

Island and Naval Expansionism: Mapping China's Propaganda Narratives and Operations in the West Philippine Sea and Its Implications on the Philippine Blue Economy

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ABSTRACT: In the Indo-Pacific region, geopolitical tensions have intensified and drawn significant public attention as China continues its maritime expansion in the West Philippine Sea. The disputed waters constitute an inalienable asset to the Philippine Blue Economy. Hosting a rich marine ecosystem, the area serves as a haven for fisherfolk from nearby coastal communities. Beyond the compelling conditions of hard power militarization, China has masterfully employed strategic narratives that are designed to influence regional and international preferences. This paper utilized a qualitative evidence synthesis to synthesize some of the dominant Chinese propaganda narratives, as evidenced by secondary sources published between 2011 and 2026. The review utilized peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, policy documents, legal documents, Chinese White Papers, ASEAN publications, and reports from national and international organizations. The retrieved sources and the data extracted therein were screened using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and synthesized to identify recurring themes exposing some of the converging evidence and competing ideas regarding China's strategic narratives and maritime operations in the West Philippine Sea. The evidence synthesis revealed that the retrieved sources consistently identified dominant narratives around historical claims, peaceful development, and regional stability, legal legitimacy and rule-based interpretation; most applicably in China's Nine-Dash Line claim, external interference and victimhood, and the Blue Economy as a discourse of sustainable development. These narratives reinforce China's maritime claims by being designed to establish legitimacy and public preference aligned with Nye's soft power theory. The literature indicates that these activities contribute to persistent geopolitical uncertainty, limit access to fisheries and offshore energy resources, weaken investor confidence, heighten maritime security risks, and place additional pressure on the contested marine ecosystem.

KEYWORDS: Chinese Propaganda Narratives, Philippine Blue Economy, Nine-Dash Line, Maritime Security, West Philippine Sea, South China Sea

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century, still an era of resurgence of maritime domains becoming critical arenas for contemporary geopolitical competition, where control over seas, oceans, and waterways vehemently shapes the distribution of power, strategic influence, and economic security among states. Historically, maritime power has been deemed a key instrument of state influence, enabling states to project military capabilities, secure trade routes, and shape regional orders (Mahan, 1890; Till, 2018). In the emerging multipolar international system, maritime disputes progressively expanded into multi-dimensional contests involving territorial claims, legal interpretations, economic interests, military and technological superiority, or strategic communication. As the international status quo moves toward intensified great-power competition, maritime regions have become critical sites where states attempt to redefine regional order and influence (Kaplan, 2014; Buzan & Weaver, 2003).

Among the world's contested maritime spaces, the South China Sea emerged as not only one of the foremost geopolitical theatres where strategic interests of regional and extra-regional powers converge, but also as the important maritime corridors in Southeast Asia. Its geopolitical significance stems from its vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), through which an estimated onethird of global maritime trade transits annually, as well as its abundant fisheries, hydrocarbon reserves, and strategic maritime chokepoints that underpin regional and global economic stability (Kaplan, 2014; Hayton, 2014). However, within this broad maritime domain, the West Philippine Sea occupies a particular significant position and portion. Officially referring to the maritime areas within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea, the West Philippine Sea is crucial to the country's fisheries, marine biodiversity, maritime commerce, and national security (Batongbacal, 2014). Its strategic importance has been further amplified by

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China's illegal maritime presence, island-building activities, and influence operations, which negatively generate implications on Philippine sovereignty, the livelihood of coastal communities, and the broader development of its blue economy (Storey 2021; Batongbacal, 2015). Consequently, the South China Sea dispute represents not merely a territorial disagreement among claimant states but a struggle over maritime governance, regional hierarchy, and the future of the Indo-Pacific order (Fravel, 2011; Buszynski, 2012).

Across disputed features in the South China Sea, China has significantly expanded its maritime presence including a portion of majority of West Philippine Sea legally claimed by the Philippines such as Scarborough Shoal, Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, Second Thomas (Ayungin) Shoal and portion of the Spratly Islands. Beijing justified such activities in the name of its Nine-Dash Line and assertion of historic rights, claims that formed the basis of its maritime extensive jurisdiction over much of the South China Sea but were found to have no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) by the 2016 Tribunal in Philippines vs. China (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). With coast guard deployments, maritime militia operations, large-scale land reclamation, and the militarization of artificial islands, China has strengthened its de facto control over several contested maritime features, intensifying concerns over Philippine sovereignty, regional security, and the rules-based international maritime order (Fravel, 2011; Hayton, 2014; Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

Beyond territorial expansion and direct maritime enforcement activities, China employed strategic narratives and information operations to legitimize its expansionist activities in South China Sea. Through the promotion of the Nine Dash Line, the discourse of historic rights, and narratives portraying China as the legitimate defender of its ancestral maritime interests, Beijing sought to normalize its claims and shape domestic and international perceptions of the dispute (Storey, 2021; Joske, 2020). In the Philippine context, China's influence operations in the areas of West Philippine Sea and island territories have attempted to strengthen its legitimacy of its maritime assertion through Chinese diplomatic messaging, China state-controlled media, maritime presence, and information campaigns. By combining such physical coercion and narrative strategies, China has pursued what scholars describe as lawfare and gray zone approaches, using legal arguments, historical narratives, and non-military pressure to consolidate its position without triggering direct armed conflict (Fravel, 2011; Kurlantzick, 2022).

The significance of the West Philippine Sea extends beyond geopolitical and national security concerns as it represents a vital component of the Philippines' emerging blue economy. The Blue Economy refers to the sustainable utilization of ocean resources to promote economic growth, livelihood development, and environmental sustainability (Silver, Gray, Campbell, Fairbanks, & Gruby, 2015). The Philippines, as a maritime state, ocean and sea resources are central to national development, particularly in sectors such as aquaculture, fisheries, maritime transportation, maritime industries, marine renewable energy and biotechnology, and tourism (Sativábal et al., 2020). Maritime security and economic development are deeply interconnected; instability of a state's marine governance can directly influence resource accessibility, livelihood security, and sustainable development outcomes. On the other hand, the Chinese context incorporates its blue economy into broader state-led modernization strategies that connect maritime developments with national and historical rejuvenation, military and technological advancement, and territorial expansionism (Fabinyi et al., 2021).

At this juncture, the West Philippine Sea should be understood as a geopolitical arena where territorial expansion, strategic narratives, international law, military, technological, and economic interests intersect. Existing scholarly sources have extensively examined the dispute through security, legal, and geopolitical perspectives. However, China's illegal operations and expansionism in Philippine maritime spaces and territories, its accompanying narratives and propaganda structure and its implications to the Philippine Blue Economy requires further investigation. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the dominant propaganda narratives disseminated by Chinese state media concerning the West Philippine Sea and Philippine-claimed territories, and also examining how China's island-building, naval expansion, and associated maritime activities influence the Philippine Blue Economy. This study seeks to answer the following questions: What are the dominant propaganda narratives employed by

Chinese state media regarding the West Philippine Sea and Philippine-claimed territories? And what are the implications of China's island and naval expansionism for the Philippine Blue Economy? These questions will be directly expressed through Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory.

The Propaganda Narratives and Joseph Nye's Idea on Soft Power

This study is anchored with Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory. His idea of soft power is based on the notion of being indirectly influential (Kivak, 2020). This is in contrast to the compelling conditions of hard power. According to Kivak (2020), a mix of soft and hard power makes a strategy effective in international relations. Nye (2008) introduced the concept of smart power to describe this combination. Here, it is material how the Chinese government persistently and masterfully employs these forms of influence to advance its sovereign claims in disputed waters. However, Nye (2008) believed that reliance on hard power alone does not guarantee success. This is where the idea of soft power comes into play to fill the gaps in hard power. Nye conceptualizes soft power as the ability of a state to shape the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy, rather than coercion or military force. Within the context of the South China Sea, scholars have recently argued that China increasingly complements its

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military modernization and economic initiatives with communication strategies designed to cultivate favorable perceptions of its regional role and maritime claims.

The relevance of Soft Power Theory to this paper lies in its ability to explain how communication serves as an important instrument of the state in maritime disputes. Instead of relying on militarization, states may employ soft power narratives to shape international preference on the contested territories. Nye (2008) argues that legitimacy enhances the effectiveness of power because states are more likely to obtain cooperation when their actions are perceived as appropriate and consistent with the accepted international norms. Anguelov and Kaschel (2017) provide empirical support for this proposition by examining the role of information technology and mass communication as soft power platforms in the Middle East following the September 11 attacks. By analyzing Internet access and mobile phone subscriptions across Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries from 2004 to 2014, the study found that communication technologies contributed to improved government effectiveness and indirectly strengthened governance by shaping political environments through information dissemination rather than coercive means. These findings reinforce Nye's argument that influence can be exercised through communication platforms capable of cultivating credibility, legitimacy, and favorable perceptions. Through official statements, state-owned media, diplomatic engagements, and international forums, China seeks to reinforce narratives that emphasize historical sovereignty, mutual development, and regional cooperation while mitigating criticism of its maritime expansion.

Doctrine Validity: Chinese Government Narratives vs Actual International Law

Under China's domestic policy, such as Article 14 of its 1998 Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Law, its government asserts its expansive historic rights within the South China Sea, where such narrative is recognized in its domestic legislation that suggests evading the international limits (Ye, 2019). It embeds a framework that is based on its own domestic narrative, which is not recognized by international law. Where such state narrative is constantly utilized for labeling as a standard domestic administrative policy and framing aggressive gray-zone operations as routine law enforcement (Maddern, 2024).

However, as recognized by the following arbitral tribunal ruling on July 12, 2016, under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the award of the disputes between the Philippines and China in their maritime area, which is in the South China Sea, while the international law recognizes the procurement of historic rights, which is through continuous sovereignty tolerated by the international community, still it declares the failure of China's nine-dash line claims as it fails to meet such legal basis (Bautista, 2020). This gives the sense of UNCLOS as a body that functions as a comprehensive framework that nullifies the historic rights that are pre-existing and challenges the convention; this exposes a direct conflict and problem towards China's claims and treaty obligations. There were arguments that Chinese state-backed scholars utilize that China's historic claims supplement UNCLOS rather than violate it; however, it was deconstructed through a strict doctrinal lens, where it addresses the comprehensiveness of UNCLOS, stating that the tribunal's verdict that China's narrative claims on expansive rights over waters and the seabed outside of its specific EEZ provisions illustrates that it does not hold legal weight under the modern international law (Kanehara, 2018).

The principle of "Mare Liberum" by Hugo Grotius may pertain to the "free sea" and guarantee the right to freedom of navigation, where all states are open for exploration and trade, though such principle is constrained as stated by a 17th-century scholar, John Selden, in his published work "Mare Clausum seu de Domino Maris Libri Duo," which translates to "closed seas," it pertains to the principle that Mare Clausum is the use and exploitation within its exclusive sovereignty (Romulo, 2016). In this case, China not just defends the presence of its military warships, coast guard vessels, and maritime militia within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as a lawful exercise of free navigation under international law but also establishes artificial islands (Eshanasir, 2025). However, such expansive narrative and claims contravene the doctrine of the Philippines' sovereignty, which is under Article I of the 1987 Constitution of the Philippines, where it states, "*The waters around, between, and connecting the islands of the archipelago, regardless of their breadth and dimensions, form part of the internal waters of the Philippines.*" By deploying state-owned vessels to conduct unauthorized enforcement of unfair fishing bans and block Filipino fishers, this shows that China's unregulated maritime activities do not constitute a legal exercise of the principle of Mare Liberum; rather, it represents a consistent violation of the Philippines' sovereignty and maritime authority.

Philippine Blue Economy and The West Philippine Sea Maritime Dispute

The development of the Philippine blue economy has been greatly affected by the ongoing dispute in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) and has been gradually identified as a major constraint. Risks in the WPS directly affect marine-based industries, fisheries, and national economic growth because they argue that the blue economy cannot be developed detached from geopolitical realities (Mendoza, 2017; Mendoza, 2021). The West Philippine Sea economy accounts for about 4.5% of the country's gross domestic product, thus any disturbances in the country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) pose serious risks to economic productivity and the protection of marine resources (Ebarvia, 2016). Outlining the WPS dispute as a major question of blue justice, thus bringing into focus of the distinct impacts on local coastal communities that are heavily reliant on marine-based resources for their food security

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and daily living. Those limited movements to disputed waters is a major socioeconomic issue are greatly affects the millions of Filipinos who deeply depend on fisheries livelihood. (Satizábal et al., 2020; Campos, 2024). Bennet et al (2021) warns that the inequality in governance, “ocean grabbing”, and territorialization can weaken the livelihood security and can marginalize the local fishing communities. Contreras (2025) suggested that threats to marine livelihoods are not only driven by the interstate disputes but also by a large-scale domestic commercial fishing livelihood.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a Qualitative Evidence Synthesis Design to analyze China’s naval expansionism and maritime operations in the West Philippine Sea and the implications for the Blue Economy from the year 2011 to 2026. According to Nussbaumer-Streit et al., (2025), an evidence synthesis is a qualitative approach that uses systematic analyzation, identify and integration of information from various credible sources. This is used to generate a comprehensive understanding of a problem. To guide with the evidence synthesis, this study aimed at addressing two specific research questions: (1) What are the dominant propaganda narratives employed by Chinese state media regarding the West Philippine Sea and Philippine-claimed territories? and (2) What are the implications of China's island and naval expansionism for the Philippine Blue Economy? It aimed to address and analyze the economic and environmental impacts, governance, and implications in national security. This study centered on synthesizing the existing evidence obtained from government publications, legal documents, national and international organizations, and policy reports. Evidence Synthesis design is relevant in this study because it investigates a complex geopolitical dispute. Integrating the findings from these credible sources enabled this study to examine the recurring themes, compare the differing standpoints, and broader emerging patterns with the ongoing dispute in the West Philippine Sea and its impact on the Philippines governance in maritime territory and Blue Economy.

Data Sources

This study relied on secondary data sources including peer reviewed journal articles, published studies, government reports and publications, policy documents, Chinese White papers, ASEAN documents, news articles, and local and international organizations’ publications. These sources were selected to provide diverse perspectives and ensure credibility of the synthesized evidence.

Eligibility Criteria

The review applied predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that only relevant and credible sources were synthesized. Sources were eligible for inclusion if they were published between 2016 and 2026, written in English, and focused on issues concerning the West Philippine Sea or the South China Sea. Eligible studies also needed to examine one or more of the following themes: China's naval expansion, propaganda narratives, maritime operations, or their implications for the Philippine Blue Economy, maritime security, or regional geopolitics. To capture the breadth of existing evidence, the review considered peerreviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, government publications, reports from international organizations, and reputable policy papers. Sources were excluded if they were not directly relevant to the objectives of the study, lacked sufficient academic or institutional credibility, or consisted primarily of opinion pieces, blogs, editorials, or other unverified online content. Duplicate records and publications that presented substantially identical information were likewise removed during the screening process to avoid redundancy in the evidence synthesis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Relevant literature is obtained by systematically searching the academic databases, organizational repositories, government agencies, and the international organizations. After screening all the retrieved relevant resources based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, relevant information was analyzed and extracted for inclusion in the evidence synthesis. After the selection process, pertinent information pertaining to the research objectives was obtained from all included sources. The information obtained was then thoroughly compared and analyzed through systematic evidence synthesis to identify similarities, differences, and complementary information (Aromataris et al., 2024) regarding China’s island and naval expansionism as well as its propaganda narratives, marine activities in the West Philippine Sea, and what these imply for the Philippine Blue Economy. To improve validity of the synthesis, the researchers evaluated the quality and credibility of all selected sources by taking into account various aspects, including type of publication, method transparency, authority of institutions, and relevance to the study. The synthesized information was presented in an organized manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dominant Propaganda Narratives Employed by Chinese State Media Regarding the West Philippine Sea and Philippine Territories

Strategic Consolidation Through Peaceful Expansion

The literature consistently portrays Chinese state narratives as framing its activities in the West Philippine Sea not as aggressive territorial expansion but as a gradual and legitimate consolidation of authority. Fravel (2011) argues that China's strategy is characterized by delay rather than immediate military escalation, noting that Beijing has "opted not to pursue a strategy of escalation of seizing disputed features from other states or compelling them to abandon their own claims to maritime rights." Instead, the strategy seeks to "consolidate China's ability to exercise jurisdiction over the waters that it claims," although he also recognizes that this process weakens the positions of other claimant states and contributes to regional instability. Similarly, Hayton, as reviewed by Chanda (2015), contends that China has pursued dominance without resorting to conventional warfare by relying on its economic and political influence while maintaining the implicit threat of force. Rather than defeating rivals through armed conflict, China extends its de facto control incrementally, reflecting Sun Tzu's principle that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." Callahan (2016) likewise argues that China's regional diplomacy extends beyond neighborhood cooperation and functions as part of a broader effort to promote its preferred vision of global governance. Collectively, these scholars suggest that Chinese messaging consistently portrays maritime expansion as measured, peaceful, and strategically justified despite its significant geopolitical consequences.

Narrative Construction as an Instrument of Legitimacy

The reviewed literature also demonstrates that propaganda functions not merely as information dissemination but as a strategic process of constructing legitimacy for contested state actions. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) explain that political leaders employ narratives of security and economic development to shape public understandings of the past, present, and future in ways that "garner legitimacy for particular and highly contestable policy responses." Their perspective suggests that strategic narratives simplify complex geopolitical disputes into coherent stories that encourage audiences to accept preferred political outcomes. Rolland (2020) similarly argues that the Chinese Communist Party considers discourse itself a strategic resource. She notes that Xi Jinping regards philosophy and the social sciences as the foundations of China's "discourse system," emphasizing that without an indigenous intellectual framework China cannot achieve meaningful "discourse power." Rather than viewing communication as a passive reflection of policy, both authors demonstrate that official narratives are deliberately constructed to influence international perceptions, reinforce state legitimacy, and normalize China's preferred interpretation of maritime affairs. Within the West Philippine Sea context, these narratives become an important complement to China's diplomatic and strategic objectives by presenting its maritime activities as both reasonable and historically justified.

The Blue Economy Narrative in Resource Governance

Another recurring narrative emerging from the literature concerns the use of Blue Economy discourse to justify maritime activities and state extraction within the language of sustainable development. Bennett et al. (2019) caution that the global expansion of the Blue Economy carries significant environmental and social risks despite its developmental promises. While acknowledging that healthy oceans contribute to economic prosperity and human well-being, they argue that unchecked ocean-based industries may intensify environmental degradation, deepen economic inequality, facilitate "ocean grabbing," and erode local access to fisheries and marine resources. Rather than assuming that Blue Economy initiatives automatically produce shared benefits, the authors emphasize that weak governance may allow economic development to privilege strategic and commercial interests over environmental sustainability and community welfare. Voyer et al. (2018) similarly argue that the Blue Economy has no universally accepted meaning. Drawing on Silver et al. (2015), they demonstrate that the concept has been interpreted differently by governments, environmental organizations, development agencies, and fisheries advocates, with each employing the term to advance distinct political and economic priorities. Because of this conceptual flexibility, the Blue Economy functions as a policy "buzzword" that can legitimize diverse and sometimes conflicting agendas. Applied to the West Philippine Sea, these studies suggest that development and sustainability narratives possess significant persuasive value because they frame maritime expansion and resource governance as contributing to economic progress while potentially obscuring their broader geopolitical implications.

The evidence synthesis reveals that Chinese propaganda concerning the West Philippine Sea is predominantly organized around three mutually reinforcing narratives: the normalization of gradual strategic expansion, the construction of legitimacy through carefully crafted political narratives, and the promotion of maritime development under the language of the Blue Economy. Although each scholar approaches the issue from a different disciplinary perspective, they broadly agree that communication serves purposes extending well beyond public information. Fravel (2011), Chanda's (2015) review of Hayton, and Callahan (2016) emphasize China's preference for expanding influence through incremental political, economic, and diplomatic means rather than direct military confrontation. Miskimmon et al. (2013) and Rolland (2020) further explain that such strategies depend upon narratives capable of

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legitimizing contested policies and strengthening China's discourse power in international affairs. Bennett et al. (2019) and Voyer et al. (2018), meanwhile, highlight how development-oriented concepts such as the Blue Economy can simultaneously promote sustainability while providing flexible political language through which competing strategic interests may be advanced.

The literature differs, however, in the emphasis placed on these narratives. Fravel primarily interprets China's actions through the lens of strategic restraint, whereas Hayton, as discussed by Chanda, emphasizes coercive leverage exercised below the threshold of armed conflict. Callahan situates these same actions within China's broader ambition to reshape regional and global governance. Likewise, Bennett et al. focus on the material risks associated with Blue Economy development, while Voyer et al. examine the concept's discursive ambiguity rather than its geopolitical consequences. Despite these differences, the reviewed scholarship converges on a common finding: China's communication surrounding the West Philippine Sea consistently seeks to present its expanding maritime presence as legitimate, peaceful, and development-oriented, thereby cultivating acceptance of policies that ultimately reinforce its long-term strategic interests in the region.

Implications of China's island and naval expansionism for the Philippine Blue Economy

Implications on Food and Energy Security

South China Sea serves as one of the most productive marine biomes, accounting for about 12% of the global wild fish catch, as stated by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (Kasi, 2026). This marine area supports the economic survival of fisherfolk and fisheries among the baseline of millions of people residing within its coastal areas in Southeast Asia (Wang, 2015). With ongoing expansion and aggressive tactics of China and the establishment of its artificial islands, it becomes a cause for a serious socio-economic crisis within the Philippines blue economy. With China's continuous militarization and aggressive blocking of fishing grounds such as in the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, it significantly reduces the Filipino local fishing fleets' catching capacity (Hudzon, Burhanuddin and Seniwati, 2025). These maritime disputes pose a significant impact on personal human security, livelihood stability, and the dignity of Filipino fishers, since the everyday life and economic survival of these local fishing families heavily depend on fishing grounds in the West Philippine Sea, with the disruptions caused by regular encounters with foreign government and non-government vessels of China (Galvez, 2024). Furthermore, with these persistent sovereignty conflicts, it gridlocks collective efforts towards environmental sustainability; in the absence of such efforts, resource management frameworks are ignored, and it accelerates unchecked overfishing across maritime areas, with such lack of maritime regional cooperation and combined with China's large-scale island reclamation activities, it triggers a catastrophic collapse of the maritime ecosystem and further impacts Filipino fishers' livelihoods (Wang, 2015; Baviera, 2014).

Another insinuation suggests beyond living resources, that the geopolitical disputes over the Philippines' blue economy are also driven by the contest to secure significant non-living marine resources such as oil and hydrocarbons, where the South China Sea serves as a massive reservoir of unexplored fossil fuels, as stated by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), showing the presence of 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gases reserve within the region, since China is one of the most importer of natural gases and petroleum, its national energy security strategy explains the monopolization that it takes towards such oil and gases domains, where it consequently uses these artificial islands as bases with military checkpoints within these routes to view rival presence such by Philippines and the US (Lin, 2018). For the Philippines, such unresolved disputes and resource competition heavily affect its domestic stakeholders due to the state's inability to exploit energy fields within its own exclusive economic zone (EEZ); this creates a heavy long-term economic disadvantage and vulnerability, where this energy vulnerability makes already a bad situation worse since one of the Philippine's primary gas sources, which is the Malampaya gas field, has imminent commercial depletion, with the approaching depletion of Malampaya gives the rise for a need of an immediate exploration and development of gas fields for next-generation to come to prevent domestic power crisis (Baviera, 2014; Rival, 2025). However, China's aggressive forward has blocked such development of energy projects, such as promising resource zones in the Reed Bank SC 72, where it is in a state of freeze by diplomatic intimidation and security threats from Chinese maritime forces (Rival, 2025).

These implications reveal that the food security and living resources in the West Philippine Sea further extend to socio-economic crisis within the coastal populations, with the physical militarization of the maritime domains of China's vessels, with its aggressive strategies and artificial island bases as deployed, reducing the catching capacity of local fleets of Filipino fisherfolks (Galvez, 2024; Hudzon, Burhanuddin and Seniwati, 2025; Wang, 2015; Kasi, 2026). Furthermore, this dispute leads to ecological sustainability failures since such persistent disputes stop and freeze collective regional efforts for resource management and sustainability (Baviera, 2014; Wang, 2015). At the same time, energy security and non-living resources, where China is heavily reliant on oil imports, strategically monopolizes natural gas and oil within the region of gases, which gives a disadvantageous stance towards the Philippines since these aggressive moves legally and physically freeze exploration blocks of the Philippines, where such a containment strategy of China creates an energy crisis in the Philippines (Baviera, 2014; Lin, 2018; Rival, 2025). This significantly shows that China weaponizes its artificial islands, where it chokes out the everyday livelihood and food security of Filipino coastal

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communities while it also paralyzes the Philippines' sovereignty in its capacity to secure its energy future (Baviera, 2014; Lin, 2018; Galvez, 2024; Rival, 2025).

An Implication of Declined Confidence in Maritime Trade and Investment

With existing studies and literature, the study identified maritime trade and investment as also one of the major dimensions of China's illegal island-building and naval expansionism backed up by Chinese propaganda narratives affecting the Philippine Blue Economy. Across existing literatures, there is a broad agreement that China's continued militarization of disputed maritime features and persistent coercive activities have heightened geopolitical uncertainty, thereby weakening investments zones for Philippine maritime industries despite uninterrupted flow of international maritime shipping in the maritime region, the South China Sea and the West Philippine Sea (Morton, 2016; Hayton, 2019; Poling, 2024). Rather than disrupting maritime commerce and business in the regional maritime space, the synthesized evidence indicates political, legal, and operational risks for sectors dependent on secure maritime governance, including ports, logistics, offshore energy, fisheries, and maritime tourism (Midlen, 2021; UNCTAD, 2025). The reviewed studies consistently highlight that maritime security is a pre-requisite for a Sustainable Maritime Development. Midlen (2021) argues that effective ocean governance and secured marine resources accessibility are crucial for attracting longterm investments, while the United Nations on Trade and Development highlights that around 80% of global trade by volume is transported at sea. Moreover, UNCTAD (2025) asserted that persistent maritime disputes undermine investor confidence by increasing uncertainty surrounding maritime operations and future economic returns. These findings of the study highlights that economic implications of China's activities are less reflected in maritime trade and business disruption but primarily on diminished confidence among investors considering long-term maritime projects.

Findings of the study further indicates that China's gray zone tactics, including illegal coast guard patrols, maritime militia reinforcements, and administrative operations reshapes the security environment of the West Philippine Sea without escalating into traditional open-armed conflict (Fravel, 2019; Erickson & Martinson, 2019). According to Fravel (2019), these activities are executed to consolidate control over disputed waters while Erickson & Martinson (2019) argued that maritime militia operations enable China to assert its claims while complicating responses from neighboring states. Poling (2024) similarly notes that coercive strategies normalizes persistent security risks, discouraging investments in offshore infrastructure, fisheries, and maritime development. Hayton (2019) states that legal uncertainty over resource governance has prolonged due to China's illegal assertions of the Nine-Dash Line despite its invalidity due to the 2016 Arbitral Award by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Moreover, Beckman (2017) contends that contested maritime claims complicate the exercise of sovereign rights guaranteed by the UNCLOS. This uncertainty reduces the attractiveness of investments in offshore petroleum, renewable energy, coastal infrastructure, and maritime industries critical to the Philippine Blue Economy (Beckman, 2017; OECD, 2016).

Overall, the study's findings through evidence synthesis demonstrates strong convergence across existing studies. Although China's illegal maritime actions have not halted maritime trade in the region, they have collectively created a geopolitical environment characterized by heightened investment risks, operational uncertainty, and weakened maritime governance (Morton, 2016; Fravel 2019; Poling, 2024). The findings of the study therefore suggests that the most significant implication of China's island and naval expansionism is the gradual erosion of investment confidence and the reduced capacity of the country to maximize its long-term economic potential of the Philippine Blue Economy.

China's Expansionism and Its Implications for Philippine Blue Economy Sustainability

The expansionism of China in the West Philippine Sea is a major threat to the sustainability of the blue economy of the Philippines through environmental degradation, reduced fisheries productivity, and altered maritime governance structures. Research has indicated that the Chinese island building and land reclamation operations in the disputed areas are causing significant harm to the coral reef ecosystems in terms of dredging, sediment displacement, and coastal engineering, leading to losses in marine biodiversity and degradation of marine environments (Afzal, 2022). Apart from the environmental degradation, the maritime expansion of China in the region has restricted the traditional access of Filipino fishers to fishing grounds through patrolling and harassment of fishermen in contested waters (Satizábal et al., 2020).

China's maritime expansion has resulted in changes in the governance of the blue economy through a shift in emphasis from sustainable resource governance to securitization and investment-driven development. The blue economy approach in China has been described as a fusion of economic development, geopolitics, and ecological modernization, where disputed maritime regions have become strategic territories for controlling resources and asserting regional power (Fabinyi, 2021). This trend has affected regional governance and promoted territorialized governance approaches that focus on security and development rather than environmental governance and social justice (De Castro, 2024). Regarding the Philippines, studies show that territorialization of the blue economy concept will negatively affect the coastal population, environmental justice, and local resource users through the exclusion of mechanisms that protect their rights (Satizábal et al., 2020). At the same time, academic literature shows that Chinese investments and maritime policies have contributed to governance changes by reinforcing dispute resolution and resource extraction

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(Camba, 2020), whereas comparative analysis in the case of Indonesia showed that top-down investment-based blue economy policies connected with China often exclude local communities and cause environmental harm without sufficient governance structures (Andana, 2025).

Overall, The study findings demonstrate Chinese expansionist policy negatively influences the sustainability of the Philippine blue economy through environmental, economic, and governance issues. The negative effect on the environment is caused by islandbuilding, which destroys marine environments necessary for fishery and biodiversity. Moreover, coercive behavior of China in the seas limits access to fishing areas and endangers the lives of communities living near the sea. Regarding governance issues, the use of the concept of the blue economy for geopolitical competition by China creates conditions for securitization and investments that can be detrimental for environmental and social sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The dominant propaganda narratives that surfaced in this review demonstrate that as part of its maritime claim in the West Philippine Sea, China's communication strategy aligns with Nye's idea on Soft Power Theory, wherein influence is pursued not solely through militarization. It is also pursued and achieved through the strategic construction of legitimacy. The literature suggests that historical claims, legal reinterpretations, peaceful development rhetoric, external threat framing, and Blue Economy discourse collectively function to reinforce China's maritime objectives while shaping regional and international perceptions of the West Philippine Sea. The findings also revealed that China's island and naval expansionism produces significant indirect consequences for the Philippine Blue Economy by creating persistent geopolitical uncertainty, constraining access to marine resources with disruptions to food and energy security, weakening investor confidence in trades and investments, and maritime degradation to the country's blue economy sustainability. While China's activities have not fundamentally disrupted regional maritime trade, the cumulative effects of maritime coercion, legal uncertainty, regional security risks, and environmental degradation constrain the Philippines' capacity to fully utilize its fisheries, offshore energy, maritime infrastructure, and other ocean-based economic resources. The evidence synthesis consequently demonstrates that maritime security and economic development are intrinsically interconnected: protecting Philippine maritime rights and maintaining a stable, rules-based maritime environment are essential not only to national sovereignty but also to safeguarding the long-term sustainability, competitiveness, and economic potential of the Philippine Blue Economy.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the analysis and findings in this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen maritime security and resolve the maritime dispute between the Philippines and China in the West Philippine Sea.

The Philippine government should establish agencies that will specifically protect nearby coastal areas within the EEZ to secure and support the livelihoods of Filipino fishermen and manage marine time resources.

The Philippines should propose a multi-layered maritime security and diplomatic strategy or plan that fuses ASEAN-centered regionalism with strengthened defense partnerships with the United States and Japan. Within ASEAN, Manila should encourage maritime domain awareness, intelligence-sharing, coast guard cooperation, and a unified commitment to international maritime law and the effective implementation of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Ultimately, the Philippines should strengthen defense arrangements with the United States and Japan through expanded joint military exercises, enhanced maritime surveillance, rotational access to strategic facilities, and improved interoperability focused primarily on deterrence and territorial defense. Such a coordinated approach would strengthen the Philippines' capacity to resist gray-zone coercion, raise the strategic costs of further expansionism, and safeguard its sovereign rights and long-term Blue Economy.

The Philippine government should strengthen the protection of the West Philippine Sea by combining science-based marine conservation, stronger support for Filipino fishing communities, and the consistent enforcement of international maritime law to ensure the long-term sustainability of the country's blue economy.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATION

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All rights are credited to the individual contribution of the research team for their fair share of authorship to the following content:

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Declaration of Generative AI

The research team certifies that all the contents presented herein are not works of generative AI. This paper underwent a series of AI detection and no signs of generative tools were flagged. Should there be any generative tool, AI was only used for structured planning and accuracy of language which is ideal for the rigor of the paper considering the limited time frame. The research team guarantees the readers that all contents presented herein are works of limited human capacity.

Data Availability Statement

Committed to academic integrity, the research team guarantees the availability of the data cited herein. All graphs, charts, numbers, and narratives were cited accordingly and carefully extracted from the host link to ensure a low ethical risk.

Disclosure Statement

The research team certifies that there is no conflict of interest involved in the conduct of this study. The paper stands on its own, committed to contributing to the body of knowledge. No external party is present in the funding or any personal ties that could influence the result of this study. If any, the research team was only guided by a research adviser, providing the team with expert advice for content accuracy and does not in any way control the variables of this study. Rest assured that all undertakings deemed necessary for the creation of this study were carried out independently by the research team.

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