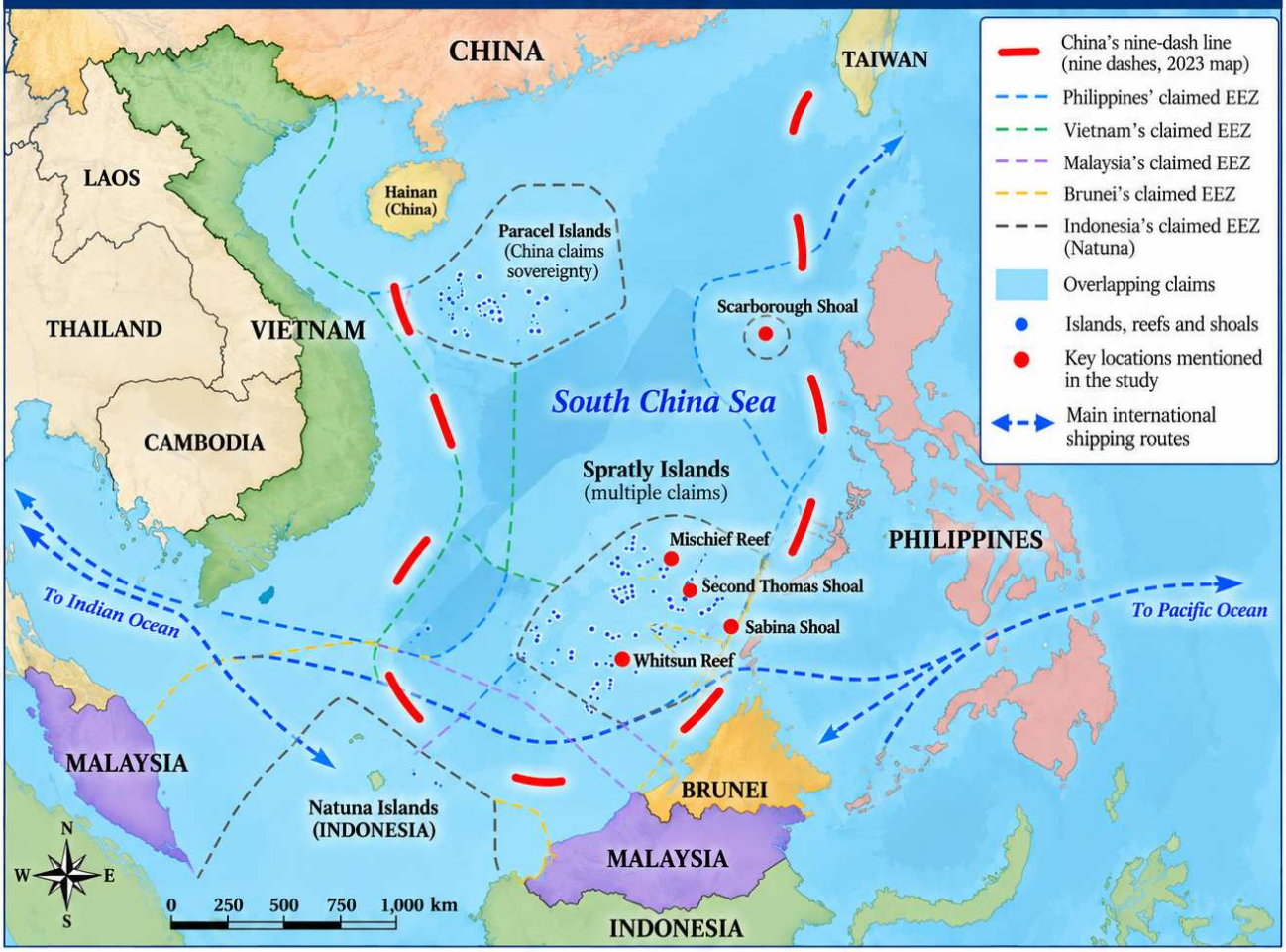
This paper argues that the nine-dash line has evolved from a contested cartographic claim into a broader system of maritime presence, pressure and practical influence. China combines historical claims, legal arguments, coast guard operations, maritime militia, survey activity, artificial islands and naval power. These instruments allow China to strengthen its position without necessarily crossing the threshold of conventional war.

The paper applies the Maritime Resilience and Security Framework developed in earlier maritime research. The framework is adapted to the South China Sea through five connected dimensions:

strategic geography, trade connectivity, energy security, maritime governance and maritime security capacity. The study argues that these dimensions cannot be examined separately. Their interaction explains the continuing contest over maritime space.

The paper examines five research questions. The first studies how the nine-dash line has transformed the strategic geography of the South China Sea. The second examines why maritime skirmishes have become an important instrument of competition. The third analyses international law and maritime governance. The fourth studies trade connectivity and energy security. The fifth examines how the dispute is changing the maritime order of Southeast Asia.

Figure 1. The Nine-Dash Line and Major Areas of Maritime Contestation in the South China Sea



Note: The map shows China's nine-dash line (nine dashes), maritime claims of the main claimant states, key locations mentioned in this study, and major international shipping routes. China's 2023 standard map depicts nine dashes in the South China Sea and an additional dash near Taiwan, but the term "nine-dash line" is retained in this paper.

Source: Adapted by the author from publicly available cartographic and official maritime sources.

Literature Review:

The literature on the South China Sea can be divided into five broad areas. The first examines history and competing sovereignty claims. Valencia, Van Dyke and Ludwig (1997) provided an early systematic study of resource sharing and competing claims. Hayton (2014) later examined the historical foundations and political development of the dispute. Fravel (2011) linked China's South China Sea policy with wider questions of territorial strategy.

The second body of literature focuses on international maritime law. Beckman (2013) explains the central role of UNCLOS in determining maritime entitlements. Dupuy and Dupuy (2013) examine the legal problems surrounding China's historic-rights claims. The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration became a major turning point in this literature. The tribunal did not decide sovereignty over all disputed islands. It examined maritime entitlements, historic rights and the compatibility of China's claims with UNCLOS.

The third body of research examines China's maritime strategy. Erickson and Goldstein (2009) connect China's naval development with wider maritime strategy. Martinson (2022) demonstrates how China's naval, coast guard and maritime militia forces can support one another in the maritime grey zone. Holmes and Yoshihara (2017) examine the strategic importance of grey-zone activities for deterrence and alliance policy.

The fourth body of literature focuses on resources. Fisheries remain central to the livelihood of coastal communities. Wu et al. (2024) used automatic identification system data to compare Chinese and Vietnamese fishing activity. Their findings demonstrate the large scale of fishing activity in the South China Sea. Other studies show that distant-water fishing can affect small-scale fishing communities in Southeast Asia.

Energy security is also important. Chinese survey activities have repeatedly coincided with oil and gas exploration by Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. This indicates that maritime disputes are linked not only with territorial claims but also with access to offshore resources.

The fifth body of literature examines regional responses. Southeast Asian states have not adopted one common strategy. The Philippines has become more open in challenging Chinese maritime actions. Vietnam has strengthened its maritime position. Malaysia generally prefers quieter diplomacy. Indonesia maintains a firm legal position regarding its Natuna EEZ while avoiding unnecessary escalation. Brunei has generally adopted a low-profile approach.

The existing literature provides valuable analysis of these separate dimensions. However, a gap remains. Legal studies often concentrate on legal entitlement. Strategic studies focus on military power. Resource studies focus on fisheries and energy. Studies of maritime incidents often concentrate on individual confrontations.

This paper connects these dimensions through one analytical framework. It examines how geography, trade, energy, governance and maritime security capacity interact to create repeated maritime contestation.

Taken together, these studies show that the South China Sea dispute has been examined through separate legal, strategic, economic and regional perspectives. Less attention has been given to how these dimensions interact through repeated maritime encounters. This study addresses that problem by linking maritime claims with presence, pressure and practical influence.

Research Gap:

The major research gap lies in the relationship between maritime claims and practical maritime influence. Existing studies often treat legal claims and maritime behaviour as related but separate subjects. This study treats them as parts of one process. The nine-dash line is usually examined either as a historical claim or as a legal problem. Yet its strategic importance also depends on the ability to maintain a physical presence within the claimed space.

A second gap concerns maritime skirmishes. Many studies use the language of grey-zone competition but do not systematically distinguish between routine patrols, coercive encounters, physical confrontations and armed clashes.

A third gap concerns the relationship between maritime security and economic interests. Fishing, energy exploration and shipping are not simply economic matters. They can become instruments and targets of maritime competition.

This study addresses these gaps by treating maritime contestation as the outcome of interaction among geography, connectivity, resources, governance and security capacity.

Significance of the Study:

The study is significant because the South China Sea is moving from a dispute over claims towards a contest over practical maritime influence. The nine-dash line provides the geographical basis for a wide range of Chinese maritime activities. Its importance therefore cannot be understood through legal claims alone.

The study contributes to maritime security research by applying a five-part Maritime Resilience and Security Framework. The framework connects strategic geography, trade connectivity, energy security, maritime governance and maritime security capacity.

The study also gives specific attention to maritime skirmishes. Most confrontations in the South China Sea do not constitute conventional armed conflict. They involve blocking, shadowing, water cannons, ramming, boarding, dangerous manoeuvres and physical interference. Studying these events helps explain how states can change conditions at sea without starting a major war.

The study is also important for understanding Southeast Asian responses. China's neighbours do not have identical interests or capacities. Their different responses affect ASEAN's ability to manage the dispute. Finally, the study has policy value. It identifies the need for stronger crisis communication, maritime transparency, practical rules of conduct and improved maritime capacity.

Methodology:

The study uses a qualitative analytical research design supported by selected quantitative data. The empirical analysis covers developments from the early 2010s to the first half of 2026, with particular attention to major confrontations after 2012. It draws upon peer-reviewed research, academic books, international legal documents, government sources and specialist maritime datasets. The study compares five Southeast Asian maritime settings affected by Chinese maritime claims or activities, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia's Natuna waters. Sources were selected from peer-reviewed

scholarship, official legal documents, government publications, ASEAN documents and specialist maritime datasets. Recent operational evidence was cross-checked where possible with independent maritime monitoring sources. These cases are not treated as identical. Their claims, legal positions, economic interests and strategic responses differ.

The study also uses event-based analysis. Major maritime confrontations are examined to identify changes in Chinese behaviour and responses from neighbouring states. The analytical framework used in this study builds on the *Maritime Chokepoint Resilience Framework* developed in the author's earlier research on strategic maritime chokepoints. That framework identified strategic geography, trade connectivity, energy security, maritime governance and maritime security capacity as five connected dimensions of maritime resilience (Mangu, 2026).

The present study adapts these dimensions to the South China Sea, where they help explain how maritime claims are translated into sustained presence, pressure and practical influence. Building on the framework developed in earlier research, this study adapts the five dimensions to the South China Sea. The framework follows an analytical sequence. Strategic geography creates value. Trade connectivity and energy security increase the stakes. Maritime governance establishes rules. Maritime security capacity determines practical influence. These factors shape maritime presence and pressure, which can produce skirmishes and wider maritime contestation.

The framework presents maritime contestation as a connected process rather than a set of separate factors. Strategic geography creates the initial value of maritime space. Trade and energy interests increase the cost of disruption. Governance establishes the rules for maritime conduct. Security capacity determines the ability to maintain presence. Sustained presence can create pressure, producing repeated skirmishes and wider contestation. Over time, these processes can influence the regional maritime order.

Figure 2 Maritime Resilience and Security Framework

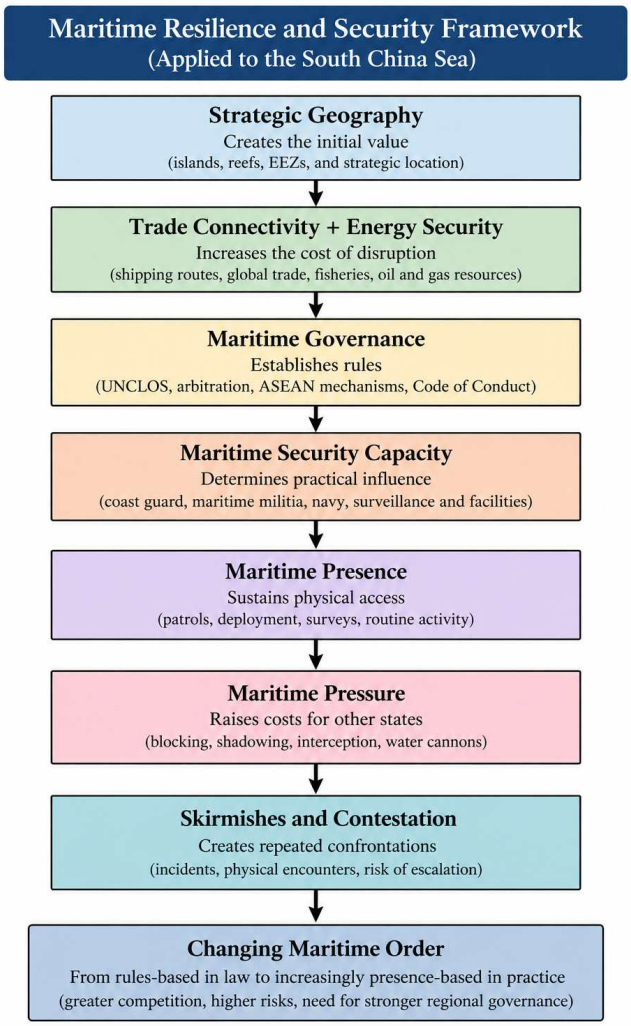


Table 1. Maritime Resilience and Security Framework: Dimensions, South China Sea Application and Indicators

Framework Dimension	South China Sea Application	Main Indicators
Strategic geography	Nine-dash line, islands, reefs, EEZs and sea lanes	Location and maritime zones
Trade connectivity	Shipping and energy movement	Petroleum, LNG and sea routes
Energy security	Offshore oil and gas	Exploration and survey activity
Maritime governance	UNCLOS, arbitration, ASEAN and COC	Rules, institutions and compliance
Maritime security capacity	Coast guard, militia, navy and facilities	Patrols, incidents and infrastructure

Source: Developed by the author

Defining Maritime Skirmishes:

The term "skirmishes" in this paper does not mean sustained naval warfare. It refers to a spectrum of maritime interactions between maritime forces operating below the level of conventional armed conflict. Within this spectrum, Levels 2–4 represent the main range of maritime skirmishes examined in this study. The study distinguishes five levels.

Table 2. Five-Level Spectrum of Maritime Interaction in the South China Sea

Level	Category	Illustrative Activities
1	Maritime presence	Patrols and surveillance
2	Coercive encounter	Blocking, shadowing and interception
3	Maritime incident	Collision and water-cannon use
4	Physical confrontation	Boarding, ramming and injury
5	Armed clash	Sustained use of weapons

Source: Developed by the author

Most incidents examined in this study fall within Levels 2–4. Levels 2–4 constitute the main skirmish range examined in this study, while Levels 1 and 5 represent the lower and upper boundaries of the spectrum.

The term "skirmishes" is therefore used as an analytical description of repeated coercive and physical encounters rather than conventional military battles.

From Cartographic Line to Strategic Geography - How the Nine-Dash Line Reshapes Maritime Space:

The nine-dash line has become the geographical centre of China's South China Sea policy. Its historical roots lie in Chinese maps produced during the twentieth century. The People's Republic of China retained and modified the earlier line after 1949. China later used the line in diplomatic statements and official maps. The difficulty is that the line does not correspond neatly to the maritime zones created by UNCLOS. It extends towards the exclusive economic zones of several Southeast Asian states. This produces a fundamental conflict between China's historic-rights position and the modern law of the sea. The South China Sea contains hundreds of islands, rocks and reefs. The Paracel and Spratly Islands are especially important. Many features are small or partly submerged. Their legal status affects the maritime zones they can generate.

The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration clarified several aspects of this problem. The tribunal concluded that China's claims to historic rights over resources, insofar as they exceeded the maritime entitlements permitted by UNCLOS, had no legal effect. It also examined the status of several maritime features. However, the tribunal did not decide sovereignty over the disputed land features. This distinction is important. The Award did not simply determine ownership of the South China Sea. It clarified the legal limits of particular maritime claims.

The geographical importance of the nine-dash line nevertheless remains considerable. China conducts patrols, surveys and fishing activities within areas covered by its claim. The line therefore has an operational dimension even though its legal meaning remains contested. Strategic geography becomes important when a claim is supported by physical presence. China has developed major infrastructure on several features in the Spratlys. Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief Reefs contain facilities that support surveillance, logistics and maritime operations. These facilities increase China's ability to maintain a continuing presence far from its mainland.

The resulting asymmetry is significant. Southeast Asian states possess smaller maritime forces and must operate over large distances. China can draw on a much larger coast guard fleet and a substantial naval force while using island facilities to support operations. The strategic question has therefore changed. It is no longer only about who claims a particular feature. It is also about who can maintain presence around it and influence activities within surrounding waters. The nine-dash line provides the geographical reference. China's maritime capacity gives that reference practical significance. This interaction between claim and presence is central to the changing strategic geography of the South China Sea.

From Naval Power to Layered Maritime Pressure - Why Maritime Skirmishes Matter:

China's maritime strategy in the South China Sea cannot be understood through the navy alone. Coast guard vessels, maritime militia, survey ships and fishing fleets also contribute to China's maritime presence. The China Coast Guard is the most visible instrument. It can challenge foreign vessels while presenting its actions as law enforcement. This provides China with an instrument between diplomacy and conventional military force.

The maritime militia adds another layer. Its vessels can operate near disputed features and support broader Chinese objectives. Their presence can complicate attribution and make the response of other states more

difficult. China's maritime strategy can therefore be understood as a layered system in which different instruments perform different functions.

Table 3. China's Layered Maritime Instruments and Their Strategic Functions

Maritime instrument	Main function
China Coast Guard	Law enforcement and direct maritime pressure
Maritime militia	Persistent presence, support and obstruction
Survey vessels	Seabed and resource survey activity
Fishing fleet	Economic presence and resource activity
PLA Navy	Deterrence and strategic backing
Artificial island facilities	Logistics, surveillance and operational support

Source: Developed by the author

The significance lies not in any single instrument but in their combined use. The Philippines provides the strongest evidence of this approach. The BRP Sierra Madre at Second Thomas Shoal has been the focus of repeated confrontations. Chinese forces have attempted to prevent Philippine resupply missions through blocking, water cannons and physical interference.

The June 2024 confrontation marked a serious escalation. Chinese personnel boarded a Philippine vessel during a resupply operation. Philippine personnel were injured and equipment was damaged. The incident remained below the threshold of conventional armed conflict, but it demonstrated the danger of physical confrontation. The pattern at Second Thomas Shoal also shows that pressure can change when political circumstances change.

After a July 2024 arrangement between China and the Philippines, CCG activity around Second Thomas declined in 2025. At the same time, Chinese activity increased sharply at Scarborough and Sabina. The data reveal a clear shift.

Table 4. China Coast Guard Patrol Activity at Six Monitored South China Sea Locations, 2024–2025

Location	CCG ship-days 2024	CCG ship-days 2025	Change	Change %
Scarborough Shoal	516	1,099	583	113.0%
Sabina Shoal	139	405	266	191.4%
Second Thomas Shoal	288	131	-157	-54.5%
Luconia Shoals	364	257	-107	-29.4%
Thitu Island	281	51	-230	-81.9%
Southwest/Vanguard Bank	351	240	-111	-31.6%
Total	1,939	2,183	244	12.6%

Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2026a), based on AIS-derived observations.

Note: Ship-days indicate observed patrol presence and do not represent the number of unique vessels. AIS (Automatic Identification System) coverage has limitations.

(The figures require caution. Ship-days measure observed patrol presence, not the number of unique vessels. AIS data also have gaps. They should therefore be treated as indicators rather than complete measures of Chinese maritime activity.)

Even with this limitation, the pattern is clear. China increased overall patrol activity while reallocating a large part of its effort towards Scarborough and Sabina. This pattern is better understood as selective maritime pressure than as uniform expansion. This is more significant than a simple increase in patrols. It indicates the capacity to redistribute maritime pressure across locations. China can reduce pressure at one location while increasing it at another. This makes crisis management more difficult because an agreement at one shoal does not necessarily reduce competition across the wider sea.

Scarborough became particularly important. China has maintained a coast guard presence there since 2012. During 2025, patrol activity expanded around the shoal and along approaches used by Philippine vessels. The trend became even stronger in 2026. During the first six months of 2026, CCG patrols at Scarborough reached 933 ship-days (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative [AMTI], 2026c). This was nearly the entire 2025 total of 1,099 ship-days. The same dataset recorded 112 days with observed interaction between Chinese and Philippine law-enforcement vessels. This shows that the contest is becoming more persistent.

The maritime militia demonstrates a different pattern. AMTI recorded an average of 241 militia vessels per day in monitored areas during 2025. This was the highest level measured by the project. However, the militia was not concentrated at Scarborough to the same extent as the coast guard. Most activity remained around Mischief Reef and Whitsun Reef. This distinction is analytically important.

China does not use every maritime instrument in the same place. Coast guard activity is particularly useful for direct enforcement. Militia deployments can support longer-term presence around strategic features. Vietnam presents another form of maritime pressure. Chinese survey activity has repeatedly coincided with Vietnamese energy exploration. The 2019 Haiyang Dizhi 8 operation near Vanguard Bank was accompanied by Chinese coast guard and maritime militia vessels. Malaysia has also experienced Chinese survey activity near offshore energy operations. Indonesia faces a different problem around the Natuna Islands. Indonesia does not accept the nine-dash line as a basis for Chinese rights within its EEZ. Chinese fishing and coast guard activity has nevertheless created repeated tensions.

These cases demonstrate that maritime skirmishes have different forms. In the Philippines, they involve direct obstruction and physical confrontation. In Vietnam, they are strongly linked with energy surveys. In Malaysia, they involve offshore resource activity and maritime presence. In Indonesia, they concern fishing and EEZ rights. The common feature is persistent maritime pressure. This supports the central argument of the Maritime Resilience and Security Framework.

Maritime security capacity affects the practical ability of states to exercise maritime rights. The dispute is therefore not only about military strength. It is also about endurance. The state that can maintain vessels at sea for longer periods can influence access even without changing formal legal boundaries. Maritime power in this setting is therefore partly a function of persistence.

Law, Arbitration and the Enforcement Gap - UN CLOS and the Limits of Compliance:

UNCLOS provides the principal legal framework for the South China Sea. The Convention establishes rules for territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, continental shelves and navigation. It also provides procedures for resolving disputes. The major legal problem concerns China's historic-rights claims. The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration became central to this issue. The Philippines initiated proceedings under Annex VII of UNCLOS in 2013. China rejected the proceedings and did not participate in the hearings. The tribunal nevertheless proceeded under the dispute-settlement provisions of UNCLOS.

The Award clarified several important issues. It found that China's historic-rights claims to resources, insofar as they exceeded the maritime entitlements permitted by UNCLOS, had no legal effect. It also found that several features in the Spratlys could not generate the extensive maritime zones claimed by China. The tribunal did not decide sovereignty over the islands. This distinction should remain central to any analysis of the dispute. The Award therefore reduced legal uncertainty but did not end the political dispute. China rejected the Award. The Philippines continues to regard it as final and binding. This produces what can be described as an enforcement gap.

International law can establish rights and obligations. It cannot by itself guarantee compliance. The South China Sea illustrates this problem clearly. A state can possess a strong legal position but still face difficulty exercising practical access to contested waters. The issue is not that international law has become irrelevant. It remains essential. UNCLOS provides the legal language through which states define maritime rights. The 2016 Award provides a detailed interpretation of important questions. The problem is the gap between legal entitlement and maritime behaviour.

ASEAN provides a second layer of governance. The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea commits participating states to peaceful settlement, self-restraint, freedom of navigation and respect for international law. However, the Declaration is not a comprehensive enforcement mechanism. Negotiations towards a Code of Conduct have continued for many years. ASEAN and China again discussed the Code of Conduct in 2026.

The challenge is to move from general political commitments towards practical rules. A useful Code of Conduct should address dangerous manoeuvres, blocking, boarding, water-cannon use, maritime militia activity and crisis communication. It should also establish rapid procedures for dealing with incidents. This is particularly important because many confrontations occur between coast guard vessels rather than naval forces.

The legal and governance dimensions therefore interact directly with maritime security. A weak governance mechanism increases the importance of unilateral maritime capacity. A strong governance mechanism

can reduce the need for unilateral enforcement. The South China Sea therefore presents a paradox. There is a relatively developed legal framework, but the practical maritime order remains contested. This explains why legal disputes continue to appear as physical encounters at sea.

Trade, Energy and Fisheries - The Economic Stakes of Maritime Competition:

The South China Sea is one of the world's major maritime trade corridors. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that about 10 billion barrels of petroleum and petroleum products and 6.7 trillion cubic feet of LNG passed through the South China Sea in 2023. This gives the sea importance far beyond the claimant states.

Disruption would affect energy markets, shipping costs and regional supply chains. Trade connectivity therefore increases the value of maritime stability. Fisheries add another dimension. Millions of people in China and Southeast Asia depend directly or indirectly on fishing. The South China Sea is also an important source of food and employment. Yet fishing pressure is increasing.

Wu et al. (2024) found very high Chinese fishing effort in comparison with Vietnam in their AIS- based study. The findings demonstrate the scale of fishing activity, although fishing effort should not automatically be treated as proof of illegal activity. The fisheries issue is important because maritime disputes can affect access to fishing grounds. A fisherman does not experience an EEZ dispute as an abstract legal issue. It affects where that person can fish, how far vessels can travel and whether vessels face interception.

Energy security is equally important. The South China Sea contains significant oil and natural gas resources. However, resource estimates should not be exaggerated. Much of the proven and probable resource base is located near the coastlines of claimant states rather than around every disputed feature. The strategic importance of energy therefore comes from both resources and access.

Surveying is particularly important. A survey vessel can map seabed conditions and support later exploration. Preventing another state from conducting surveys can delay energy development without requiring an armed confrontation. China's survey activities near Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia demonstrate this connection. The sequence is:

survey → assessment → exploration → investment → production

Control over the first stage can affect the later stages. Energy security therefore becomes part of maritime security. Malaysia provides a strong example. Offshore energy is important to the Malaysian economy, while China is also an important economic partner. Malaysia therefore has incentives to protect maritime interests while avoiding uncontrolled confrontation. Vietnam has adopted a firmer position in several disputed areas. Indonesia has combined legal resistance with diplomatic caution. The Philippines has become more public and assertive.

These different strategies reflect different levels of dependence and different perceptions of risk. Trade connectivity and energy security therefore reinforce the strategic importance of the South China Sea while also shaping the responses of individual states. This is why the maritime framework treats economic connectivity as part of security rather than as a separate issue.

From a Rules-Based Order to Presence-Based Competition - The Changing Maritime Order:

The central consequence of the nine-dash line is its effect on the regional maritime order. The formal maritime order remains based on international law. UNCLOS continues to provide the principal legal framework. Yet practical access increasingly depends on presence. This produces a mixed order. It is rules-based in law but increasingly presence-based in practice. China's coast guard activity demonstrates this change.

Persistent patrols allow China to monitor, challenge and regulate maritime activities in areas covered by its claims. The Philippines has responded by increasing its own coast guard and fisheries patrols and by using greater transparency. Vietnam has expanded maritime infrastructure. Malaysia and Indonesia have strengthened their ability to monitor maritime areas while maintaining diplomatic restraint.

These responses show that Southeast Asian states are not simply accepting China's expanding presence. However, their responses are uneven. This creates a challenge for ASEAN. The Philippines sees the dispute as a direct security issue. Vietnam regards maritime sovereignty and resource access as major national interests. Malaysia seeks to protect offshore energy while preserving stable relations with China. Indonesia focuses on its EEZ rights around the Natuna Islands. Brunei generally maintains a low-profile

position. These differences make a unified ASEAN response difficult. Yet ASEAN remains central to regional governance.

The 2026 ASEAN-China meetings continued negotiations towards an effective and substantive Code of Conduct. The ASEAN-China Plan of Action for 2026–2030 also calls for progress towards such a Code consistent with international law and UNCLOS. The success of these negotiations will depend on whether the Code addresses actual behaviour. A document that simply repeats existing commitments will have limited effect. A stronger Code would need practical provisions on coast guard operations, maritime militia, dangerous manoeuvres, resource surveys and crisis communication. External powers also affect the maritime order.

The United States has strengthened security cooperation with the Philippines. Japan and Australia have expanded maritime cooperation with Southeast Asian states. India has supported freedom of navigation, UNCLOS and ASEAN centrality. External involvement can strengthen deterrence. It can also increase strategic competition. The regional challenge is therefore to strengthen maritime resilience without creating an uncontrolled military competition. The interaction of these factors produces the present maritime contest.

The interaction of these factors produces the present maritime contest. The strongest evidence is found in the changing pattern of skirmishes. Repeated encounters show that the maritime order is not being transformed through one dramatic event. It is changing gradually, patrol by patrol, encounter by encounter, infrastructure project by infrastructure project. This gradual process is strategically important because it may change practical conditions without formally changing legal boundaries. The central concern is therefore not necessarily an immediate major war. It is the possibility of gradual normalisation of coercive behaviour.

If repeated blocking, water-cannon use or physical interference becomes routine, the threshold for future confrontation may become lower. The maritime order could then become more dependent on practical power than on agreed rules. This is the most serious long-term implication of the nine-dash line.

Findings:

The study produces six major findings. First, the nine-dash line has developed from a cartographic claim into a reference point for sustained maritime activity. Its strategic significance comes from the combination of claim and presence.

Second, maritime skirmishes have become an important instrument of strategic competition. They allow China and other states to demonstrate resolve and influence behaviour without necessarily beginning conventional war.

Third, China's maritime power is layered. The China Coast Guard, maritime militia, survey vessels, fishing fleets and navy perform different but sometimes complementary functions.

Fourth, international law has clarified important maritime rights but has not eliminated the enforcement gap. The 2016 Award remains legally significant, but its rejection by China limits its immediate political effect.

Fifth, trade, fisheries and energy increase the strategic value of the disputed maritime space. Economic interests are therefore closely linked with security competition.

Sixth, the South China Sea is developing a mixed maritime order. Legal rules remain important, but practical access increasingly depends on sustained maritime presence.

The 2025 CCG data strengthen this conclusion. Total patrol activity across six monitored locations increased, but the distribution changed sharply. The concentration at Scarborough and Sabina shows that Chinese maritime pressure can be geographically redirected. The 2026 Scarborough data provide further evidence. CCG patrols reached 933 ship-days during the first six months of the year. This indicates that the 2025 increase was not simply a temporary change.

The evidence therefore supports a more precise conclusion. China's strategy is not merely one of expansion in every location. It is a strategy of selective and sustained maritime pressure.

Discussion:

The findings show that maritime power in the South China Sea is not limited to naval strength. Coast guard vessels, maritime militia, survey ships, fishing fleets and offshore facilities also shape behaviour at sea. Repeated patrols and coercive encounters can influence access without changing formal maritime

boundaries. The Maritime Resilience and Security Framework, developed in earlier research on maritime chokepoints and adapted here to the South China Sea, explains this process through five linked dimensions (Mangu, 2026). The 2025 and 2026 patrol data also show that Chinese maritime pressure is not uniform. Activity declined at some locations while rising sharply around Scarborough and Sabina Shoals. This suggests selective redistribution of maritime pressure rather than simple expansion.

The findings also explain why maritime skirmishes have become important. Blocking, shadowing, water-cannon use, ramming, boarding and other physical encounters allow a state to impose costs while avoiding conventional war. The June 2024 confrontation at Second Thomas Shoal illustrates this danger. Similar pressure appears through survey activity near the energy areas of Vietnam and Malaysia and through fishing and EEZ tensions around Indonesia's Natuna waters. International law remains important, but the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration did not end the dispute. It clarified important questions about historic rights and maritime entitlements, while China rejected the Award. This creates an enforcement gap between legal rights and actual behaviour. The problem is therefore not the absence of rules, but the difficulty of ensuring compliance at sea.

The wider implication is the emergence of a mixed maritime order. UNCLOS and regional agreements continue to provide the formal legal basis, but practical access increasingly depends on sustained maritime presence. The process can be expressed as Claim→ Presence→ Pressure→Practical Influence. Persistent presence can affect fishing, exploration, resupply and patrol operations without formally changing sovereignty or maritime boundaries. This does not mean that China has established full influence over the South China Sea. It means that repeated maritime activity can gradually shape behaviour and access. The central challenge is therefore to prevent this gradual normalisation of coercive conduct. Stronger crisis communication, practical ASEAN-China rules, maritime transparency and improved regional maritime capacity are needed to reduce the risk that repeated skirmishes develop into wider conflict.

Analytical Synthesis: From Claim to Practical Influence:

The evidence indicates a four-stage process.

- First comes the claim. The nine-dash line establishes China's broad geographical position.
- Second comes presence. China develops patrols, bases, surveys and maritime militia activity.
- Third comes pressure. Chinese vessels challenge fishing, resupply, exploration and patrol operations.
- Fourth comes practical influence. Repeated presence and pressure can affect which activities

other states can perform in particular maritime spaces.

Table 5. From Maritime Claim to Practical Influence: The Analytical Sequence

Stage	Main mechanism	Maritime expression	Expected effect
Claim	Nine-dash line	Cartographic and legal assertion	Establishes claimed space
Presence	Maritime capacity	Patrols, surveys and facilities	Sustains physical access
Pressure	Coercive activity	Blocking, shadowing and water cannons	Raises costs for other states
Practical influence	Repeated presence and pressure	Changes in access and behaviour	Creates practical influence

Source: Developed by the author.

This sequence provides the central analytical link between the Maritime Resilience and Security Framework and the changing maritime order. The process explains why the South China Sea cannot be understood through maps alone. The Maritime Resilience and Security Framework provides the link between these stages.

- Strategic geography creates value.
- Trade and energy create stakes.
- Governance establishes rules.
- Security capacity creates practical influence.
- Skirmishes reveal the interaction among these elements.

The central analytical finding is that the nine-dash line gains practical significance when a maritime claim is supported by sustained presence and repeated pressure. Legal claims establish the stated position, but persistent maritime activity can influence access and behaviour. The struggle is therefore not only over what states claim, but also over what they can maintain and enforce at sea.

Policy Implications:

- **Crisis Prevention and Maritime Communication:** China and Southeast Asian maritime agencies should maintain direct communication channels during periods of

tension. These channels should remain active during maritime incidents and support rapid contact between operational commanders. Clear procedures should address blocking, dangerous manoeuvres, boarding, ramming and water-cannon use. Such measures can reduce misunderstandings and prevent individual incidents from becoming wider crises.

- **Regional Governance and Practical Rules:** The ASEAN-China Code of Conduct should contain practical rules for behaviour at sea. It should address coast guard operations, maritime militia activity, resource surveys and dangerous encounters. The Code should also establish procedures for reporting and managing serious incidents. UNCLOS should remain the principal legal foundation for maritime rights and regional maritime order. The focus should move from general commitments towards rules that can guide actual conduct at sea.
- **Maritime Transparency and Regional Capacity:** ASEAN states should strengthen maritime domain awareness through satellite imagery, AIS data and shared incident records. Independent verification can reduce conflicting accounts and improve crisis management. Smaller states do not need to match China's maritime fleet. They should strengthen surveillance, coast guard coordination, search-and-rescue capacity and information sharing. External partners can support these efforts through training, technology and professional exchanges without turning every incident into a military confrontation.
- **Fisheries, Energy and Economic Cooperation:** Fisheries cooperation should receive greater regional attention because maritime disputes directly affect coastal communities and fishing access. Joint monitoring and sustainable fishing arrangements can reduce pressure on fishing grounds. Energy cooperation should also be explored where political conditions permit. Carefully designed joint development arrangements may reduce incentives for unilateral confrontation. Trade, fisheries and energy should therefore be treated as part of maritime security rather than as separate economic concerns.

Limitations of the Study:

The study has several limitations.

- First, the South China Sea is a large and complex maritime space. A 6,000-word study cannot examine every incident, patrol and diplomatic exchange.
- Second, AIS-based data have limitations. Some vessels do not carry AIS equipment, while others may not transmit continuously. Ship-day figures therefore indicate observed activity rather than total activity.
- Third, maritime militia activity is difficult to measure. Satellite imagery can identify vessels and patterns, but it cannot always establish the precise purpose of every vessel.
- Fourth, governments often provide competing accounts of the same incident. The study therefore gives greater weight to independently verifiable information and uses official statements mainly to establish state positions.
- Fifth, the study focuses on maritime security and regional order. It does not provide a complete legal analysis of sovereignty over every disputed feature.
- Finally, the maritime situation remains fluid. Developments after the study period may alter the pattern identified here.

These limitations define the scope of the findings and indicate areas for further empirical research.

Conclusion:

The South China Sea dispute has moved beyond a contest over maps and islands. The nine-dash line now operates within a wider system of maritime claims, enforcement, resource competition and strategic pressure. China's growing maritime capacity has changed the nature of the dispute. Coast guard patrols, maritime militia, survey vessels, artificial islands and naval forces provide different forms of influence. Their combined use allows China to strengthen its practical position without necessarily entering conventional war. The Philippines-China confrontations show the dangers of this approach. Second Thomas Shoal, Scarborough Shoal and Sabina Shoal demonstrate how repeated encounters can become a persistent security problem. Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia face different forms of pressure connected with surveys, fisheries, energy and EEZ rights.

International law remains central. The 2016 Award clarified important questions concerning historic rights and maritime entitlements. However, legal clarification has not produced full compliance. The gap between law and behaviour remains a major weakness of the regional maritime order. The Maritime Resilience and Security Framework

explains why the dispute persists. Strategic geography creates value. Trade connectivity and energy security increase that value. Maritime governance establishes legal rules. Maritime security capacity determines practical presence.

The future of the South China Sea will therefore depend not only on the strength of competing claims. It will also depend on whether regional states can combine international law, diplomacy, maritime capacity and cooperation without allowing repeated skirmishes to develop into uncontrolled conflict. The central challenge is to ensure that maritime presence supports stability rather than replacing law with power.

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