



**Statement before the  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on East  
Asia and the Pacific**

***““Building Bridges, Countering Rivals:  
Strengthening U.S.-ASEAN Ties to  
Combat Chinese Influence”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairwoman Kim, Ranking Member Bera, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to share my views with you on the topic of U.S.-ASEAN cooperation to combat China's influence in the region. CSIS does not take policy positions, so the views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of my employer. In my testimony, I would like to reflect on the current state of play in the South China Sea, relative U.S. and Chinese influence across Southeast Asia, and the resources the U.S. and its partners have to combat Chinese malign activity in the region.

## **Holding the Line in the South China Sea**

China seeks to control all activity, military and civilian, across the South China Sea in clear violation of international law. This represents a systemic challenge to freedom of navigation, a key plank of the rules-based order and an abiding U.S. national interest since the earliest days of the Republic. It is also an immediate challenge to the interests of U.S. partners, especially the Philippines, which is the oldest U.S. treaty ally in the Indo-Pacific. Should Beijing succeed in realizing its vast claims to "historic rights" throughout this body of water, it would undermine the credibility of U.S. commitments to its allies in the region and severely damage the law of the sea globally. This is a challenge the United States can only confront by working hand-in-hand with allies and partners.

For more than a decade, China has pursued its claims with increasing coercion and threats of force under Xi Jinping's leadership. Beijing assesses that it can achieve its aims through pressure and non-lethal force – often dubbed "gray zone" coercion – which it believes will eventually compel Southeast Asian states to acquiesce. From 2012 until 2021, gray zone tactics spearheaded by the China Coast Guard (CCG) and militia were remarkably successful in denying Southeast Asian claimants access to fishing grounds, offshore energy resources, and other lawful rights in their exclusive economic zones and continental shelves. This was made possible by the island building campaign of 2013 to 2016 and the subsequent construction of naval, air, and sensing infrastructure at those bases, which by 2017 allowed Chinese ships to sustain operations across the South China Sea every day of the year.<sup>1</sup>

But the tactics employed by the CCG and militia have become less effective since late 2021. Across multiple fronts, Southeast Asian claimants have been able to succeed in resource exploitation, military upgrades, patrols, and resupply missions despite concerted pressure from China. Throughout this period, CCG and militia tactics have grown more violent, including intentional collisions, more frequent use of high-pressure water cannons, dangerous air-to-air intercepts, and use of dazzlers and acoustic devices. This suggests a force whose orders are to assert China's prerogatives but not at the cost of military escalation. Southeast Asian claimants have realized this and proven willing to accept considerable risk in order to maintain access to the waters and reefs still left to them. And so Chinese forces appear stuck iterating on

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<sup>1</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "An Accounting of China's Deployments to the Spratly Islands," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 9, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/accounting-chinas-deployments-spratly-islands/>.

unsuccessful gray zone tactics to which Southeast Asian claimants have grown increasingly resilient.<sup>2</sup>

The Philippines under the administration of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., has reestablished a patrol around Scarborough Shoal for the first time since 2012 and enhanced its posture in the Spratlys, especially around Thitu Island. Most impressively, the Philippines was able to sustain monthly resupply missions to the BRP *Sierra Madre* in 2023 and early 2024 despite a violent Chinese blockade effort. Manila eventually repaired the ship and was able to negotiate a return to the status quo without triggering military escalation. In the meantime, Manila used the increasing Chinese pressure to rally domestic support behind a once-in-a-generation modernization of the U.S. alliance in order to enhance deterrence (which proved critical at Second Thomas). It has also embedded itself more firmly in an emerging regional security architecture, strengthening its partnership with Australia under the Status of Visiting Forces Agreement, concluding a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan in July 2024, reaching a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement with New Zealand in early 2025, and nearing conclusion of similar pacts with Canada, France, and the United Kingdom. Just as importantly, Manila has refocused international attention on the illegal nature of China’s claims, more than tripling to 28 the number of countries that have publicly called on Beijing to comply with the 2016 South China Sea arbitral award since Marcos came into office.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, China has failed to stop Malaysian, Indonesian, or Vietnamese oil and gas surveys or drilling operations since the fall of 2021. In addition to the daily presence at Luconia Shoals, a leaked diplomatic note in September 2024 revealed China had pressured Malaysia to halt oil and gas exploration in the area. Instead, Malaysia drilled 15 new exploratory wells off Sarawak in 2024 after having broken a record by drilling 25 in 2023.<sup>4</sup> China also challenged a seismic survey in Indonesia’s Natuna D-Alpha gas field in October 2024. Indonesia broke with its usual policy by publicly releasing photos and footage of China’s harassment. Then it completed the survey operations as planned.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile Vietnam has spent the last three years expanding its own military outposts in the Spratlys. That effort accelerated in 2024 and by the middle of the year, Vietnam had created more than two-thirds as much land as China. It continues to dredge at a blistering pace and will likely match China’s acreage in 2025. The most impressive work has been on Barque Canada Reef, now the fourth-largest outpost in the Spratly Islands and home to Vietnam’s second and longest runway in the islands. At least one other feature, Pearson Reef, seems likely to get a new

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Poling, “China Loses Strategic Waters in the South China Sea,” East Asia Forum, March 15, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/15/china-loses-strategic-waters-in-the-south-china-sea/>; Gregory Poling and Monica Michiko Sato, “Beijing Treads Water in the South China Sea,” East Asia Forum, March 12, 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/03/12/beijing-treads-water-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>3</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Arbitration Support Tracker,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, updated January 10, 2025, <https://amti.csis.org/arbitration-support-tracker/>.

<sup>4</sup> World Oil, “PETRONAS Discovered over 1Bboe in 2023 with ‘Significant’ Malaysian Oil, Gas Exploration Campaign,” December 1, 2023, <https://worldoil.com/news/2023/12/1/petronas-discovered-over-1-bboe-in-2023-with-significant-malaysian-oil-gas-exploration-campaign/>.

<sup>5</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Seismic Strife: China and Indonesia Clash over Natuna Survey,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://amti.csis.org/seismic-strife-china-and-indonesia-clash-over-natuna-survey/>.

runway.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, China has made no effort to physically stop Vietnam's island building campaign and has only once criticized it publicly, in a rather boilerplate statement on February 19, 2025, by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun.<sup>7</sup>

The reasons for China's muted response to Vietnam's island building compared to its violent reaction to much less ambitious activities by the Philippines are debated, but one key factor is likely that Vietnam has a history of accepting risk and even casualties in the South China Sea when it deems something a strategic necessity. Beijing likely realizes that gray zone coercion will not stop Vietnam's island building campaign, which means there is not point in trying unless China is prepared to use military force.<sup>8</sup>

China's control over waters, seabed, and airspace has plateaued and in some cases may have retreated over the last three years. But the South China Sea is not getting any safer. Quite the opposite. As Southeast Asian states stand firm at a handful of symbolically or economically important locations, China has steadily increased the number of vessels it deploys in reaction and the tactics they employ. This creates a steady drumbeat of interactions that have a low but non-zero chance of military escalation due to an accidental fatality. That nearly occurred in June 2024 when Chinese forces severed a Filipino sailor's thumb by pinning it between their boat and his. Had he been pinned by the elbow, the Philippines might have triggered the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty over a fatality. If this tempo of operations continues, it is a mathematical certainty that a Southeast Asian mariner—most likely a Filipino—will be killed with unpredictable escalation risks.<sup>9</sup>

## A Regional Competition for Influence

Winning the strategic competition with China is not only about military or economic advantage, but about influence broadly defined. It is a struggle over whether the rules-based order the United States helped craft, which most of the international community has come to embrace, will adapt and endure or be replaced by China's preferred norms. In order to succeed, the United States needs other governments and their citizens to *choose* to support its preferred rules and norms more often than they do China's. And in that competition the United States' best tool is what the late Joseph Nye dubbed "soft power": the ability to shape others' choices because of the attractiveness of one's institutions, culture, values, and so on. Southeast Asia is at the front lines

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<sup>6</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "How Many Runways Is Vietnam Building in the Spratly Islands?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 30, 2024, <https://amti.csis.org/how-many-runways-is-vietnam-building-in-the-spratly-islands/>; Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Hanoi in High Gear: Vietnam's Spratly Expansion Accelerates," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 7, 2024, <https://amti.csis.org/hanoi-in-high-gear-vietnams-spratly-expansion-accelerates/>.

<sup>7</sup> "China Denounces Vietnam's Island Building in South China Sea," Radio Free Asia, February 19, 2025, <https://www.rfa.org/english/china/2025/02/19/vietnam-spratlys-south-china-sea-protest/>.

<sup>8</sup> Zack Cooper and Gregory Poling, "The South China Sea Dog that Hasn't Barked... Yet," War on the Rocks, June 18, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/06/the-south-china-sea-dog-that-hasnt-barked-yet/>.

<sup>9</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Shifting Tactics at Second Thomas Shoal," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 22, 2024, <https://amti.csis.org/shifting-tactics-at-second-thomas-shoal/>.

of U.S.-China competition and the United States still remains more influential, but that edge is eroding.

The Southeast Asia team at CSIS has measured changes in relative U.S. and Chinese influence in each country in Southeast Asia by collating public opinion polling, surveys of elites, UN voting behavior, and educational data.<sup>10</sup> This all makes clear that the United States maintains a latent advantage in influence. On balance, the United States is viewed more favorably, its global leadership is more trusted, and its educational and cultural institutions are more attractive than China's in most countries in Southeast Asia. And this advantage is most evident in the larger countries of the region, which by virtue of population and future economy are likely to have a larger say in issues of global governance. But that advantage has diminished over time, and recent developments will likely accelerate that negative trend.

The countries in which the United States maintains a clear advantage over China are the Philippines, Vietnam, and by some metrics, Burma, Cambodia, and Singapore. Publics in Burma and Cambodia are overwhelmingly pro-American and skeptical of China, though that is tempered by elites who often lean toward Beijing. In Singapore, the opposite is true, with a persistent elite preference for the United States amid public sentiment that increasingly favors China. The United States has also historically held an edge over China in the largest country in the region, Indonesia, though that reversed at least temporarily in 2024. The United States and China tend to run neck and neck on measures of influence in Thailand and Laos, while China has a clear and growing advantage only in Malaysia.

A review of relative U.S. influence in the three largest countries of the region is illustrative, starting with the place in which the United States seems to have all the advantages: the Philippines. Based on historical public opinion polling by Gallup, the Philippines overwhelmingly favors the United States, with views of U.S. global leadership among Filipinos at more than net 90 percent positive and those of China more than net 50 points negative. This reflects not only the fact that the United States remains popular in the Philippines, but also the fact that China remains distinctly *unpopular*. Elite opinion surveys in the Philippines show similar preferences for the United States among Filipino government, business, and thought leaders. And this is increasingly reflected in UN voting behavior, where the Philippines has increasingly sided with the United States on votes of particular importance (as defined by the State Department) in recent years. In 2022, for instance, the Philippines was aligned with the United States on 67 percent of such votes and with China on only 57 percent.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gregory B. Poling, *U.S. and Chinese Soft Power and Influence in Southeast Asia*, CSIS, August 14, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-and-chinese-soft-power-and-influence-southeast-asia>; Gregory B. Poling and Andreyka Natalegawa, *Assessing U.S. and Chinese Influence in Southeast Asia*, CSIS, August 7, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-us-and-chinese-influence-southeast-asia>.

<sup>11</sup> Forthcoming report, CSIS, 2025.

Vietnamese public opinion is similarly pro-U.S. and anti-China, and the United States has been surging in the last decade and a half, though China still maintains significant if shrinking influence over Hanoi's international decisionmaking. Vietnamese public opinion of the United States has seen a remarkable upward trajectory in the years since 2008, matched by a concurrent fall in public opinion of China. While the United States and China enjoyed net approval scores of 28 percent and 49 percent in 2008, by 2024 this reversed to 56 percent for the United States and - 41 percent for China. Vietnamese elites also consistently voice approval of the United States and disapproval of China. In the United Nations, Vietnam's voting coincidence with the United States on important votes has risen from just 4 percent in 2008 to a high of 47 percent in 2021, while its voting coincidence with China fell from 96 percent to 71 percent over the same time period.

In Indonesia, the United States has historically held an edge in most measures of influence, but that has always been narrow and now risks reversing. Indonesian public opinion of China and the United States has shifted significantly since 2008. Gallup polling shows the Indonesian public favored China slightly in 7 of the last 17 years, while favoring the United States in all others. Indonesian elite surveys show a similar pattern, with a modest but unstable preference for the United States in most years. Worryingly, both public and elite opinion flipped in favor of China in 2024, likely in response to the Israel-Hamas war. Indonesia's UN voting behavior has shown a similar trend to Vietnam's, aligning with the United States on important votes just 12 percent of the time in 2008 but 55 percent in 2022. By contrast, Indonesia voted with China 96 percent of the time in 2008 but dipped to 64 in 2022.

### **Maintaining U.S. Influence in Southeast Asia**

In the South China Sea, it is vital that the United States continue to deepen alliance coordination with and support for the Philippines, both bilaterally and multilaterally with like-minded partners like Japan and Australia. Recent moves on this front have been well-received in the Philippines, including the early waiver to in February 2025 allowing the Philippines to access the remaining \$336 million of its FY24 Foreign Military Financing funds, the recently concluded Balikatan exercises, the State Department's reiteration of the application of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty to any attack on Filipinos in the South China Sea, and Secretary of Defense Hegseth's comments on the alliance both in Manila and during his recent attendance at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. The United States must continue to provide sufficient funds to support the longterm modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines as agreed in the U.S.-Philippines 10-year Security Sector Assistance Roadmap.

But all the alliance coordination and modernization support Washington could possible offer would only buy time. The ultimate solutions to the South China Sea disputes are diplomatic, not military, and require imposing non-military costs on Beijing while supporting efforts by Manila and other claimants to lay the groundwork for a future compromise. The State Department is the lead agency in that effort and U.S. partners will be looking for assurances that it is not turning away from multilateral diplomacy in the South China Sea. The proposed closure of the Multilateral

Affairs Office in the State Department's Bureau for East Asia and the Pacific will be viewed with concern on that front. The office is the lead on the department's work on ASEAN and the South China Sea, as well as the Mekong River, and fills a multilateral role for which individual country desks are ill-equipped. It had a driving role, for instance, in the creation of the 2020 Position Paper on the South China Sea under the first Trump Administration. It is vital that EAP-MLA's work continue uninterrupted even if that role is moved to another office.

In the broader geopolitical competition in Southeast Asia, the tools of U.S. influence have been severely disrupted over the last several months. If their functions are quickly restored, even if under different agencies or institutions, the damage to U.S. soft power could be transient. Otherwise, the damage will be generational at a time when the United States can least afford to cede the battlefield for influence in Southeast Asia to China.

For example, the disruption of most USAID programs has been felt across the region, as it has globally, but the harm to U.S. influence was particularly visible in the wake of the severe earthquake that struck near Mandalay, Burma, earlier this year. Chinese and Russian personnel were quickly on the scene to search for survivors while the U.S. government struggled to find a vehicle to deliver any aid even after funds were announced. The pause on Fulbright funding and interviews for student visas is disrupting planned study in the United States by countless students and researchers from the Philippines, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries, diminishing the U.S. edge as a preferred educational destination. The end of most Radio Free Asia and Voice of America programming in the region has been welcomed by China's *Global Times* while leaving the pro-American publics of countries like Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam deprived of access to honest information. A recent study by the Lowy Institute showed that VOA was the most popular radio broadcaster in the region. The beneficiary will now likely be the outfit that came in a distant second: Russia's Sputnik.<sup>12</sup>

As the U.S. government seeks to reorganize agencies and recalibrate the way foreign funding is distributed, it is important to avoid undermining the foundations of U.S. influence. A strong military and economy will not be enough to win the geopolitical competition with China; the United States must also retain the attractive power to convince countries to align with Washington's preferences more often than those of Beijing.

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<sup>12</sup> Susannah C Patton, "Silencing the Voice of America," *The Interpreter*, March 18, 2025, <http://lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/silencing-voice-america>.