



UNCLASSIFIED

U.S. Seventh Fleet Legal Vigilance Report

Office of the Fleet Judge Advocate

April 2026

READY, LETHAL, CONFIDENT

Quote of the Month:

"The Strait of Hormuz, just like the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, are examples of Straits Used for International Navigation. No ifs, no buts, no questions, as far as we are concerned, it is so. Now, what is the international law position on these types of straits? The position is quite clear. There is a right of transit passage. It is not a privilege to be granted by the bordering state, it is not a license to be supplicated for, it is not a toll to be paid. It is a right of ships to traverse."

- Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore Minister of Foreign Affairs, 7 Apr 2026

(1) Singapore Reaffirms Right of Transit Passage for All Nations, Citing Strategic Importance for Indo-Pacific Chokepoints (April)

- **Bottom Line:** Singapore's Foreign Minister, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, issued a robust defense of the right of transit passage through international straits, categorically rejecting any notion of negotiating with Iran for safe passage or paying tolls to transit the Strait of Hormuz. This principled stance is linked to Singapore's vital national interest in preserving the same right through the even narrower Straits of Malacca and Singapore, reinforcing a fundamental legal right for all naval and commercial traffic in the Indo-Pacific.
- **Key Points:**
 - **A Legal Right:** In a parliamentary address, the Minister asserted that transit passage through straits used for international navigation is a *right*, not a privilege to be granted, licensed, or paid for. He emphasized that this right is enshrined in UNCLOS (Article 44) and also exists as a binding principle of customary international law, applicable to all states regardless of UNCLOS ratification.
 - **No Exceptions:** The Minister stated that under UNCLOS, a bordering state's obligation to not hamper transit passage is absolute, with "no exception for security, no exception for the environment, and no exception for war."
 - **Strategic Link to Indo-Pacific:** Dr. Balakrishnan directly connected Singapore's firm position on Hormuz to the strategic necessity of upholding the same legal right for the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. He noted that while Hormuz is 21 nautical miles at its narrowest point, the Singapore Strait is less than two, making any erosion of the right of transit passage an existential threat to Singapore and global trade.

TRANSIT PASSAGE: GUARANTEED TO ALL NATIONS

STRAIT OF MALACCA



STRAIT OF HORMUZ



UNCLOS: INTERNATIONAL STRAITS & THE RIGHT OF TRANSIT PASSAGE

THE RIGHT OF TRANSIT PASSAGE (Articles 37-44)

- **Scope:** Applies in International straits connecting one part of the high seas or EEZ with another part of the high seas or EEZ
- **Definition:** The exercise of the freedoms of navigation and overflight solely for the purpose of continuous and expeditious transit of a strait
- **Application:** Ships and aircraft of all States enjoy the right of transit passage
- **Execution:** Conducted in the normal modes utilized by such ships and aircraft
- **Guarantee:** Coastal States cannot hamper or suspend transit passage

References:

- [Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan's Oral Reply on the Conflict in the Middle East](#), Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 Apr 2026
- [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Part III \(Straits Used for International Navigation\)](#)

(2) China's "Prohibited Entry" Zones Raise Legal Questions (22 Mar–Present)

- **Bottom Line:** The Shandong Maritime Safety Administration's announcement (183/26) of a 3,300 sq. nautical mile "prohibited entry" box in the Yellow Sea from 22 Mar to 1 Apr 2026 is characteristic of China's routine use of exclusionary language in notices to mariners and airmen.
- **Key Points:**
 - **The Legal Framework:** Under international law during peacetime, a State may establish a temporary warning area in international waters and/or airspace to alert ships and aircraft of hazardous military activities. Such areas are purely advisory; they cannot legally restrict freedom of navigation or overflight, but rather encourage vessels and aircraft to voluntarily operate elsewhere for their own safety. The authority to establish exclusion zones beyond the territorial sea is a belligerent right in armed conflict, conditioned on giving due regard to the rights of neutral nations, including their legitimate commerce.
 - **The Problem of "Prohibited Entry":** By routinely using exclusionary language in peacetime, China is apparently asserting a de facto authority to control access to international waters and airspace, a practice that directly challenges the navigational rights and freedoms guaranteed to all nations by customary international law reflected in UNCLOS.

The screenshot shows the official website of the China Maritime Safety Administration (CMSA). The header includes the CMSA logo, the name in Chinese (中华人民共和国海事局) and English (Maritime Safety Administration of the People's Republic of China), and navigation links for English, email, accessibility, and social media. A search bar is also present. The main navigation menu includes links to front page, Institutional Functions, Government Information, Internet + Government, Navigation safety, Maritime compliance, Interactive communication, and Maritime Data. The breadcrumb trail reads: front page > Navigation safety > Security information > Navigational warning > Shandong Maritime Safety Administration. The main content area features the title 'Military mission—Luhangjing 183/26' in large bold Chinese characters. Below the title, it states: 'Source: Qingdao Maritime Safety Administration; Document Number: Lu Hang Jing 183/26; Publication Time: 2026-03-20 18:00'. A font size selector is available. The notice text reads: 'Luhangjing 183/26, Yellow Sea, from 1800 on March 22 to 1800 on April 1, military operations will be conducted within the area bounded by the four points 36-00N 121-19E, 36-00N 122-40E, 35-10N 122-40E, and 35-10N 121-19E. Entry is prohibited.' At the bottom, there are links for 'Bookmark', 'this page', 'Print this page', and 'Close window'. On the right side, there are QR codes for 'China Maritime Official Account' and 'Maritime Pass App', along with a '12395' emergency number.

- **Unusual Airspace Reservation:** Concurrent with the "prohibited entry" zone described above, China issued a notice to airmen reserving a vast area of airspace for an unusually long 40-day period (27 Mar–6 May 2026) – a move that drew wide attention from international media outlets. The five airspace zones, collectively larger than Taiwan, extended from the Yellow Sea to the East China Sea, affecting critical airspace near major coastal hubs.
- **References:**
 - Qingdao Maritime Safety Administration, Notice Lu Hang Jing 183/26, 20 Mar 2026
 - NOTAM A0881/26, Reserved Area Established, accessed via Department of Defense Aeronautical Information System (DAIP)
 - [Maritime Exclusion Zones in Armed Conflicts](#), Raul (Pete) Pedrozo, International Law Studies, Stockton Center for International Law, 2022
 - [The Commander's Handbook on the Law of Naval Operations](#), NWP 1-14M, Mar 2022
 - [USINDOPACOM - Japan Joint Staff Bilateral Memo: Combined Legal Understanding Regarding Warning Zones and Exclusion Zones](#), 16 Dec 2022
 - [China Creates New Aviation Mystery With Offshore Warning Zones](#), The Wall Street Journal, 5 Apr 2026
 - ['No possible use other than military': China closes huge airspace zone off Shanghai for 40 days; offers no explanation](#), Times of India, 9 Apr 2026

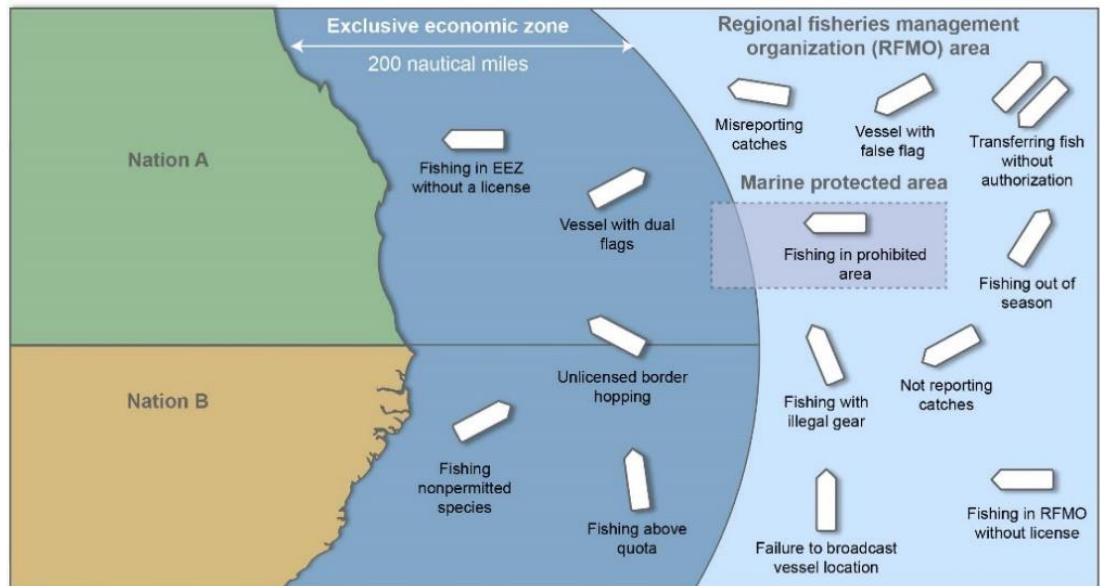
(3) *Argentina and Vanuatu Take Joint Legal Action Against China's Distant Water Fishing Fleet (11 Apr)*

- **Bottom Line:** In a significant move against Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, Argentina imposed a record fine on a Chinese-owned vessel, and Vanuatu subsequently deregistered it and two other Chinese-owned vessels. This case may provide a blueprint for more effective global enforcement, including in the Indo-Pacific: combining domestic legal tools with flag-state accountability to protect sovereign rights and food security from IUU fishing.

- **Key Points:**

- **“Zero Tolerance” and Record Fines:** Under a new “zero tolerance” policy, Argentina levied a \$900,000 fine on the *Bao Feng*, a Chinese-owned, Vanuatu-flagged vessel, for illegally fishing within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Two other Chinese-owned vessels were also detected and fined for similar illegal activities.
- **Flag State Responsibility:** Following Argentina’s enforcement action, Vanuatu’s International Shipping Registry took the decisive step of deregistering all three vessels. This move underscores the responsibility of flag states to ensure that vessels flying their flag are not engaged in IUU fishing. The use of “flags of convenience” from countries with lax regulations is a common tactic used by Chinese fishing vessels to evade accountability and exploit legal loopholes.

- **China’s Role in IUU Fishing:** China fields the world’s largest distant-water fishing fleet, operating at an industrial scale to exploit gaps between fisheries law, labor law, trade law, and maritime enforcement. According to a recent report from the U.S.



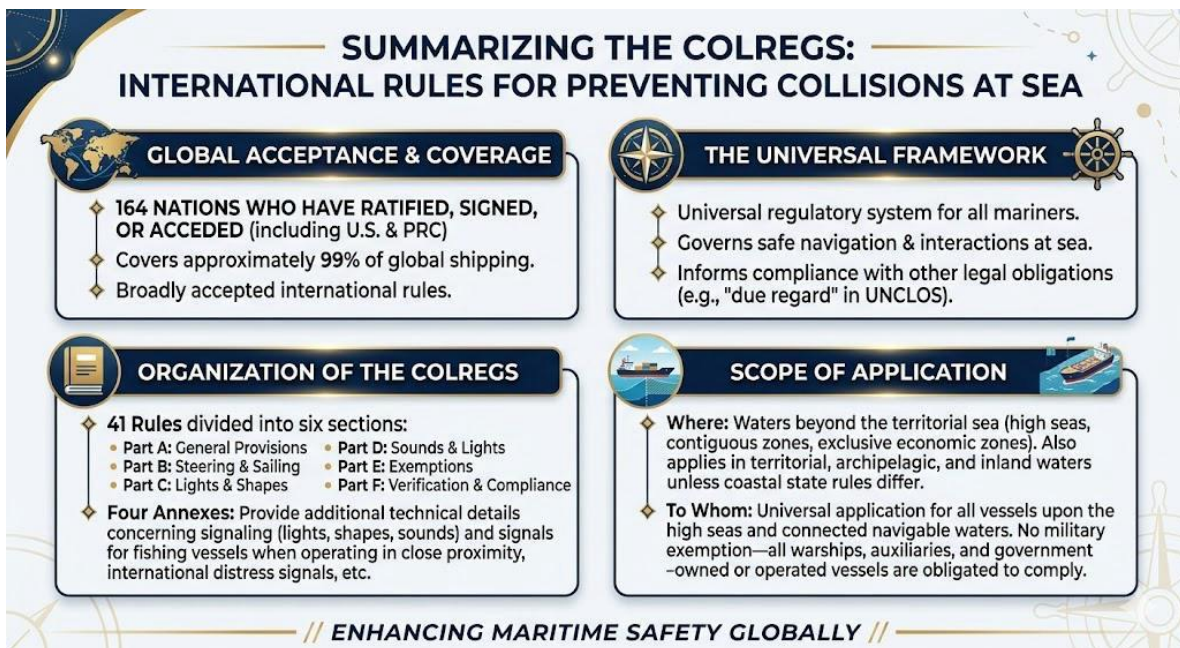
Source: GAO analysis of agency information. | GAO-22-104234

House of Representatives, China’s distant water fishing fleet “is not merely a commercial industry; it is a deliberate instrument of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s ‘Maritime Great Power’ strategy.”

- **U.S. Support for Regional Enforcement:** To support accountability in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. Coast Guard leverages bilateral maritime law enforcement agreements with partners like Papua New Guinea, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia – directly assisting partners in protecting their sovereign resource rights from IUU fishing.
- **References:**
 - [LinkedIn Post on Vanuatu Deregistering Chinese Vessels](#), Milko Mariano Schwartzman, 13 Apr 2026
 - [China’s Role in the Exploitation of Global Fisheries: Issues for Congress](#), Congressional Research Service, 12 Apr 2022
 - [China’s IUU Fishing Fleet: Pariah of the World’s Oceans](#), Raul (Pete) Pedrozo, International Law Studies, Stockton Center for International Law, 2022
 - [Oceana Applauds Bipartisan Resolution Targeting Flags of Convenience in Global Fishing Fleet](#), Oceana, 3 Jun 2025
 - [What is China’s connection to illegal fishing and environmental harm in Argentina’s South Atlantic?](#), Expediente Público, 3 Mar 2025
 - [INDOPACOM TACAID: IUU Fishing](#), 23 Oct 2023
 - [INDOPACOM TACAID: Bilateral Maritime Law Enforcement Agreements](#), 21 Feb 2025
 - [China’s Global Fishing Offensive, China in our Backyard: Volume I](#), U.S. House of Representatives, Jan 2026
 - [Vanuatu deregisters three vessels fined for IUU fishing in Argentina](#), SeafoodSource, 14 Apr 2026

(4) Chinese Frigate Reportedly Harasses Philippine Navy Ship, Violates COLREGs (25 Mar)

- **Bottom Line:** Reports indicate a Chinese frigate conducted unsafe maneuvers against a Philippine Navy ship in the South China Sea. The actions, as documented, appear inconsistent with the 1972 Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGs), undermining the universal framework for maritime safety.
- **Key Points:**
 - **The Incident:** On 25 Mar 2026, a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Type 054A missile frigate (identified as hull 532) reportedly maneuvered to within 5 to 8 meters (16 to 26 feet) of the Philippine Navy's BRP BENGUET (a tank landing ship) near Thitu Island (known as Pag-asa in the Philippines) in the Spratlys. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Western Command stated that the crew of BRP BENGUET utilized bridge-to-bridge communications with the Chinese frigate and adjusted course to avoid a potential collision, describing the Chinese vessel's actions as "unsafe and unprofessional."
 - **Governing Legal Framework:** The COLREGs are the universal "rules of the road" governing safe navigation and interaction between vessels. They apply to all vessels, including warships, in waters beyond the territorial sea of any coastal state (including contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones, and high seas) and, except where a coastal state has established different rules, in territorial seas, archipelagic waters, and inland waters.



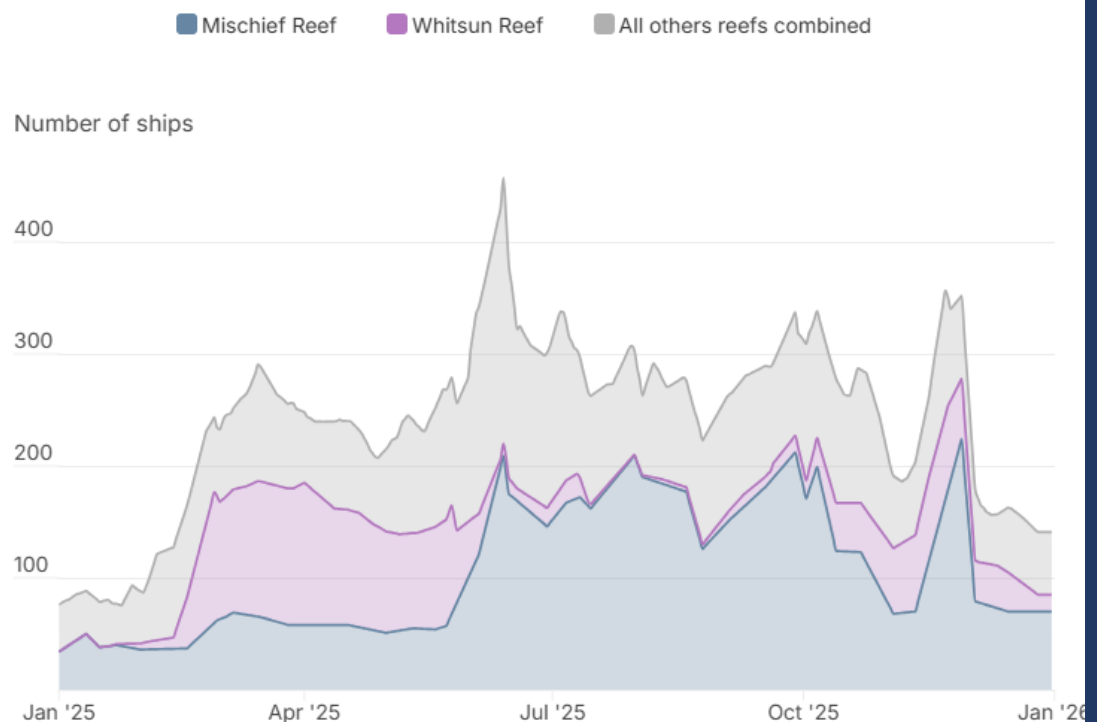
- **Apparent COLREGs Violations:** By reportedly maneuvering to within 5 to 8 meters of the Philippine vessel, the Chinese frigate appears to have violated the letter and spirit of several foundational rules. This includes Rule 7 (Risk of Collision) by actively creating a dangerous situation, Rule 8 (Action to Avoid Collision) by taking provocative action instead of ensuring safe navigation, and the overarching Rule 2 (Responsibility) by disregarding the fundamental practice of good seamanship and creating a scenario where a collision was imminent.
- **Legal Obligation:** The COLREGs constitute a binding international legal obligation, having been ratified by over 160 nations, including the United States, China, and the Philippines. For U.S. forces, these rules are not just an international standard but are codified in U.S. [federal law](#) and are a cornerstone of [Navy regulations](#).
- **References:**
 - [Philippine Navy Ship Avoids Collision During Chinese Frigate Harassment in South China Sea](#), USNI, 27 Mar 2026
 - [Video: Philippines Calls "Close Encounter" With Chinese Navy an Escalation](#), Maritime Executive, 27 Mar 2026
 - ['Intentional': AFP says near-collision with Navy ship an escalation by China](#), ABS-CBN, 27 Mar 2026
 - [WESCOM reported that a Philippine Navy vessel, the BRP Benguet, averted a potential collision](#), Manila Standard, 27 Mar 2026
 - [USINDOPACOM TACAID: COLREGs](#), 2 Nov 2023

(5) *China's Maritime Militia Deploys in Record Numbers, Revealing Potential Combat Role (ongoing)*

- **Bottom Line:** China's Maritime Militia (CMM) reportedly deployed in record-high numbers across the South China Sea in 2025, while also conducting unprecedented massing drills in the East China Sea. These actions align with PLA texts that explicitly frame the CMM as a "front line" combat force responsible for "Three Warfares at Sea."
- **Key Points:**
 - **Record Deployments & Unprecedented Drills:** In 2025, a near-constant CMM presence was observed at key disputed features in the South China Sea. This was complemented by multiple incidents in the East China Sea where thousands of Chinese "fishing boats" massed in unusual, geometric formations, suggesting coordinated drills to test their mobilization for a crisis or conflict.
 - **PLA Writings Confirm Combat Role:** These deployments are consistent with PLA strategic writings translated by the China Maritime Studies Institute, which outline CMM tasks to include waging "maritime guerrilla warfare" (including reconnaissance, deception, and obstruction), directly coordinating with the PLA Navy (including in anti-submarine warfare), providing combat logistics support, and executing "Three Warfares" (psychological, public opinion, and legal) at sea to undermine an adversary's will.
 - **Erosion of the Principle of Distinction:** The calculated ambiguity between the CMM's potential combat role and its outward civilian facade erodes the principle of distinction under the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) – the obligation to distinguish combatants from civilians and military objectives from civilian objects. This lawfare tactic muddles legal boundaries, potentially increasing risk of civilian harm while providing China a veneer of deniability and false pretext for alleging unlawful attacks on fishermen. Despite this calculated ambiguity, the CMM's apparent integration with the PLA and war-supporting roles may render them valid military objectives under the LOAC.

Chinese Maritime Militia Vessels by Location

Estimates based on Planet Labs satellite imagery



References:

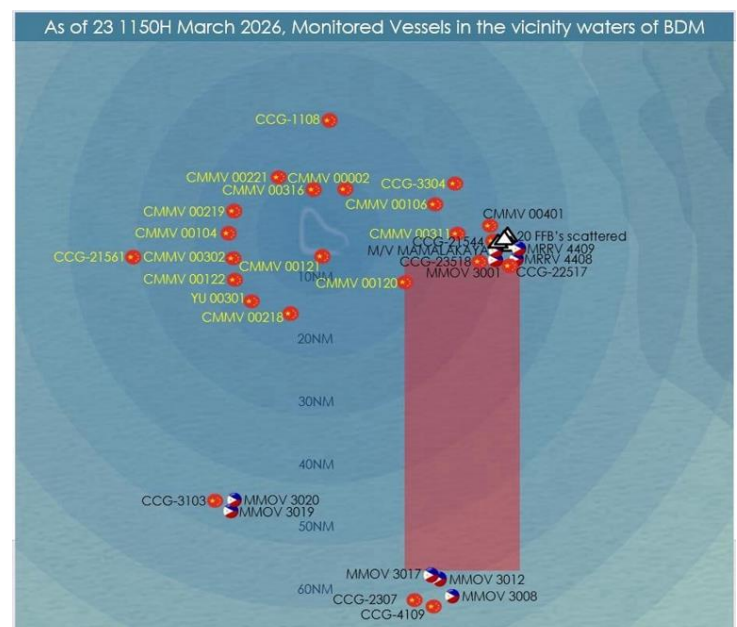
- [All Together Now: China's Militia in 2025](#), CSIS/AMTI, 23 Feb 2026
- [Thousands of Chinese Boats Mass at Sea, Raising Questions](#), Barron's, 13 Mar 2026
- [Thousands of Chinese Fishing Boats Quietly Form Vast Sea Barriers](#), The New York Times, 16 Jan 2026
- [The Legal Struggle for China's Maritime Power: Strategy, Sovereignty, and Enforcement](#), CMSI Quarterly Review, Feb 2026
- [Newport Manual on the Law of Naval Warfare](#), 2023
- [Department of Defense Law of War Manual](#), Jun 2015 (Updated Jul 2023)
- [Japan Joint Staff – USINDOPACOM Bilateral Memo: Maritime Militia](#), 3 Aug 2023

(6) China Initiates “Clearing Operations” at Scarborough Reef, Excluding Lawful Access (Mar)

- **Bottom Line:** The China Coast Guard (CCG) initiated so-called “clearing operations” at Scarborough Reef, citing domestic law in radio calls to Philippine vessels and aircraft while excluding access by Filipino fishermen, whose traditional fishing rights are affirmed by the legally binding 2016 arbitral award.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Announced Exclusion Zone:** Chinese forces broadcasted four coordinates delineating a rectangular zone southeast of Scarborough Reef (known in the Philippines as Bajo de Masinloc), explicitly ordering vessels to vacate the designated area.
 - **Escalatory Tactics:** China deployed CCG, maritime militia, and supporting PLA Navy and Air Force assets to “clear” the designated area, utilizing [radio calls](#), [sirens](#), speedboat [swarms](#), and air-to-air [challenges](#) to chase away fishermen and block access by Philippine forces.



- **Philippine Resilience:** In response, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) deployed vessels to provide security, fuel, and food to Filipino fishermen. Additionally, PCG aircraft conducted maritime domain awareness flights, actively observing and documenting the presence of Chinese maritime forces surrounding the feature.
- **The 2016 Arbitral Award:** The legally binding 2016 arbitral award determined that Scarborough Reef can generate only a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea and that the waters beyond 12-nautical miles are part of the Philippine exclusive economic zone. The award explicitly affirmed traditional fishing rights at Scarborough Reef for multiple nationalities, including Filipino fishermen, rendering China's exclusion of Filipino fishermen unlawful.
- **References:**
 - [China Coast Guard broadcasts 'clearing operation' near Scarborough Shoal](#), 23 Mar 2026
 - [Jay Tarriela, Facebook Post](#), 24 Mar 2026
 - [Latest Aerial Patrol Confirms Significant Chinese Presence Near Bajo de Masinloc](#), ABS-CBN, 23 Mar 2026
 - [Chinese Ships Harass PH Fishers, Challenge PCG Plane at Scarborough](#), ABS-CBN, 18 Mar 2026
 - [PCG Sends Ships, Plane to Bajo de Masinloc After Alleged Chinese Harassment vs Pinoy Fishers](#), GMA News Online, 18 Mar 2026



(7) U.S. Seventh Fleet Flagship Visits Manila, Marking 75th Anniversary of U.S.-Philippines Alliance (16-20 Mar)

- **Bottom Line:** The port visit of USS BLUE RIDGE (LCC 19), flagship of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, to Manila underscores the ironclad U.S.-Philippines alliance, particularly as the nations commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Alliance Commitment:** The visit was highlighted by high-level engagements between the U.S. Seventh Fleet Commander and his counterparts in the Philippine Navy and Coast Guard.
 - These meetings reinforced maritime security cooperation and advanced planning for major exercises like Balikatan 2026, underscoring the alliance's role in maintaining regional stability.
 - A U.S. Navy press release following the visit affirmed that the alliance is “critical for advancing our shared interests and upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific, which bolsters deterrence, signals unwavering resolve, and aligns our collective efforts to preserve regional stability.”
 - **MDT Application:** The 1951 MDT remains the cornerstone of the alliance.
 - In Article IV, each Party recognizes that in the event of an “armed attack” on either of the Parties that it “would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes.”
 - Article V goes on to say that an “armed attack” for the purposes of Article IV is deemed to include an “armed attack” on “armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft.”
 - Officials from both countries recently reiterated that Article V extends to armed attacks on either country's armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft – including those of their coast guards – anywhere in the Pacific, to include the South China Sea.
 - **Growing Network:** This foundational alliance is now the hub of a broader, growing network of agreements. In Mar 2026, the Philippines signed a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement with France. The Philippines recently inked similar agreements with [Japan](#) (2024), [Canada](#) (2025), and [New Zealand](#) (2025), and is pursuing an enhanced framework with [Australia](#) (targeted for 2026) and exploratory talks with the [United Kingdom](#). Each agreement establishes status protections, jurisdictional rules, and entry/exit procedures, reducing barriers to military cooperation and partnered operations.
- **References:**
 - [USS Blue Ridge Departs Manila, Philippines](#), United States Navy, 20 Mar 2026
 - [Joint Statement on the Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue](#), U.S. Department of State, 16 Feb 2026
 - [France, Philippines Strengthen Defense Cooperation with New Agreement](#), Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 4 Apr 2026
 - [Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines](#), 30 Aug 1951



(8) China's New “Ethnic Unity” Law Builds on Legal Framework for Coercion Against Taiwan (12 Mar)

- **Bottom Line:** China's new “Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress,” effective 1 Jul 2026, builds upon its existing legal architecture for confronting Taiwan by framing the cross-strait issue as an internal ethnic and cultural matter.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Expanding Lawfare Framework:** The “Ethnic Unity” law augments existing tools like the Anti-Secession Law (2005) (providing a pretext for military force) and the 2024 “Opinions” on punishing separatists (outlining criminal liability). By focusing on cultural assimilation and national identity, the law

conceivably enables China to frame so-called “separatism” as an offense against the “Chinese people,” providing an expanded pseudo-legal justification for coercion or potential aggression against Taiwan.

- **Weaponizing Ambiguity:** The law’s ambiguous prohibitions against “undermining ethnic unity” (Article 6) or creating “ethnic division” (Article 63) align with China’s expanding interpretation of “Taiwan independence,” which analysts say is applied to routine activities that support Taiwan’s democracy or its participation in international organizations. By directly targeting “Taiwan compatriots” for cultural integration (Article 21), the law provides a domestic legal pretext to punish political opposition under the guise of protecting ethnic harmony.
- **Extraterritorial Jurisdiction:** Article 63 states: “Organizations and individuals outside the [mainland] territory of the P.R.C. that commit acts... that undermine ethnic unity and progress or create ethnic division are to be pursued for legal responsibility.” This provision provides a domestic legal basis to punish foreign individuals for actions taken outside of mainland China.
- **References:**
 - [China’s Expanding View of “Taiwan Independence” and Implications for U.S. Policy](#), Small Wars Journal, 6 May 2025
 - [China’s New Ethnic Unity Law: From Autonomy to Assimilation](#), CFR, 26 Mar 2026
 - [Ethnic Unity and Progress Law](#), China Law Translate, 12 Mar 2026
 - [China codifies ethnic assimilation with new ‘unity’ law as it counters the West](#), South China Morning Post, 12 Mar 2026

(9) States Bolster Submarine Cable Security Amidst Rising Gray-Zone Threats (Mar-Apr)

- **Bottom Line:** Recent reporting highlights an intensifying international effort to protect critical undersea infrastructure from sabotage. In response to escalating threats against global digital networks, states are deploying a combination of new military, technological, and legal measures. However, the persistent, deniable nature of these threats will require a sustained, integrated defense posture.
- **Key Points:**
 - **China’s Gray-Zone Maritime Threat:** A recent Institute for the Study of War (ISW) report details how China “uses disguise and concealment to confuse its adversaries, conduct sabotage and surveillance, clutter the information space, and ultimately set the conditions for further aggression.” This strategy involves using disguised vessels to achieve objectives with plausible deniability. Since 2023, at least five of Taiwan’s undersea cables have been damaged by Chinese-crewed or flagged vessels, indicating a potential pattern of deliberate targeting rather than accidents.
 - **The Problem of Civil-Exploitation Lawfare:** Undersea cable security is challenged by the potential for what analysts have called “civil-exploitation lawfare” – the manipulation of international law governing civilian maritime activity to mask state-backed behavior. This tactic exploits the UNCLOS principle of exclusive flag-state jurisdiction by utilizing ostensibly civilian vessels registered in states with limited enforcement capacity. Such calculated ambiguity blurs the legal distinction between civilian and military objects, complicating threat assessments and exploiting a lack of enforcement mechanisms in international treaties, such as the 1884 Submarine Cable Convention.
 - **Latest Incident (Taiwan, 30 Mar):** In late Mar 2026, a Chinese-flagged work barge, the *Hai Hong Gong* 66, allegedly damaged the Taiwan-Matsu No. 3 subsea cable while conducting salvage operations. In a swift response, the Taiwan Coast Guard detained the vessel and its 11 crew members, bringing the captain ashore for investigation and demonstrating a robust enforcement posture.
 - **International Military & Technological Responses:**
 - In the Atlantic, the United Kingdom recently announced that its naval and air forces successfully tracked Russian submarines conducting surveillance over vital undersea infrastructure in its Exclusive Economic Zone, issuing a stern warning against any attempt to damage them.
 - In the Baltic Sea, NATO is deploying ships, drones, and aircraft to patrol and deter similar threats.
 - Technologically, new methods like distributed acoustic sensing are being developed to provide real-time alerts when vessels approach a cable.
 - Innovative military thinkers in Taiwan are leveraging AI and publicly available ship-tracking data to [monitor](#) gray-zone threats in the Strait, fostering greater transparency and accountability.
 - **Legal and Legislative Action:** Nations are enhancing legal accountability to deter cable damage. Taiwan has prosecuted a ship captain for severing a cable and is proposing higher penalties for intentional acts of sabotage. In the U.S., a bipartisan bill (the *Critical Undersea Infrastructure Resilience Initiative Act*) was introduced on April 2 to protect Taiwan’s cables by deploying advanced monitoring

systems, establishing rapid repair protocols, enhancing maritime awareness through cooperative patrols, and mandating sanctions against individuals involved in sabotage.

- **References:**

- [Inside the Race to Protect Submarine Cables From Sabotage](#), The Wall Street Journal, 9 Apr 2026
- [China vessel suspected of damaging undersea cables](#), Taipei Times, 2 Apr 2026
- [X Post on Suspected Undersea Cable Sabotage Near Taiwan](#), Taiwan Security Monitor, 2 Apr 2026
- [UK navy foiled Russian submarines surveying undersea cables, defence minister says](#), The Guardian, 9 Apr 2026
- [Silent Shadows: Tracking Disguised PRC Vessels in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea](#), Institute for the Study of War, 23 Mar 2026
- [Reps. Lawler, Min & Stanton Introduce Bipartisan Legislation to Protect Taiwan's Critical Infrastructure](#), Press Release, 2 Apr 2026
- [Building Cooperative Frameworks for Subsea Cable Security in the Indo-Pacific](#), CSIS, 24 Mar 2026
- [Signals in the Swarm: The Data Behind China's Maritime Gray Zone Campaign Near Taiwan](#), CSIS, 8 Oct 2025

(10) Philippines Fortifies South China Sea Presence Amidst China's Continued Coercion (Mar-Apr)

- **Bottom Line:** The Philippines is undertaking a multi-faceted campaign to solidify its presence in the South China Sea by establishing a new Coast Guard outpost and formally naming maritime features in the Spratlys. Meanwhile, China is accused of using cyanide to destroy marine ecosystems near Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal), potentially threatening the food supply and safety of Philippine forces embarked on BRP Sierra Madre.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Strengthening Law Enforcement Presence:** The Philippines has opened a new Coast Guard base on Thitu Island, establishing a forward-deployed law enforcement presence to enhance maritime domain awareness and protect Filipino fishermen and marine resources.
 - **Codifying Domestic Nomenclature:** Through Executive Order No. 111, the Philippines formally adopted standard Filipino names for 131 geographic and maritime features within what it calls the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG) in the Spratlys.
 - The Philippine National Maritime Council stated that the “right to name such features is within its sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction” under UNCLOS.
 - Conversely, China assailed the move, claiming it is illegal under international law.
 - **Alleged Environmental Sabotage at Second Thomas Shoal:** The Philippines has accused Chinese fishing vessels of repeatedly using cyanide around Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal).
 - Philippine officials report multiple instances between early 2025 and Mar 2026 – including the seizure of cyanide from Chinese boats and positive water tests.
 - Cyanide, sometimes used to stun and capture exotic reef fish for the aquarium trade, can destroy coral reefs in violation of the UNCLOS obligation “to protect and preserve the marine environment.”
 - Philippine officials have raised the possibility that cyanide use near Second Thomas Shoal could be calculated to deprive Philippine Navy personnel of food, expose them to poisoned water, and potentially compromise the reef foundation supporting the BRP Sierra Madre outpost.
- **References:**
 - [Philippines opens key coast guard base in the disputed South China Sea](#), NBC News, 9 Apr 2026
 - [Philippines say Chinese boats dumped cyanide near West PH Sea outpost](#), Rappler, 13 Apr 2026
 - [Philippines accuses China of poisoning waters around Spratly Islands](#), Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 16 Apr 2026
 - [PH naming of Kalayaan Island Group features in WPS draws China warning](#), Inquirer.net, 2 Apr 2026
 - [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Part XII \(Protection and Preservation of the marine Environment\)](#)



The views expressed in this Legal Vigilance Report are those of the U.S. Seventh Fleet Legal Office. U.S. Seventh Fleet's Legal Vigilance program is aligned under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Counter-Lawfare Center.

