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## **An Analysis of the Philippine-U.S. Game on Natural Resources and Ecology Issues in the South China Sea and the Trends of Arbitration Weaponization**

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**Abstract:** Since the Marcos Jr. administration, the Philippines has reasserted a provocative stance in the South China Sea, deepening its coordination with the United States and extending competition into the domain of natural resources and ecology. Issues such as coral reef destruction, biodiversity loss, and fishing disputes have been securitized and employed as strategic instruments, raising the puzzle of why ecological concerns are increasingly weaponized in regional geopolitics. This study applies a qualitative case-based analysis grounded in the theoretical framework of strategic saturation and arbitration weaponization. It argues that the Philippines and the United States have resorted to ecological and resource issues for three main reasons: the saturation of traditional strategic approaches, the lack of integrated decision-making and coordination capabilities, and the demand for comfortable and feasible short-term policy tools. The analysis identifies three interrelated trends: rekindling international arbitration, expanding strategic narrative frameworks, and reshaping containment dynamics through issue linkage. The findings suggest that these dynamics will produce four critical effects: entrapment in the logical flaws of strategic narratives, the further weaponization of international arbitration, escalating strategic costs for both parties, and the lowering of the conflict threshold. The article contributes on the politicization of non-traditional security issues and the weaponization of international legal instruments, demonstrating how weaker states in alliance with external powers instrumentalize environmental issues to reshape regional order. It further highlights the risks this trajectory poses to cooperative governance, underscoring the need for solutions within the China–ASEAN framework.

**Keywords:** South China Sea Dispute; Natural Resources; Ecology; Arbitration Weaponization; Narrative Framework

## 1. Introduction

Since Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. assumed office, the Philippines has once again stirred up trouble in the South China Sea, in coordination with the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. The Philippines and China has frequently clashed over issues such as the establishment of additional military bases, the strengthening of the US-Philippines defense agreement, and the sensationalizing of the grounded vessel at the Ren'ai Reef. Simultaneously, the US and the Philippines have disregarded China's sovereignty and interests in the South China Sea, continuously hyping up the 2016 South China Sea arbitration case, attempting to turn the arbitration result into international law and established facts, and spreading this narrative to the international community. The South China Sea issue is becoming increasingly militarized and conflict-prone, leading to heightened tensions and making peaceful and orderly resolution more difficult.

Since September 2023, the Philippines and the United States have further extended the arena of geopolitical competition in the South China Sea to the domain of natural resources and ecological environment. This development, compared to traditional methods such as militarization, freedom of navigation operations, and competition in gray areas, presents a new issue emerging within the old arena, demanding strategic attention.

Structurally, this article will first elucidate and analyze recent developments in the South China Sea natural resources and ecological competition initiated by the Philippines and the United States, providing a basic understanding of the existing facts and logical framework. Secondly, on the explanatory level, it will attempt to answer why the Philippines and the United States have chosen to open up a new arena of competition in the South China Sea in the domain of natural resources and ecology, and why they have broadened and weaponized international arbitration. Lastly, it will discuss the potential impacts of this situation, laying the groundwork for understanding the future trajectory of events and formulating policy responses.

## 2. The New Trends of Gaming Initiated by United States and Philippines

In the first half of 2023, China reached a significant consensus with ASEAN countries, particularly with Indonesia, to accelerate the implementation of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC). All parties agreed to continue advancing negotiations on the Code, and officially announced the initiation of the third reading of the document in October, which provided an important diplomatic foundation for the peaceful and orderly situation in the South China Sea. However, since Marcos took office, the Philippines has frequently taken actions in the South China Sea. On one hand, the Philippines swiftly took military actions, such as opening up military bases to the US, reaffirming the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, forcefully reinforcing military presence at the Ren'ai Reef and promoting potential alliances with the US and Japan. On the other hand, the Philippines unilaterally changed the status quo by removing buoys near the Huangyan Island, further complicating and escalating the situation in the South China Sea, with the frequency of conflicts and confrontations gradually rising. Meanwhile, the Philippines also intensified cooperation with countries outside the

region such as Japan, India, and Australia, deepening and broadening the degree and scope of militarization in the South China Sea. This has led to a continuous rise in the level of militarization in the region, exacerbating geopolitical tensions and conflicts. These actions were aimed at solidifying confrontation in the gray areas, attempting to militarize the region further.

## 2.1 New Issues: Coral Reefs and Fishing

In addition to various high-level political maneuvers aimed at promoting pan-securitization and manipulating the recognition of the illegal arbitration results, the Philippines and the United States have also intensified efforts to counter China in the South China Sea's natural resources and ecology issues. A notable milestone occurred in September 2023 when the Office of the Philippine Vice Prosecutor General announced an "investigation into the destruction of coral reefs and biodiversity in the South China Sea, potentially initiating arbitration against China once again." On September 21st and 29th respectively, The Manila Times and Time Magazine published articles suggesting that the Philippines may once again initiate legal "first strike" against China, focusing on ecological environment issues and continuing to highlight the South China Sea dispute, particularly regarding coral reef destruction. In February 2025, the Philippine Secretary of Justice claimed that the country would file an international lawsuit against China on the grounds of "marine environmental destruction," accusing China of harming biodiversity through the extraction of giant clams and damaging coral reefs through land reclamation in the South China Sea. The Philippine Coast Guard announced they had collected "substantial evidence" to support claims for compensation from China. Although the Philippines has yet to determine the international judicial body to bring the case before, this move reflects a continuation of the new trends in non-traditional security competition in emerging domains, revealing a clear stance on the weaponization of international arbitration.

On December 18, 2023, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), established by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), released a comprehensive report *The Scar in the Deep: Environmental Threats in the South China Sea*. Focused on the current state of destruction of coral reefs and marine biodiversity in the South China Sea, the report provides detailed data and comparisons. The report squarely points fingers at China and Vietnam, asserting that they play primary roles in damaging the ecological environment of the South China Sea. While other claimant states may have lesser degrees of involvement in environmental destruction, they are still responsible for preserving one of the world's most diverse marine environments. Indeed, between 2022 and 2023, the United States began exerting frequent pressure and criticism on China regarding fishing issues. On June 27, 2022, President Biden signed a national security memorandum on illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities, during which a White House senior official claimed China as the primary perpetrator of IUU activities. Then, in August 2023, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the United States released its 2023 International Fisheries Enforcement Report submitted to the US Congress, identifying China as a country engaged in or supporting illegal fishing activities. After entering 2024, in February, the Philippine government accused Chinese

fishermen of using cyanide to fish in the waters near Huangyan Island, damaging coral reef ecosystems and fish stocks, and preventing Filipino fishers from fishing in the area. Officials from the Philippine National Security Council responded, stating that they would submit relevant documents to the Department of Justice for accountability checks. The subsequent statement from President Marcos Jr. indicated that if sufficient evidence of cyanide fishing is found, lawsuits will be filed. These various indications suggest a trend of the Philippines and the United States once again utilizing arbitration instruments to promote the pan-securitization of the South China Sea natural resources and ecology issue.

## 2.2 New Trends: Disrupting the Strategic Landscape of the SCS

The latest developments in the South China Sea are in clear alignment with earlier public opinion guidance from the Philippines, indicating increasingly apparent strategic implications. It suggests that the Philippines and the United States will provoke disputes in the South China Sea under the pretext of natural resources and ecology concerns, focusing on coral reef destruction, biodiversity, and overfishing. They may employ tactics such as instigating international arbitration, imposing unilateral sanctions and extraterritorial jurisdiction, and promoting the multilateralization of the issue to exert joint pressure. Specifically, the main trends may involve the following three aspects.

### 2.2.1 Provoking Arbitration Once Again

Philippines is currently conducting an assessment of the ecological damage in the South China Sea through its domestic judicial system and attempting to once again initiate unilateral arbitration proceedings. Compared to the last one, the new direction of the South China Sea game that the Philippines may undertake in terms of arbitration presents a different approach.

Comparatively, the first significant difference lies in the nature of the focused issues. In 2013, the Philippines primarily centered around sovereignty over islands and the attribution of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), attempting to solidify unilateral claims and rights through arbitration, which related to diplomacy and sovereignty. However, this time, the focus is on natural resources and ecology issues, particularly specific concerns regarding coral reefs and fishing, placing greater emphasis on environmental protection. Secondly, the targets of arbitration may increase. In 2013, the arbitration was directly aimed at China. However, the attention towards Vietnam has grown on this issue. Especially in the report released by the AMTI, Vietnam's destructive actions were explicitly mentioned. Previously, the AMTI also tracked Vietnam's increasing tendency towards island construction after 2016. Thirdly, the potential impacts may differ. The illegal arbitration result in 2016 lacked binding force, and whether it was recognized by the international community was subject to debate. Only a few countries publicly opposed the arbitration result or maintained neutrality through formal diplomatic statements and other channels, while most countries implicitly opposed it. Some allies of the Philippines and the United States expressed support for the illegal arbitration result.

In reality, the effectiveness of international arbitration over islands and reefs have limited impact in the absence of political consensus among the claimant parties. However, initiating arbitration through natural resources and ecology issues presents a slightly different scenario. The main reason is that this issue has gradually become an internationally recognized norm and has gained attention from the international community. If the Philippines were to initiate unilateral arbitration proceedings on this basis, the international reputational cost borne by the target country would escalate further.

### 2.2.2 Expanding the Strategic Narrative Framework of SCS

Around 2016, the Philippines and the United States had essentially developed a relatively mature strategic narrative regarding the South China Sea issue. This narrative was constructed through persuasion, cognitive framing, and the sedimentation of memory. These mechanisms were used to craft a narrative framework for the sovereignty disputes and strategic competition in the South China Sea. The main manifestation is that the Philippines and the United States each leverage different roles and advantages, utilizing their strong soft power and media dominance to persuade and induce the international community to establish exclusive standards for the South China Sea issue. They predominantly frame the narrative around the asymmetrical power dynamics in the South China Sea to foster a biased cognitive framing based on sympathy. The illegal arbitration ruling in 2016 is utilized as an established fact to solidify the memory of others. This strategic narrative framework has led to a misalignment in the international community's understanding of the true historical context, complete logic, and underlying issues of the South China Sea. It also inadvertently constructs a distorted image of third-party countries.

By starting from the natural resources and ecology issue, the Philippines and the United States have effectively expanded this narrative framework. In fact, as early as the mid-20th century, the coral reefs and fish stocks in the coral reefs and fishing grounds under the actual control of the Philippines have suffered significant damage, and the depletion of fisheries resources has long been evident. However, the recent actions of the Philippines and the United States have avoided addressing this issue directly. Instead, they are attempting to establish a new cognitive framing, directing the focus towards China and Vietnam through agenda-setting tactics. If the Philippines and the United States succeed in imposing blame on the respective perpetrators and combine this with other South China Sea containment strategies, they will further expand the strategic narrative framework.

It is worth noting that, besides the South China Sea context, significant breakthroughs have been achieved this year in the international community regarding the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) agreement and joint efforts to combat Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing. The United States is also seeking to designate China as a country engaged in illegal fishing activities and is planning to impose trade restrictions on seafood products as a result. Additionally, sanctions are being considered targeting China's distant-water fishing and industries such as Antarctic krill fishing. If the United States also incorporates the South China Sea natural resources and ecology issue into the corresponding narrative framework, it will further expand the rhetoric and content of the

strategic narrative. This would not be conducive to rational and orderly dialogue among all parties and would deviate from its self-proclaimed commitment to responsible competition management.

### 2.2.3 Reshaping the SCS Containment Dynamics

The main issues in the game played by the Philippines and the United States in the South China Sea involve military security expenditure, international judicial arbitration, competition in gray areas, and framing of narrative discourse. This time, the Philippines and US are initiating an natural resources and ecology game through the destruction of coral reefs and illegal overfishing, which is also an important aspect of international judicial arbitration. However, compared to previous games, this issue has certain particularities and will reshape the containment dynamics in the South China Sea. Firstly, this issue has strong interconnectedness. Recently, the Philippines and the United States have been taking frequent actions near Meiji Jiao and Huangyan Island, attempting to challenge the strategic resolve of all parties through salami-slicing tactics. Secondly, they explicitly avoid engaging in direct confrontations in terms of hard power. By adopting the new issue, a soft power and low-political topic, they can significantly strengthen the combination containment effect. Additionally, regarding the Taiwan issue, recent released information from the Philippines and the United States intentionally avoid discussing Taiwan-controlled reefs such as Tai Ping Island. However, this also benefits the United States in concentrating its efforts on both the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea issues. Finally, if the United States expands its strategic competition under the guise of combating IUU fishing by leveraging the designation of illegal fishing nation, and even goes so far as to designate China as such through jurisdiction, there is a high likelihood of linkage with the situation in the South China Sea.

From the above three aspects, it is evident that the Philippines and the United States may reshape the current containment dynamics in the South China Sea. They are employing alliance management in asymmetric game settings, coupled with issue linkage, indicating a growing trend towards multifaceted containment.

## 3. Why Weaponized Natural Resources and Ecology Issue?

International cooperation, especially utilizing legal means to negotiate and resolve international disputes, is an important historical practice recognized by the international community in international relations. Corresponding historical practices are not uncommon, but they often manifest as a form of bluffing. For example, Vietnam has repeatedly issued threatening signals, claiming to use arbitration to address South China Sea disputes, as seen in 2014 and 2019.

In this research perspective, the weaponization of arbitration in the context of the natural resources and ecology issue, has become increasingly apparent. The main logic behind this lies in two factors. Firstly, the unilateral arbitration initiated by the Philippines in 2013 set a precedent for other claimant countries, especially for asymmetric arbitration between smaller countries and permanent members of the UN Security Council, providing psychological support. Secondly, the judgment of the arbitration in 2016 left a loophole for the Philippines to attempt arbitration in this regard. This manipulation and

exploitation of the arbitration process have led to its weaponization and instrumentalization in the South China Sea.

The weaponization of international law is a common phenomenon in international relations. However, in the international community, particularly in the South China Sea, which involves complex historical, legal, and factual bases, where sovereignty, military, diplomatic, natural resources, ecology, and fishing issues are intertwined at different political levels, the weaponization of arbitration carries significant strategic security risks. This section will provide explanations for why there is an attempt to open up new areas of contention and to further resort to arbitration from the following three perspectives.

### **3.1 Saturated Strategic Approaches**

Firstly, the strategic approaches employed by the Philippines and the United States in the South China Sea are relatively limited. Since 2015, the US position on the South China Sea has gradually shifted from its previous stance of non-intervention and non-participation, which leaned towards neutrality, to a more unilateral support for the Philippines. Against the backdrop of implementing the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States, particularly as a long-term ally, the Philippines, continues to invest strategic resources in asserting claims in the South China Sea. Its primary approaches include conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), intermittently deploying military vessels and aircraft for provocative actions, normalizing military deployments and presence, utilizing aircraft carriers, submarines, and reconnaissance aircraft for intelligence gathering and military deterrence in the South China Sea. The United States also strengthens the alliance relationship with the Philippines, gradually leveraging mechanisms such as the Quad, the US-Japan-South Korea alliance, and the trilateral security partnership between the US, UK, and Australia (AUKUS) to construct a small multilateral security network in the Indo-Pacific region, promoting issue linkage to counteract China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. For the Philippines, there has been a notable push towards militarization in the South China Sea. Apart from initiating continuous provocations and engaging in grey zone competition, the Philippines opened four new military bases to the US in 2023 and vigorously pursued the procurement of F-16 fighter jets despite financial constraints. Since 2015, although there has been an upward trend in the strategic resources that the Philippines and the United States can deploy, it is also evident that the effective means for both countries to continuously invest in and exert strategic deterrence in the South China Sea are gradually becoming saturated. This provides a fundamental backdrop for the Philippines and the United States to contemplate new arenas for competition and expand strategic narrative framework.

### **3.2 Lack of Integrated Strategic Decision-Making and Coordination Capabilities**

While the Philippines and the United States have established a military security alliance, this relationship is primarily based on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). It is also founded solely on security assurances and colonial history. Due to the highly asymmetric nature of their capabilities, the

military alliance between the Philippines and the United States exhibits a one-sided characteristic. This means that the United States unilaterally provides deterrence protection to the Philippines, while the Philippines' capacity to offer strategic support, military involvement, and economic resources to the United States is quite limited. Although after a gap of 7 years, the Philippines and the United States held another Defense and Foreign Ministers (2+2) meeting in April 2023, reaching important cooperative agreements. However, this arrangement faces several challenges.

Firstly, the "2+2" meetings lack institutionalization, and a unified decision-making coordination mechanism between the Philippines and the United States remains absent. This arrangement is susceptible to changes aligned with the preferences of ruling authorities and leaders within the Philippines' political tradition. Notably, the joint statement does not advocate for formalizing these meetings as a standard mechanism for both parties. Secondly, despite expressed intentions to bolster joint patrols with Japan, engage in discussions regarding support for AUKUS and the Quad, and condemn North Korean missile tests, the consensus reached in these meetings appears relatively tenuous. The foundational agreement seems to lack consistent convergence of interests, with each side primarily bundling issues of individual concern into the dialogue. Lastly, a longstanding issue between the Philippines and the United States concerns the status of ASEAN. Despite repeated affirmations in the joint statement regarding respect for ASEAN's centrality, a discernible absence of a coherent and consistent Southeast Asia strategy from the United States is evident. The current state of cooperation between the Philippines and the United States, as reflected in the achieved statements, positions Southeast Asia and ASEAN beneath the Indo-Pacific Strategy and a series of alliance relationships in the United States' strategic decision-making hierarchy.

Thus, it can be seen that the strategic relationship between the Philippines and the United States in the South China Sea is asymmetric. Even though they have an alliance foundation, it is built upon asymmetries in strategic intent, strategic consensus, and strategic capabilities. This leads to a lack of unified assessments of the strategic situation in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. Furthermore, it becomes even more challenging to discuss highly coordinated, consistent, and resilient effective deployments. Therefore, the lack of comprehensive strategic decision-making and strategic coordination between the Philippines and the United States results in their inability to initiate natural resources and ecology issues as part of their strategic gameplay. Even the tacit approval of the Philippines' weaponization of arbitration underscores their decision-making shortsightedness. This constitutes the underlying logic behind choosing to engage in ecological environmental issues in the South China Sea.

### 3.3 Seeking Comfortable and Feasible Short-Term Policy Approaches

The policy approaches of Philippines and US concerning the South China Sea have reached a point of saturation. This is compounded by deficiencies in comprehensive strategic decision-making and coordination, alongside the persisting power asymmetry in the region. Consequently, there arises an imperative for both nations to identify new areas of contention. Three primary driving forces underpin

this urgency: firstly, the Philippines' pressing need to assert its sovereignty over its exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea, particularly concerning fishing activities and ensuring food security; secondly, the emphasis during Biden Administration on addressing climate change and environmental preservation; thirdly, domestic political struggles within the Philippines are intensifying. In March 2025, Duterte was detained and stood trial before the International Criminal Court. Although the Philippines had withdrawn from the organization, the Marcos administration still provided cooperation and support. Under this logic, the Philippines and the United States allocated resources to address issues such as coral reef destruction and the decline in biodiversity in the South China Sea, preparing to initiate strategic maneuvers on this issue.

In fact, both the Philippines and the United States are well aware of the damage to fisheries resources from themselves and the declining sustainability capacity in the South China Sea. Coral reef products and fisheries have long held significant positions in the trade structure between the two countries. In 2022, the United States was the second-largest destination for Philippine fisheries products, accounting for 32% of the total exports. Furthermore, with the increasing global environmental awareness and the gradual spread of norms, as early as around the turn of the millennium, various sectors of society, including US government agencies, have maintained a high level of attention and criticism towards the trade in coral reef products between the Philippines and the United States, as well as the issue of coral reef destruction. In light of the current strategic competition reality, it is evident that the Philippines and the United States lack moral capital. Their frequent challenges on this issue at this time, with the apparent intention of countering third parties, are clearly exposed. Moreover, actively initiating competition with target countries in this area would be advantageous for shifting focus and perspectives, as well as helping to consolidate the alliance consensus between the Philippines and the United States. Thus, a situation similar to that of 2013–2016 may arise again: stirring up public opinion and nationalism, establishing the target country as an ecological resource destroyer domestically, and provoking conflicts between various parties in the South China Sea.

In summary, the trends of the Philippines and the United States to initiate a game on natural resources and ecology environmental issues appears to be a comfortable and feasible short-term policy approach. However, from a long-term perspective, this decision is unlikely to achieve genuine strategic alignment and change the declining power status of the Philippines and the United States in the South China Sea. On the other hand, the trade cooperation between them, as well as the Philippines' long-standing practice of overfishing, have themselves led to the embarrassing situation of extensive coral reef destruction and dwindling fish stocks. By initiating a new game on this issue in the South China Sea, the Philippines and the United States will not only exacerbate tensions with other claimant countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia but will also struggle to maintain a moral high ground. The hypocritical attention paid to the issue, divorced from regional dialogue and cooperation mechanisms among neighboring countries, is unlikely to genuinely improve the natural resources and ecology in the South China Sea. If the Philippines attempts to weaponize this issue under the logic of pan-securitization, by

initiating international arbitration again, it would mean another political show costing tens of millions of dollars and could further escalate tensions towards confrontation. A preliminary assessment suggests that this approach would require a significant investment of strategic resources yet may yield limited strategic returns.

#### **4. Strategic Shortcomings Under Trump's Second Term**

By instigating a new natural resources and ecology game, the strategic move by the Philippines and the United States has already signaled corresponding strategic risks. Furthermore, their choice to let pan-securitization dominate their decision-making logic and weaponize the stirring up of opposition among various parties in the South China Sea in the current strategic competition background is itself a strategic gamble that is not worth the cost. This section will further analyze the strategic impact in conjunction with the alliance between the Philippines and the United States and the situation in the South China Sea under Trump's second term.

##### **4.1 Caught in the Logical Flaws of Narratives**

By instigating an natural resources and ecology game, the Philippines and the United States attempt to expand their strategic narrative framework and engage in strategic competition under international normative pressure. However, they are likely to fall into a logical trap due to discrepancies between their existing facts and self-narratives, leading to significant tension. In reality, the Philippines has long faced numerous issues such as depletion of fisheries resources and destruction of coral reefs, which undermines its moral basis for accusing other countries. Meanwhile, the United States cannot evade responsibility for environmental destruction in the South China Sea. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) released a report as early as 2012 on the import and export of coral reef products to the United States, which indicated that the Philippines was one of the major sources of coral, coral products, and related species exported to the United States. Ironically, the country that first opened the Pandora's Box by using cyanide fishing to supply fish for international aquarium trade, including the United States, was the Philippines, which began in the 1960s. The Philippines' grounding of the BRP Sierra Madre on Ren'ai Reef has led to over 25 years of extensive coral reef degradation and irreversible, ongoing damage to surrounding marine life. Reports from China's Ministry of Natural Resources and Ministry of Ecology and Environment have comprehensively, directly, and objectively exposed the environmental and resource destruction in the South China Sea. This highlights that the Philippines and the United States, using coral reef damage and biodiversity loss as pretexts to accuse other South China Sea claimants of violating international norms on sustainable development and environmental protection, are in fact admitting their own violations. Their position is not unified, nor can they claim the moral high ground. Therefore, if the Philippines and the United States continue to invest strategic resources into this issue, it will become increasingly difficult for them to justify their stance, ultimately falling into a logical paradox in their strategic narrative.

At the same time, the core purpose of a strategic narrative is to serve the diplomatic policies and strategic objectives of the relevant actors. Under the Biden administration, global governance issues, particularly climate change and environmental protection, have occupied a significant position. The United States has repeatedly called for cooperation with China on these issues to address this shared global challenge. China has placed high importance on natural resource and ecological protection, as evidenced by the 2019 issuance of the "Turtle Protection Action Plan (2019-2033)." China's marine biodiversity protection efforts have yielded positive results, with an increasing number of sea turtles returning to lay eggs on islands such as the Seven Reefs, and significant breakthroughs in artificial breeding technology. Thus, the United States' expansion of the natural resource and ecology agenda in the South China Sea not only contradicts China's stance, undermining the rare shared foundation for U.S.-China cooperation, but also diverges from its own diplomatic and strategic objectives, contradicting its broader global governance narrative. Overall, the Philippines and the United States' strategic move to initiate a natural resource and ecology agenda in the sensitive South China Sea not only contains inherent logical flaws but also fails to align with their strategic interests.

During Trump's second term, there was a noticeable decline in the emphasis on natural resource and ecology issues, yet his continued mindset of weaponizing international arbitration persisted, alongside the military-focused, hedging strategies of his first term, particularly the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad framework. This trajectory was inevitable. It was during the Trump 1.0 era that the U.S. reached historical highs in military militarization and freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. It can be foreseen that the U.S. will likely adopt a more unilateral and historical nihilistic approach in the future: on one hand, it will intensify military pressure in the South China Sea, attempting to extract more security expenditures from allies like the Philippines and Japan; on the other hand, it will overlook its own historical role in damaging the South China Sea's coral reefs, while continuing to utilize the small multilateral mechanisms initiated by Trump and continued by Biden to deter China.

In summary, even if the U.S. abandons its focus on climate change, natural resources, and ecological issues, Trump's personal habits and policy inertia will still place the U.S. in a narrative paradox. Meanwhile, the Philippines will be caught between the grim reality of being exploited and the continued entanglement in the U.S.'s hegemonic agenda.

#### 4.2 Weaponized International Arbitration

If the Philippines continues to stir conflicts on the natural resources and ecology issue, especially by resorting to international arbitration again, it will also have a negative demonstration effect on international norms and the practice of international law. From historical experience, using international arbitration to address international disputes, especially in situations of asymmetrical power, is a common strategy for relatively weaker states. This approach "often allows a group of weaker states to confront stronger ones."

However, during the 1990s and around 2009 when countries submitted their continental shelf delimitation claims, the claimants in the South China Sea did not opt to weaponize arbitration. Instead,

they primarily pursued sovereignty disputes over islands and reefs through various means such as internal legislation, occupation of facts, and negotiation. However, since 2015, the Philippines' stance on the South China Sea issue has been inconsistent, attempting once again to use unilateral international arbitration, supplemented by existing gray zone competition tactics and coordinated with US military security actions, to shape the image of a weak party. In essence, the Philippines has weaponized arbitration, exploiting international norms and legal logic to seize geopolitical interests. If the Philippines uses the natural resources and ecology issue as a basis for arbitration, it not only expands the scope of existing South China Sea arbitration but also deepens the demonstration effect for future decision-makers in the Philippine government, lowering the threshold for initiating international arbitration domestically and triggering psychological and path dependence. Moreover, this approach may also lead to the proliferation of such tactics to other claimants in the South China Sea, providing a window for self-inflicted consequences. Fundamentally, using natural resources and ecology issues to initiate lawsuits and promote the weaponization of international arbitration not only contradicts a state's own national interests but also exacerbates the regional situation.

#### 4.3 Escalating Strategic Costs for both Parties

From a strategic cost perspective, such actions appear illogical. Initiating arbitration not only raises the target country's strategic costs for counterbalancing and hedging but also escalates costs for the US and the Philippines themselves. China and Vietnam, faced with unilateral arbitration initiated by the Philippines, would likely mobilize domestic resources and media forces for countermeasures and possibly deploy military resources to signal deterrence, hindering cooperation dialogue and peaceful negotiation.

Relatively speaking, the Philippines will be increasingly exhausted by the need to introduce more balancing and countervailing forces, or to draw on domestic resources for such investments, which will intensify its already bleak domestic political struggles. Under these circumstances, the situation could spiral further into an asymmetric arms race and a security dilemma. The Trump administration clearly understood that initiating arbitration over issues like natural resources and ecology would see the U.S. as a behind-the-scenes orchestrator, with think tanks, media, and other civil organizations playing a frontline role. This strategy, however, was only intended to be a limited action—as a hegemonic power in a period of strategic retrenchment, the U.S. could not afford to deploy limited strategic resources to a small island in the South China Sea. If the situation escalates, it will be difficult for the U.S. to provide comprehensive security support to the Philippines, let alone risk becoming involved in a potential great power conflict. Trump's "America First" doctrine, preference for unilateralism and tariff war also suggest that, even if the U.S. takes an interest in South China Sea natural resource and ecology issues, it will not directly intervene. Instead, the U.S. will likely escalate its military presence in the region or use a linkage with Taiwan to engage in transactional coercion, intensifying gray zone competition to extract further strategic resources from the Philippines.

#### 4.4 Lowering of the Conflict Threshold

The final potential impact is that the threshold for conflict between the Philippines, the United States, and the target country could be lowered. A significant consequence of the weaponization of international arbitration is the increased frequency of such actions, which may lead the target country to develop two possible perceptions: one for long-term scenarios, where after enduring arbitration as a routine measure, the sensitivity to conflict and the flexibility in response will decrease. If any new changes or disruptions occur, the lack of credible strategic signals may increase the likelihood of conflict. The second scenario corresponds to short-term situations, where litigation stirs nationalism, making restrained actions on the South China Sea front—such as signaling and demonstrating resolve—possible. Simultaneously, the likelihood of high-risk accidents, such as unintended encounters or collisions between aircraft and vessels, will rise. For the target country, if it is unilaterally attacked or believes it has a moral basis for its actions, the likelihood of responding with restrained use of force, to partially achieve strategic objectives, will increase.

Regardless of which scenario unfolds, it lowers the threshold for conflict, making military crises or even war more likely. For the Philippines and the United States, initiating an asymmetric conflict with a low probability of success, or even war, is unacceptable due to the high strategic costs. However, historical experience shows that although conflicts are influenced by the decision-makers' perceptions, the sudden nature of conflict outbreaks, information asymmetry, and cognitive dissonance make it difficult for either side to back down, leading to the complex logic of deterrence and game theory.

Thus, if the Philippines cooperates with Trump to initiate repeated legal battles on the South China Sea issue, weaponizing international arbitration, it will lower the threshold for conflict in the region. This will bring more negative consequences to the South China Sea situation. Particularly, considering Trump's second term strategy of extreme militarization in the South China Sea to extract trade-offs on other issues, the risk of relevant scenarios occurring will increase. Unprofessional or accidental encounters, compounded by long-term fatigue, will significantly lower the threshold for conflict.

### 5. China's Involvement in the Game

#### 5.1 “Tit-for-Tat” Rebuttal

Initially, the Philippines was the party using arbitration as a weapon, while China appeared to be a passive participant. However, China has attempted to “strike back” by responding in a tit-for-tat manner. China accused the Philippines of causing significant environmental damage to the coral reefs in the South China Sea, claiming that the Philippine military’s “grounding” of a vessel was “illegal” and extremely harmful to the local ecosystem. This accusation directly targets a highly contentious area between the two countries and is part of the broader, long-standing territorial disputes.

In July 2024, China's Ministry of Natural Resources released a report, harshly condemned the Philippines from two aspects: first, the “illegal grounding” severely infringes on China's territorial sovereignty; and second, that the prolonged grounding of the Philippine vessel has severely damaged

the diversity, stability, and sustainability of the coral reef ecosystem at the Ren'ai Reef: the rusting and paint peeling off the ship, pollution from the crew, and fishing activities, which have led to the fragmentation of the coral reef.

Simultaneously, China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment released another report, assessing the ecological conditions of Huangyan Island, a previously contested area with the Philippines, and stated that the sea water quality, marine sediment quality, and other environmental indicators all met the highest standards, with no cyanide detected and pollutant residues in fish samples, such as heavy metals and petroleum hydrocarbons, all below standard limits. The coral reef ecosystem was reported to have a rich diversity of reef-building coral species.

Clearly, China's approach is to refute the elements of the U.S.-Philippines strategic narrative that do not align with objective facts, and indirectly demonstrate its legitimacy, resolve, and responsibility in managing its territory through its achievements in coral reef and marine environmental protection.

## 5.2 Proactive Preparations

In recent years, China has intensified various activities in the South China Sea, particularly in disputed areas. One of these activities involves comprehensive surveys and studies of the ecology and resources. In 2020, China completed a nationwide survey of typical ecosystems such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and coastal salt marshes, gaining a thorough understanding of the distribution and ecological status of these ecosystems. The survey also identified prominent ecological issues, major threats, and risks. In terms of early warning and monitoring, China regularly conducts ecological early warning monitoring in key areas and publishes warning products, providing a fundamental basis for marine ecological protection and restoration. Compared to the period before the 2016 South China Sea arbitration case, China appears to be much better prepared this time.

The facts show that China is not entirely in a reactive posture on South China Sea issues. Although the U.S. and the Philippines are the ones pushing for arbitration this time, China has some “home-court advantage”, with lower costs in responding to sudden accusations.

## 5.3 The Reemergence of Geopolitical Contest

Regardless of the actions taken by the U.S. and the Philippines or by China, the so-called “natural resources and ecology issues” are still intertwined with geopolitical tensions. The interactions among China, the U.S., and the Philippines reveals that geopolitical conflicts surface easily, creating a “ecology-geopolitics” vicious cycle that raises strategic costs for all parties and lowers the threshold for conflict.

Every year from May 1 to August 16, China enforces a seasonal fishing ban, accompanied by strict inspections and crackdowns by its fisheries and public security departments. However, the Philippines has protested against this four-month fishing ban in the South China Sea, claiming it exacerbates tensions and demanding that Beijing cease and desist from its actions that allegedly “infringe on Philippine sovereignty”. Similarly, some scholars have considered China's ecological claims as a “rules

dispute". Bill Hayton, author of *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, remarked, "China is essentially holding a gun to the head of Southeast Asia's fisheries, saying either join our fishery management arrangement, or we will consume everything." This framing escalates ecological and commercial (food) issues into political and strategic problems.

In this context, the geopolitical stalemate in the South China Sea has indeed led to environmental consequences, suggesting that disagreements over ecological issues ultimately rely on political solutions between China and the Philippines and are merely subtopics of broader territorial and resource disputes.

## 6. Conclusion

The article explores recent developments in the South China Sea issue between the Philippines and the United States. Through the natural resources and ecology issue, the Philippines has once again tried initiating arbitration in the South China Sea, expanding the strategic narrative framework and attempting to reshape the regional power dynamics. However, due to the saturation of strategic means and the lack of comprehensive strategic decision-making and coordination within the alliance, the Philippines and the United States are unable to afford a potential conflict. This has led them to seek comfortable and feasible short-term gaming tactics. The natural resources and ecology issue, particularly concerning coral reef and biodiversity destruction, is gradually being pan-securitized.

While this study sheds light on the emerging role of natural resources and ecological issues in the Philippine–U.S. game in the South China Sea, several limitations remain. The analysis primarily relies on qualitative case-based interpretation and publicly available policy documents, which may not fully capture the domestic political calculations or the decision-making processes of key actors. Moreover, the focus on the Philippines–U.S. dynamic limits the scope of comparison with other claimant states, whose behavior may also influence the trajectory of arbitration weaponization. Future research could benefit from integrating quantitative discourse analysis of media narratives and comparative studies across multiple claimant states. In addition, further exploration of the interaction between ecological securitization and broader regional governance mechanisms would deepen understanding of how environmental issues are instrumentalized in great power competition. Such extensions would refine the theoretical framework and enhance its explanatory power.

For the Philippines and the United States, due to the lack of inherent moral legitimacy on this issue, stirring up competition in this domain and resorting to international arbitration will be difficult to achieve their strategic objectives. Attempting to "express concerns over the destruction of South China Sea coral reefs and biodiversity" while distancing themselves from ASEAN countries and existing regional mechanisms is ultimately a political spectacle. The South China Sea issue is highly complex, involving historical disputes, power dynamics, real interests, public opinion, individual survival needs, and national prestige. Attempting to resolve all South China Sea issues through international arbitration, or even weaponizing it, is short-sighted. If the parties involved in the South China Sea genuinely wish to promote regional peace and stability, they are supposed to engage in negotiations and cooperation

based on fairness, dialogue, and rationality, requiring political wisdom, political will, and strategic mutual trust.

From China's perspective, it should actively assume regional responsibility and transform its strength and the relatively favorable internal and external environment into solutions that embody the spirit of win-win cooperation, while refuting the moral hypocrisy and double standards of the Philippines and the United States. Efforts should be made to seek solutions and a peaceful resolution within the China-ASEAN cooperation framework. This will make a new and greater contribution to the construction of a community with a shared future with neighboring countries, turning the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation.

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### **Author Contributions**

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

### **Availability of Data and Materials**

None.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

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

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