

**South China Sea  
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**Beijing's Battle of Ideas in the South China Sea:  
How Chinese Think Tanks Deliver Maritime Strategy**

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In the South China Sea, where territorial disputes often make headlines for naval standoffs and island-building, China is waging a quieter, more sophisticated campaign. Beyond the reach of patrol boats and warships, a network of state-aligned think tanks and academic institutions is working to reshape global perceptions of Beijing's maritime claims.

Organizations such as the [Grandview Institution](#), the [China Institute of International Studies](#), the [Huayang Centre for Ocean Governance and Maritime Cooperation](#), and the [Charhar Society](#) are emerging as key players in this intellectual offensive. Though presented as independent voices, these institutions operate with the backing of government ministries, military entities, and Party-affiliated patrons. Through white papers, policy roundtables, and English-language publications, they advance a carefully curated narrative—casting China's actions as defensive, historically grounded, and in line with international law.

These think tanks do more than interpret policy; they manufacture it. Participating in Track II dialogues and regional forums, they seek to normalize Beijing's position and blunt international resistance—not through coercion, but through persuasion. For too long, Western analyses of the South China Sea have focused on China's military modernization and gray-zone tactics. But to fully grasp Beijing's maritime strategy, one must also reckon with the ideas—and institutions—driving it—one policy brief at a time.

### **China's Think Tank Ecosystem: Strategic Narrative, Not Neutral Research**

China's rise as a maritime power has not only depended on dredgers and destroyers but also on the steady expansion of a domestic policy research ecosystem designed to serve the state's geopolitical agenda. The country's foreign policy think tanks—often housed within ministries, party bodies, or military-affiliated universities—function less as independent analysts and more as narrative engineers. Institutions such as the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), the National Institute for South China Sea Studies (NISCSS), and the Grandview Institution are at the forefront of what might be called Beijing's "strategic communication apparatus": tasked with reframing sovereignty disputes as historical entitlements, legal ambiguities as interpretive nuance, and foreign resistance as destabilizing interference.

Unlike their Western counterparts, which often operate at arm's length from state authority, many of China's most influential think tanks are structurally embedded in the government. CIIS, for instance, is administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; NISCSS operates under the guidance of Hainan's provincial government with close ties to the Chinese Coast Guard; Grandview, although nominally a non-governmental organization, has longstanding affiliations with the Communist Party's external propaganda organs; The Huayang Centre for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance is the operational entity of the China–Southeast Asia Research Center on the South China Sea (CSARC), a non-governmental think tank closely linked to Chinese government-affiliated institutions. These think tanks allow Beijing to trial legal arguments, test international reactions, and diffuse criticism through the seemingly neutral language of research.

But this is not a monolithic system. The Chinese think tank landscape includes a spectrum of institutions ranging from hardline doctrinal voices to more internationally savvy operators. On one end, military-affiliated centers like the Academy of Military Sciences or National Defense University produce closed-circuit research for elite consumption. On the other, groups like

Grandview and the Charhar Society publish bilingual essays, organize international symposia, and emphasize “people-to-people exchange.” Their goal is not just to defend China’s maritime claims but to soften them—to package assertiveness in the language of responsibility and restraint.

These efforts are especially visible in Track II dialogues, where Chinese participants present their positions as scholarly interpretations rather than government doctrine. By cultivating an image of openness, these think tanks help China reframe its maritime assertiveness as stability-seeking behavior—thereby occupying rhetorical space before rival powers can define it. This strategy is particularly potent in Southeast Asia, where maritime law is politically fraught and scholarly exchanges can offer a lower-stakes avenue for influence.

In effect, Chinese think tanks serve as intermediaries between strategy and story. They may not set policy, but they shape the context in which policy is understood—both at home and abroad. For China, the battle for the South China Sea is not only about who controls the waters, but who controls the narrative currents that define them.

### **The Three Functions: Nexus, Network, and Narrative**

To understand how these institutions operate beneath the surface, we turn to a framework that captures their layered functions: nexus, network, and narrative. China’s South China Sea think tanks do not operate in isolation, but perform interlinked strategic functions that embed them deeply into the state’s maritime policymaking. As political scientist Ngeow Chow-Bing [argues](#) in *The Rise of China’s South China Sea Think Tanks: Nexus, Network, Narrative*, these institutions serve as vital nodes of policy influence, strategic communication, and international engagement.

The first function, nexus, refers to the tight coupling between knowledge production and state policymaking. Many think tank leaders hold advisory roles in government or maintain revolving-door relationships with bureaucracies, allowing their research to feed directly into legislative drafting and strategic planning. This linkage ensures that academic output is not abstract, but instrumental—shaping China’s claims, baselines, and diplomatic positions.

The second function, network, captures how these think tanks act as conveners and connectors—both domestically and abroad. At home, they form epistemic communities of maritime historians, legal scholars, and strategic analysts. Abroad, they serve as China’s Track II vanguard: organizing joint conferences, establishing overseas affiliates (such as NISCSS’s Institute for China-America Studies in Washington), and partnering with foreign universities. These networks do not simply share information; they align narratives and build coalitions.

Finally, the narrative function highlights how these institutions project China’s maritime claims through scholarly publications, media engagement, and real-time digital platforms. Institutions like the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI) use satellite tracking and Twitter diplomacy to counter what they call the “information imbalance” in Western media. Others, such as Wuhan University’s CIBOS and Nanjing University’s CICSCSS, disseminate legal arguments grounded in historical continuity and sovereign entitlement. The goal is not only to respond to foreign criticism, but to pre-empt it by shaping the discursive terrain.

Together, these three functions—nexus, network, narrative—form a conceptual architecture that explains how Chinese think tanks shape both internal consensus and external perception. They are not just extensions of the state; they are engines of legitimation. As such, understanding their roles is indispensable to understanding Beijing’s broader South China Sea strategy.

## **Track II Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics**

While China's official diplomacy in the South China Sea is often rigid and assertive, its semi-official dialogues tell a more subtle story. Track II diplomacy—unofficial, academic, and ostensibly non-binding—has become a key arena where Chinese think tanks test legal arguments, signal policy shifts, and shape foreign perceptions. Here, the façade of scholarly neutrality is used not to escape geopolitics but to stage it.

Institutions like the Grandview Institution have become especially active in this space. Based in Beijing, Grandview is known for its outward-facing posture: organizing dialogues with Western scholars, publishing in English, and convening multi-national panels on maritime security. In 2020, it co-hosted a private roundtable with Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai China Center, bringing together former diplomats and legal scholars from both countries. Two years later, Grandview joined the U.S. Naval War College at the Manila Dialogue to exchange views with experts such as James Kraska, Professor of International Law in the Stockton Center, on crisis management and rule-of-law frameworks in contested waters. Such engagements allow China to assert its interpretations of international law—including its controversial readings of UNCLOS—within structured, polite conversation rather than open confrontation.

The [National Institute for South China Sea Studies](#) (NISCSS) operates similarly. In 2022, it co-organized the 13th U.S.–China Dialogue on Maritime Issues & International Law, where discussions included the Second Thomas Shoal and China’s baselines around disputed features. Chinese delegates framed their position as legal continuity rather than provocation—an argument echoed later in official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this way, Track II forums act as incubators for China’s official diplomatic messaging, allowing rehearsed lines to be refined in real time.

Likewise, a newly formed Beijing-backed institution, the Huayang Centre for Ocean Governance and Maritime Cooperation, helmed by Dr. Shicun Wu, has become central to China’s Western-facing South China Sea outreach. As chairman, Dr. Wu spearheads high-profile symposium, hosting officials from across Southeast Asia and Western think tanks—and consistently emphasizes Chinese leadership in regional maritime order, framing U.S. involvement as the primary destabilizing force. More specifically, The Centre frequently hosts high-level events featuring senior Chinese officials, such as Wang Yi, Member of the CPC Central Committee Political Bureau and Foreign Minister, alongside international participants. These forums are co-organized with government-linked research bodies like NISCSS and the Hainan Free Trade Port Research Institute, and branded by CGTN, a state media channel.

Not all Chinese think tanks involved in Track II diplomacy are equally moderate. Some use the space to amplify maximalist claims while preserving plausible deniability. But others, like Charhar Society, specialize in “soft-front diplomacy.” Though not formally maritime-focused, Charhar has embedded South China Sea narratives into broader forums on East Asian peace and

regional trust. Framing disputes through the lens of harmony and dialogue, it reframes China's strategic moves—such as island-building or coast guard patrols—as responsible statecraft rather than coercive expansion.

Even in seemingly academic settings, these dialogues are rarely ideologically neutral. As Dr. Krista Wiegand of the University of Tennessee observed after participating in the 2024 Manila Dialogue, Chinese scholars “present caution as a strategic choice”—yet this caution may be reactive, not principled. What appears as scholarly deliberation often masks message discipline. The true value of these forums lies not in their ability to resolve disputes, but in their utility for strategic mapping: identifying how key actors define terms like “stability” or “freedom of navigation,” and how far they are willing to reinterpret them.

Track II diplomacy thus serves dual purposes for China. It offers a controlled outlet to engage with critics while projecting the image of a rational, law-abiding maritime actor. More importantly, it allows Chinese think tanks to shape the intellectual terrain before policy is formally declared. In the South China Sea, ideas are weapons—and Track II is a proving ground.

### **The Grandview Case: Soft Front of a Hard Strategy**

Among China’s expanding network of maritime think tanks, the Grandview Institution distinguishes itself not by its official proximity to power, but by its tactical agility in narrative projection. Through bilingual publications, regional dialogues, and selective collaborations with Western institutions, Grandview has positioned itself as a soft interface—delivering hard strategy in digestible form.

In recent years, Grandview has played an outsized role in Track II diplomacy. It has co-hosted forums with the Paul Tsai China Center at Yale Law School, joined legal dialogues with the U.S. Naval War College, and co-organized multilateral roundtables in Manila and ASEAN capitals. These forums typically feature figures such as [Liu Xiaobo](#)—Grandview’s maritime law specialist—and Hung Jiang, its strategic policy advisor, who together articulate a version of China’s South China Sea claims that appears restrained, rational, and law-bound.

Liu’s interventions are particularly notable. At the 2024 Manila Dialogue, he defended China’s new baselines around Scarborough Shoal as legal codifications of long-standing positions—not aggressive redrawing. His language emphasized “restraint,” “status quo maintenance,” and “coast guard-based enforcement,” carefully avoiding phrases associated with militarization. In doing so, he delivered a message aimed not at critics, but at fence-sitters: Southeast Asian nations wary of both U.S. and Chinese escalation.

Grandview’s power lies not in altering foreign policy, but in shaping how that policy is perceived. Its bilingual framing, legal fluency, and selective openness make it a useful lens through which foreign analysts can observe shifts in Beijing’s strategic thinking—sometimes even before they appear in official statements. It serves simultaneously as a rhetorical buffer for China’s more coercive actions and a barometer for testing international response. In short, Grandview is both the varnisher of China’s maritime position and a listening post for how far that varnish might travel.

## **The Charhar Society: The Cultural Sublimate of Maritime Politics**

While Grandview employs legal nuance and diplomatic engagement, the [Charhar Society](#) takes a subtler route—elevating China’s maritime messaging into the register of civilizational discourse. Since its founding in 2009, Charhar has operated at the intersection of soft power and strategic intent, projecting China’s South China Sea stance not through law, but through language—harmonious, historical, and humanistic.

Officially described as non-governmental, Charhar functions as a soft-power proxy, particularly in domains where overt state messaging might provoke resistance. It organizes forums on “civilizational dialogue” and “peaceful development,” where discussions of maritime issues are often embedded within broader themes of Asian unity, anti-colonial heritage, or global cooperation. These platforms are less about policy debate than narrative reshaping.

Senior fellow He Wenping exemplifies this strategy. In her public essays and interviews, she frames China’s island construction in the South China Sea not as expansionism, but as “defensive necessity”—a rational response to external provocation. Military build-up becomes maritime stewardship. Sovereignty claims are reinterpreted as historical continuity. The adversarial becomes administrative.

Unlike Grandview, Charhar rarely engages directly with legal critique. Instead, it offers conceptual cover—recasting international skepticism as misunderstanding, and framing regional tensions as remnants of Cold War mindsets. Through English-language essays, global op-eds, and curated academic exchanges, it advances what might be called strategic sublimation: the transmutation of hard policy into soft narrative.

Thus, while Charhar lacks direct involvement in Track II dialogues or legal drafting, it plays a distinct role in China’s maritime communication architecture. It is not a neutral marketplace of ideas; it is a narrative sanctuary, where controversial policy becomes cultural inevitability. In that sense, Charhar functions not as a platform of neutrality, but as a soft front for legal legitimization—embedding Beijing’s maritime posture in language too smooth to provoke, and too strategic to ignore.

## **International Reflections: Strategic Dialogue or Narrative Export?**

As Chinese think tanks increase their visibility in Track II maritime dialogues, a parallel increase in international skepticism has emerged—especially among seasoned participants from the United States, Southeast Asia, and Australia. These observers, while acknowledging the importance of sustained academic engagement, caution against overestimating the openness or neutrality of Chinese interlocutors. Their insights suggest that beneath the courteous tone of Track II diplomacy lies a strategic asymmetry—one rooted not merely in political control but in conceptual divergence.

Dr. Pooja Bhatt, a legal scholar and author of *Nine-Dash Line: Deciphering the South China Sea Conundrum*, was blunt in her assessment: “The participation of such institutions provides legitimacy to their arguments and even mainstream some of the misinformation/disinformation on the topic. I would have been more convinced of the institution's work if they provide global



viewpoints on the SCS to their domestic Chinese audience too, to work at a level playing field.” For Bhatt, China’s think tanks operate less as bridges of mutual understanding and more as gatekeepers of curated legitimacy.

Not all observers dismiss the value of dialogue with Chinese think tanks, but many caution against mistaking performance for flexibility. Dr. Krista Wiegand, Director of the Center for National Security and Foreign Affairs at the University of Tennessee, takes a more measured, yet critical view. “I’m not sure I have a good answer except that the Chinese are always going to try to share information and their views about the South China Sea, even if non-CCP affiliated officially, in any context they can, especially at the international level. I do think it’s useful to keep good lines of communication with Chinese think tanks for Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, but it’s also important to keep in mind that what is said could be questionable.” In her view, strategic messaging cloaked in the language of dialogue masks a deeper strategic rigidity.

Likewise, CPT Dianne Despi, a member of the Corps of Professors in the Armed Forces of the Philippines, offers a grounded view of Chinese think tanks’ limited sway over U.S. South China Sea policy, noting that “such Chinese think tanks have not been influential enough to really influence U.S. policy on the South China Sea (there is a considerable trust deficit).” Instead, she sees their value primarily as information sources which provides insights into “the Chinese government’s interests, perspectives, and priorities,” as well as “internal conversations in China (and divisions, possibly), and prospects for cooperation or collaboration, if any.” While she remains skeptical about legal progress—observing that “China seems very set in its intent for legal frameworks to form part of their lawfare” Despi stresses the importance of continued engagement: “dialogue remains important as it tempers down possibilities for conflict escalation.” Her remarks reflect a pragmatic approach that acknowledges strategic limits while underscoring the informational and risk-reduction value of Track II exchanges.

Despite these limitations, some Sino experts argue that engagement still holds analytical value. Harrison Prétat of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies sees utility not in expecting breakthroughs, but in tracing rhetorical shifts that might signal policy recalibration. He explains: “I think Chinese think tanks or their participation in conferences are unlikely to have direct impacts on U.S. policy, but we have found it valuable for scholars from both sides to engage in order to get a better understanding of how academic and policy communities in Beijing and Washington are viewing the issues.” For Prétat, Track II dialogue offers analytic utility, even when it lacks substantive reciprocity.

Yet others point to a more fundamental divide, [Dr. Bec Strating](#), Director of La Trobe Asia, highlights the deeper problem: “My sense from the SCS Manila dialogue is that the participants tended to be talking across each other, a point I raised in the final session. One view from a non-Chinese participant was that there is little point asking for a clear explanation of a concept like the nine-dash line. In contrast, one of the Chinese participants argued that they *were* providing a clear meaning to the concept.” Her experience at the 2024 Manila Dialogue illustrates the difficulty of translating between legal positivism and Beijing’s historical anchored claims—an asymmetry that complicated not only diplomacy, but the very terms of conversation.

Together, these reflections converge on a central insight: Track II’s asymmetry isn’t merely procedural—it’s conceptual. Chinese think tanks enter the conversation fluent in international

legal vocabulary but operate within an internally closed epistemic system. Their outputs are designed for foreign consumption, yet their inputs remain tightly filtered by state priorities. This creates a one-way flow of narrative authority: outward-facing, dual-language legitimacy production without inward-facing openness.

### **Misreading the Messenger Risks Misreading the Message**

For policymakers and analysts, the temptation to treat Chinese think tanks as independent, neutral platforms carries real risk. While their participation in international forums lends an air of transparency, mistaking this engagement for policy flexibility can lead to serious miscalculations. The very structure of China's think tank diplomacy is designed not to reveal intent, but to manage perception.

Institutions like Grandview and Charhar exemplify what might be called Beijing's legitimacy offensive: the use of civil voices to normalize state narratives. Through bilingual reports, regionally tailored forums, and controlled dialogues, these think tanks manufacture the appearance of strategic moderation—emphasizing “stability,” “law-based order,” and “restraint.” But beneath this language lies a deeper tactical rhythm: stabilization as prelude to expansion, engagement as mechanism of boundary-setting.

Charhar's civilizational rhetoric, Grandview's legal nuance, and the broader apparatus of Track II projection all serve a dual function—external engagement and internal insulation. By offering the world carefully modulated narratives, China's think tanks create a conceptual buffer zone: a discursive grey zone that mirrors the maritime one.

The implication is clear: China's maritime strategy is a contest of ideas as much as it is a contest of islands. To understand the power dynamics at sea, one must first understand the architecture of argument on land. In that sense, think tanks are not peripheral actors. They are the frontline messengers of statecraft—shaping not only how China defends its claims, but how the world is meant to receive them.

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