

THE NINE-DASH GAMBLE

*Seventy-Nine Years of a Line on a Map
Vs One Ruling It Refuses to Read*

THE LINE

The line that now defines Asia's most contested waterway was drawn before the People's Republic of China existed. In 1947 the Republic of China published an **Eleven-Dash Line** enclosing almost the whole of the South China Sea.

In 1949 the incoming PRC inherited the claim, and in 1953 quietly reduced it to the **Nine-Dash Line** that still appears on Chinese maps today.

For decades the claim remained largely theoretical a cartographic assertion unmatched by any capacity to enforce it. That changed around **2013**, when China began converting reefs, shoals and submerged features into artificial islands equipped with airstrips, deep-water ports, radar arrays and missile facilities.

What first looked like a series of isolated engineering projects gradually revealed a single strategic objective: de facto control over close to **90 per cent** of the South China Sea.

Today the dispute ranks among the world's most dangerous maritime flashpoints, drawing in China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan and, indirectly, the United States.

NINE DASH GAMBLE



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LAW VERSUS HISTORY

At root this is a contest between two incompatible sources of authority: history and law.

Beijing argues from **historic rights**. Chinese fishermen, traders and officials, it maintains, used these waters continuously for centuries; the Nine-Dash Line therefore records a pre-existing entitlement rather than inventing one, and sovereignty over the islands carries with it sovereignty over the adjacent waters.

The opposing claimants argue from **UNCLOS**. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei and, around the **Natuna Islands**, Indonesia — measure their entitlements as Exclusive Economic Zones projected from their own coastlines. The Nine-Dash Line runs straight through all of them.

That contest was tested in **2016**, when a tribunal constituted under UNCLOS at the **Permanent Court of Arbitration** ruled on a Philippine submission. The findings were unambiguous: the Nine-Dash Line has **no legal basis under UNCLOS**; artificial islands generate no exclusive economic zone; and Mischief Reef lies inside the Philippine EEZ.

China refused to take part and dismissed the award as “illegal, null and void.”

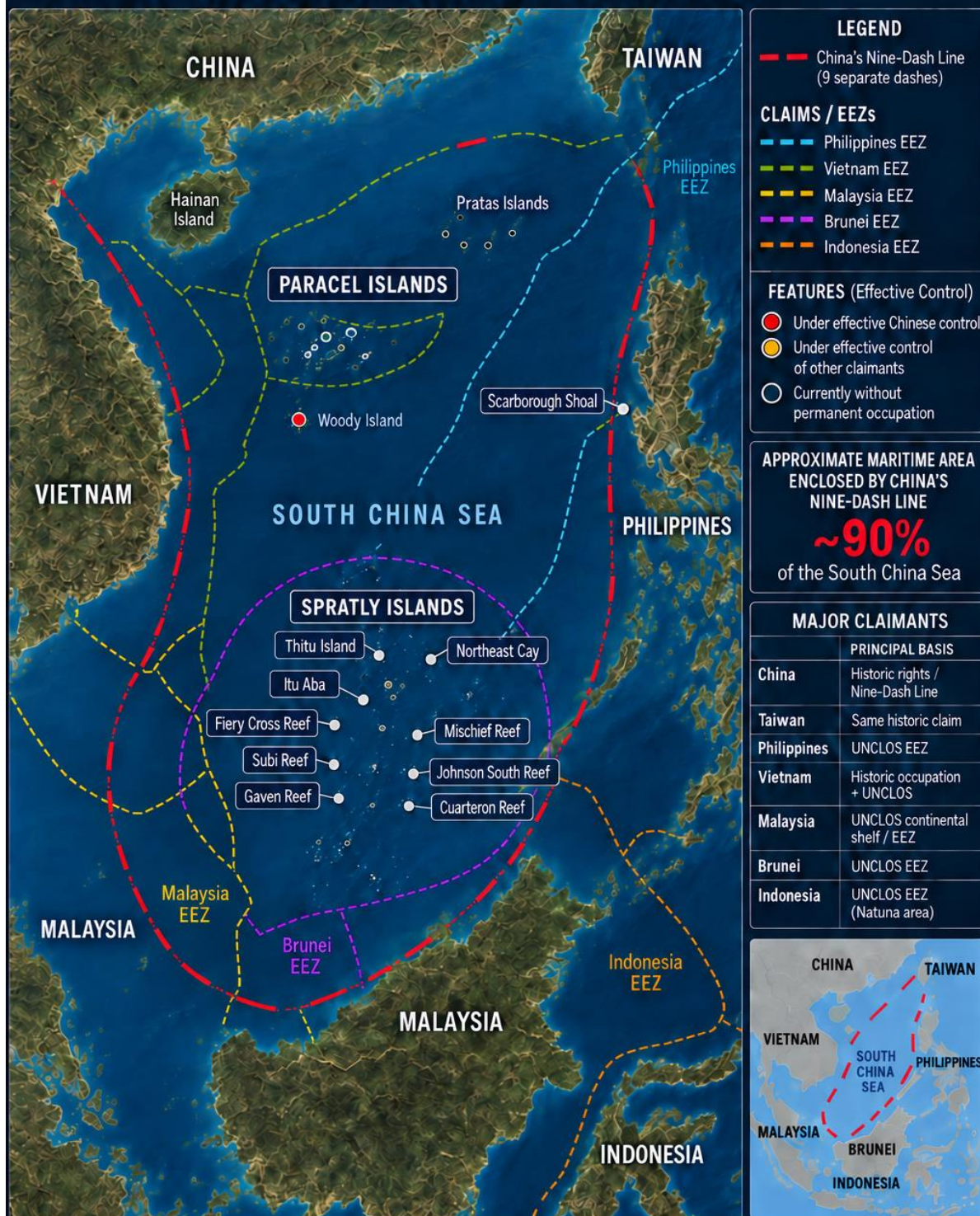
The ruling is binding.

It is also unenforced.

GREY-ZONE WARFARE

The competition is conducted almost entirely below the threshold of war, and the instruments are deliberately non-military.

THE NINE-DASH LINE



China's Nine-Dash Line encloses approximately 90% of the South China Sea. The claim overlaps the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia under UNCLOS.

The China Coast Guard, now the largest such force in the world by tonnage; the **maritime militia** the so-called *little blue men* operating from ostensibly civilian fishing fleets; water cannon; laser illumination; close-quarters blocking and dangerous manoeuvres; ramming; attempted boardings; floating buoy barriers; and, above all, patient and continuous patrolling.

Each act is calibrated to coerce without qualifying as an act of war, and therefore to sit awkwardly beneath the trigger of any alliance treaty.

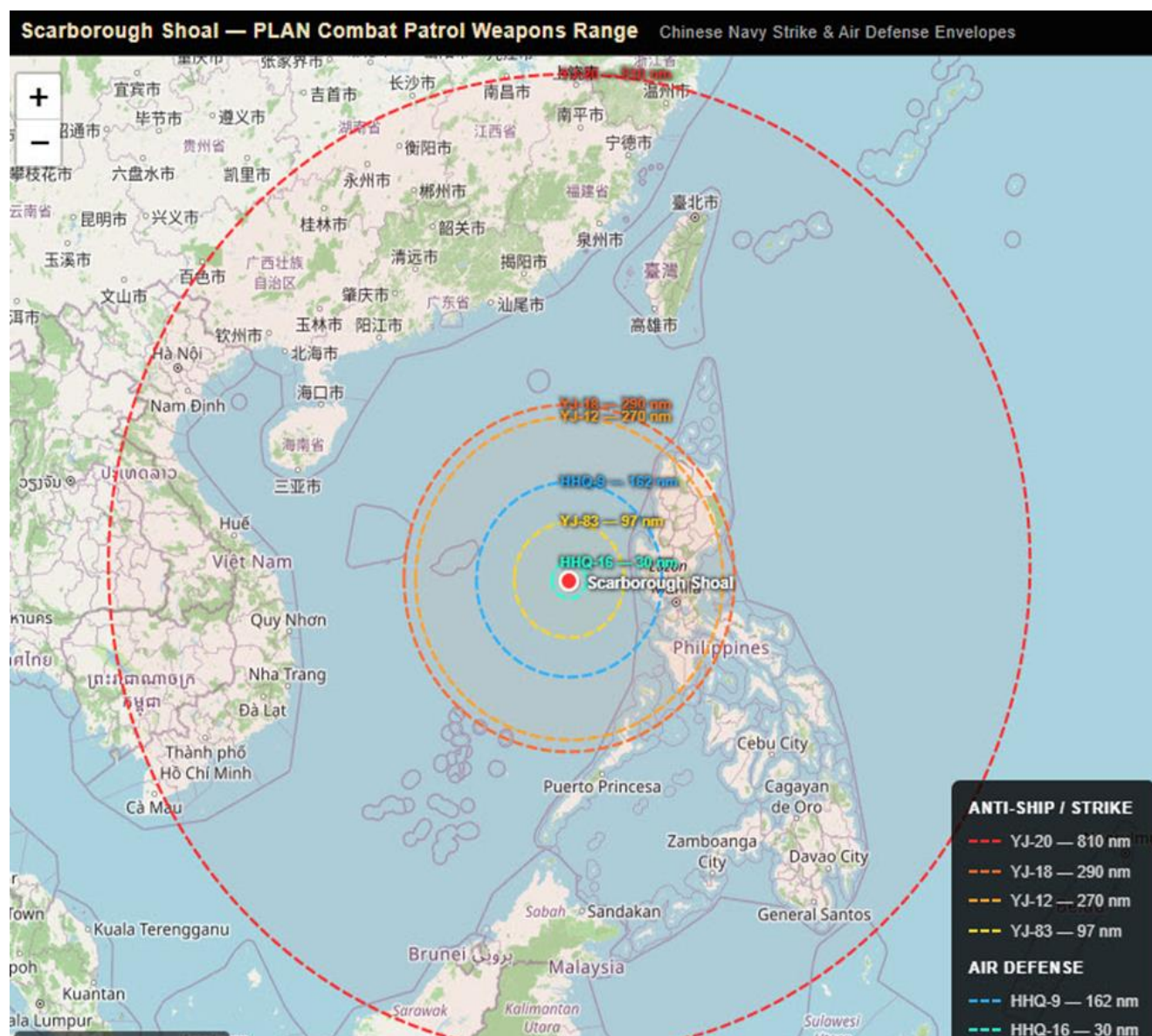
The Philippines has absorbed the sharpest edge of this. **Scarborough Shoal**, under effective Chinese control since 2012, and **Second Thomas Shoal**, where the grounded *BRP Sierra Madre* must be sustained by the Ayungin resupply missions, have produced the most serious confrontations alongside the routine harassment of Filipino fishermen.

Vietnam faces pressure of a different texture: interference with oil and gas exploration, coast guard stand-offs and the seizure of fishing vessels.

Malaysia prefers quiet diplomacy, but has met sustained pressure around the **Luconia Shoals** and the recurring presence of Chinese survey ships in waters off Sarawak.

Indonesia is not formally a claimant. Yet the Nine-Dash Line clips its EEZ near the **Natuna Islands**, where illegal fishing conducted under Chinese Coast Guard escort has pushed Jakarta into a defensive posture it never sought.

***Beijing is not seeking a battle it might lose.
It is accumulating facts that are hard to reverse.***



TAIWAN: THE ESCALATION TRIGGER

Taiwan changes the arithmetic entirely.

The South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait are not separate theatres but two ends of the same strategic space.

In any conflict over Taiwan the **PLA Navy** would need maritime dominance to its south, and the South China Sea would immediately become the logistics rear area the fuel, munitions and sea lines on

which a blockade or an invasion would depend. The militarised features built after 2013 are not primarily about fish or hydrocarbons. They are about depth.

The reverse is equally true. **Philippine bases**, reopened to rotational American access, become essential to any US response.

Japan would be drawn in indirectly through Okinawa and its own sea lanes; **Australia** would carry much of the logistics burden; and **ASEAN**, which has never spoken with one voice on this, would fracture under the strain.

A single crisis would not stay local. It would merge into a wider Indo-Pacific confrontation almost immediately.

THE PHILIPPINES SUBMISSION

On **29 July** the Philippines formally presented its partial submission on an extended continental shelf in the **West Palawan Region** to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf

The second such Philippine submission after the Philippine Rise in 2009, and the product of some fifteen years of technical survey work.

Manila asked the commission to take the 2016 award into account. Beijing's rebuttal followed within a day. Its mission to the UN accused the Philippines of infringing Chinese sovereignty.

And urged the commission not to consider the filing under its own rules of procedure, and again dismissed the arbitral ruling as null and void.

Malaysia had already lodged its own objection on 24 July, citing overlapping entitlements projected from Sabah a reminder that the claimants are not a bloc.

At sea the pattern held. On **23 and 24 July** China Coast Guard vessels used water cannon and close manoeuvring against Philippine fisheries ships near **Scarborough Shoal**, the third confrontation of that week; no injuries were reported and the missions continued. In his State of the Nation Address on **27 July**, President **Marcos** called the award final and binding and said the Philippines would not yield.

Then, on **30 July**, the carrier **USS George Washington (CVN-73)** — with the cruiser *Robert Smalls* and the destroyer *Shoup* entered Da Nang for a five-day port call, the fourth US carrier visit to Vietnam since the war and the first since 2023.

Officially routine.

Nobody in the region read it that way.

CONCLUSION: THE NARROWING MARGIN

Beijing increasingly behaves as the dominant maritime power inside the First Island Chain, using coast guards, maritime militia and incremental coercion to reshape the regional balance without crossing the threshold of open war.

The United States, meanwhile, continues to reassure its allies through freedom-of-navigation operations, joint exercises and symbolic carrier deployments but its capacity to sustain long-term military commitments has come under sharper scrutiny after decades of prolonged overseas campaigns, including the latest Middle East conflict that began on **28 February 2026**.

Whether this reflects enduring decline or deliberate strategic re-prioritisation remains contested, and the honest answer is that it is too early to know. What is already evident is that every new confrontation narrows the diplomatic margin for error.

The law says the line has no basis.

The coast guard says otherwise, every week.

Ten years on, the water has not been persuaded.

A single collision, miscalculation or escalation around Taiwan could turn today's maritime competition into tomorrow's regional war.

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