

Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies, Nanjing University  
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# Pragmatic Cooperation in the South China Sea under the Framework of Building a China–Vietnam Community with a Shared Future

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# Executive Summary

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In recent years, the South China Sea situation has grown increasingly complex and volatile. Certain neighboring states, backed by external forces, have steadily intensified maritime operations and information campaigns, while some extra-regional powers have continued to deepen their involvement under the pretexts of "freedom of navigation", joint military exercises, and forward military presence, thereby raising the risk of air and sea friction and miscalculation and eroding the hard-won stability of the South China Sea. Meanwhile, the conflict in the Middle East and tensions in the Strait of Hormuz have demonstrated that once critical maritime passages become entangled in military confrontation, energy supplies, international shipping, and global supply chains all suffer. Since February 2026, U.S. and Israeli military strikes against Iran and the sustained US-Iran standoff over the Strait of Hormuz have made it all the more urgent for regional states to safeguard maritime peace and passage security.

Against this backdrop, Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary and President To Lam paid a state visit to China in April 2026, marking both his first overseas trip after being elected President and a significant follow-up to his earlier visit to China following his assumption of the party leadership in August 2024. This pattern of "high-frequency, high-level" strategic communication signals to the international community that China-Vietnam relations remain durably stable and that political mutual trust continues to deepen. While differences over the South China Sea persist, and certain countries seek to exploit these differences to disrupt the overall bilateral relationship, history and practice have repeatedly demonstrated that maintaining dialogue and consultation, effectively managing differences, and expanding practical cooperation, with disputes resolved peacefully through negotiation by the parties directly concerned, remain the realistic choice most consistent with both countries' fundamental interests and with regional peace and stability.

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## > Key Points

- The South China Sea issue is an important and sensitive point in China-Vietnam relations, but it does not define the relationship in its entirety. Given that both countries have successfully resolved their land border and Beibu Gulf delimitation disputes through negotiation, they should maintain a high degree of strategic patience and avoid allowing localized differences to become structural obstacles to the broader bilateral relationship.
- China and Vietnam's sustained joint patrols and joint maritime training in the Beibu Gulf demonstrate that both sides are capable of building institutionalized cooperation and security confidence in low-sensitivity areas. Going forward, the two sides can further enrich the substance of mechanisms covering fishery resource conservation, marine environmental protection, joint search and rescue, and maritime law enforcement notification, consolidating the foundation of mutual trust through concrete projects.
- Under the framework of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), both sides can adhere to the principle of "gradual progress, easy issues first", advancing cooperation in low-sensitivity areas alongside substantive Code of Conduct (COC) consultations. Without prejudicing either side's sovereignty position, they can explore practical pathways that combine shared economic interests with risk management.

## > Policy Suggestions

- Continue to treat China-Vietnam relations as a priority direction of neighborhood diplomacy. Through high-level visits, inter-party exchanges, strategic dialogues, and local cooperation, send a clear signal to the international community that bilateral relations remain durably stable and that political mutual trust is deepening — thereby narrowing the space for external forces to drive a wedge between the two countries.
- In the already-delimited Beibu Gulf, promote the establishment of a joint fishery resource conservation database, a joint law enforcement notification mechanism, and joint scientific research projects on marine environmental protection and climate observation; improve the joint maritime search and rescue system; and use institutionalized arrangements to handle low-intensity disputes while continuously accumulating cooperative outcomes.
- In sea areas and sectors where both sides have genuinely overlapping interests and conditions are relatively mature, encourage Chinese and Vietnamese enterprises to explore cooperative projects on the basis of strict risk separation, non-prejudice to

sovereignty positions, and mutual agreement. At the same time, jointly advance the conclusion of a substantive, effective COC text that does not impair China's sovereign rights and interests, so as to prevent the South China Sea issue from being drawn into bloc rivalry, militarization, or instrumentalization by external forces.

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# Both Sides Should Maintain a High Degree of Strategic Patience Toward Existing Differences

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China-Vietnam relations have entered a new stage of jointly building a community with a shared future, yet the South China Sea issue remains an important and sensitive constraint on the further deepening of bilateral ties. This reality should neither be evaded nor overstated. China-Vietnam friendship represents the overall picture of the bilateral relationship; maritime differences are complex issues that must be managed over the long term within that relationship. Precisely for this reason, both sides need to acknowledge their differences while maintaining strategic patience, channeling disputes into a trajectory that is communicable, manageable, and amenable to cooperation.

In exploring the complexities of the South China Sea issue today, a basic fact must not be overlooked: as socialist neighbors sharing mountains and rivers, China and Vietnam have a successful track record of resolving major boundary issues through negotiation, and have forged deep political ties through their shared struggles for national liberation, socialist construction, and regional cooperation. Despite the divergences that changes in the international environment and shifts in the configuration of interests have produced between the two sides at sea, "communication" and "dialogue" have consistently been the primary means by which both countries manage their differences. The China-Vietnam Land Border Treaty was signed in 1999 and the demarcation and placement of boundary markers was completed at the end of 2008; the Beibu Gulf Delimitation Agreement and Fisheries Cooperation Agreement were signed in 2000 and entered into force simultaneously in 2004. These experiences demonstrate that China and Vietnam are not lacking in the capacity to resolve complex problems through political consultation and legal-technical means.

After the resolution of the land border and Beibu Gulf issues, border crossing points gradually became important platforms for people-to-people exchanges, trade, and local cooperation, and the land border has increasingly transformed into a frontier of friendship, openness, and development. Following the Beibu Gulf delimitation, both sides established confidence-building measures such as joint patrols and fisheries cooperation, providing replicable experience for maritime security governance. This process shows that, as long as both sides persist in equal consultation, accommodate each other's reasonable concerns, and place the overall bilateral relationship first, historically accumulated problems can genuinely be converted into incremental cooperation.

To be sure, the South China Sea issue is far more complex than the land border and Beibu Gulf delimitation. It involves not only geographic distances, the legal status of islands and reefs, maritime rights claims, and resource development arrangements, but is also subject to multiple competing interests, domestic public opinion, and the intervention of external forces. Accordingly, neither side should expect the South China Sea differences to be resolved all at once in the short term. For China and Vietnam, the more realistic path is: while holding firm to principled positions, avoid allowing specific frictions to escalate into strategic confrontation; while relinquishing neither side's position, prioritize expanding space for cooperation, reducing the risk of miscalculation, and accumulating the institutional conditions for eventually resolving the issues.

## Using the "Beibu Gulf Model" to Pioneer New Pathways for Maritime Cooperation

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Despite the overall South China Sea situation being influenced by external power intervention and adventurist actions by certain states, China and Vietnam have in recent years maintained relative stability in relevant sea areas and continued to advance practical cooperation in several domains. In the Beibu Gulf in particular, both sides have developed a relatively mature cooperative mechanism that offers an important model for expanding maritime cooperation in the future.

In March 2026, China and Vietnam completed the 40th Beibu Gulf joint patrol and the first joint maritime training. During the mission, naval vessel formations from both sides patrolled in an orderly manner along the China-Vietnam Beibu Gulf demarcation line, completing exercises including simulated escort of merchant vessels, strikes against "pirate" targets, and joint rescue of personnel in distress. The long-running nature of this mechanism demonstrates that the maritime forces of the two countries have developed a degree of understanding in risk management, information communication, and non-traditional security cooperation, and provides a sustainable platform for bilateral maritime security cooperation.

Following To Lam's visit to China, the two sides should further enrich the institutional substance of Beibu Gulf cooperation. In the already-delimited Beibu Gulf, both sides should move beyond symbolic patrols and periodic exchanges toward cooperation focused on project-based, institutionalized, and normalized arrangements.

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First, establish a joint fishery resource conservation mechanism. Fishing vessels in the Beibu Gulf are numerous and fishing activities frequent, making occasional frictions difficult to avoid entirely. Both sides can "depoliticize" the handling of low-intensity disputes — such as unauthorized fishing, vessel collisions, and rescue of fishermen — by building a fisheries resource database, a key fishing ground information-sharing mechanism, and a joint law enforcement notification mechanism, resolving specific problems as far as possible through technical channels and law enforcement cooperation.

Second, expand marine environmental protection and scientific research cooperation. In low-sensitivity areas such as marine ecosystem protection, marine debris management, ocean climate observation, and fishery resource assessment, China and Vietnam can establish joint scientific survey projects and expert working groups. Such cooperation does not directly touch on sovereignty disputes, yet helps enhance exchanges among scientific personnel, accumulates a shared data foundation, and shapes a more stable public opinion environment for "blue economy" cooperation.

Third, improve the joint maritime search and rescue mechanism. The Beibu Gulf sees heavy vessel traffic, and risks from typhoons, storm surges, and fishing vessel accidents are objective realities. Establishing an efficient joint search and rescue mechanism to provide safety guarantees for fishermen, commercial vessels, and other personnel from both countries operating in or transiting the Gulf is both a humanitarian imperative and an effective means of accumulating military and law enforcement mutual trust.

After nearly two decades of exploration, China and Vietnam have accumulated substantial institutional experience in the Beibu Gulf. As summit meetings between the two countries' leaders and political mutual trust are further elevated, if the "Beibu Gulf model" can be deepened, it will send a clear signal to the outside world: as long as both sides act in good faith, mechanisms are in place, and projects provide tangible traction, maritime security cooperation and military mutual trust can be incrementally built.

## **Seeking the Greatest Common Ground for "Joint Development" in Disputed Areas**

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In addressing South China Sea disputes, China has long maintained the policy position of "setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development". In the current complex international landscape and regional security environment, this position retains practical operational relevance. Vietnam, too, in its relevant policy discussions, pays attention to the

possibilities of cooperative development and common development. From an academic and policy perspective, the two sides are not without points of intersecting interest; the key lies in identifying cooperative forms that are workable, verifiable, and sustainable without compromising either side's principled position.

In the past, trilateral cooperation among China, Vietnam, and the Philippines — such as marine seismic work — was attempted but could not be sustained due to insufficient political mutual trust, changes in the external environment, and domestic public opinion pressure; substantive joint development between China and Vietnam in sea areas such as Wan'an Tan has also yet to achieve a breakthrough. These difficulties demonstrate that maritime joint development requires political mutual trust, legal arrangements, and risk control mechanisms. Yet difficulty does not mean both sides can only "stand still"; on the contrary, the more complex the disputes, the greater the need to accumulate trust through low-sensitivity, phased, and reversible cooperative projects.

At the present stage, both sides can continue to adhere to the principle of "gradual progress, easy issues first".

First, carefully delineate cooperative sea areas in accordance with law. The so-called "disputed areas" should not be unilaterally expanded in interpretation by either party, nor should the DOC be simplistically treated as a legal document demarcating the scope of disputed areas. The DOC's significance lies in providing a political framework for maintaining restraint before disputes are resolved, building confidence, advancing cooperation in low-sensitivity areas, and promoting COC consultations. Under the DOC, the modalities, scope, and locations of relevant cooperation shall be agreed upon by the parties before implementation. Accordingly, China and Vietnam can prioritize studying the feasibility of cooperation in areas where both sides have genuinely overlapping claims, technical conditions are relatively mature, and third-party factors are limited.

Second, take the lead in low-sensitivity areas. In marine ecological protection, marine scientific surveys, maritime humanitarian rescue, fishery resource conservation, and maritime disaster early warning, both sides can pioneer cooperation. Such cooperation does not directly touch on sovereignty attribution, has relatively low technical thresholds, and carries comparatively manageable political risks. Through joint research, joint monitoring, data sharing, and personnel training, both sides can gradually develop cooperative momentum, creating conditions for higher-level maritime cooperation in the future.

Third, explore a limited, manageable model of enterprise cooperation. Without affecting either side's sovereignty claims, constituting any relinquishment of rights, or altering the status quo, Chinese and Vietnamese enterprises can study the establishment of joint ventures in oil and gas, fisheries, or marine services, prioritizing low-sensitivity

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and ancillary operations and implementing risk isolation, profit-sharing, and dispute prevention mechanisms. Enterprise cooperation must be premised on government-to-government communication, grounded in legal compliance, and safeguarded by transparent arrangements, to prevent commercial projects from being misread as unilateral expansion of rights and interests.

Fourth, actively advance substantive COC consultations. As major coastal states of the South China Sea, China and Vietnam have a shared responsibility to jointly promote the conclusion of a COC text that is substantive, effective, and does not impair China's sovereign rights and interests. "Substantive" should be reflected in concrete mechanisms for crisis communication, incident notification, maritime rules of engagement, and lists of low-sensitivity cooperation; "effective" should be reflected in the ability of all parties to observe and implement the COC and to reduce the risk of friction escalation; and "not impairing sovereign rights and interests" means the COC should not be interpreted as any party abandoning or recognizing a particular sovereignty claim.

Finally, guide public opinion away from "zero-sum thinking" toward "mutual benefit and shared gains". Vietnam is at a critical stage of industrial upgrading and has a legitimate basis for its concerns about maritime resources, energy security, and external markets. China has long been Vietnam's largest trading partner, and Vietnam is an important trading partner for China in ASEAN. Both sides still have considerable room for cooperation in railway connectivity, border crossing upgrades, power cooperation, and industrial chain coordination. The closer the economic and trade ties, the more they will help strengthen Vietnam's capacity for strategic autonomy and regional stability, and the more they will narrow the space for external forces to manufacture confrontation by exploiting the South China Sea issue.

## **Restraining "Centrifugal Forces" and Maintaining Strategic Resolve Amid Growing External Intervention**

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One important reason why the current South China Sea situation is increasingly complex is that certain extra-regional powers are attempting to incorporate the South China Sea issue into their "Indo-Pacific" strategy and great-power competition framework, seeking to promote the blocification, frontline positioning, and instrumentalization of regional

security agendas through military presence, joint exercises, so-called "freedom of navigation" operations, and narrative shaping. Vietnam and the Philippines, by virtue of their unique geographic positions, have long been priority targets of external forces. Whether regional states can maintain strategic autonomy in the face of such external pull is directly relevant to the degree of stability in the South China Sea.

In recent years, the Philippines, backed by external security commitments, has adopted a higher-intensity confrontational approach, objectively aggravating maritime friction and the risk of crisis escalation. By contrast, Vietnam, while firmly upholding its own maritime rights claims, has continued to attach considerable importance to maintaining overall stability in its relationship with China. To Lam's choice of China as his first overseas destination as President, and his emphasis during the visit on the priority of the relationship with China, carries important strategic significance. It demonstrates that both China and Vietnam are still positioned to manage South China Sea differences within the overall bilateral relationship, rather than allowing maritime disputes to drive the overall direction of bilateral ties.

From Vietnam's perspective, its South China Sea policy is shaped not only by national sovereignty narratives, maritime resource needs, and domestic public opinion, but also by its longstanding tradition of strategic autonomy. Therefore, the key to practical China-Vietnam cooperation is not to ask Vietnam to abandon its own concerns, but rather to expand the space for shared interests that can be cooperated on, verified, and publicly demonstrated, all without either side relinquishing its principled position. Only when Vietnam achieves a relatively stable balance among economic development, security autonomy, and regional cooperation is its South China Sea policy more likely to remain rational and flexible.

Faced with turmoil in the Middle East and tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, both China and Vietnam, as developing countries, need a peaceful and stable external environment for economic construction and neither wishes to see its region become a frontline in great-power competition. Following US and Israeli military strikes against Iran, the Middle East situation has heated sharply, and related conflicts in the Strait of Hormuz have further disrupted international energy transport and global shipping security. These events demonstrate that once critical maritime passages are engulfed in military confrontation, they will bring cascading risks to regional states and the global economy.

Accordingly, on the South China Sea issue, both China and Vietnam should maintain strategic resolve and avoid being drawn by external forces into a logic of confrontation. Both sides must hold firm to their respective principled positions while preventing specific disputes from escalating without limit; strengthen maritime risk management while expanding cooperation in low-sensitivity areas; advance COC consultations while jointly

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defending regional states' right to independently handle regional affairs. A stable, cooperative, and predictable China-Vietnam relationship is itself an effective response to hegemonism, unilateralism, and the logic of bloc confrontation.

## Conclusion

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Looking ahead, the development of China–Vietnam relations still faces a long and difficult journey. The waves of the South China Sea will not be calmed completely by a single visit, nor will long-accumulated differences disappear overnight. However, regarding maritime disputes, we should remain confident — the successful resolution of the land boundary and Beibu Gulf issues has already demonstrated the political wisdom of the two parties and countries. At the same time, we must also remain patient — resolving maritime issues will likely require a much longer process.

At the operational level, both sides must continue to maintain stability through mechanisms such as joint patrols in the Beibu Gulf, strengthen economic ties through cooperation in railways and trade, and consolidate political foundations through inter-party exchanges. The principle that "cooperation benefits both sides, while confrontation harms both" applies to China–Vietnam relations at all times.

In a turbulent and unstable world, a stable and cooperative China–Vietnam relationship is not only essential for the well-being of the peoples of both countries, but also serves as a crucial "stabilizing anchor" for peace and stability in the South China Sea. We have every reason to believe that as long as both sides move toward each other and take the concept of a community with a shared future as their guiding principle, the path toward maritime cooperation — though winding and difficult — will, with time, ultimately lead to the resolution of maritime disputes, just as the land boundary dispute and the Beibu Gulf delimitation issue were eventually resolved.

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Founded in July 2012, the Center was initiated by Nanjing University and has been greatly supported by three governmental departments: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, the People's Government of Hainan Province, and the State Oceanic Administration. The Center mainly conducts multidisciplinary collaborative innovation, following the mode of "arts and sciences-army and local-universities and institutes-school and school collaboration". The Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies promotes comprehensive research on the South China Sea and serves for the national strategic decisions on the South China Sea.

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