



**China-Southeast Asia Relations:
South China Sea, More Tension and Challenges**

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Relations in early 2016 were dominated by China's unremitting efforts to expand its control in disputed territory in the South China Sea in the face of complaints, maneuvers, and challenges by regional governments and concerned powers headed by the United States. Heading the list of US-led challenges to Chinese expansion were expanded military presence and freedom of navigation operations accompanied by strong rhetoric from US defense leaders warning of Chinese ambitions. China rebuked the US actions and pressed ahead with military deployments, construction of defense facilities, and island expansion. Beijing remained determined to gain greater control in the disputed sea despite earlier indications of moderation, notably President Xi Jinping's pledge not to militarize disputed territory made during his September 2015 summit in Washington. That the rising tension did not spill over and impede the constructive outcome of the US-China meeting on March 31 reinforced indications showing Southeast Asian governments that neither Washington nor Beijing sought confrontation. Against that background, the responses of these governments to Chinese challenges to their interests in the South China Sea remained measured. They followed past patterns of often ambiguous hedging against China's assertiveness, demonstrating some increased criticism of China, and greater willingness to link more closely with the US in order to dissuade China's disruptive expansionism.

Expanding Chinese control

Beijing's multifaceted expanding control in the South China Sea in 2016 saw several significant developments.

Civil and military aircraft deployments. In January, China sent a small civilian plane followed a few days later by two commercial airliners to land on the just completed 10,000 foot runway on Fiery Cross Reef, one of the newly created Chinese land features in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Beijing said the flights were to ensure safe operation of large civilian aircraft using what it described as China's "most southerly airfield." Vietnam and the Philippines protested the flights. In February, US media reported the presence of Chinese fighter aircraft at the largest of the Paracel Islands, Woody Island, which is the location of the headquarters of China's recently created Sansha prefecture that has administrative responsibilities for all of Chinese claimed territory in the South China Sea. In April, an unnamed US Defense Department official told the media that China had deployed 16 *J-11* advanced fighter aircraft to Woody

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Island, advising that such a large deployment was “unprecedented.” An emergency evacuation by a Chinese military aircraft that had been on patrol over the South China Sea of three ill Chinese construction workers on Fiery Cross Reef on April 3 received positive publicity in China, but some foreign coverage depicted the episode as another advance in China’s gradual military control in the South China Sea.

Anti-air and anti-ship missile deployments. Media reports, based on satellite imagery, in February, showed the deployment on Woody Island of two batteries of eight surface-to-air missile launchers and a related radar system for China’s *Hongqi-9 (HQ-9)*, a 200km-range air-defense system. In March, imagery showed China had deployed the land-based version of the 400km-range *YJ-62* anti-ship cruise missile to the island. Both moves prompted complaints from US and regional officials about China’s military build-up.

Island expansion, civilian and military installations. In March, media reports, based on satellite imagery, also confirmed that China was using large-scale dredging and land filling to expand the size of North Island in the Paracel Islands. A Chinese-controlled Hong Kong newspaper said the project is part of a plan to connect North Island and South Island and then connect them with a bridge to Woody Island. The connected North-South Islands would be used to host an airfield larger than the one on Woody Island.

China’s Transportation Ministry on April 5 held a ceremony to mark the completion of a 180-foot-high lighthouse on the newly created Chinese land feature Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands. Lighthouse construction was also reported to be underway in Cuarteron Reef and Johnson South Reef, both recently created Chinese land features in the Spratly Islands. CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative reported in February that the construction of what appeared to be a high-frequency radar system at Cuarteron Reef was nearing completion.

In response to US Navy sighting of a Chinese survey ship at Scarborough Shoal and resulting speculation of China building facilities there, a Philippines diplomat in mid-April warned against the “very provocative” step of building facilities in the large (58sq mi) atoll claimed by and close to the Philippines. It was disclosed by the US Pacific Command on April 22 and in later reports that US warplanes at Clark Air Base in the Philippines had carried out missions near Scarborough Shoal on April 19, 21, and 26. On April 25, the Chinese foreign and defense ministry spokespersons dismissed foreign criticism of China’s reported intention to construct an outpost in Scarborough Shoal and rebuked the US flights as provocations.

Air defense identification zone. Responding to senior US defense officials warning against China establishing an air defense identification (ADIZ) in the South China Sea, similar to the one abruptly announced by Beijing over the East China Sea in November 2013, the Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson on March 31 said that setting up an ADIZ was within China’s sovereign rights and depended on the degree of air security threat China faced. A Chinese major general who serves as a Chinese representative to the multilateral and nongovernmental Council of Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific told the *Asahi Shimbun* in late March that an ADIZ in the South China Sea was not yet on “Beijing’s agenda for discussions.”

Debate over “militarization”. Chinese officials deflected US and other criticism of Chinese activities as an indication that China was “militarizing” South China Sea islands despite earlier pledges not to do so. At first, officials defended the Chinese activities by offering a variety of explanations of defense preparations that in China’s view did not amount to militarization. For example, in January, military installations being constructed on disputed islands were characterized as “necessary defense facilities” by the commander of the Chinese Navy. With the large US show of force as an aircraft carrier battle group entered the South China Sea coincident with the start of China National People’s Congress in early March, Chinese officials attempted to reverse the table on this issue, focusing criticism on the US for militarizing the South China Sea with such “provocative” actions.

Planned expansion involving military, coast guard, militia, and other means. The dominance of military, coast guard, and militia forces in China’s expansion efforts in the South China Sea saw the vice mayor of the Sansha administration affirm in mid-January that the airport at Woody Island will see scheduled flights to newly constructed airports on other South China Sea islands “now mainly used by People’s Liberation Army units stationed there.” The official added that three ships will be built to further support the transport of supplies throughout the South China Sea, and piers will be built on all of China-occupied islands to accommodate the ships. He also said that an optical fiber cable network will be set up and all inhabited islands and reefs will be covered by Wi-Fi service by the end of 2016.

Underlining the military dimension of China’s activities, in late February, the first comments to the media by the commander of China’s newly created Southern Theater Command with responsibility for the South China Sea emphasized vigilance and strength in protecting Chinese sovereignty in the disputed area. The Chinese Ministry of Defense announced in mid-April – coincident with US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter’s visit to the Philippines – that Vice Chairman of China’s Central Military Commission Fan Changlong carried out a recent inspection visiting unnamed islands in the South China Sea.

China’s Coast Guard fleet, busy in the South China Sea and other adjacent waters, continued to register strong growth including the conversion of navy frigates and destroyers refitted as impressively large Coast Guard vessels. Official Chinese media and a variety of foreign coverage also focused in 2016 on the important role of the so-called maritime militia – mainly large numbers of fishermen and boats – in intelligence, law enforcement, and asserting and protecting Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Though exact figures of the number of militia among China’s reported 21 million fishermen and 439,000 motorized fishing vessels is not known, the Sansha administration over the South China Sea reportedly provides expensive satellite surveillance systems to 50,000 fishing vessels; it also encourages the fishermen to range widely in the disputed seas by providing widespread fuel subsidies along with some replenishment of fuel at sea. Part of the reason for such government support was affirmed by the Communist Party leader of Hainan Province who commented during the National People’s Congress in March that such fishing presence provides “proof of our rights and interests” in the South China Sea.

Relations with ASEAN and concerned regional countries

Tensions coming from China's advances in the disputed South China Sea in the face of growing opposition impacted Chinese relations with ASEAN and a number of other governments.

ASEAN. Chinese official commentary foreshadowed possible adverse implications for China in the lead-up to President Obama's widely publicized summit in February with the leaders of the 10 ASEAN governments at the Sunnylands estate in California. Prior to the meeting, Chinese media reported Beijing's "grave concern" with possible summit statements against Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. In the event, Chinese officials interpreted positively the absence of specific mention of China in the official statement from the summit. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson said it showed that the majority of ASEAN leaders did not agree to efforts by some unnamed countries to "hype" the South China Sea disputes.

The Philippines. Chinese officials and media viewed negatively the decision by the Philippines Supreme Court in January to uphold the constitutionality of the US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement; they also viewed critically the US-Philippines agreements in March designating five Philippines military bases for use by US forces on a rotating basis. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson called the planned deployments and closer military ties a reflection of "Cold War mentality" and as promoting "militarization" of the South China Sea. On March 31, China's Defense Ministry spokesperson ambiguously warned that "I can only suggest they be careful" in reference to US Navy ships visiting the Philippines under these arrangements.

China had more to criticize with Defense Secretary Carter's April visit to the Philippines. The disclosure that joint US-Philippines military patrols were already underway and Carter's flight to a US aircraft carrier conducting operations in the South China Sea for an appearance with the Philippine defense minister was criticized as evidence of further militarization. Adding to various US shows of force in support of its ally, a 16,000-ton US submarine, with a capacity for 150 *Tomahawk* cruise missiles, visited Subic Bay in late March. Other US allies getting involved in defense cooperation with the Philippines as it faced Chinese expansion included Japan leasing five training aircraft to the Philippine Navy, consultations in March among senior US, Japanese, and Philippines naval officers aboard the US Seventh Fleet flagship in the Philippines, and Australian forces participating for the first time and Japanese forces observing for the first time the large annual US-Philippines *Balikatan* military exercise in April. A day before the start of the exercises, a Japanese submarine and two destroyers visited Subic Bay to conduct a military exercise with Philippine counterparts. Two weeks later, a 19,000-ton Japanese helicopter carrier came to Subic Bay to carry out a "navigation mission" with the Philippines.

China-Philippines disputes involved an exchange of charges in January over Philippine civilian aircraft being warned away from China's newly created land feature on Subi Reef and China's complaint about the Philippine plan to set up a civilian flight-tracking system on a Philippine-controlled island that China claims is "illegally occupied." China's removal in late February of a Philippines fishing boat stranded for several weeks on an atoll in the disputed Spratly Islands prompted considerable negative Philippines media coverage. Media reports in April that the Philippine Air Force was shipping supplies to upgrade its airfield on Thitu Island (Philippines:

Pagasa; China: Zhongye; Vietnam: Thi Tu) in the South China Sea drew sharply critical comments from China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in speeches and press conferences in China and abroad took the lead in attacking the Philippines over its case challenging China's South China Sea claims before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. He and other Chinese representatives and media commentary portrayed the Philippines as acting in ways that were 'unlawful,' 'unfaithful,' and 'unreasonable.' They depicted China to audiences at home and abroad as following a principled stand in line with accepted international practice. The effort will reinforce sentiment in China supporting Beijing's position on the arbitration case, though international reaction will likely be heavily influenced by the court's decision expected later this year.

Vietnam. Hanoi lodged protests over the Chinese test flights at Fiery Cross Reef in January. It also demanded that China move a large Chinese oil rig from waters claimed by Vietnam; China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson disputed the Vietnamese claim to China's "indisputable waters." In February, Vietnam protested China's deployment of advanced missiles to Chinese-controlled Woody Island, which is also claimed by Vietnam. In early April, Vietnam seized a disguised Chinese fuel ship for allegedly intruding into Vietnamese waters with 100,000 liters of fuel for Chinese fishing boats working in the waters near Vietnam. It also renewed the protest against the Chinese oil rig in April. A positive highlight was the Chinese defense minister's visit to Vietnam in late March when he met his Vietnamese counterpart and Vietnam's top leader, Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, amid public reassurances that disputes will be dealt with through dialogue amid strengthening political trust and pragmatic cooperation.

Indonesia and Malaysia. Both countries faced serious territorial intrusions from China that resulted in notable public concern voiced by some senior officials. Nevertheless, they did not appear to substantially change each government's overall cautious stance on South China Sea disputes with Beijing. On March 19, Indonesian authorities arrested eight Chinese fishermen for illegally fishing in Indonesia's EEZ and towed their boat to port. Early on March 20, as the towing was underway, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel intervened by ramming the Chinese boat, forcing its release. In response, the popular Indonesian fisheries minister was publicly outraged; Indonesia issued a written protest and summoned the Chinese charge d'affaires. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson's rebuttal suggested that China's very broad and vague claims to the South China Sea include Indonesia's EEZ when he announced that the Chinese fishermen were conducting "normal activities" in "historically Chinese fishing grounds." In contrast to earlier Indonesian expressions of concern, however, Jakarta's foreign minister later strove to distance the government from the South China Sea dispute and unwanted friction with China. She said that the encroachment of the Chinese Coast Guard into Indonesia's EEZ was not related to the South China Sea dispute. She added, "I emphasize that Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea."

On March 25, a Malaysian Coast Guard official disclosed 100 Chinese fishing boats and two accompanying Chinese Coast Guard vessels were detected intruding into Malaysia's EEZ. In what was viewed as reflecting different views in the Malaysian government about such Chinese infringements of Malaysia sovereignty, the Malaysian national security minister announced that Coast Guard and Navy ships were sent to the area to monitor the situation, while the defense

minister later indicated a reluctance to provoke tensions with China in noting that whatever infraction took place could be resolved bilaterally. In the event, the episode passed without apparent consequence.

Japan, Australia, India. Chinese leaders, ministry spokespersons, and official media showed varying degrees of criticism and concern over the initiatives of these Asia-Pacific powers in 2016 involving Chinese policies and interests in the South China Sea. The initiatives often involved military advances done in collaboration with and the strong support of the United States. The patterns of closer cooperation and collaboration saw media reports citing Defense Secretary Carter and US Pacific Command Commander Adm. Harry Harris that the US and the three powers were close to reviving the quadrilateral security dialogue, which had been attempted but abandoned in the previous decade because of strong objections from China.

Japan. Chinese officials and commentary repeatedly registered more strident criticism against Japan's involvement in issues related to the South China Sea than any other regional power. Reasons probably included Japan's more frequent and direct criticisms of Chinese policies and behavior than other concerned powers. Thus, for example, China's sending a small civilian aircraft to test the new landing strip on Fiery Cross Reef in early January prompted a strong rebuke from the Japanese foreign minister expressing "grave concern" over this "unilateral change of the status quo" in the South China Sea. Along these lines, China saw Japan as the culprit behind the G7 statement in April stressing without mentioning China "our strong opposition to any intimidating, coercive or provocative unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions" in the South China Sea.

In addition to registering Chinese concerns over deeper Japanese military and other cooperation with the Philippines noted above, Chinese official media criticized Japan's plans to have *P-3C* patrol aircraft transiting from anti-piracy operations off Somalia to contribute to the US-led surveillance in the South China Sea and to stop for refueling in Vietnam, the Philippines or Malaysia. Two Japanese *P-3C* aircraft participated in a three-day joint exercise with Vietnam's Navy in February. The two Japanese destroyers participating in the April visit to Subic Bay noted above then traveled to Cam Ranh Bay for a port call in Vietnam.

Australia. At a summit with President Obama in Washington on Jan. 19, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull reaffirmed positions critical of China by opposing land reclamation and supporting arbitration in the South China Sea dispute. Australia's Air Force chief told the media in early February that the country's routine patrols over the South China Sea will continue at a "slightly" increased rate, even though they were routinely challenged by the Chinese.

China responded to criticism by Prime Minister Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop of Chinese deployment of surface-to-air missiles in the South China Sea by having the foreign minister warn Bishop on Feb. 17 against Australia purchasing Japanese submarines. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson promptly and strongly criticized the Australian Defense White Paper, released on Feb. 25, which featured blunt concerns about the South China Sea against the background of China's military buildup. The Australian defense minister on March 21 reassured officials in Malaysia that Australia would continue sending ships and planes to defend freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. Turnbull sharply rebuked China's military

activities in the South China Sea prior to his April visit to China where Chinese officials and commentaries were pleased that the Australian leader played down the South China Sea disputes.

India. Prior to visits to India by Pacific Command's Adm. Harris in March and Secretary Carter in April, the US ambassador to India raised the possibility of joint US-Indian patrols in Indo-Pacific waters. Later reports cited US defense officials forecasting joint US-Indian patrols in the South China Sea. Chinese officials and media criticized such patrols and India's Defense Ministry dismissed the reports of possible US-Indian patrols. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson on March 3 noted warily, but without direct criticism, two developments during the Harris visit to India: the announcement that this year's *Malabar* naval exercise involving Indian, US, and Japanese forces will take place in the Philippine Sea to the east of the disputed waters of the South China Sea, and reports that the US was anxious to join a current dialogue of India, Japan, and Australia to discuss maritime issues and freedom of navigation. Carter's visit in April saw a joint statement reaffirming a commitment to safeguarding maritime security and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

Taiwan. President Ma Ying-jeou used his remaining months in office in 2016 to take the lead in asserting Taiwan's interests in the South China Sea. His controversial visit on Jan. 28 to Taiwan-controlled Taiping Island (Itu Aba), the largest natural land feature in the Spratly Islands, prompted a protest from Vietnam and unusual public criticism from the United States. Ma's speech to the accompanying officials and scholars laid out in detail a roadmap for Ma's South China Sea Peace Initiative. It stressed the need for Taiwan's inclusion in deliberations on South China Sea territorial disputes and the status of Taiping as an island, in contrast to the Philippines argument in its arbitration case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration that Taiping does not qualify as an island, but is a rock, with much more limited claims to territorial waters. Ma's government followed the visit by sending delegations of journalists and international legal experts to examine conditions on Taiping. Taiwan President-elect Tsai Ing-wen refused to send representatives to accompany Ma on his visit while she adhered in general terms to Taiwan's sovereignty claims.

Economic largess, initiatives amid troubled assessments

As in the past, Beijing endeavored to offset negative regional reactions to its determined expansion in the South China Sea by stressing the benefits of closer cooperation with China in pursuing mutually beneficial development. However, the image of Chinese largess ran up against the realities of Chinese economic uncertainties and substantial declines in the value of its foreign trade, the most important element in Chinese economic relations with neighboring countries deeply involved with international production chains centered on China.

Prime Minister Li Keqiang gave sober accounts of recent Chinese economic performance at the National People's Congress in early March and in his keynote speech on March 24 to the Boao Forum for Asia annual conference in Hainan later that month. As he noted at Boao, "things may not look good" but "we must not lose confidence." Reported double-digit declines in the absolute value of Chinese exports and imports in January and February were eased but not erased by a rebound in March amid troubled forecasts. Against that background, Chinese economic initiatives of recent years were duly noted but received little of the grandiose media treatment

highlighting Chinese largess seen earlier. This treatment involved the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” tying all the Southeast Asian countries into China’s ambitious One Belt One Road initiative with accompanying funding from China in the Chinese Silk Road Fund and the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Meanwhile, Chinese difficulties in making headway in signature high-speed railway projects in Indonesia and Thailand also were highlighted in official Chinese media.

At Boao, Prime Minister Li strongly emphasized China helping its neighbors with various forms of economic support. He reiterated China’s backing for the Asia-based Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement which is seen in competition with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement backed by the US. Reinforcing China’s support for Asia-only groupings, the Chinese premier’s main region-wide initiative at the meeting was a proposal to establish the Asian Financial Cooperation Association to manage volatile markets and prevent financial turmoil. The rationale for the group was to strengthen the role of Asia in managing the global financial system which was said to be dominated by the United States and Europe.

Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Summit

In Hainan Island on March 23, the day prior to the Boao Forum, Prime Minister Li met the leaders of the five Southeast Asian countries along the Mekong River (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) to launch an initiative to improve Chinese relations and build greater influence in the sub-region. Li promised \$1.5 billion in preferred loans and a credit line of \$10 billion to support infrastructure and other projects involving China and the other Mekong countries. Reports on the meeting said the leaders discussed the use of water resources, stressing that China – controlling the upper part of the river (known as Lancang in China) – would take measures to support downstream users. Li proposed that the LMC leaders meet every two years and that the LMC foreign ministers meet every year. The March 23 meeting came amid Chinese media highlighting the release, at Vietnam’s request, of water held back by China’s dams to alleviate drought conditions in Vietnam. China’s cooperation with Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos in conducting 41 joint law enforcement activities since the inauguration in 2011 of efforts to deal with various crimes along the part of the river passing through the countries was also prominent in Chinese media reports.

Some regional commentary on the summit was less positive, seeing the move as a way to marginalize the Mekong River Commission (MRC) set up by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam in 1995 with international expertise and funding assistance to manage river resources under international conventions and protocols governing major global waterways. China, along with Myanmar, is a dialogue partner of the MRC, but Beijing has resisted restrictions on developing its hydro-electric resources as China has completed 6 of 15 planned dams along the river and supported efforts of Laos and others in building dams. International forecasts show up to 70 dams along the river by 2030, which will benefit electricity supply for upper river countries but create massive environmental and economic damage for Cambodia and Vietnam. Chinese refusal to be bound by the international standards also severely challenges efforts by the United States and Japan to support good governance of river resources in the Lower Mekong Initiative promoted by the United States and in the Japan-Mekong Cooperation.

China-Myanmar relations

The focus of China-Myanmar relations in early months of 2016 centered on Myanmar's newly formed government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy. On March 15, shortly after the election of President Htin Kyaw, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson offered congratulations and indicated Beijing will work with the new government to strengthen bilateral relations. The spokesperson also emphasized that China will "continue to support Myanmar's efforts toward stability, development, and ethnic reconciliation."

The continued ethnic conflicts in Myanmar remain a major source of concern for China, as evidenced by an incident involving a landmine explosion along the two countries' borders in January. The explosion came as a spillover effect from the ongoing clash between the Myanmar military and the Kachin forces. It injured a Chinese national, prompting Beijing to lodge a formal protest with Myanmar over the conflict that is increasingly straining bilateral ties. Last March, a similar incident occurred when stray bombs landed in Yunnan and killed five Chinese nationals.

On April 5, Myanmar's Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi met her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in the first formal diplomatic encounter of her new government, underscoring the continued importance of Myanmar's relations with China. It was meant to signal the resetting of bilateral relations, putting them on a more positive footing and avoiding such contentious topics as the Myitsone dam, copper mining, and other Chinese infrastructure projects in Myanmar. It remains to be seen if the previous government's decision to suspend the construction of the controversial Myitsone dam will be upheld. After their meeting, Wang indicated that the Chinese government will better "guide" its companies operating in Myanmar to respect local laws and regulations, and to take heed of the environmental and societal impact of these projects. Turning to areas of collaboration, they agreed to strengthen high-level communication and mutual trust. Bilateral and regional economic cooperation through such major initiatives as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor under Beijing's proposed Belt and Road Initiative were also areas of priority for the new Myanmar government's engagement with China.

Uncertain outlook

Although China seems determined to expand its control in the South China Sea, how much trouble this will cause is a matter of debate, seemingly even in China. Supported by fawning official publicity and growing internal pressure to squelch dissent, Xi Jinping is portrayed as a confident and decisive leader moving Chinese foreign and domestic policies in proper directions. Yet difficulties abound and sometimes are registered by Chinese media and representatives. In January, a senior editor of *People's Daily* advised that greater US activism along China's rim requires greater costs for China as it tries to expand its regional influence, slowing China's overall efforts to become a leading voice in regional affairs. He judged that "for a long time to come," what he saw as rising US influence around China's periphery will overshadow Chinese efforts to spread its influence. "Beijing's initiatives will be contained by the US-conjured air of distrust." In February, a major report by the Academy of Social Sciences said geopolitical competition in China's neighborhood will intensify and disadvantage China; it registered particular concern with US-Japan cooperation against China, asserting that China's Belt and

Road plan will be weakened and US allies and others will be emboldened to pursue territorial claims at China's expense. India was depicted as leaning more to Japan than to China. *Xinhua* in March forecast more tense US-Chinese relations over a variety of issues headed by the South China Sea disputes. Also in March, political adviser and senior Asian specialist Zhang Yunling pointed to the upsurge in US "provocations" and "demonstration of power" in the South China Sea, which led him to judge that "the biggest challenge for China this year is to stabilize the situation despite US intimidation."

Chronology of China-Southeast Asia Relations January – April 2016

Jan. 2, 2016: China lands a small civilian aircraft on a recently completed runway on Fiery Cross Reef. Vietnam, Philippines, and Japan protest the action, accusing China of destabilizing the region.

Jan. 6, 2016: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodges a formal protest with Myanmar following a land mine explosion along the two countries' border. It urges Myanmar security forces to contain the civil conflict between the Kachin rebel groups and the Myanmar military.

Jan. 6, 2016: China lands two commercial jets on the Fiery Cross Reef, prompting formal protests from Vietnam and the Philippines.

Jan. 21, 2016: China's *Haiyang Shiyou-981* deep-water rig begins drilling activities 90 miles west of the disputed Parcel Islands. The oil rig deployment comes at a sensitive time amidst Vietnam's Communist Party Congress.

Jan. 28, 2016: Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou visits Taiping Island (Itu Aba). United States and Vietnam criticize the visit for adding tension to the disputed waters.

Feb. 4, 2016: State Councilor Yang Jiechi meets Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Nor Namhong in Beijing for the China-Cambodia Intergovernmental Coordination Committee meeting. They agree to deepen high-level bilateral engagements, strengthen their strategic communication and coordination on international and regional affairs, and support each other on issues concerning their respective "core and major interests."

Feb. 17, 2016: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi says that the deployment of surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island is intended to build "limited and necessary self-defense facilities."

Feb. 19, 2016: China announces that it will carry out its first bilateral naval exercise with Cambodia. The drills will focus on humanitarian operations and search and rescue exercises.

Feb. 23, 2016: China confirms deployment of fighter jets to Woody Island.

Feb. 25, 2016: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi states that the Philippines violated Article 4 of the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea by resorting to arbitration instead of dialogue and bilateral negotiations.

Feb. 29, 2016: Gen. Wang Jiaocheng of the People's Liberation Army's newly established Southern Theater Command announces it will be "highly vigilant" and "capable of dealing with any security threat" in the command's jurisdiction, including the South China Sea.

March 2, 2016: President Xi Jinping meets Hoang Binh Quan, special envoy of Vietnam's Community Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong, in Beijing. Xi calls for the "proper handling of differences" and deepening the comprehensive and strategic bilateral partnership.

March 3, 2016: China stations several ships near Jackson Atoll in the disputed Spratly Islands, preventing local Filipino fishermen from accessing the surrounding fishing grounds. Manila lodges formal protests with Beijing.

March 3, 2016: Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Singaporean counterpart Vivian Balakrishnan exchange exploratory ideas on ways to minimize risks of unplanned encounters at sea. Both sides reaffirm the importance of respecting freedom of navigation and over-flights in international waters for regional peace and stability.

March 13, 2016: China's chief justice, Zhou Qiang, says China will launch an "international maritime judicial center" to safeguard its territorial claims and protect its maritime rights.

March 15, 2016: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson congratulates Myanmar's President Htin Kyaw and offers support to his government's efforts in political and ethnic reconciliation.

March 19-20, 2016: Chinese Coast Guard patrol boat enters Indonesian waters near Natuna Islands to prevent local maritime authorities from seizing a Chinese fishing boat for illegal fishing. Indonesian officials clarify the incident is a fishing dispute rather than a border dispute, and add that Beijing and Jakarta are in communication to resolve the incident peacefully.

March 23, 2016: Senior officials from Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam convene in China for the inaugural Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) leaders' meeting to discuss coordination mechanisms within the Greater Mekong Sub-region and drought issues in the impacted Lower Mekong areas.

March 29, 2016: Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan meets Vietnamese counterpart Phung Quang Thanh. They pledge to strengthen military ties, minimize tension and conflict, and exercise restraint in areas of difference.

March 31, 2016: China and ASEAN countries agree to expand cooperation in regional law enforcement. Yunnan Police College in Kunming will establish the China-ASEAN Law Enforcement Academy to help train 2,000 police officers from ASEAN law enforcement agencies over the next four years to address such emerging security threats as cyber-crime, drug smuggling, and human trafficking.

March 31 2016: Malaysia Foreign Ministry summons China's ambassador for "clarification" and "to register Malaysia's concern" over the encroachment of some 100 Chinese fishing boats

into Malaysia's territorial waters in the South China Sea which were accompanied by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel.

March 31, 2016: Vietnamese Coast Guard announces the seizure of a Chinese resupply vessel that was allegedly disguised as a fishing boat for trespassing into Vietnamese territorial waters.

April 3, 2016: Chinese military aircraft lands on Fiery Cross Reef for an emergency evacuation of three ill Chinese construction workers stationed there.

April 5, 2016: Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrives in Myanmar to meet counterpart Aung San Suu Kyi. They agree to deepen bilateral communication, mutual trust, and pragmatic cooperation.

April 19, 2016: China and Vietnam begin their 11th joint fishery patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin. The joint activity includes two marine police vessels from each side observing fishing vessels and making random inspections in the common fishing grounds.

April 24, 2016: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets counterparts from Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos. They reach a four-point consensus on the South China Sea, emphasizing that the dispute should be resolved through consultations and negotiations of the claimant states.

April 27-28, 2016: The 22nd China-ASEAN Senior Officials Consultation is held in Singapore. The meeting focuses on advancing China-ASEAN relations and regional cooperation in East Asia. Chinese Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Liu Zhenmin urges ASEAN states to resolve territorial disputes through dialogue and warns of "negative consequences" if the Philippines wins an arbitration case in The Hague.