

South China Sea NewsWire

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Summary of the 15th Annual South China Sea Conference

Conference hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative

Summary provided by Sherry Chen

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Introduction: 15th Annual South China Sea Conference

The [15th Annual South China Sea Conference](#), hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), brought together a distinguished group of regional experts, military officials, policy practitioners, and academic scholars to examine the rapidly evolving dynamics of the South China Sea. Spanning four comprehensive panels and a keynote address, the conference tackled the region's most pressing challenges, from legal disputes and military deterrence to alliance building and the role of outside powers.

The conference opened with Panel 1: States of Play in the South China Sea, moderated by Henrietta Levin, and featured contributions from Harrison Prétat, Krista Wiegand, Phuong Thao Nguyen, and Hoo Chiew Ping, who assessed recent developments, including China's increased patrols, U.S. military exercises, and Vietnam's island expansions.

Panel 2: Legal Developments and Dispute Management focused on the evolving legal landscape and regional responses. Moderated by Andreyka Natalegawa, the panel included insights from Jacqueline Espenilla, Isaac B. Kardon, Liu Xiaobo, and Nguyen Thi Lan Huong, addressing recent legislative actions, international law, and the potential for scientific diplomacy in easing tensions.

Panel 3: Evolving Alliance Networks, moderated by Kristi Govella, explored how U.S. allies like Japan and Australia are recalibrating their regional strategies. Speakers Kotani Tetsuo, Dianne Despi, John Blaxland, and Kathryn Paik examined bilateral and multilateral cooperation, defense modernization, and alliance operationalization, with additional insights from the *Regional Defense Cooperation Meeting* transcript.

Panel 4: The Role of Outside Parties highlighted the growing engagement of non-claimant actors such as the European Union, South Korea, India, and Canada. Moderated by Max Bergmann, and featuring Mateusz Chatys, Wongi Choe, Pooja Bhatt, and Jonathan Berkshire-Miller, the panel analyzed capacity-building efforts, evolving strategic postures, and normative influence in the South China Sea.

The conference culminated in a keynote address by Admiral Stephen "Web" Koehler, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, moderated by Gregory Poling, Director of Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. Admiral Koehler emphasized the

strategic importance of the South China Sea, the role of the U.S. Navy in maintaining regional deterrence, and the importance of sustained cooperation with allies and partners.

Together, the sessions offered a multifaceted view of the South China Sea as a site of legal contestation, military tension, and strategic cooperation. The conference underscored the need for collective action, international law, and regional resilience to uphold peace and stability in this critical maritime domain.

Panel I : States of Play in the South China Sea

1. Overall Summary

[The first panel of the 15th annual South China Sea Conference](#) offered a detailed examination of the evolving strategic dynamics in the South China Sea. Moderated by Henrietta Levin, the session brought together regional experts to explore recent military developments, diplomatic maneuvers, and influence campaigns in the region. Central themes included China's increased patrols around Scarborough Shoal, Vietnam's island expansion, U.S. military engagement, and Malaysia's shifting alignment amid rising Chinese influence. The panelists underscored the strategic importance of the region and the complex interplay between military presence, public opinion, and international cooperation.

2. Panelist Contributions

Henrietta Levin: Framing the Strategic Context

As the panel moderator, Henrietta Levin opened the session by situating the South China Sea as a theater of overlapping economic interests and strategic ambitions. She underscored the continuity of the region's significance for global trade and regional security and framed the session as an inquiry into how local claimants and external powers are shaping the new status quo. Levin emphasized the need to understand not only state behavior but also the narratives, historical memories, and institutional mechanisms that underpin actions in the maritime domain.

Harrison Prétat: Escalation Around Scarborough and Vietnam's Quiet Expansion

Harrison Prétat provided a granular assessment of on-the-ground developments, including China's sharp increase in patrol activity around Scarborough Shoal, now totaling 95 days in 2025. He pointed out a tactical shift from focus on Second Thomas Shoal to Scarborough,

coinciding with heightened Sino-Philippine tensions. Prétat also noted the Philippines' first recorded air-to-air encounters with China, a sign of rising aerial friction. In contrast, Vietnam has continued to expand its outposts with relative impunity, building new airstrips and harbors. He suggested that China's muted response toward Vietnam reflects its strategic choice to prioritize relations with Hanoi while applying pressure on Manila.

Krista Wiegand: U.S. Policy Consistency and Military Signaling

Krista Wiegand focused on the U.S. role in the South China Sea, particularly the continuity in deterrence strategy across the Trump and Biden administrations. She highlighted that while diplomatic initiatives may have fluctuated, military engagement has remained robust, evidenced by eight joint exercises with allies like Japan, Australia, and the Philippines in the past year. She stressed the importance of consistent U.S. messaging on the Philippines' mutual defense treaty and suggested that while military deterrence is crucial, a lack of complementary diplomatic strategy may represent a missed opportunity for de-escalation and coalition building.

Phuong Thao Nguyen: China's Influence in Malaysia and Public Diplomacy

Representing the Malaysian perspective, Phuong Thao Nguyen analyzed how Chinese influence operations have reshaped public sentiment in Malaysia. She cited data showing that public support for China increased from 39% in 2022 to 77% in 2024, a shift attributed to targeted narratives, demographic factors, and post-COVID-19 economic dependency. Nguyen discussed Malaysia's cautious stance on transparency measures and its focus on energy security, while highlighting new Navy and Air Force base construction. Despite close military engagement with the United States, Australia, and France, Malaysia appears increasingly hedged between maintaining sovereignty and accommodating China's regional ascendance.

Hoo Chiew Ping: Maritime Capacity and Strategic Realism

Hoo Chiew Ping elaborated on Malaysia's military posture, noting the country's substantial naval modernization and growing involvement in joint exercises. She explained that while Malaysia remains reluctant to fully embrace transparency initiatives that might antagonize China, it is quietly investing in hard power and expanding cooperation with Western partners. Hoo emphasized that energy security—particularly in Malaysia's offshore zones—is a driving factor behind its South China Sea strategy. Her analysis framed Malaysia as a realist actor seeking to maximize autonomy within a constrained geopolitical environment.

3. Q&A Session and Further Insights

The Q&A session further deepened the conversation with sharp questions on capability gaps, strategic motivations, and historical perceptions. When asked about China's maritime dominance, Harrison explained that Chinese Coast Guard and militia vessels vastly outclass Southeast Asian patrol ships in size and equipment, contributing to an asymmetric power dynamic. On the motivations behind China's increased patrols, he linked them to the completion of major base construction in 2019 and a recalibrated strategic focus for 2025. Responding to a question on China's divergent approaches to Vietnam and the Philippines, Harrison argued that Beijing views Vietnam as a more enduring partner, making it reluctant to escalate tensions despite Hanoi's island-building activities. Another thread explored whether China's assertiveness is historically rooted; Harrison countered that present actions are more about power projection and tactical resource management than historical grievances. Finally, the panelists collectively acknowledged the growing role of public diplomacy and strategic communications, particularly in countering disinformation and shaping regional narratives.

4. Conclusion

The panel revealed a South China Sea in flux—where deterrence, influence, and strategic signaling intermingle. China's increased patrols and Vietnam's expansion signal a new phase of assertiveness, while the United States doubles down on military deterrence without a corresponding surge in diplomatic outreach. Malaysia, caught between major powers, responds with cautious pragmatism, leveraging both public opinion and military partnerships. Throughout, the panelists emphasized that regional stability hinges not only on ships and airstrips but also on the narratives told, alliances built, and norms upheld. Multilateral cooperation, intelligence-sharing, and public diplomacy are emerging as critical tools alongside traditional military capabilities in shaping the future of the South China Sea.

Panel 2: Legal Developments and Dispute Management

1. Overall Summary

[Panel 2 of the 15th annual South China Sea Conference](#) focused on legal developments, legislative responses, and regional strategies for managing disputes. The discussion centered

on the Philippines' new maritime zones legislation, China's reactive baseline declarations, and competing interpretations of international law. The panelists emphasized the importance of upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), fostering regional cooperation, and leveraging scientific diplomacy to mitigate tensions. Recent events, including unsafe vessel behavior and environmental degradation, were presented as urgent reminders of the stakes involved. Collectively, the panel underscored the dual necessity of legal rigor and collaborative innovation to stabilize one of the world's most contested maritime zones.

2. Panelist Contributions

Andreyka Natalegawa: Legal Frameworks and Regional Coordination

Andreyka Natalegawa opened the panel with a comprehensive analysis of the legal underpinnings of the South China Sea disputes. She emphasized the Philippines' recent legislative efforts, especially the Maritime Zones Act and Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, which operationalize the 2016 arbitral award by rejecting any claims to extended EEZs from the Spratly Islands. She outlined how China swiftly countered this move by announcing new baselines around Scarborough Shoal, challenging established interpretations of UNCLOS. Natalegawa detailed the U.S. rejection of these Chinese baselines and Beijing's subsequent diplomatic note dismissing the critique, exposing a persistent legal impasse. She concluded by advocating for enhanced regional cooperation, particularly in areas like joint scientific research and fisheries management, to uphold high seas freedoms and reinforce legal norms.

Isaac Kardon: U.S. Reactions and Legal Challenges

Isaac Kardon focused on the contrasting legal interpretations between China and the United States. He explained that China's claim—that baseline issues are governed not by UNCLOS but by “general international law”—serves to justify its ambiguous legal posture in the South China Sea. Kardon outlined how the U.S. State Department formally opposed China's baseline declarations, arguing they violate established maritime law. He noted that this legal divergence has created a dangerous stalemate, in which neither side is likely to relent. Despite the legal gridlock, Kardon urged regional actors to pursue mechanisms for cooperation—especially scientific and environmental initiatives under frameworks like the BBNJ treaty—to maintain stability in shared maritime spaces.

Jacqueline Espenilla: The Philippines' Strategic Legal Posture

Jacqueline Espenilla provided an in-depth view of the Philippines' proactive legal and diplomatic strategy. She highlighted the passage of domestic legislation that enshrines the arbitral ruling, thereby reinforcing Manila's claims within its national legal framework. Espenilla emphasized growing Chinese activity near Philippine waters and cited recent incidents involving unsafe maneuvers by Chinese vessels. She argued for the continuation of the transparency initiative, which has been effective in garnering international support. Espenilla also floated the idea of launching a new legal case against China, possibly focusing on environmental damage, such as reef destruction and illegal harvesting. Her remarks underscored Manila's reliance on law and transparency over confrontation.

Nguyen Thi Lan Huong: Diplomatic Notes and Scientific Diplomacy

Nguyen Thi Lan Huong offered a regional perspective, focusing on recent diplomatic and legal developments. She highlighted Vietnam's and the Philippines' submissions for extended continental shelves and international support—via diplomatic notes from the U.S., Italy, Germany, France, and the U.K.—rejecting China's expansive maritime claims. Nguyen emphasized the importance of international law, not only for enforcement but for sustaining dialogue. Crucially, she championed scientific diplomacy as a pragmatic tool for conflict de-escalation, advocating for real-time data sharing, joint marine environmental studies, and multilateral research to create common ground even amid political discord.

Liu Xiaobo: China's Legal Narrative and Status Quo Strategy

Liu Xiaobo represented China's viewpoint, explaining its recent legal and policy developments. He framed the new baseline declarations around Scarborough Shoal as consistent with China's long-standing territorial claims. Liu emphasized China's preference for status quo maintenance, arguing that while China opposes new land reclamation, it actively asserts control through law enforcement operations led by the Coast Guard. He portrayed these activities as stabilizing rather than provocative. While acknowledging international criticism, Liu defended China's legal position and urged other countries to respect what he called "mutual restraint and historical understanding" in regional affairs.

3. Q&A Session and Further Insights

During the Q&A session, discussions pivoted to the interaction between legal recourse and on-the-ground enforcement mechanisms. A question on the coordination between legal tools

and paramilitary actions led Natalegawa to highlight the importance of legislative precision and public transparency. Espenilla responded by emphasizing consistency with international law as a strategy to secure both domestic and global support.

Another question explored the role of scientific diplomacy. Liu Xiaobo explained China's environmental protection efforts and suggested more international collaboration in data collection. Nguyen Lan Huong and Isaac Kardon echoed the sentiment, arguing that scientific initiatives offer a neutral platform for cooperation and a way to depoliticize contentious maritime issues. This discussion reframed science as a bridge-building tool in an otherwise adversarial landscape.

4. Conclusion

Panel 2 reaffirmed that law and diplomacy remain indispensable in managing the South China Sea disputes. While legal actions like the Philippines' Maritime Zones Act and China's baseline declarations expose the depth of normative disagreement, they also signal a legalizing trend that may ultimately constrain escalation. The panelists recognized the limitations of pure legalism, advocating for complementary strategies such as transparency, regional coordination, and scientific diplomacy. In an environment of overlapping claims and asymmetric capabilities, the future of peace and order in the South China Sea may hinge less on courtrooms and more on creativity—where law, science, and dialogue converge to offer viable paths forward.

Panel 3: Evolving Alliance Networks

1. Overall Summary

[Panel 3 of the 15th Annual South China Sea Conference](#), titled *Evolving Alliance Networks*, explored how regional and global powers are recalibrating security partnerships in response to the shifting power dynamics of the South China Sea. The conversation revolved around Japan and Australia's increasing security engagements, the Philippines' push for modernization, and the importance of ASEAN cohesion. A recurring theme was the integration of bilateral and multilateral arrangements into operational deterrence strategies. A supplemental discussion from a *Regional Defense Cooperation Meeting* was also incorporated, highlighting the cautious yet strategic stance of U.S. allies—especially Japan—

toward Taiwan, the evolving role of AUKUS, and the importance of shipbuilding and maritime defense capabilities. The panelists stressed that only by transforming political alignment into operational readiness can the Indo-Pacific's fragile balance be preserved.

2. Panelist Contributions

Kristi Govella: Framing the Multilateral Shift

Moderator Kristi Govella opened the panel by underlining the Indo-Pacific's transition from bilateral defense ties to multilayered alliance networks. She emphasized the South China Sea as a barometer of the region's broader security architecture, increasingly influenced by non-claimant stakeholders like Japan, Australia, and the United States. Govella highlighted the challenge of converting abstract commitments into concrete capabilities, urging a focus on logistics, defense-industrial cooperation, and capacity building. She also noted the importance of harmonizing strategic messaging across partners, especially on sensitive topics such as Taiwan and regional deterrence.

Kotani Tetsuo: Japan as an Emerging Security Catalyst

Kotani Tetsuo detailed Japan's new role as a *security assistance provider*, notably through its *Official Security Assistance (OSA)* initiative, which made the Philippines its first recipient. Japan has equipped the Philippines with air defense radars, enabling real-time information sharing. He explained Japan's increasing role in multilateral exercises, including upcoming coast guard drills near Kyushu, and its leadership in the *Quad* framework. However, Kotani also addressed Japan's caution around Taiwan due to the *One China policy*, clarifying that while Japan is not yet openly engaging Taiwan in defense ties, it is ramping up regional capacity-building in ways that indirectly benefit Taipei's strategic position.

Dianne Despi: The Philippines' Push for Modernization and Resilience

Dianne Despi highlighted the Philippines' precarious position amid rising Chinese pressure. She described how Manila is navigating political coercion and economic dependency while pushing for self-reliance and defense modernization. Despi called for deeper engagement with U.S., Japanese, and ASEAN partners through joint concept development, tabletop exercises, and strategic assessments. She noted the impact of China's hybrid tactics, which range from gray zone operations to information influence, reinforcing the urgency of embedding the Philippines more deeply into evolving alliance networks for both hard and soft security.

John Blaxland: Australia's Strategic Realignment and Maritime Doctrine

John Blaxland focused on Australia's transformation from a reactive to a proactive regional actor. Anchored in the *2020 Defence Strategic Update* and the *2023 Defence Strategic Review*, Australia now seeks to uphold Indo-Pacific stability by integrating more robustly into ASEAN's political-security mechanisms and forming deeper bilateral and multilateral ties. He pointed to Australia's exploration of a security partnership with the EU, and discussed its expanding role in Pacific Island security, noting Canberra's dual focus on great power competition and climate resilience. From the *Regional Defense Cooperation Meeting*, Blaxland also reinforced Australia's advocacy for status quo maintenance and deterring adventurism, particularly around Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Kathryn Paik: ASEAN Cohesion, Indonesia, and Institutional Architecture

Kathryn Paik emphasized ASEAN's centrality to any regional security arrangement. She analyzed Australia's growing relationship with Indonesia, noting positive momentum in bilateral military ties. Paik addressed legacy frameworks like the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), asserting that while outdated, they still provide value through institutional memory and joint capabilities. She stressed that current alliance frameworks must evolve from policy statements to operational capability, with specific investments in shipbuilding capacity, maritime awareness, and defense-industrial collaboration with private sector support to lower costs.

3. Q&A Session and Further Insights

During the Q&A, a major topic was the inclusion of Taiwan in regional security architecture, particularly as an observer in *RIMPAC*. Panelists treaded cautiously but recognized Taiwan's strategic importance, especially given its control of several South China Sea islands. The discussion underscored how Taiwan contingencies and South China Sea scenarios are intertwined, raising the need for joint contingency planning and messaging alignment among the United States, Japan, and Australia.

Participants also delved into AUKUS, with questions raised about how its ongoing review might affect Australia's defense trajectory. Panelists reaffirmed that even if AUKUS evolves, Australia's long-standing defense partnership with the United States remains solid. Emphasis was placed on the strategic necessity of nuclear-powered submarines for defending Australia's EEZ and supporting Indo-Pacific maritime stability. These vessels, panelists

noted, offer the range, stealth, and deterrence required in a more volatile strategic environment.

Other audience questions centered on how Europe and Asia might divide strategic responsibilities. Kristi Govella suggested Europe take a greater role in Ukraine and Arctic security, while Asian powers lead Indo-Pacific balancing efforts. Overall, the conversation concluded that regional stability demands greater interoperability, shipbuilding readiness, and multilateral deterrence coordination.

4. Conclusion

Panel 3 demonstrated that the Indo-Pacific's evolving alliance networks are being shaped not just by threat perceptions, but by strategic intent and operational necessity. Japan is cautiously extending its security footprint, the Philippines is becoming more assertive about its modernization goals, and Australia is moving toward long-range, high-tech deterrence strategies. The United States and its allies are aligning more closely on messaging, defense postures, and strategic foresight, especially with Taiwan and the South China Sea increasingly seen as interconnected flashpoints. Moving forward, it will be essential to convert commitments into capabilities—through shipbuilding, joint training, scientific collaboration, and multilateral diplomacy—if the region hopes to maintain peace and stability amid intensifying strategic competition.

Keynote: Admiral Stephen “Web” Koehler

1. Overall Summary

[Admiral Stephen “Web” Koehler delivered a keynote address](#), moderated by Gregory Poling, that emphasized the strategic weight of the South China Sea in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. He detailed China's coercive behavior and the growing resilience of Southeast Asian nations, while reaffirming the centrality of deterrence and international law. He emphasized the U.S. Navy's role—particularly the Pacific Fleet—in upholding regional order through multilateral exercises and forward presence. He also addressed future strategic priorities, such as aligning with allies, countering China's attempts to divide the region, and enhancing maritime capabilities across partner nations. His remarks, including a robust Q&A session, conveyed both urgency and commitment in maintaining peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

2. Key Points

Strategic Significance of the South China Sea

Admiral Koehler began by outlining the *geostrategic importance* of the South China Sea—not just for the nations bordering it, but for global commerce and regional stability. He highlighted two major trends: growing global recognition of the region’s critical role and the increasing effectiveness of deterrence in holding back coercive behavior, particularly from China. Despite escalating maritime deployments, Koehler noted that China has failed to intimidate Southeast Asian states or sever their growing partnerships with the United States and its allies.

China’s Aggression and Southeast Asian Resilience

A central theme was China’s continued use of *maritime militia*, *coast guard vessels*, and *artificial island bases* to assert control over contested waters. Admiral Koehler described these tactics as coercive and unlawful under international law. Yet he praised countries like the Philippines for their resilience, citing examples where Manila resisted pressure and exposed Chinese harassment. Public transparency, he argued, plays a vital role in countering Beijing’s gray-zone operations.

U.S. Navy’s Deterrence and Regional Cooperation

Koehler detailed the U.S. Navy’s ongoing efforts to bolster deterrence and enhance regional maritime capabilities. He cited key multilateral exercises such as *Malabar* (with India, Australia, and Japan) and *Valkyrie* (with the Philippines) as demonstrations of joint readiness and interoperability. The U.S. Pacific Fleet, he explained, remains focused on maintaining combat readiness, supporting freedom of navigation, and ensuring its ability to prevail in a high-end conflict if necessary.

Balancing Global Commitments and Pacific Focus

While acknowledging America’s global military responsibilities, Admiral Koehler stressed the priority of maintaining a strong Pacific posture. He addressed concerns over resource strain, asserting that the Navy remains committed to meeting both regional and global demands. He also highlighted the role of the U.S. Coast Guard in upholding maritime law and governance, especially in training and patrolling missions with Southeast Asian partners.

China's Base in Cambodia and Future Threats

Admiral Koehler flagged China's naval base in *Ream, Cambodia* as a development of strategic concern. He warned of Beijing's intent to project power and divide Southeast Asian countries through political and military leverage. He urged allies and partners to continue investing in their own defense capabilities while operating collectively to ensure that no single country in the region could be isolated or coerced.

Future Strategic Priorities and Expectations

Looking ahead, Admiral Koehler emphasized *deterrence through presence* as the guiding strategic principle. He called for increased joint training, shipbuilding collaboration, and sustained operational tempo to prepare for future contingencies. He also warned that China would likely continue efforts to pressure and divide ASEAN countries, necessitating unified messaging and stronger defense networks among U.S. allies and partners.

3. Summary of the Q&A Session and Further Insights

During the Q&A session, Admiral Koehler responded to several key questions, providing further clarity on U.S. strategy and regional coordination:

U.S. Coast Guard Role: He highlighted the Coast Guard's increasing importance in *maritime law enforcement*, fisheries protection, and capacity-building with smaller Southeast Asian nations.

Cambodia's Naval Base: On China's facility in Cambodia, Koehler acknowledged the strategic implications and called for vigilance, asserting that *such footholds could enable coercion far beyond China's coast*.

Legal Frameworks and UNCLOS: Koehler reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to *upholding international maritime law*, despite the United States not being a signatory to UNCLOS, and emphasized its operational alignment with legal principles in practice.

Balancing Readiness and Diplomacy: He admitted the difficulty of maintaining high readiness across global theaters but reiterated that deterrence requires sustained presence, credible combat power, and regional cooperation.

Alliances and Messaging: In line with ongoing concerns, Koehler stressed the importance of strategic messaging and operational synchronization among the United States, Japan,

Australia, and other regional players to ensure that *no Southeast Asian nation faces pressure alone*.

4. Conclusion

Admiral Koehler's keynote reinforced the message that the South China Sea is a linchpin of regional and global stability. In the face of mounting Chinese coercion, he championed the U.S. Navy's role as both a deterrent and a partner. Through exercises, persistent presence, and joint capabilities, the Pacific Fleet aims to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. The Admiral's message was clear: the United States will not stand alone, nor let others stand alone, in protecting the principles of sovereignty, stability, and international law in one of the world's most contested maritime regions.

Panel 4: The Role of Outside Parties

1. Overall Summary

[Panel 4](#) explored how external stakeholders—particularly the European Union, South Korea, India, and Canada—are engaging with the South China Sea region amid intensifying strategic competition. Though not direct claimants, these actors bring economic weight, normative influence, and evolving security roles. Panelists discussed Europe's commitment to freedom of navigation, South Korea's expanding defense diplomacy, India's evolving regional posture, and Canada's growing Indo-Pacific ambitions. Collectively, the discussion underscored the increasing convergence of outside parties around shared principles: upholding international law, enhancing maritime capacity, countering coercive behavior, and operationalizing security cooperation. Each contributor offered a distinct yet complementary perspective on why and how global actors are asserting their stakes in this critical maritime domain.

2. Panel Contributions

Max Bergmann: Maritime Capacity and Minilateralism

As the moderator of this panel, Max Bergmann emphasized the growing role of *mini-lateral arrangements* and the importance of maritime domain awareness (MDA). He highlighted the need for countries like Canada, Japan, and South Korea to contribute to Southeast Asia's

maritime governance through *equipment provision, training, and intelligence sharing*.

Bergmann also reflected on how China's activities have prompted a reevaluation of global strategic coordination, especially with *intersecting flashpoints* like Taiwan and the South China Sea. He advocated for actionable projects rather than symbolic alignments, and stressed the urgency of capacity-building to ensure that Southeast Asian countries are not left vulnerable.

Mateusz Chatys: Europe's Normative Strategy and Maritime Interests

Mateusz Chatys emphasized the European Union's deep economic and strategic interests in the South China Sea, noting that *40% of EU maritime trade* flows through the region. The EU has endorsed the *2016 PCA ruling*, aligning itself with UNCLOS and rules-based order principles. Rather than seeking a major military footprint, the EU emphasizes *normative influence, maritime capacity-building, and limited coordinated deployments* through mechanisms like the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP). He also highlighted Europe's support for *transparency initiatives* in partnership with countries like the Philippines to counter disinformation and Chinese gray-zone tactics. Chatys advocated for expanded Global Gateway projects and deeper bilateral ties between EU states and Southeast Asian partners.

Wongi Choe: South Korea's Strategic Awakening

Wongi Choe discussed a marked shift in South Korea's policy toward the South China Sea under President Yoon Suk-yeol. Korea has moved from quiet diplomacy to more active engagement, characterized by *defense exports, joint exercises, and maritime capacity support*. Key developments include deliveries of *frigates, corvettes, and FA-50 light combat aircraft* to the Philippines, transfer of *decommissioned vessels*, and joint exercises with Vietnam and the Philippines. Korea has also joined regional dialogues and issued statements of concern over Chinese behavior, signaling a break from past strategic ambiguity. Wongi noted that while China's pressure remains a constraint, Seoul increasingly views itself as a regional stakeholder rather than a distant observer.

Pooja Bhatt: India's Normative Commitments and Strategic Realignment

Pooja Bhatt outlined India's key role in the South China Sea, highlighting its economic, security, and normative interests. With 80% of India's trade passing through the region, instability in the South China Sea directly impacts India's security, especially in the Indian Ocean. India supports a rules-based international order, advocating for UNCLOS and freedom of navigation. Bhatt calls for greater regional engagement, urging ASEAN to

involve extra-regional stakeholders like India in discussions, especially regarding the Code of Conduct. She notes India's evolving policy, marked by military exercises and defense sales, and concludes that India's growing involvement will bolster regional stability.

Jonathan Berkshire-Miller: Canada's Role in the Indo-Pacific

Jonathan Berkshire-Miller provided a detailed overview of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy, released three years ago. He acknowledged Canada's limited military capabilities but highlighted *increased naval deployments*, support for *UNCLOS and the PCA ruling*, and *diplomatic staffing* in ASEAN countries. Canada's challenge lies in maintaining focus amid distractions like Ukraine and the Arctic. Miller called for deeper Canada–EU coordination, expanded defense-industrial partnerships with Southeast Asia, and greater alignment with democratic Indo-Pacific powers like Japan and South Korea. He also raised the importance of language clarity in diplomatic statements, especially regarding Taiwan, the South China Sea, and erosion of the status quo.

3. Q&A Session and Further Insights

The Q&A session deepened the panel's insights into the practical limits and possibilities of external involvement:

India's Legal and Normative Tools: Responding to a question on legal activism, Bhatt agreed that while legal declarations alone cannot stop coercion, they remain critical for legitimacy and alliance-building. India's compliance with UNCLOS and its vocal support for Southeast Asian claims were seen as foundational for its credibility.

South Korea and Mini-lateral Engagement: Asked about South Korea's potential engagement in *mini-lateral formats* like the Quad and AUKUS, Choe explained that Seoul's defense diplomacy is expanding, but participation in U.S.-led security formats remains politically sensitive. Still, South Korea sees value in deepening its alignment through non-military formats and selective exercises.

Canada–Europe Coordination: Miller spoke to Canada's efforts to align with Europe, especially France and Germany, in Southeast Asia. He acknowledged the ongoing debates within Canada about the interdependence of maritime disputes and broader strategic concerns posed by China.

Bilateral Defense Partnerships: The potential for upgrading Korean and European defense agreements with countries like the Philippines was discussed, particularly as *maritime domain awareness systems* and *coastal radar stations* become essential tools in countering gray-zone operations.

4. Conclusion

Panel 4 revealed that while the South China Sea disputes are often portrayed as a regional issue, they are increasingly shaped by global actors with vested interests in *rule of law*, *economic security*, and *strategic stability*. The EU promotes normative frameworks and capacity-building; South Korea is expanding defense partnerships; India is operationalizing its regional leadership; and Canada is moving toward greater coordination with like-minded democracies. Each actor faces internal limitations—be it political caution, limited naval assets, or bureaucratic inertia—but collectively, they form a widening arc of external engagement. As China continues to challenge the status quo, these outside parties play an essential role in supporting Southeast Asian resilience and reinforcing a rules-based maritime order.

Conclusion

The 15th Annual South China Sea Conference illuminated the multifaceted and intensifying contest over one of the world's most strategically significant maritime regions. Across four panels and a keynote address, participants underscored the continued relevance of international law, the growing complexity of regional military dynamics, and the expanding involvement of global stakeholders. From China's assertive behavior to the quiet resilience of Southeast Asian states, from the evolution of U.S.-led alliances to the normative activism of actors like the EU, Korea, India, and Canada, the discussions revealed a region at the crossroads of confrontation and cooperation. The recurring theme was clear: no single actor can shape the future of the South China Sea alone. Instead, peace and stability will depend on sustained deterrence, credible legal frameworks, expanded capacity-building, and the political will to defend a free and open maritime order. As challenges mount and gray-zone tactics evolve, so too must the regional and international strategies designed to confront them—grounded in unity, resilience, and a shared commitment to rules-based governance.

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