



Counterpoint Southeast Asia

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Navigating the South China Sea: Southeast Asia's Strategic Choices

By Barbora Valockova

The South China Sea sits at the intersection of sovereignty, security, competition and cooperation. Around **one-third of global shipping** worth trillions of dollars annually transits its waters, and its seabed holds significant reserves of oil and natural gas alongside some of the world's most productive fishing grounds. For the hundreds of millions of people living along its shores, the sea is a source of food, income, and livelihood. Yet overlapping territorial and maritime claims involving six claimants, an intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, and accelerating environmental pressures have made this vital waterway one of the most contested spaces in the contemporary international system.


Lee Kuan Yew
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Counterpoint Southeast Asia is published regularly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to answer major questions of strategic significance for Southeast Asia by bringing in diverse voices from around the region. Each issue will tackle one question from three different perspectives.

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How Southeast Asian states should respond to these compounding challenges is an important governance question with significant implications for regional order in the decades to come.

The traditional security dimensions of the South China Sea are well known, yet they remain highly challenging. China's expansive claims, encapsulated in its nine-dash line, were found to have no legal basis as a source of maritime entitlements by the arbitral tribunal constituted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in its landmark **July 2016 award**, a ruling Beijing refused to recognise and has continued to contest. Those claims overlap with the maritime entitlements of Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, and intersect with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Natuna Islands. Rather than receding in the wake of the award, Chinese pressure has intensified. The deployment of coast guard vessels, maritime militia, and military assets across disputed features, including Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands, has created a recurring pattern of confrontations at sea, particularly between Chinese and Philippine forces in waters surrounding Second Thomas Shoal.

The institutional architecture meant to manage these tensions has struggled to keep pace. Negotiations between ASEAN and China over a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea are based on a **Single Draft Negotiating Text** agreed in 2018, building on the **2002 Declaration** on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. A political

target to **conclude the COC by 2026** has injected new urgency, with the Philippines, as 2026 ASEAN Chair under the theme "**Navigating Our Future, Together**," making the COC a centrepiece of its maritime security agenda. Despite multiple readings of the draft, **critical questions** over the code's legal bindingness, geographical scope, and enforcement mechanisms remain unresolved, making Manila's ability to reconcile its assertive China policy with ASEAN's consensus-driven leadership one of the key diplomatic tests of the year.

Yet the South China Sea challenge cannot be reduced to sovereignty disputes and institutional deadlock alone. The sea is simultaneously a theatre of great power competition, **an environmental common under stress**, and an increasingly important arena for human security. The United States, with core interests in promoting freedom of navigation and a rules-based maritime order, have intensified its regional engagement through freedom of navigation operations, deepened defence partnerships with the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, and framed China's behaviour as a threat to international norms. China, for its part, has sought to manage the South China Sea primarily through bilateral channels and has been cautious toward multilateral frameworks that might constrain its operational flexibility or legitimise external involvement. In this context, Southeast Asian states face an intensifying dilemma over how to safeguard national interests and support regional norms while avoiding deeper entanglement in major-power rivalry.

ASEAN's response has reflected both its normative aspirations and its structural constraints. The bloc has consistently advocated for peaceful dispute resolution in accordance with international law and sought to preserve its centrality as a platform for regional security governance. But consensus-based decision-making, **divergent threat perceptions** among member states, and the economic leverage that China exercises over individual members has made it harder for ASEAN to speak with one voice.

Last but not least, beyond the traditional security agenda lies a set of non-traditional challenges that existing governance frameworks have yet to address effectively. Climate change is **altering** the physical conditions of the South China Sea, degrading coral reefs, reducing fish stocks, intensifying storms, and raising sea levels in ways that **undermine livelihoods** and, in some cases, the long-term habitability of coastal communities. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing depletes shared stocks and **gives rise** to incidents that blur the boundary between law enforcement and security operations. Therefore, the growing prospect of climate driven displacement, as communities move in response to sea level rise and ecosystem disruption is likely to produce evolving patterns of irregular maritime movement that pose additional demands on ASEAN's maritime governance architecture.

Given these complex and interlocking dynamics, it is essential to ask: **How should Southeast Asian states respond to the evolving challenges in the South China Sea?**

To explore this question, the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) invited students from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy to participate in the Counterpoint Southeast Asia (CSA) essay competition. The three winners presented their essays at the 18th CSA panel discussion on March 10, 2026. This special issue features their winning essays, each offering a distinct perspective on the region's challenges and strategic choices.

In the first-prize essay, **Arisha Parvez, Marjan Begum, and Preeti Chandrakumar Patil** argue that climate change is transforming the South China Sea into a human security frontier. Their essay documents the growing phenomenon of climate-driven displacement and contends that ASEAN's maritime governance architecture is insufficiently equipped to address it. From their perspective, integrating climate mobility into regional institutions is not merely a humanitarian imperative, but a strategic necessity.

In the second-prize essay, **Alec Julian Andrade Templonuevo** examines the South China Sea through the lens of institutional leadership, focusing on the Philippines' 2026 ASEAN Chairmanship and its pledge to advance COC negotiations. He argues that Manila's credibility as chair hinges on its ability to project internal coherence, align its foreign policy signals across government, and rally broader ASEAN unity among claimant and non-claimant states.

In the third-prize essay, **Léna Fargier** approaches the challenge from a different angle, arguing that grey-zone friction over fisheries and maritime access currently constitutes the most immediate escalation risk in the region. Her essay proposes a functional rather than sovereignty-based response: Southeast Asian states should prioritise technology-enabled, issue-specific maritime governance and selectively engage non-escalatory external partners, notably the European Union, to strengthen surveillance and enforcement capacity.

Taken together, these essays highlight that the South China Sea is shaped by overlapping challenges of sovereignty, maritime security, and emerging human security concerns, which existing regional arrangements only partly address. They suggest that progress is more likely to come from gradual, multi-level efforts to strengthen ASEAN's capacity for consistent leadership, improve functional maritime governance in contested areas, and more systematically incorporate climate and mobility issues into regional rules and institutions.

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Beyond Territorial Disputes: Climate Change and Redefining Maritime Governance

By Arisha Parvez, Marjan Begum, and Preeti Chandrakumar Patil

Climate change is transforming the South China Sea into a human security frontier, displacing vulnerable coastal communities and driving irregular maritime movement across borders. ASEAN's current maritime governance overlooks climate mobility and integrating it into regional rules and institutions is essential to prevent escalating humanitarian crises from devolving into strategic instability.

Between 2011 and 2020, Southeast Asian countries accounted for **15 percent of the Asia-Pacific population** affected by disasters and one-quarter of all fatalities. By 2050, the East Asia and Pacific region is projected to see as many as **48.4 million internal climate migrants**. This indicates that climate change is transforming the contested waters of the South China Sea into a critical **human security frontier**. Despite this, the South China Sea is typically framed as a **site of territorial disputes, naval competition, and great-power rivalry**, overlooking a quieter but equally destabilising force: the intensifying **nexus of climate change** and human displacement.

Sea-level rise, saline intrusion, and the catastrophic loss of livelihoods in the fishing and agricultural sectors are pushing coastal communities to relocate both internally and

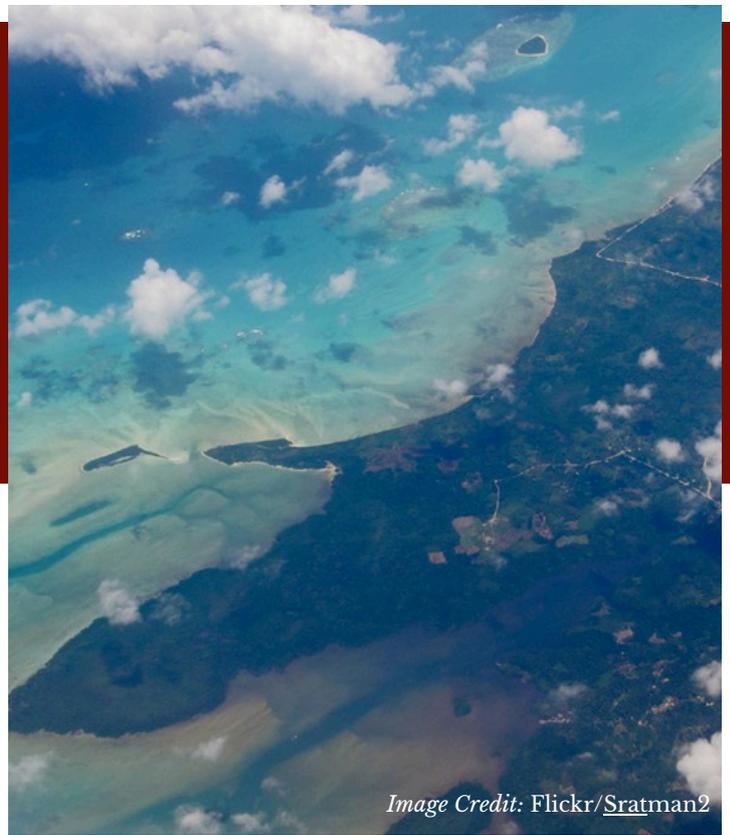


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across international borders, transforming migration into a fundamental governance challenge. Despite growing evidence of these shifts, maritime governance frameworks for the South China Sea rarely address **human mobility**. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) mechanisms and regional maritime agreements **prioritise state sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and traditional military security** while largely ignoring the growing reality of displacement.

Emerging Crisis

Millions in Southeast Asia face displacement due to climate impacts by mid-century. Coastal and deltaic regions closely tied to the South China Sea—specifically the Mekong, Red River, and Manila Bay—are especially exposed. In these frontiers, livelihoods depend heavily on fisheries, aquaculture, and small-scale agriculture. However, sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion are progressively

undermining food security and settlement viability; in Vietnam, a 100 cm rise threatens to submerge half the Mekong Delta plain.

Beyond terrestrial inundation, climate change and overfishing are reshaping fish stocks within the South China Sea, a basin responsible for 12 percent of the global catch. Warming ocean temperatures are triggering a poleward migration of species, forcing fishers to travel farther and cross maritime boundaries to follow shifting resources. For many, the choice is to operate without permission in neighbouring Exclusive Economic Zones or abandon their livelihoods entirely. This dynamic increases irregular maritime movement and heightens the risk of conflict, as fishing competition now drives the majority of violent incidents in the region.

Critically, climate-driven mobility blurs the line between survival movement and illegal activity. Lawful artisanal fishers are increasingly misidentified as "illegal" fleets or as part of maritime militias. Such uncoordinated displacement increases the risk of detention, misinterpretation, and humanitarian crises at sea.

Yet, despite these mounting pressures, the phenomenon of climate-driven migration remains largely invisible within regional governance frameworks. This makes ASEAN institutions currently unprepared to manage these slow-onset, maritime-linked movements.

ASEAN's Governance Gaps in Climate Mobility

The families along the coastlines of Southeast Asia are making quiet choices to leave not because of a single natural disaster, but due to decades-long loss of land, water and income. However, these slow and cumulative migrations remain almost entirely absent from ASEAN's official policymaking process. ASEAN's current organisations: the AHA Centre and AWGCC, do not possess the authority to address climate related human mobility. The AHA Centre is primarily focused on responding to sudden disasters leaving slow onset climate displacement outside of coordinated regional response.

ASEAN's main institutional barriers to collective action on human mobility stem directly from the non-interference principle. ASEAN manages skilled mobility within its economic pillars, while climate vulnerable low-skilled workers fall into socio-cultural frameworks that have limited enforcement capabilities. Climate-driven human mobility at sea is also invisible within all of ASEAN's traditional security institutions (i.e., maritime governance platforms), which focus on issues such as territorial disputes and freedom of navigation.

Therefore, in the existing vacuum, displacement is being handled nationally through ad hoc processes. National responses, including Vietnam's coastal relocation programmes, have had challenges in providing long-term livelihood security to displaced populations.

Without regional coordination, [ASEAN Migration Outlook](#) (2024) warns that climate displacement could generate extreme levels of social, economic, and political instability throughout the region.

Policy Innovation: Integrating Climate Mobility into Maritime Governance

A. Establish an ASEAN Climate Mobility Protocol

ASEAN should develop a formally agreed upon regional instrument under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), which currently does not explicitly reference [climate-induced mobility](#) and [evacuation measures](#). A new protocol could establish protection standards for climate-displaced persons by referencing the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa ([Kampala Convention](#)). Rather than establishing permanent obligations for resettling displaced populations, the protocol should emphasise providing temporary protections and coordinating assistance to displaced populations and include safeguards to prevent forced returns to environmentally hazardous locations.

B. Expand Maritime Governance to Include Human Security

For displaced communities at sea, the distinction between security risk and survival strategy is often vague. By strengthening the mandate of the AHA Centre and integrating regional disaster data systems, ASEAN could

better identify climate-migration hotspots, such as the Mekong Delta and Manila Bay. By incorporating climate mobility into maritime situational awareness, displaced populations would be treated as humanitarian actors, rather than security threats.

C. Identify "Climate Mobility Corridors"

ASEAN can create [climate mobility corridors](#) by developing bilateral labour pathways to facilitate [safe migration](#) as an adaptation strategy. Climate mobility corridors should be included in the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework to promote the sustainability of marine resources and to define the legal status of migrant fishers. This will allow vulnerable populations to receive resources to either remain in their places of origin or migrate safely to diversify their livelihoods and discourage irregular maritime movement and unregulated fishing. By [framing](#) mobility as managed adaptation, movement would shift from being viewed as a measure of failure to being a path to resilience.

D. Develop Access to Finance and Partnerships

ASEAN will need to [engage additional multilateral finance and technical partners](#) to fill the funding gap and to collect data on slow-onset events. Without access to predictable financing, adaptation cannot be translated into reliable protections for vulnerable populations. Adaptation-related infrastructure, such as elevated housing or mangrove restoration for coastal defence, should be supported [utilising existing financial instruments](#), including the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility. ASEAN should also

create an ASEAN Climate-Security Data System to reconcile currently unharmonised and **aggregated data** to provide a single evidence base to monitor cross-border climate mobility and inform policy decisions. This can enhance trust and cooperation among member states while emphasising ASEAN's central role in addressing non-traditional security concerns in the South China Sea.

Why ASEAN Must Act Now

The existing evidence suggests that climate-induced mobility is no longer a distant projection but an unfolding reality reshaping the South China Sea. Southeast Asia already accounts for a disproportionate share of global disaster-related fatalities, with millions forced to move each year due to floods, storms, and rising sea levels. This growing pattern makes climate change and regional security governance increasingly inseparable. Additionally, the Mekong Delta, Red River Delta, and Manila Bay are not only environmental hotspots; they are emerging mobility frontiers directly linked to maritime stability.

ASEAN's continued delay in engaging with climate-induced mobility can no longer be treated as a neutral omission. Unmanaged displacement produces strategic ambiguity. As coastlines retreat and marine resources shift, affected populations increasingly move across maritime boundaries in search of survival. In the absence of coordinated regional mechanisms, such movement risks being misinterpreted as territorial probing, illegal

encroachment, or geopolitical signalling. In a basin already characterised by fragile trust and contested maritime boundaries, this ambiguity heightens the possibility of escalation.

Integrating climate mobility into maritime governance is therefore not merely a humanitarian consideration, it is a strategic necessity for regional stability. **ASEAN's doctrine of comprehensive security** recognises that environmental degradation, economic vulnerability, and social instability are interconnected drivers of insecurity. Climate mobility is at the core of this confluence. Addressing it solely as a welfare issue undermines its transboundary consequences and weakens ASEAN's ability to manage non-traditional security risks collectively.

Political and economic conditions further reinforce the urgency. Public concern about climate change is high across the region, and evidence consistently shows that proactive adaptation, including managed mobility pathways, is more cost-effective than repeated disaster response. Acting now allows ASEAN to shape climate mobility as structured adaptation rather than respond reactively once instability has taken root.

Conclusion

The South China Sea's future will be shaped not only by ships and sovereignty claims but also by the movement of people adapting to a changing marine environment. Climate-induced displacement is already altering

livelihoods, maritime behaviour, and regional risk dynamics. Integrating climate mobility into ASEAN's maritime governance offers a pragmatic and forward-looking path. By linking disaster management, marine governance, and labour mobility within existing institutional frameworks, ASEAN can reduce insecurity while remaining consistent with its norms and people-centred vision of security.

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Steering ASEAN amid Turbulent Waters

By Alec Julian Andrade Templonuevo

Philippine domestic divisions and public “word wars” with China risk undermining Manila’s credibility as 2026 ASEAN Chair and eroding ASEAN centrality at a critical moment. Effective leadership will require projecting internal coherence, rallying broader ASEAN unity among claimant and non-claimant states, and converting the Code of Conduct pledge into concrete, legally grounded diplomatic progress.

As the Philippines assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, Manila has pledged “to endeavour to **conclude the negotiation of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct (COC)** that is in accordance with international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), within 2026.” This commitment places the Philippines at the centre of one of Southeast Asia’s most consequential diplomatic tests: whether ASEAN can finally translate decades of aspiration into a binding framework for managing disputes in the South China Sea. Because the ASEAN Chair sets agendas, shapes negotiating pace, and mobilises political momentum, the Philippines’ ability to project internal coherence and regional leadership will determine whether ASEAN centrality is strengthened or further eroded.



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Yet domestic political fragmentation and persistent regional disunity threaten to undermine the credibility required for effective leadership. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte have adopted sharply divergent positions on China policy, publicly accusing one another of being either “pro-US” or “pro-China.” Vice President Duterte criticised plans for the deployment of US missiles in the Philippines, arguing that such moves would **“antagonize China” and questioning the administration’s claim to an independent foreign policy.** In response, the Marcos administration asserted that **while the Dutertes may be “pro-China,” the president is “pro-Philippines.”** For ASEAN partners and China alike, such visible divisions raise doubts about the durability of Philippine commitments. When foreign policy appears vulnerable to domestic political shifts, negotiating partners have fewer incentives to compromise, while external powers gain opportunities to exploit internal fissures or simply wait out political uncertainty.

These divisions have spilled into the legislative arena. In an unusually public escalation, the Chinese embassy in Manila issued a **series of confrontational social media statements** attacking Philippine officials and disputing claims regarding China's actions in the West Philippine Sea. Philippine lawmakers responded in kind. A **draft Senate resolution condemning Chinese actions** garnered strong support from the majority bloc but little backing from the minority, many of whom are aligned with the Duterte camp. This public "word war" transformed what could have remained a manageable diplomatic dispute into a high-visibility confrontation, generating audience costs on all sides. As rhetoric hardens, negotiators lose room for manoeuvre, rendering technical compromise within the COC process increasingly difficult.

The political fallout quickly reverberated through diplomatic channels. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Erwin Tulfo warned that the **escalating exchanges could delay COC negotiations**, while the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs urged lawmakers to tone down personal attacks to preserve ongoing dialogue with Beijing. These developments invite a crucial question: what message is the Philippine government sending to its ASEAN neighbours? To many member states, inconsistency signals that Manila may struggle to convert chairmanship authority into concrete outcomes. This perception reinforces hedging behaviour, as partners hesitate to commit amid uncertainty over Philippine follow-through.

While claimant states such as Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam have also expressed urgency in concluding the COC, the elusive conclusion of the Single Draft Negotiating Text (SDNT) after two decades of talks underscores how damaging further delays would be—especially if they stem from the Chair's domestic contradictions.

Domestic Political Fragmentation and the Credibility of ASEAN Leadership

The Philippines' internal political crises—ranging from executive–legislative infighting to impeachment complaints and deep divisions over China and US policy—have produced inconsistent foreign policy messaging. This undermines confidence among ASEAN partners and complicates Manila's ability to steer sensitive negotiations such as the South China Sea COC. ASEAN members and China will judge the Philippines not only by its legal arguments, but by whether it can speak with one voice. In diplomacy, credibility derives less from neutrality than from consistency, predictability, and the demonstrated capacity to implement commitments.

To meet this challenge, the Marcos administration must adopt a genuine whole-of-government approach to ASEAN chairmanship. Foreign policy positions should be aligned across all branches of government and anchored firmly in sovereignty, national interest, UNCLOS, and the 2016 Arbitral Award. Such coordination would reduce the risk of inadvertent

escalation, strengthen the Chair’s authority at the negotiating table, and reassure partners that Philippine commitments will remain stable across political cycles. Equally important, Manila must redirect contentious exchanges with China away from social media and public confrontation toward institutionalised diplomatic channels. Defending legal rights need not—and should not—come at the cost of narrowing the political space necessary for compromise within the COC framework.

ASEAN Unity and the Limits of Consensus

The Philippine case also reflects a broader structural challenge confronting ASEAN. The association’s muted response to the 2016 arbitral ruling and the prolonged deadlock over the SDNT reveals how hedging behaviour—often framed as “non-alignment”—has weakened ASEAN unity and diluted the effectiveness of consensus-based decision-making. This fragmentation undermines ASEAN’s ability to uphold its core norms: peaceful dispute settlement, renunciation of force, freedom of navigation, and respect for territorial integrity, as enshrined in UNCLOS and the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC). In practice, disunity lowers the diplomatic cost of delay for Beijing and facilitates divide-and-rule strategies that privilege bilateral engagement over multilateral constraint.

While the coherence of the Chair is vital, responsibility for progress cannot rest on Manila alone.

Influential non-claimant states such as Indonesia and Singapore can reinforce legal principles without appearing confrontational, while claimant states like Vietnam and Malaysia can help maintain negotiating discipline by coordinating technical positions. Shared leadership reduces the risk that ASEAN’s collective agenda becomes hostage to any single member’s domestic politics.

Frequent and institutionalised high-level ASEAN–China exchanges are also essential. Regular engagement reassures both sides of their commitment to concluding the COC, reduces misperceptions, and raises the political cost of abrupt policy reversals. Beyond this, claimant states within ASEAN—Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Philippines—should function as a caucus to project urgency and coherence. Pre-summit coordination on minimum common denominators can help resolve **contentious issues** such as geographic scope, the legal relationship between the COC and the DOC, and operational definitions of key terms like “disputed feature,” “incident,” and “self-restraint.” These are not semantic disputes; they define the scope of obligations, compliance expectations, and crisis behaviour. Convergence among claimants would shift negotiations from intra-ASEAN disagreement to genuine ASEAN–China bargaining, significantly enhancing collective leverage.

The Philippines’ challenge as ASEAN Chair is therefore twofold: restoring domestic credibility and strengthening regional unity.

Addressing only one without the other will be insufficient. If Manila succeeds in aligning its internal political signals while mobilising ASEAN toward coordinated action, it can help deliver a substantive, legally grounded Code of Conduct that reinforces regional order. Failure, however, would further hollow out the COC process and deepen perceptions of ASEAN's declining relevance in regional security. Even incremental progress would demonstrate that Southeast Asian middle powers, acting collectively, retain the capacity to shape outcomes through law, diplomacy, and institutional resilience.

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Guest Column

Beyond Sovereignty: A Functional Approach to Grey-Zone Governance in the South China Sea

By Léna Fargier

Grey-zone friction over fisheries and maritime access currently poses the greatest risk of escalation in the South China Sea. Southeast Asian states should prioritise technology-enabled, issue-specific maritime governance and selectively partner with non-escalatory external actors, like the European Union (EU), to strengthen surveillance and enforcement capacity without attempting to resolve sovereignty disputes.

The South China Sea (SCS) sustains vital trade routes worth **three trillion dollars annually** and supports hundreds of millions of people through fisheries. Today, the most acute danger in the region is the growing risk of day-to-day incidents involving fishing fleets, coast guards, and miscalculations that could unintentionally escalate into broader conflict. Existing responses remain inadequately suited. ASEAN diplomacy and international law provide essential normative foundations but struggle to manage “grey-zone” dynamics. Meanwhile, deterrence-focused approaches risk amplifying tensions.



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Why Current Approaches Are Reaching Their Limits

First, ASEAN’s consensus-based decision-making constrains timely action. While ASEAN-led forums have achieved **some success** in managing regional tensions, they frequently produce diluted outcomes shaped by divergent threat perceptions. China’s preference for bilateral engagement further weakens ASEAN’s collective leverage. Second, international legal mechanisms, though normatively vital, are operationally limited. UNCLOS clarifies entitlements but lacks real-time monitoring or enforcement tools. As **maritime law scholars** note, legality alone cannot prevent confrontations in contested waters. Third, deterrence-centric strategies risk being counterproductive. **Research consistently shows** that “the most dangerous element is not island-building but competition over rapidly declining fishery resources,” and that most destabilising interactions occur below the threshold of armed conflict

precisely where shows of force offer the least control over escalation dynamics.

The Core Challenge: Maritime Grey-Zone Governance

In April 2024, a Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessel water-cannoned a Philippine supply boat near Second Thomas Shoal. No shots were fired, yet regional tensions escalated. This illustrates the SCS's real flashpoint: persistent friction in the grey zone between peace and conflict.

The most dangerous dynamics are driven less by territorial claims than by resource competition. Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing represents the clearest example. Declining fish stocks have intensified competition among state-backed fleets, creating a primary driver of friction. CCG patrols totalled 1939 ship-days in 2024, a pattern of persistent presence enabling grey-zone coercion.

Crucially, these challenges are not only problems of deterrence but also of information, monitoring, and coordination. Grey-zone operations rely on ambiguity: vessels operate without clear identification, enforcement actions are selectively applied, and attribution remains contested. Southeast Asian states face a persistent governance problem requiring continuous management rather than episodic diplomacy.

A Strategy for Technology-Enabled Maritime Governance

To address these challenges, Southeast Asian states should adopt technology-enabled, issue-specific maritime governance focused on managing risk where escalation is most likely. It comprises three components.

Enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). MDA integrates satellite imagery, automatic identification system (AIS) data, and vessel-tracking technologies to provide real-time situational awareness. Importantly, MDA is not merely a technical tool but also a governance mechanism: improved information reduces uncertainty, enables proportionate responses, and lowers the risk of escalation. New technologies, including commercial satellites and low-cost drones, now bring MDA within reach of smaller states at achievable prices. Once detected by MDA, states can respond with coordinated coast guard patrols, diplomatic démarches, or enforcement actions against IUU vessels. This evidence-based approach enables proportionate responses and establishes accountability mechanisms, thereby reducing opportunities for deniability. The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative demonstrates how modular cooperation can enhance capabilities while preserving trust among states with diverse security priorities.

Modular and flexible cooperation. Given ASEAN's diversity, cooperation should be voluntary and functional rather than consensus driven. Groups of willing states can

share data or coordinate patrols without requiring region-wide agreement. The ASEAN Coast Guard Forum offers a natural platform for this modular collaboration.

Separating governance from sovereignty.

Rather than resolving territorial disputes, this strategy deliberately decouples day-to-day maritime governance from questions of legal ownership. By focusing on fisheries management, environmental protection, and maritime safety, states can cooperate even while maintaining divergent sovereignty positions. Functional governance arrangements have proven more effective at reducing tension than coercive attempts to enforce territorial claims.

Strategic passivity is not neutrality but a path to instability. Critics might argue that technology sharing could enable surveillance overreach, but MDA systems addressing external maritime threats differ fundamentally from domestic surveillance. Territorial disputes cannot be resolved within any foreseeable timeframe, but the risk of escalation can be actively managed. Notably, by avoiding questions of sovereignty altogether, this approach may also prove acceptable to Beijing, as it does not challenge China's claims while addressing shared maritime safety concerns.

The Role of the European Union: Enabler, Not Strategic Actor

External partners can support this strategy in carefully defined roles. The EU is particularly well-suited to serve as a non-escalatory

enabler. The EU is not a claimant and does not seek to act as a regional military power. Its 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy explicitly calls for freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute resolution, positioning it as a credible partner in capacity building. The EU's comparative advantage relative to the United States, whose engagement is inevitably viewed through a lens of strategic competition, lies in maritime surveillance technology and regulatory standards. European firms such as Airbus Defence and Space and Thales provide civilian-oriented naval surveillance systems, satellite imagery analytics, and coastal radar technologies that are distinct from the military-focused AI platforms offered by U.S. firms. This civilian-oriented technology transfer is more politically acceptable to ASEAN states with diverse threat perceptions.

Crucially, this model preserves Southeast Asian agency. External actors provide tools and expertise while regional states define priorities and remain in the driver's seat. The EU's distance from territorial disputes and lack of alliance commitments make it a more politically acceptable partner for ASEAN states, balancing competing external pressures.

Critics may question the EU's credibility in light of alternatives such as Japan and Australia. However, this misunderstands the proposal. While Japan and Australia offer valuable capabilities, their security treaties with the United States inevitably link their assistance to broader alliance politics.

The EU's value lies not in military deterrence but in providing civilian surveillance technology and institutional expertise without strategic strings attached. The EU's experience supporting civilian maritime governance through its **Critical Maritime Routes Programme** in the Indian Ocean and the **EU-ASEAN Plan of Action** (2023-2027) demonstrates the viability of this model. By enabling ASEAN states to manage grey-zone challenges without forcing them into a strategic camp, the EU offers a politically acceptable pathway that traditional security partners cannot.

Policy Recommendations

To operationalise this approach, Southeast Asian states should pursue three measures:

First, establish shared maritime data and MDA hubs among willing ASEAN states, integrating satellite, AIS, and national surveillance data for real-time monitoring. The ASEAN Coast Guard Forum should serve as the anchor for this infrastructure. The **Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP)** offers a proven model: a multilateral information-sharing centre that operates voluntarily, without requiring consensus on broader political questions. ReCAAP's success in addressing piracy incidents in Southeast Asia **declined by 65 percent** between 2015 and 2016, demonstrating the effectiveness of functional cooperation.

Second, partner with non-escalatory external actors, such as the EU, for data analytics, technology transfer, and coast guard capacity-building. This partnership should prioritise functional cooperation over military deployments. A concrete starting point would be a joint pilot programme integrating Copernicus satellite data into national MDA systems, beginning with two or three willing ASEAN states.

Third, decouple day-to-day maritime governance from sovereignty disputes, allowing functional cooperation on fisheries, environmental protection, and maritime safety to proceed independently. Combating IUU fishing is the most viable entry point: politically least sensitive, yet operationally one of the most urgent drivers of grey-zone friction.

Conclusion

Three caveats merit emphasis. First, this strategy addresses unintended escalation rather than deliberate aggression. Like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Cold War Europe, maritime governance mechanisms can prevent miscalculation but cannot deter determined aggression. The comparison is illustrative rather than prescriptive. If China were determined to initiate deliberate military conflict, no maritime governance mechanism could stop it, but such mechanisms can significantly reduce the risk of unintended escalation.

Second, while Beijing might accept functional cooperation that avoids questions of sovereignty, China may view EU involvement with scepticism. However, ASEAN states with diverse threat perceptions may welcome non-escalatory partners that provide capacity without requiring strategic commitments.

Third, success depends on sustained political will. The transparency mechanisms and data-sharing infrastructure proposed here are effective only when states commit to using them consistently and act on the information gathered to coordinate enforcement, issue evidence-based diplomatic protests, and hold violators accountable.

The South China Sea dispute is unlikely to be resolved through a final legal or political settlement in the near term. For Southeast Asian policymakers, the priority is to reduce the risk of maritime escalation. By reframing the challenge as daily risk management, Southeast Asian states can protect resources and strengthen strategic autonomy.

Technology-enabled, issue-specific maritime governance offers a pragmatic path forward. Strategic autonomy will ultimately be built not through alignment with external powers, but through the ability to govern one's own waters effectively. And that ability begins with knowing what is happening there.

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Photos



Counterpoint Southeast Asia 18 Discussions



First Place: Arisha Parvez (Masters of Public Policy 24/26), Marjan Begum (Masters of Public Administration 25/26), and Preeti Chandrakumar Patil (Masters of Public Policy 24/26)



Second Place: Alec Julian Andrade Templonuevo (Masters of International Affairs 25/27)



Third Place: Léna Fargier (Masters of International Affairs 25/27)

THE CENTRE ON ASIA AND GLOBALISATION

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