

Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies, Nanjing University
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The Tenth Anniversary of the South China Sea Arbitration: Issues and the Future

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Author Zhu Feng
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Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies

Floor 3, Yifu Building, 22 Hankou Road, Gulou District, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, 210093
Tel: +86 25-83597212/+86 25-83593123 | Fax: +86 25-83597212 | Web: nanhai.nju.edu.cn

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About the Author



Zhu Feng

Professor Zhu Feng is Executive Director of the Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University. He previously served as Dean of the School of International Studies at Nanjing University, Deputy Director of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, and Professor at Peking University. His research focuses on China-U.S. relations, East Asian security, and maritime security in the South China Sea. Professor Zhu has held visiting scholar appointments at the Brookings Institution, Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He currently serves as Vice President of the China Association for International Studies and the Chinese Association for Japanese Studies. He has also received several national academic distinctions and held research appointments at institutions specializing in Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and related studies.

Email: zhufeng@nju.edu.cn

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Executive Summary

July 12, 2026, marks the tenth anniversary of the so-called South China Sea Arbitration. Over the past decade, the international community has never ceased to debate this arbitration, which was unilaterally initiated by the Philippines and covertly manipulated by forces outside the region. From the very beginning, this arbitration violated the purposes and principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Chinese government's position on the so-called arbitration has been clear and consistent from the outset, namely, that China neither accepts, participates in, nor recognizes it, and it maintains that the award is invalid and has no binding force. China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea remain unaffected under any circumstances. China's position is firmly grounded in international law and history, and has garnered the understanding and support of a growing number of countries and stakeholders within the international community that uphold fairness and justice. Ten years have passed since the South China Sea Arbitration, yet the United States and some Western countries have not given up on manipulating this case. They continue to use it as a pretext to deny China's legitimate claims to sovereignty over islands, reefs, and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea. By waging diplomatic, legal, and public opinion campaigns, and by establishing various mini-multilateral mechanisms aimed at containing China, they are attempting to substantially constrain China's maritime presence and projection of power in the Western Pacific. In response, China must be prepared for a protracted struggle and contest.

› Key Points

- Extra-regional interference poses a major challenge to order in the South China Sea. Over the past decade, the situation in the South China Sea has remained generally peaceful and stable. China and ASEAN member states have demonstrated the capacity and willingness to manage disputes through dialogue and cooperation, while interference and intervention by the United States and other Western powers from

outside the region have become major sources of disruption to regional order.

- The South China Sea issue has become an important geostrategic instrument in U.S. strategic competition with China. Around the tenth anniversary of the arbitration award, the United States and other Western powers have intensified diplomatic, legal and public-opinion pressure on China. U.S. think tanks and media outlets continue to shape public narratives; Japan has stepped up substantive security coordination with the Philippines; and European countries have expressed diplomatic support for the award. Together, these developments have produced pressure on China through multiple channels.
- The South China Sea arbitration award continues to fuel strategic and legal contestation. A decade later, the United States and other Western countries still invoke the award to challenge China's claims to territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, while strengthening regional security cooperation to constrain Chinese maritime forces. Diplomatic, legal, and public-opinion contestation surrounding the award will persist.

› Policy Recommendations

- Pursue the peaceful settlement of South China Sea disputes through dialogue and consultation. China should firmly safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, remain committed to settling disputes through negotiation and consultation with the countries directly concerned, and work with them to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.
- Prepare for protracted strategic contestation over the South China Sea issue. China should strengthen diplomatic, legal and public-opinion responses at the governmental, academic, think-tank and media levels, and promptly expose and rebut political maneuvers by extra-regional powers seeking to use the South China Sea arbitration to exert pressure on China.
- Continue advancing consultations on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. China and ASEAN member states should press ahead with consultations toward the formulation of a COC, promote the development of rules under the law of the sea acceptable to the parties concerned, and remain vigilant against, and work to prevent, interference and intervention by powers outside the region.

The Nature of the Arbitration and the Overall Situation in the South China Sea over the Past Decade

July 12, 2026, marks the tenth anniversary of the issuance of the so-called award in the South China Sea arbitration unilaterally initiated by the Philippines. For ten years, controversy in the international community over this arbitration—initiated unilaterally by the Philippines and covertly manipulated by forces outside the region—has never subsided. The proceedings contravened the purposes and principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) from the outset. Since the arbitration was initiated, the Chinese government's position has been unequivocal and consistent: China does not accept or participate in the arbitration, nor does it accept or recognize the award. The award is null and void and has no binding force; China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea shall not be affected by the award under any circumstances. This position has a firm legal and historical basis and has won understanding and support from a growing number of those in the international community who uphold fairness and justice. Over the past decade, the situation in the South China Sea has remained generally peaceful and stable. Through direct dialogue and consultation, China and the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have continued consultations on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) and actively explored practical maritime cooperation. These efforts have shown that countries within the region have both the capacity and the willingness to manage South China Sea disputes through peaceful means and cooperation.

China has consistently fulfilled its obligations and responsibilities under international law. Its actions to safeguard maritime rights and interests and maintain stability in the South China Sea are grounded in its position on sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao (the South China Sea Islands) and on historic rights and relevant maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea and adjacent waters; these actions are also fully consistent with the existing framework of international law. On May 28, 2026, Singapore's ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute published an analysis entitled "The 2016 South China Sea Arbitration Award Did Not Fail." The analysis made what may be regarded as a relatively objective observation: a decade after the 2016 award, the more consequential question is no longer whether China complied with the ruling, but whether the award continues to reshape the strategic and legal landscape of

the South China Sea. Interference and intervention by the United States and other Western countries from outside the region constitute the greatest source of disruption and the most serious challenge to the existing order in the South China Sea. Viewed from the tenth anniversary of the so-called award, the principal lesson of the arbitration is that unilateral provocations and attempts to manipulate judicial proceedings to infringe upon another country's territorial sovereignty can never gain acceptance in the international community, much less change historical facts. Any attempt to stir up tensions in the South China Sea and undermine regional peace and stability disregards and runs counter to the determination of China and other Asia-Pacific countries to build a community with a shared future with neighboring countries; such attempts are doomed to fail. High-handed interference by the United States and other extra-regional Western powers, including efforts to damage China's relations with the states directly concerned in the South China Sea disputes, is likewise destined to fail. China will continue firmly to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, pursue the peaceful settlement of disputes through negotiation and consultation with the countries directly concerned, and work with them to maintain regional peace and stability and make the South China Sea a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation.

The Multiple Means by Which the United States and Other Western Powers Have Pressured China Around the Award's Tenth Anniversary

Against the backdrop of China's rise, accelerating changes unseen in a century and a continuing shift in the international balance of power from West to East, the South China Sea issue has come to encompass far more than disputes between China and the states directly concerned over sovereignty over islands and reefs and maritime rights and interests. It has become a prominent geostrategic instrument in the United States' strategic competition with China and its wider campaign to suppress and contain China. The question of which country will emerge as the leading maritime power in the South China Sea has become central to current regional debates. In this context, the United States and other Western powers will continue to exploit the 2016 award in the arbitration unilaterally initiated by the Philippines. They will seek to use it to discredit China's lawful claims to sovereignty over islands and reefs and to maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, foment diplomatic, legal

and public-opinion campaigns, and establish various minilateral mechanisms aimed at containing China. Their objective is to place substantive limits on the presence and power-projection capabilities of China's maritime forces in the Western Pacific.

A. U.S. Think Tanks Use the Tenth Anniversary to Shape Public Opinion and Revive Arguments for Arbitration

In January 2025, Gregory B. Poling of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published an analysis entitled "How to Slay a Giant: Reviving the South China Sea Arbitration." Using Mauritius's strategy following arbitration concerning the Chagos Archipelago as a model, Poling urged Washington and its partners to support the Philippines should it initiate a further round of arbitration and called for greater use of the United Nations General Assembly as a platform.¹ In January 2026, CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) published a report entitled "Eyes on the Prize: CCG Patrols Prioritize Scarborough in 2025." On the basis of Automatic Identification System (AIS) data, the report claimed that China Coast Guard vessels were observed patrolling around Huangyan Dao on 352 days in 2025—approximately 96 per cent of the year—while patrol activity declined near Ren'ai Jiao, Wanan Tan and Qiongtai Jiao.² In February 2026, AMTI issued another report claiming that vessels it classified as part of China's maritime militia were present in record numbers in 2025, with an estimated daily average of 241 vessels across 12 monitored reefs, concentrated primarily around Meiji Jiao and Niu'e Jiao.³ Both reports used the 2016 arbitration award, explicitly or implicitly, as a point of reference and portrayed China's routine deployments in the areas concerned as violations of the award. In the first half of 2026, Philippine officials repeatedly signaled that they were considering another round of arbitration, while U.S. think tanks continued to assess its feasibility and timing. This has become a major theme in the public-opinion campaign surrounding the tenth anniversary of the so-called award.

1 G. Poling, "How to Slay a Giant: Reviving the South China Sea Arbitration", CSIS, January 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-slay-giant-reviving-south-china-sea-arbitration> [2026-07-05].

2 AMTI, "Eyes on the Prize: CCG Patrols Prioritize Scarborough in 2025", CSIS, January 29, 2026, <https://amti.csis.org/eyes-on-the-prize-ccg-patrols-prioritize-scarborough-in-2025/>; "AMTI: China Coast Guard Focuses its Patrols on Scarborough Shoal", *Maritime Executive*, January 29, 2026, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/amti-china-coast-guard-focuses-its-patrols-on-scarborough-shoal> [2026-07-05].

3 "Beijing's South China Sea Militia Fleet Largest Ever, Report Says", *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, March 24, 2026, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2026/03/> [2026-07-05].

B. Western Media Decry the Award's Alleged Lack of Enforcement and Call for Its Supposed Normative Significance to Be Upheld

In May 2026, *The Diplomat* published a tenth-anniversary assessment entitled "10 Years After the Arbitration Ruling, Might Makes Right in the South China Sea." In reviewing what it presented as a decade of inadequate enforcement of the award, the article cited the continued appearance of the nine-dash line on official Chinese maps, floating barriers at the entrance to Huangyan Dao and the construction of approximately 3,200 acres of artificial islands in Nansha Qundao. It accused China of "selective compliance with international law" and claimed that this posed a grave threat to smaller states lacking the economic leverage to confront Beijing.⁴ It is particularly absurd that the United States, which is itself not a party to UNCLOS, repeatedly accuses China of violating international norms in the South China Sea. Even U.S. commentators have acknowledged the contradiction in Washington's support for the award in the Philippines-initiated arbitration. As early as 2016, the U.S. commentary publication *The National Interest* argued that the arbitration had disrupted the previous "equilibrium of ambiguity" surrounding the South China Sea disputes, that no major power would accept an international judicial decision damaging its core interests, and that the award would usher in a new phase of disputes and make resolution more difficult.⁵

C. Japan Deepens Its Alignment with the Philippines, Moving from Public Advocacy to Concrete Action

Japan has consistently been among the most vocal supporters of the award in the South China Sea arbitration initiated by the Philippines. On the day the award was issued, then Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida declared that it was "final and legally binding" on the parties to the dispute and that they "must comply" with it.⁶ Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs subsequently developed a practice of issuing foreign-ministerial statements on anniversaries of the award. Statements issued by Yoshimasa Hayashi on the seventh anniversary in 2023 and Takeshi Iwaya on the ninth anniversary in 2025 reiterated the award's binding character, criticized China's South China Sea claims as inconsistent with UNCLOS and "highly commended" the Philippines for its continued adherence to the award.⁷ In the media, major

4 "10 Years After the Arbitration Ruling, Might Makes Right in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, May 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/05/> [2026-07-05].

5 "South China Sea Arbitration Award Breathtaking," *National Interest*, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/south-china-sea-arbitration-award-breathtaking-17004> [2026-07-05].

6 "Statement by Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida on the Final Award," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 12, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001204.html [2026-07-05].

7 "Seven Years since the Issuance of the Arbitral Tribunal's Award (Statement by FM Hayashi)," Ministry of Foreign

Japanese newspapers from across the political spectrum, ranging from the right-leaning Yomiuri Shimbun to the left-leaning Asahi Shimbun, urged China in their 2016 editorials to accept the award. Japanese think tanks, including the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) and the Ocean Policy Research Institute of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, have generally adopted positions closely aligned with those of the Japanese government. They emphasize that "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea is vital to Japan's "maritime lifelines" and have continued to publish studies treating the award as an authoritative legal reference.⁸

In 2026, Japan adopted a still more aggressive position on the South China Sea arbitration, moving beyond public statements to concrete action. The administration of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has pursued policies of neo-militarism while disregarding the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation, major wartime Allied documents with enduring significance under international law. In the context of the postwar settlement, these instruments embody, in the author's analysis, international commitments concerning the return to China of Taiwan and the South China Sea islands seized by Japan. The Takaichi administration seeks to repudiate the legal responsibilities and obligations Japan assumed in the postwar reconstruction of the Asian order concerning the status of Taiwan and the South China Sea islands as Chinese territory. Following the entry into force of the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement in September 2025, Japan announced in March 2026 that it would, for the first time, send combat units to the U.S.–Philippine Balikatan ("Shoulder-to-Shoulder") joint military exercises. Instead of merely sending observers or participating in disaster-relief activities, Japanese troops would take part in armed defense drills, making Japan the third-largest participant after the United States and the Philippines. Japanese media explicitly linked this decision to the Philippines-initiated arbitration award of 2016 and repeatedly attacked China's nine-dash-line claim as having been "rejected by the 2016 international arbitration award."⁹ At the Shangri-La Dialogue on May 31, 2026, the defense ministers of Japan, the United States and the Philippines again prominently reaffirmed the vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Remarks invoking the award by Philippine Defense

Affairs of Japan, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000448.html; "Nine Years since the Issuance of the Arbitral Tribunal's Award (Statement by FM Iwaya)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_01444.html [2026-07-05].

8 U.S. Naval War College, "The South China Sea Arbitration After Eight Years," *International Law Studies*, 2024, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3095&context=ils> [2026-07-05].

9 "Japan to Send Combat Units to Philippines-US Balikatan Exercises for the First Time," *The Diplomat*, March 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/japan-to-send-combat-units-to-philippines-us-balikatan-exercises-for-the-first-time/> [2026-07-05].

Secretary Gilberto Teodoro also received extensive coverage in Japanese media.

Japan and the Philippines have also recently announced plans to begin negotiations on the delimitation of their respective exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and continental shelves in waters east of China's Taiwan Island. China, Japan, and the Philippines are maritime neighbors in this area, and the maritime areas that Japan and the Philippines propose to delimit overlap substantially with the EEZ and continental shelf to which China can lay claim under international law. By undertaking bilateral maritime delimitation negotiations without consulting China and without due regard for the area's particular geographical circumstances, Japan and the Philippines violate the principles of sovereign equality and good faith under international law, as well as the obligations of cooperation and restraint, thereby engaging in internationally wrongful conduct. Their reckless actions pose a genuine threat to a free and open Asia-Pacific.

D. European Countries Take Sides Diplomatically: Their Positions on the Arbitration Award Warrant Close Scrutiny

In 2020, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany jointly submitted a note verbale to the United Nations that explicitly cited the 2016 award and asserted that claims to historic rights were "inconsistent with international law." This was an attempt to mislead opinion in multilateral forums.¹⁰ The European Union subsequently adopted an increasingly assertive position. In a statement issued in Manila in 2023, the EU described the award as "legally binding on the parties" and a milestone in the dispute-settlement mechanism under UNCLOS.¹¹ In 2024, an EU spokesperson publicly endorsed the award's finding that Ren'ai Jiao lies within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and insisted that "all parties concerned must respect and comply with the award."¹² European academic institutions, including the Department of War Studies at King's College London, even organized events marking the tenth anniversary of the arbitration award and examining its implications for the strategic environment in East Asia.¹³ Although European think tanks generally side

10 "Germany, France, UK Rebuke Beijing Over South China Sea," Radio Free Asia, September 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/europe-southchinasea-09172020190344.html> [2026-07-05].

11 "Local EU Statement on the Anniversary of the Award rendered in the Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China on the South China Sea," European External Action Service, July 12, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/philippines/local-eu-statement-anniversary-award-rendered-arbitration-between-republic-philippines-and-peoples_en [2026-07-05].

12 "South China Sea: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Anniversary of the Award Rendered in the Arbitration between the Philippines and China," European External Action Service, July 11, 2024, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/> [2026-07-05].

13 "International Security of East Asian Seascape in the Turbulent Times," King's College London, January 28, 2026,

with the United States and other Western countries in supporting the continued standing of the so-called award, they have tended to be more cautious than their U.S. counterparts about diplomatic and military responses.¹⁴ Institutions such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and Chatham House in the United Kingdom tend to examine the South China Sea issue through the lenses of freedom of navigation, supply-chain security and the credibility of international adjudication, without advocating sustained military pressure through alliance arrangements.¹⁵

Conclusion

A decade has passed since the issuance of the so-called award in the South China Sea arbitration initiated by the Philippines. In multiple respects, the findings of the purported award clearly contravene the principles of UNCLOS and entirely disregard geographical realities and historic rights. Nevertheless, the United States, European countries, and Japan continue to endorse the unlawful award in the so-called South China Sea arbitration. Their fundamental purpose is to undermine the basis of China's lawful claims in the South China Sea, perpetuate their geostrategic advantages in the South China Sea and the wider Western Pacific, and further their designs to create exclusive groupings aimed at opposing and containing China, all under the pretext of upholding international law.

The continuing diplomatic, legal, and public-opinion campaigns surrounding the South China Sea arbitration reflect the narrow and rigid calculations of power and self-interest

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/events/international-security-of-east-asian-seascape-in-the-turbulent-times> [2026-07-05].

14 William Choong, "South China Sea: Bringing Power to Bear," June 5, 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2018/06/south-china-sea-power/>; William Matthews, "What the UK Must Get Right in Its China Strategy: Managing Impacts on the UK's Other External Relationships," July 8, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/what-uk-must-get-right-its-china-strategy/04-managing-impacts-uks-other-external> [2026-07-05].

15 Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Confrontations in South China Sea Surge, Raising Fears a Miscalculation Could Lead to Conflict," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/12/south-china-sea-conflict-philippines-coast-guard>; Rebecca Ratcliffe, "China Building 'Counter-Stealth' Radar on Disputed South China Sea Reef, Satellite Pictures Suggest," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/26/china-building-counter-stealth-radar-on-disputed-south-china-sea-reef-satellite-pictures-suggest>; Harriet Moynihan, "Engage China to Uphold Multilateralism—But Not at Any Cost," June 12, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/engage-china-uphold-multilateralism-not-any-cost>; William Matthews, "What the UK Must Get Right in Its China Strategy: Managing Impacts on the UK's Other External Relationships," July 8, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/what-uk-must-get-right-its-china-strategy/04-managing-impacts-uks-other-external> [2026-07-05].

pursued by the United States and other Western powers. Against the backdrop of the continuing shift in the international balance of power from West to East since the end of the Cold War in 1991 and China's steady progress in building itself into a strong maritime country, these powers seek to maintain geopolitical pressure on China and obstruct China's efforts to build a maritime community with a shared future together with neighboring countries. China will remain steadfast in its principles and position on safeguarding its core interests in sovereignty, security and development. The fundamental nature of the so-called award in the Philippines-initiated arbitration will not change: it remains nothing more than a worthless piece of paper. China must therefore prepare for a protracted struggle and sustained strategic contestation. This is a responsibility extending beyond government alone. Academic institutions, think tanks and the media must also remain vigilant, treat diplomatic, legal, and public-opinion responses as an integral responsibility and concrete task in the long-term effort to safeguard maritime rights and interests and maintain stability in the South China Sea, and promptly expose and rebut the political maneuvers through which the United States and other Western powers use the award to renew their attacks on and exert pressure against China. Keeping the situation in the South China Sea stable and under control is crucial to peace and development in the Asia-Pacific and to the evolution of East Asia's geostrategic landscape. More broadly, it will affect whether the Western Pacific moves toward deeper regional cooperation or descends into disastrous geopolitical and geoeconomic fragmentation and confrontation. To bring disputes over sovereignty over islands and reefs and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea under stable and effective management, the parties need a body of rules under the law of the sea accepted by all concerned. Equally important, China and ASEAN must continue consultations toward the formulation and adoption of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, while remaining vigilant against, and working to prevent, interference and intervention by countries outside the region. The international community should understand and accept China's position on the South China Sea in an objective and fair-minded manner and share responsibility for world peace and sustainable development.

About Us

› Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies, Nanjing University

Founded in July 2012, the Center was established under the leadership of Nanjing University, with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Government of Hainan Province, and the then State Oceanic Administration. It advances multidisciplinary collaborative innovation across the arts and sciences, civil and military institutions, universities and research institutes, and among universities. The Center conducts comprehensive research on the South China Sea and supports national strategic decision-making on South China Sea affairs.

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Address: Floor 3, Yifu Building, 22 Hankou Road, Gulou District, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province

Email: msdpr@nju.edu.cn

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