

**Making the South China Sea a Sea of
Peace, Friendship and Cooperation:
China's Actions**

Xinhua Institute

Table of Contents

Preface1

Chapter One

China's Efforts to Build the South China Sea into a Sea of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation3

 I. Building Regional Peace Through Political Mutual Trust3

 II. Economic Mutual Benefits Fostering Regional Prosperity5

 III. People-to-People Connectivity for a Shared Future7

Chapter Two

China's 4C Principles in Building the South China Sea into a Sea of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation10

 I. Equal-footed CONSULTATION10

 II. Rule-based COMANAGEMENT11

 III. Mutually-beneficial COOPERATION12

 IV. A CONSTRUCTIVE Role14

Chapter Three

China's Willingness to Work with Regional Countries to Build a Maritime Community with a Shared Future in the South China Sea 16

 I. Maintaining Peace and Stability in the South China Sea16

 II. Promoting South China Sea Cooperation and Development18

 III. Building the South China Sea into a Sea of Friendship19

Conclusion22

Preface

The vast South China Sea extends endlessly, its azure waves stretching to the horizon.

At Qionghai's ancient Tanmen fishing port, visitors flock to the China (Hainan) Museum of the South China Sea. The "Deep Blue Treasures" exhibition features archaeological discoveries from two shipwrecks found on the South China Sea's Northwestern Continental Slope—artifacts preserved for over 500 years at depths of more than 1,500 meters.

These deep-sea treasures bear witness to the magnificence of the ancient Maritime Silk Road and showcase China's enduring tradition of friendly exchange and mutual cooperation with nations bordering the South China Sea.

Today, the South China Sea serves as a vital international waterway. Over 500,000 commercial vessels traverse its waters annually, approximately 40% of global trade goods flow through its waters and surrounding straits, and its airspace accommodates more than a million civilian aircraft movements.

As both a crucial maritime corridor and the common heritage of regional nations, the South China Sea confronts a fundamental question: How should we shape the future of these waters in the face of external forces attempting to sow discord?

In November 2021, President Xi Jinping attended and chaired the Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations via video link, emphasizing that "Joint efforts are needed to safeguard stability in the South China Sea and make it a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation." These resolute words charted a clear path for safeguarding peace and promoting development in the South China Sea.

The region's fate is closely tied to the South China Sea's stability—when waters are calm, regional nations prosper; when turbulent, they suffer. Peace and stability in the South China Sea represent the shared aspiration of all regional countries, including China, and align with the collective interests of all parties involved.

China has proposed and actively implements a key initiative to transform the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation. This initiative provides strong support for regional peace, stability, and prosperity. It serves China's legitimate needs to protect its security and development interests while countering unfounded claims about Chinese "regional hegemony." The initiative also demonstrates China's commitment to its responsibilities as a major country.

China and ASEAN countries are pioneering new approaches to regional governance through collaborative efforts to maintain peace and stability. The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) has set fundamental principles and common codes for addressing regional issues. The Code of Conduct consultations have achieved notable progress, completing three readings of the text—marking a significant advance in managing regional disputes. Additionally, China and ASEAN countries have developed strong partnerships in maritime law enforcement, marine research,

environmental protection, and disaster management.

Looking back to the past illuminates our path to the future. This report summarizes China's achievements and insights in transforming the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation. It also presents a vision for collectively expanding this initiative across broader domains, deeper levels, and higher standards.

Chapter One

China's Efforts to Build the South China Sea into a Sea of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation

At the Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations, President Xi Jinping stated explicitly that "Joint efforts are needed to safeguard stability in the South China Sea and make it a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation."

China's commitment to peace and stability in the South China Sea has deep historical roots. Six centuries ago, during the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He's "Seven Voyages to the Western Ocean" carried not weapons of destruction, inhumane colonization, or brutal plunder. Instead, he brought fine silk, exquisite porcelain, and tea—goods that enhanced people's daily lives.

Evidence demonstrates that China has always been a steadfast advocate, promoter, and guardian of stability in the South China Sea. China maintains that peace and stability in these waters depend on collaborative efforts between China and ASEAN countries. Through deepened trust and cooperation across political, economic, and cultural spheres, this partnership has created lasting mutual benefits. Consequently, China has emerged as a reliable force for maintaining regional peace and stability while promoting cooperation and development in the South China Sea.

I. Building Regional Peace Through Political Mutual Trust

1. Major achievements in establishing maritime rules and mechanisms

On September 13, 2024, China and ASEAN countries convened the 22nd Senior Officials' Meeting in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, to implement the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). The parties pledged to fully implement the Declaration while enhancing cooperation in marine environmental protection, scientific research, search and rescue, and law enforcement. This represents steady progress in establishing rules and mechanisms for the South China Sea.

The Declaration stands as the first political document between China and ASEAN countries regarding the South China Sea, with China acting as its primary guardian. Since its adoption in 2002, the Declaration has been instrumental in maintaining regional peace and stability, reflecting the strong commitment to friendship, unity, and cooperation between China and ASEAN countries.

China consistently advocates for all parties to advance consultations on the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea" while implementing the Declaration. China and ASEAN countries have advanced negotiations on the "Code" in recent years, agreeing to expedite discussions through flexible and innovative approaches. These negotiations have made substantial progress, with three readings of the document now completed.

Through the Joint Working Group, China and ASEAN countries hold regular consultations to establish maritime rules and mechanisms for implementing the Declaration. By 2024, they had held 40 working group meetings, making significant progress in maritime cooperation while strengthening peace, stability, and mutual trust in the South China Sea.

2. Innovative and widely accepted approaches to dispute resolution

Over the years, China has developed innovative solutions to South China Sea issues, fostering consensus toward building a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation. In the 1980s, China introduced the principle of "shelving disputes and pursuing joint development." In 2014, China enhanced this approach with the "dual-track" framework.

The dual-track approach effectively addresses ASEAN and non-regional countries' concerns about peace and stability in the South China Sea while preventing disputes from escalating or becoming internationalized. Building on the earlier principle of shelving disputes and pursuing joint development, this framework marks a significant step by the Chinese government toward constructive resolution of South China Sea issues. Its core principle is straightforward: directly involved parties resolve specific disputes through friendly consultations, while China and ASEAN countries work together to maintain regional peace and stability.

In practice, China has consistently advocated for peace in the South China Sea through productive bilateral consultations with coastal nations, offering China's wisdom for peaceful resolution of disputes and advancing new peace-building initiatives.

In 2000, during a period of heightened geopolitical tensions, China and Vietnam successfully negotiated boundaries in the Beibu Gulf—a win-win arrangement that provided valuable insights for seeking common ground while reserving and managing South China Sea differences.

On November 9, 2024, the Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia on Advancing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the China-Indonesia Community with a Shared Future reached consensus on joint development in areas with overlapping maritime claims. The agreement established an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee operating under the principles of "mutual respect, equality, mutual benefit, flexibility, pragmatism, and consensus-building," pursuant to their respective prevailing laws and regulations. This exemplifies how coastal nations can advance maritime cooperation through goodwill while

acknowledging territorial disputes.

3. A solid foundation for the China–ASEAN Community with a Shared Future

Building the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation stands as a key objective of China's South China Sea policy and is crucial for deepening the China–ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership. China and ASEAN share longstanding friendly relations—close neighbors, friends, and partners connected by mountains and waters, bound by deep cultural ties. In recent years, China and ASEAN have strengthened their cooperation across political, economic, and cultural spheres, with the shared vision of building a community with a shared future.

In 2021, China and ASEAN formally inaugurated a comprehensive strategic partnership—a milestone that brought new momentum to regional and global peace, stability, and prosperity. In 2023, marking its 20th anniversary as the first ASEAN dialogue partner to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, China pledged to advance cooperation in four priority areas outlined in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), enhancing regional trust and mutual benefit.

Actions demonstrate commitment and responsibility. Through concrete initiatives, China continues to collaborate with ASEAN in building a peaceful home, a safe and secure home, a prosperous home, a beautiful home, and a home of good will—providing steadfast support for the China–ASEAN Community with a Shared Future.

II. Economic Mutual Benefits Fostering Regional Prosperity

1. The China–ASEAN FTA brings long-term development momentum and regional common interests

Openness and cooperation conform to historical trends, while mutual benefit reflects shared human aspirations. Bilateral trade between China and ASEAN countries surged from 876.38 billion yuan in 2004 to 6.41 trillion yuan in 2023. This 20-year period showcases not just remarkable trade growth, but mutual benefit for common regional prosperity.

Experience has proven that cooperation creates win-win outcomes.

With their substantial markets of over 1.4 billion and 600 million people respectively, China and ASEAN's strengthened free trade cooperation generates stronger, more lasting development impetus for both parties. The China–ASEAN Free Trade Area has established China as ASEAN's largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years, while ASEAN has become China's largest trading partner for 4 consecutive years.

On October 10, 2024, leaders of China and the ten ASEAN countries announced the completion of negotiations for the China-ASEAN FTA 3.0, issuing the "Joint Statement on the Substantial Conclusion of the China-ASEAN FTA 3.0 Upgrade Negotiations." This milestone strengthens China-ASEAN economic and trade cooperation, advances China-ASEAN-led East Asian economic integration, and reaffirms both parties' dedication to free trade in an era of growing protectionism and "de-globalization."

2.The RCEP promotes regional trade prosperity and economic integration

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—the world's largest free trade agreement by population and economic scale—has yielded substantial benefits in its first three years. The agreement has reduced tariffs, simplified customs processes, and facilitated trade and investment. These changes have strengthened regional supply chains and ushered in a new era of high-quality economic development.

As RCEP's largest economy and leading advocate, China has maintained over 30% of its total foreign trade with RCEP members, reaching 12 trillion yuan from January to November 2024. China's non-financial direct investment in other RCEP members rose to \$18.06 billion in 2023, showing a 26% year-on-year growth—14 percentage points higher than China's overall global investment increase.

As non-ASEAN RCEP chair in 2024, China worked to streamline new member admission procedures alongside the launch of RCEP support institutions. As RCEP's influence and appeal continue to grow, it has evolved into both a "new engine" for regional economic growth and a "new carrier" for economic integration, delivering tangible benefits to Asia-Pacific populations through enhanced trade prosperity.

3. Joint building of high-quality "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" deepens China-ASEAN relations

In the early 15th century, the renowned Ming Dynasty navigator Zheng He led seven historic ocean voyages, reaching Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and other territories—creating an enduring legacy of friendly exchanges between peoples.

In October 2013, during a state visit to Indonesia, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a landmark speech at the Indonesian parliament. He proposed jointly building the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" with ASEAN countries and envisioned a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future, charting the course for long-term bilateral development. In the decade that followed, the "Belt and Road" initiative flourished, highlighted by the completion of major infrastructure projects: the China-Laos Railway, Indonesia's Jakarta-Bandung High-speed Railway (HSR), and the "Two Countries, Twin Parks" developments between China and Indonesia and between China and Malaysia.

ASEAN countries are China's priority and important partners in advancing the "

21st Century Maritime Silk Road." Over the past decade, this joint initiative has taken root and flourished throughout ASEAN nations. Through enhanced strategic alignment, China and ASEAN have fostered robust cooperation and achieved notable successes in trade, investment, connectivity, production capacity, green transformation, and digital economy—establishing a Southeast Asian model for high-quality Belt and Road development.

During the 31st China-ASEAN Senior Officials' Consultation on February 13, 2025, ASEAN countries commended China's modernization achievements and its role as a key driver of the global economy. They appreciated China's support for ASEAN's centrality and community building, highlighting how ASEAN-China cooperation sets a standard for regional partnership that benefits local populations. They pledged to deepen practical cooperation with China across sectors, strengthen both "hard" and "soft" connectivity, promote regional integration, combat transnational crimes such as online gambling and telecom fraud, and work together to maintain regional peace, stability, and prosperity.

III. People-to-People Connectivity for a Shared Future

1. Mutual assistance and the deep-rooted concept of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness

China and ASEAN countries share deep cultural bonds and intertwined destinies forged through centuries of friendly exchanges. Trade relationships stretch back over a millennium to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), when Chinese merchants actively traded throughout Southeast Asia. During the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He's maritime expeditions brought merchants and artisans to Southeast Asian shores. Many of these voyagers established permanent homes in the region and formed families with local residents, creating the unique and vibrant Peranakan culture.

In October 2023, cultural understanding and connection emerged as one of the five core priorities in the "Action Plan for Building a China-Laos Community with a Shared Future (2024-2028)." That same month, the "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia on Deepening Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation" laid out specific initiatives to strengthen people-to-people bonds through cultural exchange programs, expand tourism routes, and enhance collaboration in education and talent development.

In February 2025, on the occasion of the "Golden 50 Years of China-Thailand Friendship," Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra visited China and expressed Thailand's commitment to strengthening high-level exchanges, promoting cultural and people-to-people connections, and launching a new half-century of shared peace and prosperity for future generations.

The spirit of friendly exchange and mutual support is fundamental to South China Sea civilization. Throughout history, China and ASEAN have faced challenges together—from the Asian Financial Crisis to the Wenchuan Earthquake, from the Indian Ocean Tsunami to the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrating unwavering mutual support during difficult times.

People-to-people exchanges serve not only as an enduring spiritual bond between China and ASEAN countries but also as a bridge spanning history, laying a solid foundation for both parties to move forward together into the future. Since the China-ASEAN Community with a Shared Future was established, bilateral cultural ties have flourished. This growth manifests in increased travel between nations, higher numbers of international students, thriving youth friendships, and productive local partnerships. The relationship deepens through expanded cooperation in tourism, education, culture, think tanks, media, sports, and women's affairs. As this sense of shared future takes root, the peoples of China and ASEAN continue to forge closer bonds.

2. Practical cooperation and growing public goods in the South China Sea

Through its deepening involvement in global ocean governance, China has expanded its provision of international maritime public goods. In the South China Sea region, China and regional countries work together through capacity-building initiatives to provide essential services to the international community, including navigation assistance, search and rescue operations, and sea conditions and weather forecasting.

The South China Sea contains some of the world's busiest maritime and air corridors, necessitating robust navigation safety infrastructure. This includes supply stations, rescue services, and emergency aircraft facilities and services. Since the establishment of the Yongshu Jiao Marine Observatory in 1988, China has steadily provided public goods, particularly ocean surface data services. Today, the South China Sea Regional Tsunami Warning Center serves nine countries in the region.

As cooperation in the South China Sea region deepens, the scope and variety of public goods continue to expand. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, China and ASEAN demonstrated this momentum through two consecutive joint maritime exercises. Their collaboration now spans multiple domains—including joint patrols between China and Vietnam in the Beibu Gulf, a joint coast guard committee (JCGC) on maritime cooperation between China and the Philippines, and partnerships in marine research, environmental protection, search and rescue, and fisheries. These initiatives have strengthened both ASEAN countries' trust in China and their confidence in peaceful dispute resolution in the South China Sea.

In October 2024, the First Institute of Oceanography (FIO) of the Ministry of Natural Resources of China and National Research and Innovation Agency of Indonesia (BRIN) completed a joint scientific expedition in Indonesian throughflow waters. As part of the Throughflow Indonesian Seas, Upwelling and Mixing Physics

(TRIUMPH) international program, this key initiative examined water transport mechanisms, mixing processes, and upwelling phenomena along the Java coast. Since 2017, the collaboration has produced numerous joint observation voyages, bilateral personnel exchanges, training sessions, and academic publications, significantly advancing scientific knowledge in this field.

China's contributions to the South China Sea region go beyond tangible public goods to include conceptual and principled ones. Researchers note that crisis in international order arises from insufficient public goods. China's open, inclusive multilateralism—which does not target other countries—itself serves as an international public good.

3. Inclusive exchange, mutual learning, extensive consultation, and joint contribution for regional well-being

On February 10, 2025, China's National Immigration Administration (NIA) issued the "Announcement on Visa-Free Policy for Tourist Groups from ASEAN Countries to Xishuangbanna, Yunnan." The policy allows ASEAN tourist groups to enter Xishuangbanna visa-free through Gasa International Airport, Mohan Railway Port, and Mohan Highway Port. A week later, the first group of 15 tourists from Thailand and Laos became the first beneficiaries of this policy, receiving a traditional welcome at the China-Laos Railway Xishuangbanna Station with a water-sprinkling ceremony and vibrant Dai dance performances.

Openness and inclusiveness have been hallmarks of China's five-thousand-year civilization, just as diversity and inclusiveness define Southeast Asian nations and peoples. Since 2014, China and ASEAN have celebrated their partnership through themed years focusing on cultural exchange, education, tourism, innovation, and media collaboration. Their relationship has flourished, with people-to-people exchanges surging from 18.2 million visits in 2013 to 65 million before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to statistics from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the People's Republic of China, all ten ASEAN countries have emerged as favorite destinations for Chinese travelers, with both regions now serving as primary sources of tourists for each other. By October 2024, the partnership had deepened further through 241 sister-city relationships between China and ASEAN.

Chapter Two

China's 4C Principles in Building the South China Sea into a Sea of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation

As the largest coastal state in the South China Sea, China plays a vital role in maintaining regional peace and stability. This shared commitment to peace and stability serves as the greatest common ground between China and its neighboring countries in the South China Sea.

Throughout history, China has never sought to pursue "regional hegemony." China remains committed to managing differences with involved parties, exercising restraint in disputes, and working diligently with regional countries to build a rules-based maritime order in the South China Sea.

China's vision for transforming the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation rests on four core principles: Equal-footed CONSULTATION, Rule-based COMANAGEMENT, Mutually-beneficial COOPERATION, and a CONSTRUCTIVE role.

These 4C principles, developed and refined through practical experience, have withstood the test of time. The collaborative achievements between China and ASEAN countries clearly show that dialogue can overcome any obstacle, and cooperation can fulfill any aspiration.

I. Equal-footed CONSULTATION

Equality serves as the cornerstone of negotiation and consultation, which provides the path to resolving differences.

The Chinese government has consistently advocated that South China Sea disputes should be resolved through negotiation and consultation between directly concerned parties, emphasizing that peace and stability in the South China Sea must be jointly maintained by China and ASEAN countries.

On December 25, 2000, China and Vietnam signed agreements in Beijing on the delimitation of territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelves in the Beibu Gulf, alongside a fishery cooperation agreement. These agreements, in effect since 2004, have established the foundation for China-Vietnam maritime cooperation and joint development in the Beibu Gulf waters, enabling effective operation of the joint development working group consultation mechanism.

While China and the Philippines have not held formal negotiations to resolve South China Sea disputes, they have engaged in multiple consultations on managing maritime disputes. The two nations have agreed to resolve disputes through negotiation and

consultation, as formalized in several bilateral agreements. The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, signed by China and ASEAN countries, strengthened this commitment. In the August 1995 Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines concerning Consultations on the South China Sea and on Other Areas of Cooperation, both sides declared that "disputes should be resolved by countries directly concerned" and that "a gradual and progressive process of cooperation shall be adopted with a view to eventually negotiating a settlement of the bilateral disputes." This understanding was later reinforced through additional bilateral documents, including the March 1999 Joint Press Release of the China-Philippines Experts Group Meeting on Confidence-Building Measures and the May 2000 Joint Statement on the Framework of Bilateral Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines.

In July 2016, the Foreign Ministers of China and ASEAN countries issued the "Joint Statement on the Full and Effective Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea," emphasizing that disputes should be resolved peacefully through negotiation and consultation between directly concerned sovereign states.

The People's Republic of China has signed boundary treaties with 12 of its 14 land neighbors through bilateral negotiations and consultations in a spirit of equality and mutual understanding, and about 90% of China's land boundaries have been delimited and demarcated.

In 2024, through joint efforts between China and ASEAN countries, the South China Sea has remained largely peaceful and stable. China and Indonesia have signed an intergovernmental consensus document on maritime joint development, while China and Malaysia have begun bilateral dialogue on maritime issues. China has now established comprehensive institutional dialogue with all South China Sea claimant states.

China has demonstrated sincerity and sustained efforts to resolve disputes through negotiation. Experience has shown that only through equal negotiations can parties achieve lasting dispute resolution, and fully and effectively implement their agreements.

II. Rule-based COMANAGEMENT

Before maritime disputes are resolved, concerned parties must exercise restraint and establish practical interim arrangements. These arrangements should include developing and strengthening rules and mechanisms to prevent disputes and conflicts from escalating.

Regarding the South China Sea issue, China firmly upholds international maritime law, especially the principles and rules of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Through concrete actions, China defends the authority and

integrity of international maritime law. Based on an in-depth understanding of international practice and its own rich practice, China firmly believes that no matter what mechanism or means is chosen for settling disputes between any countries, the consent of states concerned should be the basis of that choice, and the will of sovereign states should not be violated.

In 2002, China and ASEAN countries signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. This milestone political document not only eased regional tensions but also established a political foundation and guarantee for dispute resolution.

Under the framework of the Declaration, China and ASEAN countries continue advancing consultations on the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea." These discussions aim to establish mechanisms for conflict management at both bilateral and multilateral levels, explore joint development of fisheries and oil/gas resources, and create cooperation mechanisms among coastal states as outlined in the UNCLOS.

Even during periods of disagreement and unilateral actions, the Declaration remains the cornerstone for rebuilding consensus.

In September 2016, following the South China Sea arbitration ruling that July, the China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting adopted two key documents: the "Guidelines for Hotline Communications among Senior Officials of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of ASEAN Member States and China in Response to Maritime Emergencies" and the "Joint Statement on the Application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in the South China Sea." These agreements enhance maritime situation joint management and help prevent conflicts from both arising and escalating.

During the maritime conflict between China and the Philippines at Ren'ai Jiao in July 2024, both nations utilized the Declaration and other bilateral consultation mechanisms to address the situation. China has been engaged in consultations with the Philippines over the Ren'ai Jiao issue and has established temporary arrangements for humanitarian supply deliveries. Both sides have agreed to jointly manage maritime differences and work to reduce tensions in the South China Sea.

III. Mutually-beneficial COOPERATION

The South China Sea issue involves multiple countries and numerous reefs across vast maritime areas, making swift resolution improbable.

International law and practice demonstrate that parties can cooperate effectively under proper control mechanisms even while disputes persist. The strategy of "shelving differences and pursuing joint development" strengthens mutual political trust and creates favorable conditions for eventual dispute resolution. Such interim cooperation does not affect final boundary determinations.

China and ASEAN countries, sharing the South China Sea region, are natural maritime neighbors bound by geography and culture.

China has established practical cooperation with neighboring South China Sea countries in oil and gas development, fisheries management, marine environmental protection, and meteorological services. These partnerships create an environment that facilitates dispute resolution, removes differences, and promotes shared development while building valuable cooperative experience.

In March 2024, the research vessel "Tan Suo Yi Hao" (Exploration No. 1), carrying the "Fen Dou Zhe" (Striver) full-ocean depth manned submersible, returned to Sanya, Hainan, after successfully completing the first China-Indonesia joint deep-sea scientific expedition to the Java Trench.

The expedition brought together 60 researchers from 11 institutions across both countries. These included the Institute of Deep-sea Science and Engineering of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), Indonesia National Research and Innovation Agency's Research Center for Applied Microbiology and Fisheries Research Center, Haluoleo University (Universitas Haluoleo), Hang Tuah University (Universitas Hang Tuah), Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Hainan Tropical Ocean University.

At the celebration ceremony during the vessel's stop at Tanjung Priok Port in Jakarta, Indonesia's then-Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, highlighted the expedition's significance. He described it as a new chapter in maritime cooperation between the two countries and expressed hope for deeper scientific collaboration and the training of more Indonesian scientists and engineers.

Regional cooperation has advanced through multiple initiatives: the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative, the joint promotion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), the creation of maritime emergency response systems including search and rescue hotlines and diplomatic channels, joint naval patrols, defense security consultations, and international ocean discovery programs.

The South China Sea showcases numerous examples of neighborly friendship and shared progress, though successful engagement depends on mutual effort and trust.

In March 2005, the national oil companies of China, the Philippines, and Vietnam signed "A Tripartite Agreement on the Joint Seismic Undertaking in the Agreed Area in the South China Sea." This three-year agreement outlined plans to conduct 2D and 3D seismic surveys across 143,000 square kilometers, reprocess existing 2D seismic survey data, and evaluate the region's oil resources.

However, when the Philippines withdrew from cooperation, the China-Philippines confidence-building measures working group meetings stalled, ending the trilateral marine seismic survey work.

China has proven itself a steadfast force in maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea while promoting cooperation and development. The nation remains committed to strengthening friendly relations with neighboring countries and actively fostering practical cooperation with both neighboring nations and regional

organizations like ASEAN to achieve mutual benefits and win-win outcomes.

IV. A CONSTRUCTIVE Role

"China firmly upholds its territory, sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea. Dialogue and consultation between the states concerned is always the best way to manage differences in the South China Sea. The United States should not get involved in bilateral disputes over the relevant islands and reefs of Nansha Qundao, nor should it aid or abet the impulsion to make provocations." Chinese President Xi Jinping made the remarks during his meeting with then-U.S. President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the 31st APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Lima, Peru.

The South China Sea serves as a crucial international maritime corridor, home to some of the world's busiest commercial shipping lanes. Regional peace and stability serve the common interests of both regional and external countries. The freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, as guaranteed under international law, stands as a fundamental consensus between China and other coastal states.

External powers, particularly including the United States, aim to maintain their privileged position in the South China Sea dating back to colonial and hegemonic times. Through alliance-building and meddling in regional disputes, they seek to preserve their maritime control for their own interests. In recent years, the United States, Japan, Australia, and the European Union have repeatedly invoked "freedom of navigation" —which amounts to unconstrained interference—making them "troublemakers" that disrupt peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Some countries' growing interference through military and diplomatic channels undermines regional stability. They work to strain relationships between regional countries and China, hampering joint efforts between China and ASEAN countries to maintain peace and stability. Their involvement encourages unilateral actions by other claimant states and diminishes opportunities for maritime cooperation.

On March 31, 2016, during the Fourth Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) in Washington, President Xi Jinping met with then-U.S. President Barack Obama and stated: "The Chinese side respects and safeguards the freedom of navigation and overflight entitled to all countries by the international laws, and meanwhile will never accept any action that impairs China's national sovereignty and security interests with the excuse of freedom of navigation. The Chinese side hopes the US side to keep its commitment of not taking sides in disputes regarding sovereignty and territory and to play a constructive role in safeguarding the peace and stability of the South China Sea."

The South China Sea's openness and freedom are evident in the numbers: annually, about 500,000 commercial vessels traverse these waters, approximately 40% of global trade goods pass through the South China Sea and its surrounding straits, and over a million civilian aircraft operate in the airspace above—making it one of the world's busiest maritime and air corridors.

This demonstrates that China's protection of its sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and maritime rights does not impede the freedom of navigation and overflight that foreign vessels and aircraft enjoy under international law.

In recent years, however, U.S. military reconnaissance activities in the South China Sea have become increasingly aggressive. U.S. forces regularly approach the Chinese mainland and its Hainan Island's airspace, conducting approximately 100 approaches annually—most within 30 nautical miles of the territorial baseline.

China consistently advocates for resolving differences through bilateral friendly consultations with relevant countries. External intervention only complicates matters. China and relevant countries have both the capability and confidence to properly handle their disputes and ensure long-term peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Chapter Three

China's Willingness to Work with Regional Countries to Build a Maritime Community with a Shared Future in the South China Sea

"The blue planet humans inhabit is not divided into islands by the oceans, but is connected by the oceans to form a community with a shared future, where people of all countries share weal and woe." President Xi Jinping shared this vision of maritime community with shared future during a group meeting with the heads of foreign delegations invited to participate in the multinational naval events marking the 70th founding anniversary of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in Qingdao, Shandong Province, on April 23, 2019.

This vision reflects deep historical insight, philosophical wisdom, and global perspective. It illuminates the path and direction for global ocean governance while envisioning a future of maritime peace and prosperity.

In recent years, Western discourse has framed the South China Sea primarily through terms like "issues," "sovereignty disputes," and "freedom of navigation." However, historically, this region has been free of such conflicts—its civilization has consistently embodied principles of peace, harmony, cooperation, and mutual benefit. China and the coastal nations not only share immediate interests in peace and development and common aspirations for a better future, but also draw strength from their shared historical civilization. Through dialogue, economic integration, and multilateral engagement, regional countries can transform the South China Sea into a true sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation by recognizing the importance of building a maritime community with a shared future.

A South China Sea that is peaceful, secure, prosperous, developing, open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful aligns with both the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the Bandung Spirit. This vision demonstrates how the concept of a maritime community with a shared future can be implemented in the South China Sea region.

I. Maintaining Peace and Stability in the South China Sea

This is a chronicle of peaceful and friendly exchanges between countries around the South China Sea that spans more than six centuries.

In 1417, three rulers of the ancient Sultanah Sulu of the Philippines—Paduka Pahala, Maharajah Kalamadhin, and Paduka Prabhu—led a diplomatic mission to Beijing. Their delegation of over 340 people, including family members and officials, journeyed across mountains and seas to meet the Yongle Emperor, who welcomed them

with grand ceremony. During the return journey, Paduka Pahala fell ill and passed away in Dezhou, Shandong, where he was laid to rest. Several of his family members chose to remain as caretakers of his tomb, establishing roots in the area. To this day, their descendants continue to make their home in Dezhou and live ordinary lives there.

These historic bonds remain vibrant. In August 2023, the Philippine Ambassador to China Jaime FlorCruz paid homage at Paduka Pahala's tomb, where he wrote: "The spirit of the Sulu Sultan's historic visit to China 600 years ago lives on in our hearts! Long live China-Philippines friendship!"

Throughout the millennia of South China Sea civilization, the Sulu Sultan's visit stands as one testament to the enduring history of peaceful exchanges between China and its neighbors. The South China Sea narrative embodies the creation of a maritime community with a shared future—rooted in the peaceful aspirations of China and regional ancestors to build a better home together. Through centuries of transformation, one truth persists: a shared dedication to preserving peace and friendship.

History illuminates the present. In recent years, external forces have steered several of China's traditional friendly partners around the South China Sea into a "claimant states" impasse, transforming once-peaceful, cooperative and friendly waters into a "source of issues." Throughout history, peace and friendship have served as the foundation of collective memory among South China Sea nations and peoples. The region's stability can only be maintained through dialogue and cooperation between neighboring countries. External interference, conflict, and confrontation serve no one's interests.

President Xi Jinping's statement captures the essence of the South China Sea situation: "Nations should enhance mutual respect, equal treatment and mutual trust, strengthen maritime dialogue and exchanges, deepen practical naval cooperation, and pursue a mutually beneficial and win-win approach to maritime security. Nations should joint efforts to address common threats and challenges at sea, and safeguard maritime peace and tranquility."

Peace and stability in the South China Sea are crucial to the security and interests of surrounding countries, calling for collective protection and preservation. ASEAN countries predominantly favor dialogue-based solutions and oppose regional unrest. At the 37th Asia-Pacific Roundtable in June 2024, Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Bin Ibrahim stressed that South China Sea issues should be resolved between China and ASEAN countries, emphasizing that external interference would only complicate matters. That same month, at the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto asserted that true security comes from building friendly relations between neighboring countries, declaring that "cooperation is the only path to prosperity and harmony."

Safeguarding regional peace and ensuring common security form the foundation for maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea. We must transform disputes

into peace through a common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security approach. This requires strengthening dialogue and consultation, developing regional rules independently, and enhancing bilateral and multilateral dialogue mechanisms for policy consultation and connectivity among South China Sea nations. We must deepen bilateral consultations on fisheries, maritime law enforcement, oil and gas development, and other key issues. While standing firm against external interference, we should resolve differences peacefully. By prioritizing shared interests and addressing differences constructively, we can accelerate the completion of the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea."

We must strengthen high-level exchanges among coastal countries, enhance strategic communication, and support each other on core interests and major concerns. This will reinforce our shared commitment to regional peace, stability, development, and prosperity. Through enhanced security cooperation and trust-building measures between military forces, we can continue our essential work in making the South China Sea a sea of peace.

II. Promoting South China Sea Cooperation and Development

The South China Sea has long served as a vital waterway for free navigation, trade, and cultural exchange, fostering development and prosperity throughout the region. As a semi-enclosed sea, it has nurtured continuous friendly exchanges and cooperation among coastal countries and peoples. The millennia of shared history among South China Sea coastal nations far outweigh the brief decades of disputes and sporadic conflicts.

Through the ages, Chinese mariners generously shared their shipbuilding and navigation expertise with local South China Sea communities, elevating maritime capabilities throughout the region. According to *the 17th Century Siamese Diplomatic Archives*, Chinese maritime workers played a pivotal role in advancing the shipping technology of Siam and its surrounding areas. Their mastery was so highly regarded that Chinese crews commanded all of the Siamese king's official vessels—both for domestic and international voyages.

Today, China and Thailand work closely together in marine resource development and preservation, disaster prevention and mitigation, and related fields. The China-Thailand Joint Laboratory for Climate and Marine Ecosystem, launched in June 2013, stands as a model of international marine cooperation. The laboratory has cultivated bilateral scientific and technological collaboration through numerous projects, from Southeast Asian marine environment forecasting systems to coastal vulnerability studies, endangered species protection research, and marine spatial planning initiatives.

In this era of economic globalization, we should build bridges of communication instead of creating dividing chasms—paving smooth paths for cooperation rather than

raising iron curtains of confrontation. Today, we must transform differences into cooperation, establish mutual benefit and win-win principles as shared values among South China Sea coastal countries, and ensure that all peoples in surrounding nations share in the fruits of development.

"At present, ocean-based cooperation in market, technology, information, culture, and other areas is steadily deepening. The reason for China to propose jointly building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is to facilitate maritime connectivity, pragmatic cooperation in various fields, and the development of the 'blue economy', as well as to promote the integration of maritime cultures and to improve maritime wellbeing." President Xi Jinping's words resound with vision and purpose.

We should focus on practical cooperation, accelerate economic recovery, and maintain the positive momentum of dialogue and cooperation in the South China Sea. We must transform differences into cooperation and promote high-quality sustainable marine development through the blue economy. Guided by the principle of harmonious coexistence between coastal peoples and marine ecosystems, we must expand practical cooperation and harness marine potential. China stands ready to share its marine development achievements and experience with coastal countries, foster closer blue partnerships, and jointly build a high-quality "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." China seeks to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN countries in marine ecology, fisheries, maritime search and rescue, anti-piracy, disaster prevention and mitigation, and navigation safety. This includes joint scientific exploration of the South China Sea and establishing joint law enforcement centers for low-sensitivity issues.

We should integrate the high-quality development of the "Belt and Road Initiative" and three major global initiatives with ASEAN community building. This integration will enhance trade and investment liberalization, improve trade facilitation, and promote shared development through the blue economy. We will accelerate our common development through regional free trade prosperity. Through building a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future, we can fully realize the benefits of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) and advance regional economic integration across multiple domains. This partnership will foster growth in trade, investment, maritime affairs, agriculture, connectivity, and climate change response. It will also drive progress in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, digital economy, and green economy, thereby strengthening the economic foundation for peace and tranquility in the South China Sea.

III. Building the South China Sea into a Sea of Friendship

The diverse civilizations around the South China Sea have evolved from strangers to friends—a transformation built on growing trust.

Chinese history books reveal how trust developed in early trade between China and

the Philippines. When Chinese merchant ships first arrived in Sulu, they cautiously announced their presence with drum signals before approaching land. Local inhabitants would paddle small boats filled with goods to trade on the Chinese vessels. As trust grew, both sides abandoned this careful ritual for direct docking, though they kept the practice of hosting one or two local residents aboard as temporary "guarantors." Years of steady trading fostered deep trust, bringing prosperity to the Sulu people. They welcomed Chinese merchants with increasing warmth and invited sailors to settle in their community. Eventually, some Chinese traders made Sulu their permanent home, becoming the area's first Chinese immigrants.

The bonds of trust built through peaceful and friendly exchanges among peoples around the South China Sea continue to this day. In April 2021, a Chinese fleet—consisting of Navy Ship 863, Nan Tuo 195, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences' "Tan Suo II" (Exploration II) research vessel—joined Indonesian rescue efforts for the submarine "KRI Nanggala-402." The Chinese team conducted thorough underwater operations to survey the wreckage and recover components, all of which were immediately handed over to Indonesia. This collaboration demonstrated the Chinese Navy's dedication to fostering a maritime community with a shared future, while deepening military trust and the comprehensive strategic partnership between the nations.

Suspicion hinders cooperation, while mutual trust serves as the cornerstone of peace. A lack of trust among South China Sea nations not only increases regional tensions but also obstructs regular exchanges and cooperation.

President Xi Jinping astutely observed: "The ocean is vast because it admits all rivers. Whenever a problem crops up, countries concerned should always hold deliberations in good faith, rather than resort to the use or threat of force at will."

We should strengthen exchanges and mutual learning, promote people-to-people connectivity, and continuously enhance the warm foundation of friendship in the South China Sea. To transform suspicion into mutual trust, we must leverage existing official dialogue mechanisms—such as the China-ASEAN Summit and bilateral consultation mechanisms on South China Sea issues. Through multi-track exchange platforms, broader cooperation channels, and stronger academic exchanges between Chinese and South China Sea countries' think tanks and research institutions, we can pursue joint regional research initiatives.

We must persistently strengthen cooperation across education, culture, tourism, sports, media, youth, and other fields. We can deepen understanding and friendship among peoples around the South China Sea through focused programs—including cultural exchange years, education exchange years, tourism cooperation years, innovation years, media exchange years, and sister city partnerships. These efforts will nurture harmony, prosperity, mutual respect, and understanding among the region's diverse civilizations, building a stronger foundation for making the South China Sea a sea of true friendship.

Peace, stability, and prosperity in the South China Sea yield tremendous benefits for both the region and its people.

Guided by Eastern wisdom, countries in the South China Sea region will transform these waters into a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation—provided they maintain their commitment to dialogue, pursue win-win cooperation, and embrace mutual learning through exchange.

Conclusion

The South China Sea, shaped by millions of years of geological transformations—subduction, destruction, and rifting—gave birth to the new South China Sea basin. In the face of these vast waters, ancient peoples united to overcome migration challenges and forge brilliant civilizations.

Through the ages, as landscapes shifted and time flowed, the stories of land and sea intertwined. Rather than dividing nations and peoples, the South China Sea has served as a unifying bond. Tales of mutual support, shared hardships, and collective progress have endured through generations.

"Our exchanges are as frequent as those between relatives. We value friendship and credibility. We rejoice together in good times, and help each other out in hard times," said Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations on November 22, 2021.

The momentum toward peace and stability in the South China Sea is unstoppable, as is the surge of regional unity and cooperation. True harmony flourishes through embracing differences. Peace, friendship, and cooperation form the foundation for addressing South China Sea issues among regional countries. These complex matters, involving multiple parties, require patience, inclusiveness, vision, and wisdom to resolve.

In addressing the South China Sea's complex and sensitive situation, China maintains its strategic focus on "taking the long view." It upholds diplomatic principles of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness toward its neighbors, working alongside regional countries as a guardian of maritime peace, a builder of order, a promoter of cooperation, and a contributor to development.

From economic partnerships to ecological stewardship, from dispute management to people-to-people bonds, the cooperation model pioneered by China and ASEAN countries enriches global ocean governance with Eastern wisdom. This demonstrates the inevitable progress of joint development. As institutional cooperation networks strengthen, a new South China Sea era emerges—one that transcends geopolitical rivalry and shares development's rewards.

Through China and ASEAN countries' unwavering efforts, peace and stability in the South China Sea will strengthen, while maritime dialogue and cooperation will advance sustainably, promising a brighter regional future.

The South China Sea stands as the shared homeland of China and ASEAN countries. These blue waters' rich history shows that when regional countries embrace their shared future, challenges become opportunities. We have the confidence, wisdom, and capability to guide South China Sea solutions. By adhering to sound principles and direction in addressing these issues, we will create a genuine sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation.