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Narratives of the South China Sea Under the Marcos Administration in the Philippines: Characteristics, Trends, and Impacts

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Abstract: Since his inauguration, Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos has actively aligned with the anti-China coalition led by the US and the West, frequently provoking China and shaping a new narrative about the South China Sea. This paper, based on the overall national security perspective, deduces the Marcos administration's four-dimensional South China Sea discourse system—sovereignty, international law, history, human rights, and democracy—from Philippine news media reports. It analyzes its dissemination effectiveness in the Anglo-American public discourse arena and explores the establishment of a policy effect assessment system for the Philippines' South China Sea narrative, providing scholarly suggestions for safeguarding against risks to China's ideological security. Employing both quantitative and qualitative big data analysis, this study analyzes South China Sea reports from mainstream Philippine and British/American media from June 30, 2022, to May 31, 2024, examining the content, characteristics, metaphors, and dissemination effects of the Philippine narrative. The research shows that the Philippine South China Sea narrative focuses on territorial sovereignty, international law and history, human rights, and democracy, with the Coast Guard playing a crucial role. The Philippines strengthens its tough stance against China through public opinion, justifies its actions through international law and historical self-validation, maligns China's image through human rights issues, and links democratic values with the South China Sea issue to garner support from Western countries. The study finds that the Marcos administration, through strategic narrative techniques and ideological demarcation, has worsened China's diplomatic strategic environment around the South

China Sea, making the public opinion battle over this issue a primary line of conflict in the Sino-Philippine international cognitive space. Hardline stances against China are increasingly mainstream within Philippine society, squeezing the space for positive perceptions of China. This paper recommends that China promptly respond to provocative misinformation, guard against Western propaganda systems meddling in the South China Sea situation, expand the volume of benign perceptions, construct a peaceful diplomatic discourse system, and safeguard ideological security in foreign-related fields.

Keywords: Philippines; South China Sea Narrative; Coast Guard; Ideological Security; Public Opinion Dissemination

1. Introduction

On June 30, 2022, Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos officially took the oath of office as the President of the Philippines. Upon assuming power, Marcos Jr. departed from Duterte's "Pro-China, Distance-From-US" policy. He actively aligned with the Western-led international coalition against China on the South China Sea issues, frequently provoking China and distorting regional situations. The new characteristics and directions manifested in the South China Sea narratives among various domestic discourse agents in the Philippines during his administration merit timely assessment and analysis.

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party explicitly states the need to firmly safeguard national "Ideological Security" and enhance the capability to prevent ideological risks. Based on the overall national security perspective, this paper deduces a fourfold South China Sea discourse system of the Marcos administration from a plethora of Philippine news media reports, which is grounded on territorial sovereignty, international law, history, human rights, and democracy. Utilizing the Coast Guard as a novel perspective, this study measures the narrative's international communicative effectiveness in the Anglo-American public discourse arena. It explores the establishment of a policy effect assessment system for the Philippines' South China Sea narratives, aiming to provide scholarly suggestions for the preventive warning of ideological security risks in China.

On August 15, 2023, the Philippine government published the "National Security Policy Report 2023-2028," which can essentially be regarded as a comprehensive summary of the security threats that the Marcos administration anticipates facing over the next five years. It is particularly noteworthy that Marcos Jr. highlighted the need to "rethink, re-assess, and re-evaluate the Philippines' strategy" at a time of ongoing changes and shifts in the national security landscape. He described the so-called "West Philippine Sea issue" (South China Sea issue) as the foremost national interest of the Philippines, asserting that military conflicts in the Taiwan Strait would inevitably affect the Philippines. He believed that under the increasingly intense strategic competition between China and the United States, the South China Sea would become a focal point of geopolitical conflict risk following the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Coupled with the actions taken by Marcos Jr. and his chief administrator, Lucas Bessamin, on March 31, 2024, to reorganize the National Maritime Commission, reform the Coast Guard department and

personnel, and accelerate the frequency of ships illegally "grounding" and "stranding" in the South China Sea region, it also demonstrates that the Marcos administration's narrative on the South China Sea shows a dynamic change completely different from his predecessor.

This paper employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative big data analysis to study the discourse performance, characteristics, trends, and impacts of the Philippine South China Sea narrative since Marcos Jr. took office. It explores under the trend of Coast Guard reforms, which new areas will the Philippine domestic society focus on concerning the South China Sea issue, what new topics the narrative agents actively construct; and at the same time perceives which of the Philippine narratives are cited by Western countries, presenting what kind of communicative posture in the international public discourse arena.

2. Research Methods

The methodology employed in this study is designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the South China Sea narratives as presented in the media and public discourses. This approach integrates both quantitative and qualitative research techniques, focusing on a broad spectrum of narrative subjects and the multi-dimensional discourse they generate. By harnessing the capabilities of big data analytics and discourse analysis, this research aims to unravel the complex dynamics and implications of the narratives surrounding the South China Sea disputes.

2.1 Big Data Quantitative Research Method

This study is based on Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of South China Sea security database and systematically organizes 5,132 South China Sea-related reports from 18 mainstream Philippine media outlets from June 30, 2022, to May 31, 2024. Utilizing natural language processing (NLP) technology, it isolates the relevant discourse expressions of various narrative subjects at all levels, including government officials, legislators, media personnel, experts, military personnel, activists, and religious figures from the Philippines.

In addition, this paper integrates news texts from the Philippines, the United States, and the United Kingdom, included in the American LexisNexis database. It employs Python programming software for word frequency statistics and topic clustering. Through comparative analysis of news reports' issues, high-frequency words, article structure, and citation scenarios, this study explores the content, characteristics, metaphors, and communication effects of the Philippine South China Sea narrative.

2.2 Discourse Performance Analysis Method

This section explores the multi-faceted approach the Philippines adopts in its South China Sea narrative, analyzing various dimensions that range from sovereignty issues to the invocation of international law, human rights, and democratic values.

2.2.1 Sovereignty

Sovereignty is at the core of the Philippines' South China Sea policies and actions. However, due to the vast disparity in comprehensive national power between China and the Philippines, and China's increasingly prominent maritime law enforcement, combat, and rescue capabilities, the Philippines struggles to make substantive progress on sovereignty issues. This highlights the importance of the Philippine South China Sea narrative, which needs to convey to both the domestic public and the international community the Marcos government's firm stance on "maintaining territorial sovereignty." Therefore, this paper primarily examines how the Marcos government articulates its firm stance, how legislators propose concurrences to this stance, how scholars and military personnel reinforce this stance in diplomatic discourse, and how the Philippine media utilizes reporting topics to emphasize this stance.

2.2.2 International Law and History

International law and history are central to justifying the legality and legitimacy of the Philippines' South China Sea policies and actions. This paper focuses on which principles and regulations of international law are commonly cited by various narrative agents in the Philippines, serving to construct the legal rationale for their political actions in the South China Sea.

2.2.3 Human Rights

Human rights are a crucial narrative choice for the Philippines to malign China's international image regarding the South China Sea issue. It also serves as a key concept for the Philippines to gain attention, sympathy, and support from the international community. This aspect of the study investigates how Philippine narrative agents shape the image of China's actions in the South China Sea as endangering the human rights of the regional residents.

2.2.4 Democracy

Democracy is an important ideological narrative choice for the Philippines' South China Sea policies and actions to align with the United States. This paper explores how the Philippines links democratic values with the South China Sea issue and constructs associations with the U.S. propaganda system at the discourse level.

3. The South China Sea Narrative under the Marcos Administration

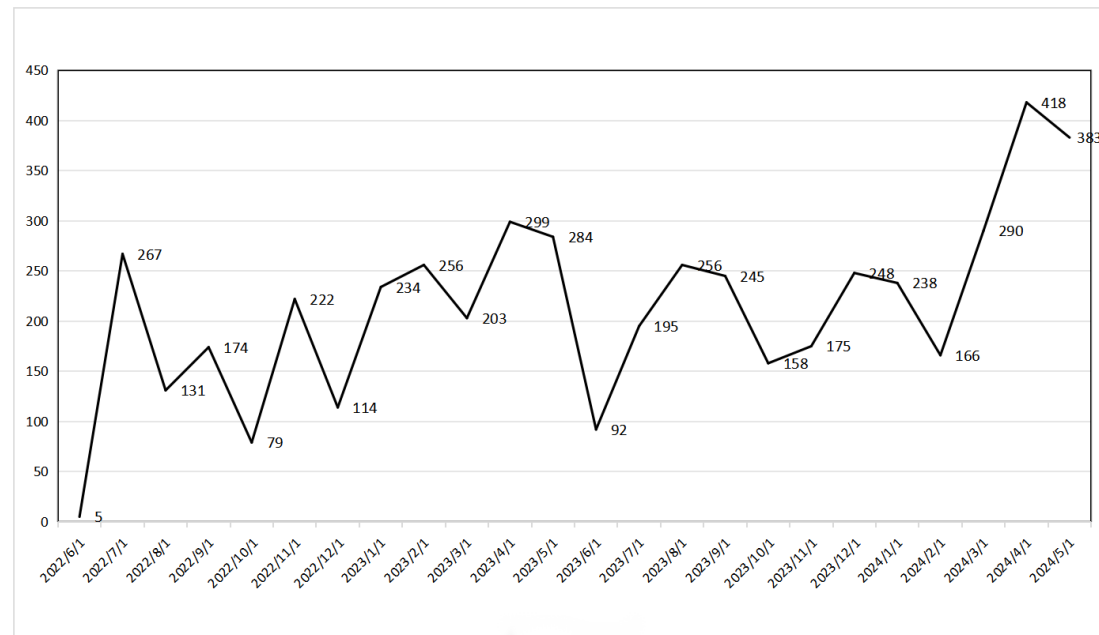
Under the administration of President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr., the narrative surrounding the South China Sea has seen significant shifts and developments. This chapter delves into the various facets of how this strategic narrative has been constructed and disseminated through different channels, focusing on media portrayal and public opinion within both local and international contexts. The following sections will examine the reporting trends, media comparisons, and case studies that highlight the evolution of this narrative under the current Philippine administration.

3.1 Reporting Situation

To understand the impact and reach of the South China Sea narrative under President Marcos, it is crucial to analyze the reporting patterns and media engagement over time. This analysis provides insights into how the narrative has been shaped by events and policy changes, and how these are reflected in media coverage both domestically and globally.

3.1.1 Reporting Quantity Trends

Figure 1: Macro Trends in the Number of Philippine News Media Reports



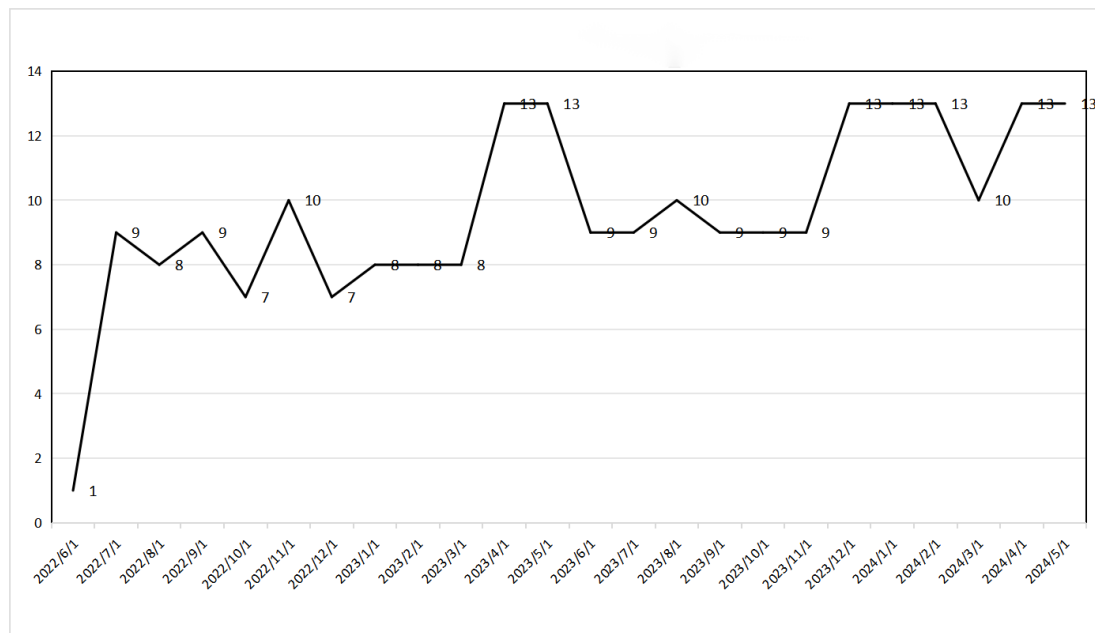
Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security.

Since Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. took office, the monthly reporting volume on the South China Sea issue in the Philippines has fluctuated, but there were three peak periods of public opinion—July 2022, April 2023, and April 2024—which corresponded with increasingly intensive reporting. In July 2022, during Marcos Jr.'s first month in office, the Philippines experienced a 7.0 magnitude earthquake in northern Luzon and a typhoon in the South China Sea. These natural disasters catalyzed public opinion, though the Philippine government had not yet officially launched a verbal offensive against China. Instead, the United States intensified its operations with 67 reconnaissance flights into the South China Sea for close-range reconnaissance of China. In April 2023, the armed forces of the US and the Philippines initiated the annual "Shoulder-to-Shoulder" joint military exercises in Manila, lasting 18 days. By this time, the Philippines had shifted its diplomatic strategy from balancing between major powers to aligning closely with the US and distancing from China. A pivotal political event was Marcos Jr.'s visit to the US at the end of the month—the first such visit by a Philippine president to the White House in ten years—where discussions on South China Sea military and economic cooperation were deepened. Marcos Jr. openly declared the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) as

a response to China's actions, which he claimed undermined the rules-based international order. In April 2024, Marcos Jr. publicly denied the existence of the so-called "gentlemen's agreement" with China, describing it as an "unrecorded secret agreement." The "Shoulder-to-Shoulder" military exercises with the US were relaunched, but more importantly, compared to the previous year, the incidents at Ren'ai Reef and the "water cannon" incident at Scarborough Shoal intensified. Philippine coast guard and other official vessels illegally entered Chinese territorial waters and were successfully repelled by Chinese coast guard ships using high-pressure water cannons. This caused a significant uproar in the Philippine media, which will be analyzed later as a case study.

3.1.2 News Media Comparison

Figure 2: Macro Trends in the Number of Philippine News Media Entering the International News Arena



Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security.

The monthly trends of the 18 mainstream Philippine media outlets entering the international news arena generally align with the overall reporting trends. After preprocessing the data from 5,132 Philippine media reports, including handling missing values, anomalies, duplicate data, and data transformations, a total of 4,438 valuable reports were identified. As shown in the graph, the Philippine Star had the highest reporting volume, accounting for approximately 17.1% and displaying a keen interest in South China Sea diplomacy, security, and military events, making it one of the most influential opinion-making tools in the Philippines. The Manila Bulletin and Business World, both major English-language newspapers, accounted for about 13.2% and 12.6%, respectively. The former, as the oldest and most widely circulated English daily in the Philippines, has a high output capacity for political issues and a stable audience for discourse dissemination. The latter is more adept at addressing

socio-economic issues such as maritime commerce and fishermen's rights in the South China Sea. This indicates that different media in the Philippines choose their reporting angles and depth based on their unique characteristics and audience focus. It is also evident that apart from the top three newspapers, other Manila-based media like the Daily Inquirer, Manila Standard Today, Manila Times, Business Mirror, and Philippine News Agency each reported more than 300 articles. In contrast, regional media such as the Cebu Daily and Mindanao Times reported less than a hundred or even ten articles, suggesting that the Marcos administration's South China Sea narrative is still centered in the capital's media circles. Regional media outlets in provincial cities are less active in external propaganda, which is linked to the complex interplay of economic disparities and religious differences within the Philippines: known as the "country of a thousand islands," the Philippines consists of over 7,000 islands, with the political center located in Luzon Island's National Capital Region and Central Luzon, home to the Catholic Archdiocese of Manila. In contrast, Mindanao, the second largest island south of Luzon, is predominantly Muslim and houses the autonomous region. Moreover, entrenched family politics within the Philippine political arena reflect diverse opinions in the Asia-Pacific security sector. This was evident when former President Duterte's son, Sebastian, publicly criticized Marcos at a mayor's gathering in Davao City in January 2024, discussing the expansion of US military bases in the Philippines, highlighting that besides the official pro-US stance, there are also domestic voices seeking a balanced foreign policy.

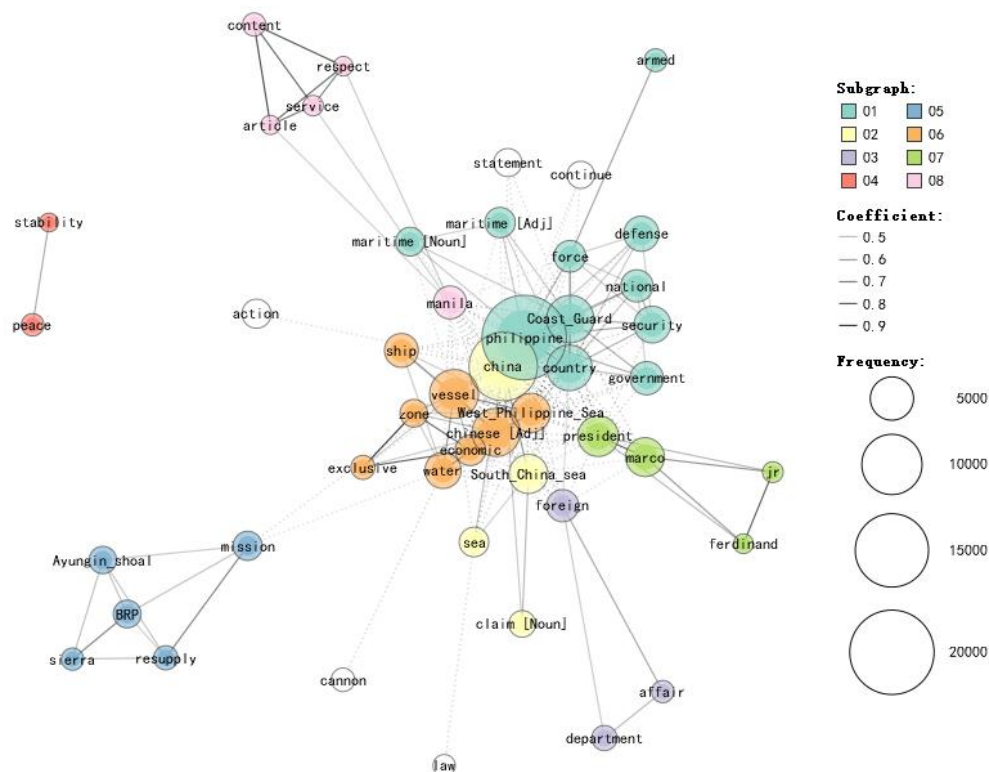
Table 1: Names and Number of Reports of Philippine News Media

Philippine News Media	Number of Reports	Philippine News Media	Number of Reports
The Philippine Star	761	Malaya	148
Manila Bulletin	584	ABS-CBN News	119
BusinessWorld	559	The Freeman	87
Philippines Daily Inquirer	427	Cebu Daily News	75
Manila Bulletin	414	United Daily News (Philippines)	9
Manila Times (Philippines)	379	Mindanao Times (Philippines)	2
Business Mirror (Philippines)	369	Sunday Punch	2
Philippines News Agency	344	Mindanao Gold Star Daily	1
Daily Tribune	157	Newsbytes Philippines	1

Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security

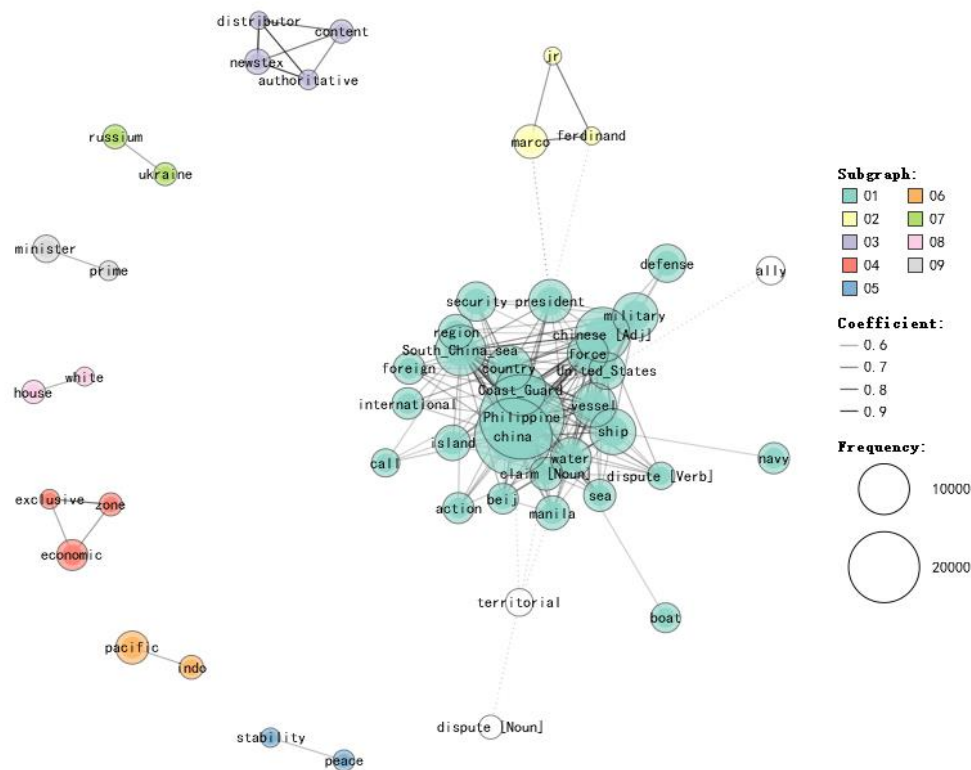
In the reports from Philippine mainstream media, "Philippines," "China," and "vessel" were the most frequently mentioned keywords. Additionally, significant attention was paid to keywords such as "Coast Guard," "president," "nation," "West Philippine Sea," and "South China Sea of China." Semantic network analysis of these texts identified eight thematic subgraphs. The terms "Philippine" and "China" served as the central nodes of two main parts. Despite some locally significant subgraphs—like the fourth, centered around "peace" and "stability," and the fifth, centered around "BRP" (Philippine ship class) and "mission"—being distant from the narrative core, the other thematic subgraphs were densely aggregated. These subgraphs demonstrated tight logical relationships and frequent intertextuality, indicating a well-connected discourse. The comprehensive analysis of the key news texts confirmed that from the perspective of the Philippine Coast Guard, the narrative predominantly focuses on national security, especially the "safety of law enforcement vessels." Other focal points like sovereignty over the "West Philippine Sea," bilateral diplomacy between China and the Philippines, and maritime economics are developed around this core narrative, showing a high degree of narrative linkage and thematic cohesion.

Figure 4: Word Frequency Clustering in Mainstream Philippine Media Reports



Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security.

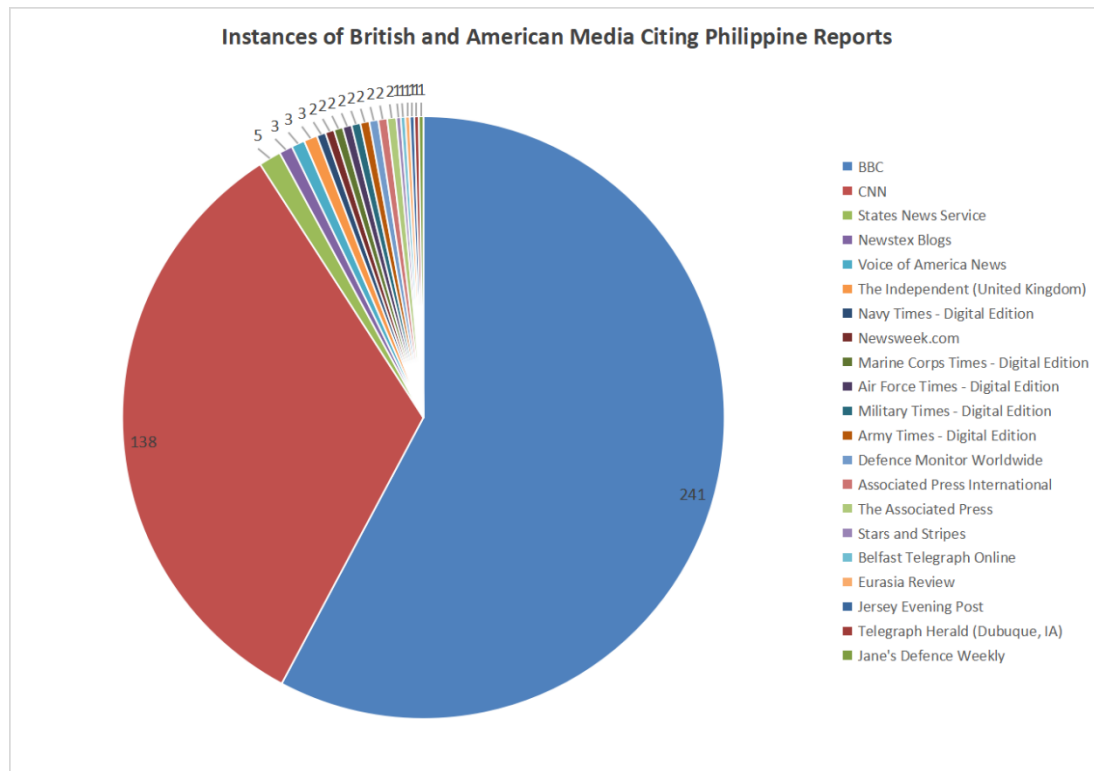
Figure 6: Word Frequency Clustering in British and American Mainstream Media Reports



Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinon of SCS' Security.

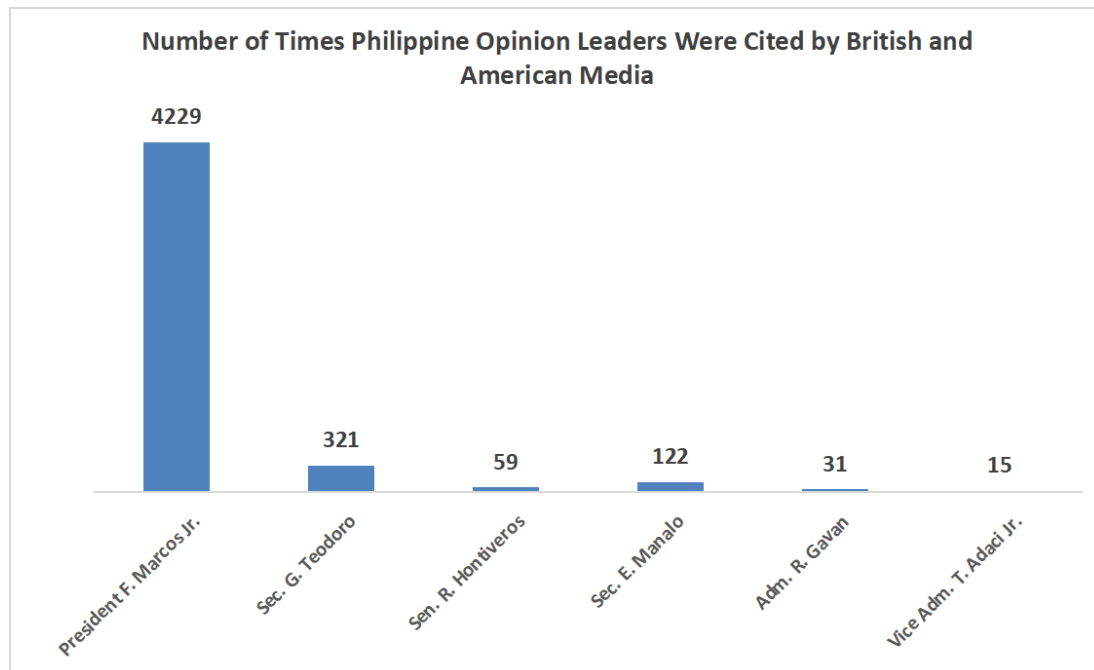
4.2 Analysis of British and American Media Citation of Philippine Mainstream Media Reports

The South China Sea narrative from the Philippines has garnered attention in the Western international public discourse, with a total of 417 articles covering the topic. Among these, media outlets such as BBC, CNN, Voice of America, and Newsweek's website have reproduced and cited speeches from Philippine leaders. Specifically, BBC accounted for 241 articles, representing about 58.8% of the citations, while CNN included 138 articles, about 33.1% of the total. This indicates that television broadcasting companies are the main battlefields for supporting the Philippine South China Sea narrative in the Anglo-American discourse. This is due to the fact that South China Sea incidents, especially those involving the Philippine Coast Guard, often feature "camera language." For example, visuals of Chinese coast guard vessels using high-pressure water cannons to expel intruding Filipino boats highlight the stark contrast in tonnage between the Chinese and Filipino vessels. Additionally, the tense standoffs featuring rust-covered, illegally "grounded" Filipino military ships confronting Chinese coast guards are narrated in the third person, providing visual impact and a compelling spread of attraction. BBC and CNN, as cable news broadcasters, have a competitive advantage in specialized broadcast capabilities.

Figure 7: Instances of British and American Media Citing Philippine Reports

Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security.

Specifically, reports citing the viewpoints of Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos totaled 4,221 articles; those citing the views of Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro accounted for 321 articles; citations of Philippine Senator Risa Hontiveros appeared in 59 articles; reports referencing the opinions of Philippine Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo were included in 122 articles; citations of statements by Philippine Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Ronnie Gil Gavan were found in 31 articles; and mentions of views from Vice Admiral Toribio Adaci, Commander of the Philippine Navy, were seen in 15 articles. President Marcos, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, has the highest visibility in the Anglo-American international news arena, followed by Defense Secretary Teodoro and Foreign Secretary Manalo. However, military leaders at the frontline of conflicts have comparatively lower visibility. Therefore, Marcos's statements should be the focal point of attention for China in the regional context. The specific impact of Philippine political leaders' South China Sea discourse in British and American media will be discussed in the following section of this paper.

Figure 8: Number of Times Philippine Opinion Leaders Were Cited by British and American Media

Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security.

4.3 The Philippine "Four-in-One" South China Sea Narrative Structure

In this section, we delve into the multifaceted narrative strategy employed by the Marcos administration regarding the South China Sea. This narrative integrates various dimensions such as sovereignty, international law, human rights, and democracy, each serving to articulate the Philippines' stance and actions in the contested waters. This comprehensive approach not only defines the national discourse but also aims to shape international perceptions and policy responses.

4.3.1 Sovereignty

Following President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos's inaugural address, Filipino fishermen's groups immediately expressed regret that the speech did not mention their rights to fish in the "West Philippine Sea." Simultaneously, officials from Luzon emphasized that the fishermen's reluctance to return to the disputed "Scarborough Shoal" was due to the presence and "harassment" of Chinese coast guard ships. They also viewed Marcos's temporary silence on this issue as a continuation of Duterte's "puppetry" towards China, vividly portraying the fishermen's deep resentment towards the government's failure to properly resolve maritime disputes. This sentiment, while putting pressure on the new government, paradoxically provides internal momentum for the Marcos administration's claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea. Over two years since taking office, the Marcos administration has shifted from Duterte's policy of "setting aside disputes and jointly developing" the area, a change partly driven by the rise of domestic right-wing nationalist forces. At the 21st Asian Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) in June 2024, Marcos repeatedly emphasized the Philippines' "sovereignty" over the South China Sea, even citing the "US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty" to reassert a tough stance against

China to the international community. He also highlighted that bilateral and multilateral military security cooperation are the points of leverage for the Philippines to assert control over Chinese territorial waters.

Figure 9: Word Frequency Statistics of Naval Ship Terms in Philippine Media Reports



Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security.

Based on an analysis of 5,132 Philippine media reports, this study extracted and conducted frequency statistics on the model names of naval ships from various countries. Remarkably, the Indian Navy topped the list with 121 reports, followed by other "Indo-Pacific" allies like the US, Australia, Japan, and also a significant presence from European nations like the UK and France. This suggests that the Philippine mainstream media's coverage of foreign navies already exhibits an embryonic form of the "Indo-Pacific" strategic framework. However, attention to Japan and European countries outside the region remains limited. Overall, the coverage shows a pattern where the South China Sea's neighboring countries are at the center, with interest gradually decreasing outward.

Table 2: Naval Ship Affiliations by Country and Reported Numbers

Naval Ship Affiliating Country Department	Number of Reports
Indian Navy	121
United States Navy	29
Philippine Navy	23
Australian Navy	11
Japanese Navy	5
French Navy	5
British Navy	4

Source: Jinan University's research program for international public opinion of SCS' Security.

In the realm of territorial sovereignty, the US and the Philippines consistently adhere to a "zero-sum game" mentality, prioritizing their own interests above the security of surrounding nations. The frequent military exercises purportedly conducted to "maintain regional peace and stability" are essentially a guise to cover actions that infringe upon other nations' sovereignty and interfere in their domestic affairs.

4.3.2 International Law and History

The South China Sea disputes between China and the Philippines mainly erupted in the last decade of the 21st century. On April 10, 2012, 12 Chinese fishing boats were intercepted by a Philippine naval ship at Scarborough Shoal. In the same year, the Chinese Navy and Coast Guard achieved actual control over the Shoal, which led to a prolonged online public opinion battle between the two countries over legal issues. On January 22, 2013, the Philippines formally initiated arbitration against China at the United Nations Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. In 2016, the involvement of the U.S. military in the South China Sea led to the most tense geopolitical crisis around China in nearly a decade. After coming to power, the Marcos administration heavily publicized the old news about the "South China Sea Arbitration." The Philippine claim to the South China Sea primarily relies on the provisions regarding exclusive economic zones in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which grants coastal states sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the sea areas extending 200 nautical miles from their coastlines. However, when applying this provision, the Philippines overlooks the fact that China has had long-standing and continuous sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea. By including Scarborough Shoal within its so-called 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone and claiming sovereignty over it, the Philippines clearly distorts international law and historical facts. Philippine Senator Risa Hontiveros has repeatedly proposed appeals to the United Nations General Assembly in Congress and encouraged foreign netizens on social media platforms like X and Facebook to commemorate the 7th anniversary of the "South China Sea Arbitration" ruling. Given China's undeniable historical and legal claim to the South China Sea spanning over two thousand years since the Han dynasty, the Philippine narrative effectively attempts to align international law with historical claims, denying the legal continuity of ancient Chinese jurisdiction and using a unilateral interpretation of maritime law as its ironclad proof.

4.3.3 Human Rights

The Marcos government's "National Security Policy Report 2023–2028" emphasizes the "commits to promote, protect, and defend human rights as enunciated in various international covenants." In November 2022, during her visit to the Philippines, U.S. Vice President Harris mentioned the South China Sea and human rights issues, but she did not integrate human rights into the discussion on the South China Sea. Her state visit focused on the Philippines' "lethal" anti-drug measures and discussions with Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte. Thus, at the beginning of Marcos's tenure, human rights

were not a major issue directly manipulated by the Philippines regarding China; rather, the Philippines itself was mired in a Western context of human rights deficits. Therefore, when Chinese coast guards intensified their efforts to expel vessels attempting to resupply illegally "grounded" military ships from 2023 to 2024, the Philippines and the Western front formed a cyclical collaboration of exploiting issues and trailing accusations. In November 2023, Australia criticized a Chinese naval vessel for using sonar pulses in an "unsafe and unprofessional" manner that injured a navy diver. In the following month, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna in Canberra stressed that "China should freely pursue economic rise but in exchange, it needs to meet international expectations on human rights," while also mentioning the "harassment" of Philippine vessels by Chinese coast guard ships. The "Philippine Star" reported in April 2024 that Manila authorities described the Chinese coast guard's eviction measures as "aggressive." Subsequently, the Global Conflict Tracker targeted human rights towards China, marking 2023 as the year "Chinese coast guard ships began to adopt dangerous tactics to harass Philippine resupply missions."

4.3.4 Democracy

The Marcos government's "National Security Policy Report 2023–2028" explicitly identifies "democracy and freedom" as core values in its first chapter, "Enduring Vision And Values." The document declares, "The Philippines shall continue to promote a rules-based international order anchored on multilateralism, ideals of sovereign equality of States, peaceful settlement of disputes, and conduct of international relations without threat to human security or use of force, as embodied in the Charter of the United Nations. The Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy and adheres to the policy of peace, equality, justice, freedom, cooperation, and amity with all nations. The Philippines shall use its stature and goodwill in promoting harmony, respect, and understanding in the regional and global community." This national security policy document represents the Philippines' official stance as part of the democratic camp, with significant rhetorical support from Western military and coast guard sectors. In November 2022, U.S. Vice President Harris stated during a bilateral meeting at the Malacañang Palace in the Philippines, "we must reiterate, always, that we stand with you in defense of international rules and norms as it relates to the South China Sea." In October 2023, Australian Prime Minister Albanese announced a plan to deploy a U.S. Coast Guard cutter to the Pacific in early 2024 to increase presence and support regional organizations in addressing maritime security priorities, expressing concern over China's excessive maritime claims and unilateral actions that could exacerbate tensions and increase the risk of miscalculations in the region. The document also mentioned "shared values of democratic nations" and a "peaceful, open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region," illustrating how the Philippines, as a strategic cover country under the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" and a traditional ally of the United States, often benefits from its identity construction within the "democracy" camp.

5. Case Study Analysis of the Recent Incidents at Ren'ai Reef and Scarborough Shoal

A complete strategic narrative includes setting the scene, establishing causality, defining roles, and developing a plot. This analysis focuses on the Philippine Coast Guard's illegal "grounding" at Ren'ai Reef and the unauthorized incursion into Scarborough Shoal throughout 2023-2024, as pivotal examples.

First, the Philippines set an asymmetric narrative scene, deliberately portraying the situation as a structural conflict between a major and a smaller country, rather than a legitimate self-defense against one nation's sovereignty infringement by another. As early as November 18, 2023, "Business World" quoted Enrico Cau, a deputy researcher at Taiwan's "Strategic Research Center," stating that Manila might need to rely on a "joint task force" to resupply the installations it has built in the South China Sea "until the Philippines can build a sufficiently strong navy to carry out these tasks on its own." This rhetoric subtly shifts concepts, attempting to draw external forces into the South China Sea disputes, thereby revealing a narrative that equates power with sovereignty. This resonates with the Philippines' political intent to link the Taiwan issue with the South China Sea, paving the way for a "China bullying" narrative.

Second, on the causality level, the Philippines escalates the Scarborough Shoal conflict to matters concerning national territory and maritime rights, portraying Manila's official protests as justifiable and patriotic. "The Manila Bulletin" reported that the Philippines' negotiations and protests "demonstrate our resilience and indomitable spirit," also mentioning that "our fellow citizens" feel "very angry" when they see related news, highlighting the rising tendency of right-wing nationalism within the country.

Third, in terms of character roles, the Philippines introduces non-traditional security issues like environmental protection into the traditional security disputes of the South China Sea, vilifying China's image. SunStar Philippines directly pointed out that Chinese scientific research fleets in the South China Sea "exhibit abnormal behavior," and GMA News TV reported comments from Filipino marine researchers who noted the "degradation" of the ecosystem at Sandy Cay, attributing it to the activities of the Chinese research vessel "Shen Kuo," thereby endorsing the "China threat" narrative in the South China Sea. This aligns with the interests of Western left-wing environmentalists in recent years.

Finally, the Philippines uses political metaphors to craft a narrative of China's "bullying" at Scarborough Shoal, maligning normal law enforcement actions by the Chinese coast guard and exaggerating their threat level. GMA News TV reported that the Filipino coast guard claimed that the Chinese coast guard's use of high-pressure water cannons was "lethal" and "could kill" and "had the force to bend metal bars." The Business Mirror also reported that the Filipino coast guard described these measures as lethal, adding that "they had not yet reached the level of an armed attack," comparing the normal Chinese eviction actions to armed assaults and implying a narrative of "quasi-armed assault." The implication is that China exploits international legal loopholes with its large-tonnage coast guard ships and high-pressure water cannons, intentionally causing harm to the Philippines, aiming to expand the scope of international sympathy and intensify domestic anti-China sentiment.

However, Philippine media also reported that in the same month as the "water cannon" incident, the first "Shoulder-to-Shoulder" joint military exercise between the US and the Philippines took place outside the Philippines' 12 nautical mile territorial waters for 2024. This exercise included tactical commands such as "island retaking" and "sinking ships," explicitly targeting sensitive areas like Ren'ai Reef, with the hypothetical enemy clearly implied. This also demonstrates that the purpose of the US-Philippine exercise was filled with intentions to assert maritime dominance and deter neighbors through military force, keeping the South China Sea in a "state of dispute" and exploiting it to the fullest.

6. Recommendations for China's Response

The Marcos administration, through strategic narrative techniques and ideological demarcation, has exacerbated China's diplomatic strategic environment in the South China Sea, making the public opinion battle over the South China Sea issue the main thread of the Sino-Philippine international recognition space struggle for the foreseeable future. Hardline stances against China are increasingly becoming mainstream within Philippine society, compressing the space for positive perceptions of China. The chilling effect among relevant cognitive agents is evident, while American and Western ideological discourse related to China is spreading throughout Southeast Asia, fanning the flames of confrontation between China and the Philippines.

On the one hand, China should continue to respond promptly and clearly to provocative and incorrect statements, urging the Philippine side to stop spreading false narratives and creating unreasonable disturbances. At the same time, it should prevent American and Western countries from interfering in the South China Sea situation, firmly maintaining national security, territorial sovereignty, and maritime rights and interests.

On the other hand, China should further refine the characteristics of different groups within and outside the Philippines that have a benign perception of China, tailor its strategies accordingly, and expand its "volume of voice" to counter the Philippine strategic narrative offensive. It should build and articulate an independent and autonomous peaceful diplomatic discourse system to safeguard ideological security in foreign-related fields.

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Author Contributions

Jingrong Liu and Ming Tsun Chau contributed equally to the research and writing of this paper.

Availability of Data and Materials

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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