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USINDOPACOM Legal Vigilance Update

Issue #58, 19 December 2025

PREVAIL

Teammates,
Happy holidays from the USINDOPACOM Office of the Staff Judge Advocate!

Below please find the 58th edition of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) Legal Vigilance Update (LVU). To access previous LVUs, please visit <https://www.pacom.mil/Contact/Directory/Jo/Jo6-Staff-Judge-Advocate/>.

Quote of the Week:

“[S]ince May 2023, PLA air and naval activity around Taiwan has surged to unprecedented levels. The number of PLA aircraft violating Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ) grew nearly threefold from 125 in May 2023 to 339 in May 2025, spiking to new highs last summer following Taiwan President Lai Ching-te’s inauguration on May 20, 2024. The PLA also launched numerous large-scale military exercises surrounding Taiwan, including Joint Sword-2024A, Joint Sword-2024B, and Strait Thunder2025A, during which it conducted live-fire missile tests over Taiwan and integrated ships from the PRC Coast Guard in a simulated blockade of Taiwan and its outlying islands. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s Adm. Samuel Paparo has stated that such exercises are ‘dress rehearsals for forced unification.’

...This attempted coercion not only endangers Taiwan’s security but also threatens the security of U.S. allies such as Japan and the Philippines.”

[Ten More for Taiwan: Policy Recommendations to Deter Chinese Communist Party Aggression](#)

Bipartisan Report of the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the U.S. and CCP
December 2025

- **12 December 2025:** U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Harriet Lane (WMEC 903) returned to Honolulu following an 81-day patrol in support of joint operations and territorial integrity missions across Oceania.
 - **Bottom-line:** patrolling more than 16,000 nautical miles throughout Oceania to include the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Tonga, and American Samoa, USCGC Harriet Lane’s crew worked alongside interagency and Pacific Island partners to deter transnational criminal organization activities, facilitate the flow of commerce, and protect critical ocean resources.
 - **References:**
 - [Coast Guard Cutter Harriet Lane returns home following 81-day patrol in Oceania \(U.S. Coast Guard Oceania District Press Release, Dec. 12, 2025\)](#)
 - **Key Points:**
 - The Harriet Lane crew exercised partnerships with the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Tonga through [bilateral maritime law enforcement agreements](#) (MLEAs), professional exchanges, and domestic federal maritime law enforcement operations — to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and transnational criminal organization activity.



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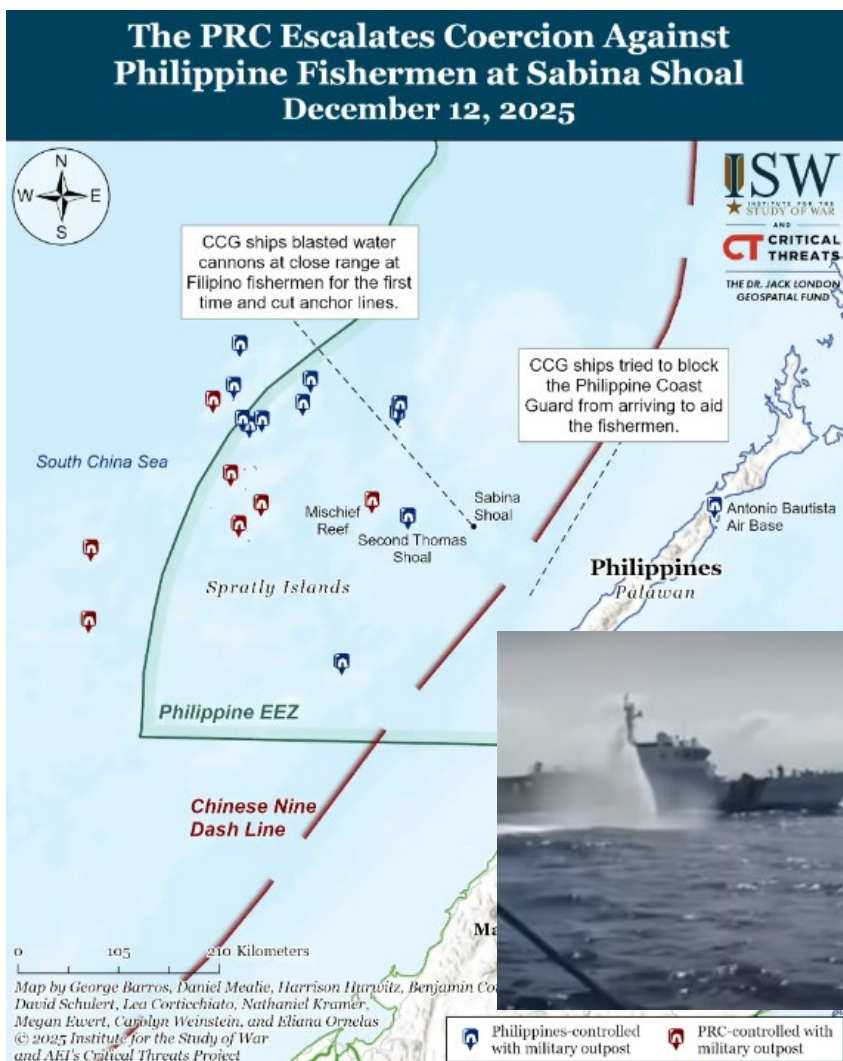
- Often referred to as Shiprider Agreements, bilateral MLEAs typically include provisions for boarding and searching vessels which claim the flag of either party, entering and pursuing suspect vessels into sovereign waters, conducting aircraft overflight, providing vessels or aircraft to support law enforcement, and embarking partner nation law enforcement officers empowered to authorize patrols, boardings, searches, seizures, and arrests under their national authority (i.e., “shiprider” provisions).
- In total, the Harriet Lane crew and Pacific Island enforcement officers conducted 31 boardings of fishing vessels, resulting in 20 potential violations — as well as 15 additional high seas boarding and inspections on commercial fishing vessels, resulting in 2 potential violations of conservation and management measures under the Western and Central Fisheries Commission.
- **Operating through bilateral MLEAs, the U.S. Coast Guard empowers coastal states to enforce their own laws in their own waters — strengthening their sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction, and sound maritime governance.**
- 12 December 2025: China endangers Filipino fishermen close to Sabina Shoal in the South China Sea.
 - **Bottom-line:** China Coast Guard (CCG) ships fired water cannons and cut the anchor lines of Philippine fishermen at Sabina Shoal, injuring three Philippine citizens and damaging two Philippine fishing vessels — just **the latest example of China’s aggressive disruption of lawful Philippine maritime activities in the South China Sea.**

- References:

- [Marilyn Cahatol & Jose Carretero, 3 Filipino fishermen injured in Chinese ships' water cannon attack \(ABS-CBN News, Dec. 13, 2025\)](#)

- Key Points:

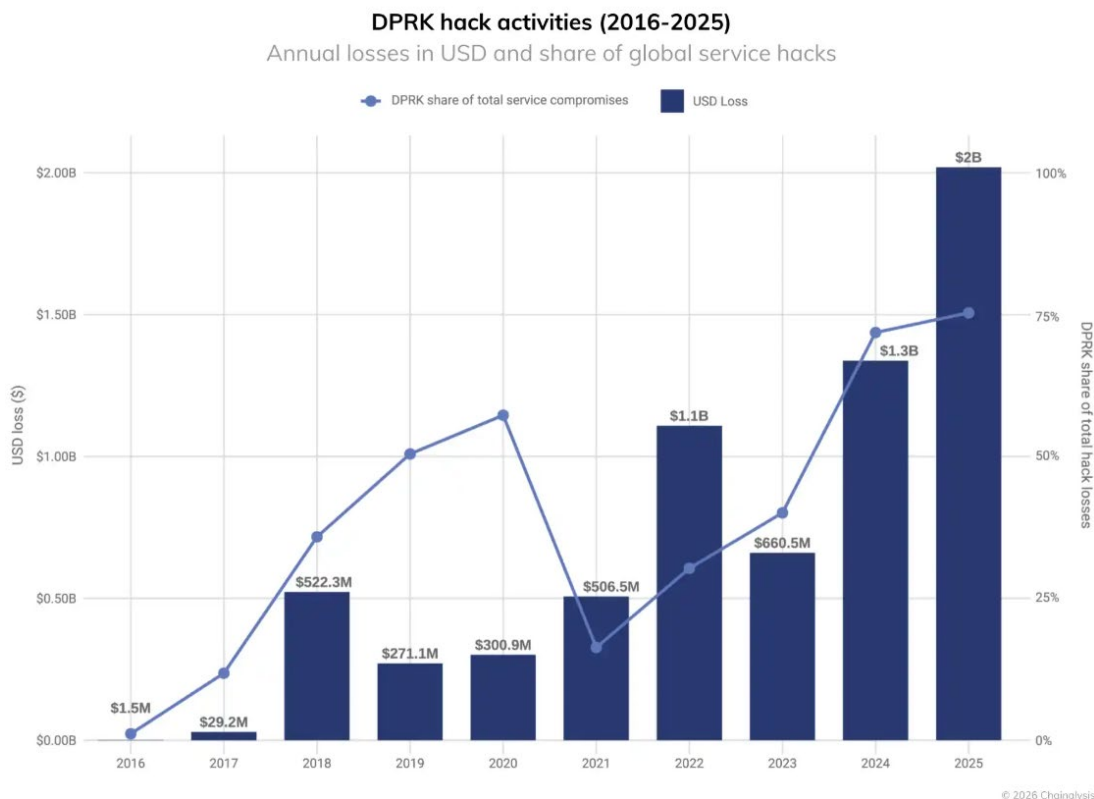
- Sabina Shoal is a **low tide elevation within the Philippine exclusive economic zone.**
- Sabina Shoal does not generate a territorial sea or other maritime zone, but the Philippines has sovereign rights at Sabina Shoal and all “States shall have due regard to the rights...of the coastal State.”
- **China’s unlawful claims of “territorial**



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sovereignty” over ocean areas where no land territory exists, and its increasingly aggressive actions to enforce them, threaten the freedoms of navigation and overflight of all nations, and infringe on the sovereign rights of the Philippines.

- In a statement condemning China’s water cannoning of Filipino fishers, [the United States Department of State said](#) it “stands with our Philippine allies as they confront China’s provocative actions and increasingly dangerous tactics against its neighbors, which undermine regional stability.”
- **18 December 2025:** new report details the extent of North Korea’s cryptocurrency theft in 2025.
 - **Bottom-line:** according to a report published by the blockchain watchdog company Chainalysis, **the DPRK’s vast cryptocurrency hacking operation stole \$2.02 billion in 2025 — breaking its own record of \$1.3 billion in hacked and stolen crypto like bitcoin and Ethereum.**
 - **References:**
 - [North Korea Drives Record \\$2 Billion Crypto Theft Year, Pushing All-Time Total to \\$6.75 Billion \(Chainalysis, Dec. 18, 2025\)](#)
 - [Kevin Collier, North Korea stole billions in crypto in 2025, new research says \(NBC News, Dec. 18, 2025\)](#)
 - **Key Points:**
 - The DPRK deploys its hackers to steal cryptocurrency to help fund its illicit nuclear weapons and missile programs.
 - According to the report, “the DPRK is achieving larger thefts with fewer incidents, often by embedding IT workers inside crypto services or using sophisticated impersonation tactics targeting executives.”
 - The U.S. Department of Justice [continues to crack down](#) on the DPRK’s use of remote IT worker schemes and cryptocurrency thefts to fund its illicit weapons program and other DPRK priorities in violation of sanctions.



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- 15 December 2025: Hong Kong court convicts Jimmy Lai, finding him guilty of crimes endangering national security — an **example of China's rule by law**.
 - **Bottom-line:** in a **case that reflects the enforcement of Beijing's laws to silence those who seek to protect freedom of speech and other fundamental rights** — Mr. Lai, 78, was convicted of two counts of conspiring with foreign forces to impose sanctions against Hong Kong and another of publishing seditious material in the former British colony.
 - References:
 - [Andrew Higgins & Alexandra Stevenson, Hong Kong Media Tycoon's Conviction Was Years in the Making \(NY Times, Dec. 15, 2025\)](#)
 - Key Points:
 - As the NY Times [reported](#), the case **“crystallized the changes that have swept Hong Kong since the introduction of a harsh national security law in 2020 in response to months of antigovernment street protests that the authorities suppressed.”**
 - Before the British government handed over Hong Kong in 1997, China agreed to allow the region considerable political autonomy for fifty years under a framework known as “one country, two systems.”
 - In recent years, Beijing has cracked down on Hong Kong's freedoms — including the imposition of [the national security law in 2020](#) that gave Beijing broad new powers to punish critics and silence dissenters, which has fundamentally altered life for Hong Kongers.
 - [U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio](#) hailed Mr. Lai as a defender of the freedom of speech and other fundamental rights (rights that China pledged to uphold in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration) — and urged the authorities to bring this ordeal to an end as soon as possible and to release Mr. Lai on humanitarian grounds.

Administrative and Autonomous Regions on China's Periphery

