



Coercive Diplomacy by Target: How China Differentiates Its South China Sea Discourse

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Over the same dispute and in the same period, China has pressed the Philippines hardest while remaining conciliatory toward Vietnam. This difference is not incidental but strategic. This study shows that China runs several distinct forms of coercive diplomacy at once, applying a different one to each rival in the South China Sea, and that toward one rival the form even shifts as that country's government changes. Reading 7,005 English-language *Global Times* articles (2013–2025) against George's (1991) four-part typology of coercive diplomacy, the study diagnoses the operative form in each case by a close reading of representative texts, with a conflict-cooperation index (CCI) and structural topic modeling (STM) as supplementary measures. Three patterns emerge. Toward the Philippines, most strikingly, the form is replaced at each change of government: incremental tightening (gradual turning of the screw) under Aquino III, restraint (non-deployment) under Duterte, and an implicit threat backed by action (tacit ultimatum) under Marcos Jr., three strategies across three successive administrations, each coinciding with a change of government. Toward Vietnam, coercion is held in reserve throughout, managed instead through party-to-party channels (sustained non-deployment). Toward the United States, a steady, incremental tightening of pressure (gradual turning of the screw) runs across four administrations yet changes no U.S. behavior. These patterns recast coercive diplomacy as something a state manages routinely across many targets at once, with direct relevance to reading China's coercive discourse toward South Korea.

Keywords Coercive Diplomacy, South China Sea, Differentiated Discourse, *Global Times*, Conflict-Cooperation Index, Structural Topic Modeling

I. Introduction

The South China Sea is the most contentious maritime domain in the 21st-century Asian security order. The dispute has never ceased. As recently as June this year, the Philippine government announced the discovery of new structures

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at Scarborough Shoal, which has been under Chinese control since 2012. The most striking feature of this dispute, sustained for well over a decade, is the relentless accumulation of changes to the territorial status quo without escalation into armed conflict. China has incrementally altered the territorial status quo — from the seizure of Scarborough Shoal in 2012, through artificial island construction beginning in 2013, the rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in 2016, to the blockade of Second Thomas Shoal in the 2020s.

This physical accumulation has proceeded in tandem with an institutional one: the 2013 consolidation of China's fragmented maritime agencies under the State Oceanic Administration, the 2018 transfer of the China Coast Guard (CCG) to the People's Armed Police (PAP), and the codification of its enforcement powers through the 2021 Coast Guard Law and the 2024 law-enforcement procedures. At the same time, Beijing has consistently avoided allowing these changes to escalate into full-scale military confrontation. The dispute has become the most representative case of a gray zone — situated between armed conflict and peace negotiations — and across the period (2013~2025) examined in this study, this pattern has continued without interruption.

Existing research on this dispute can be organized along two strands. One strand consists of the gray zone literature (e.g., Morris et al., 2019), which tracks the cumulative dynamics of status quo change. The other consists of comparative case studies (e.g., Velasco, 2026) that suggest China's coercive behavior may be differentiated by target. Both strands mostly focus their analysis on China's actions, leaving insufficiently examined how China's discourse varies. Yet discourse is not a mere reflection of action: the same physical dispute can be framed in sharply different registers across targets, and it is precisely this variation — invisible at the level of behavior — that a discourse-centered analysis brings into view.

This study addresses that gap. Drawing on the full corpus of English-

language *Global Times* between 2013 and 2025—the period corresponding to the Xi Jinping era, during which China’s South China Sea posture became distinct from that of the preceding Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao governments — it identifies how China differentiates its discourse across targets while addressing the same dispute. The analysis focuses on three countries for which a primary target can be unambiguously identified by the predominance of in-text mentions: the Philippines, Vietnam, and the United States. For the Philippines, the analysis is further divided into three periods aligned with regime change — the Aquino III period (2013~2016), the Duterte period (2017~2021), and the Marcos Jr. period (2022~2025) — to examine whether discursive variation also emerges within a single target across time.

The theoretical resource is coercive diplomacy theory. In *Forceful Persuasion*, George (1991) formalizes coercive diplomacy through four variables — demand, urgency, threat of punishment, and conditional inducements — yielding four variants: Ultimatum, Tacit Ultimatum, Try-and-See, and Gradual Turning of the Screw, distinguished along the axes of urgency and threat persistence. This study applies that framework to 13 years of *Global Times* discourse and diagnoses which variant operates for each target and period through qualitative matching, with the Conflict-Cooperation Index (CCI) and Structural Topic Modeling (STM) employed as supplementary tools. The decisive grounds for diagnosis rest on the lexical and substantive markers in the article texts themselves.

The analysis sketched above has both empirical timeliness and policy weight. The South China Sea dispute has shifted from a crisis event into a phase of routine operation, with physical confrontations accelerating again under the Marcos Jr. administration (e.g., the Second Thomas Shoal standoff in 2023, the Sabina Shoal clashes in 2024). As U.S. allies including South Korea, Japan, and Australia are drawn into South China Sea security cooperation, identifying the patterns of Chinese discourse toward each ally carries direct

implications for the design of South Korea's China policy.

The core questions this study poses are as follows. Does the same coercer (China), addressing the same dispute (South China Sea sovereignty), operate different variants of coercive diplomacy across different targets? If so, which variant operates toward each target, and how do they differ? And does the variant directed at a single target remain stable over time, or does it change across successive periods? In answering these three questions, this study moves beyond what coercive diplomacy research has traditionally examined — bilateral confrontations during moments of crisis — and identifies a new empirical domain: how coercive diplomacy operates against multiple targets at the same time, outside of crisis periods.

The paper proceeds as follows. Chapter II reviews prior research on the South China Sea dispute and the question of differentiated discourse, presents George's framework of coercive diplomacy, and locates this study's methodological position. Chapter III describes the data, the qualitative matching procedure, and the construction of the CCI and STM as supplementary tools. Chapter IV analyzes Chinese discourse toward each of the three targets, period by period, and diagnoses the coercive variant at work in each case. Chapter V synthesizes the findings, discusses implications for coercive diplomacy research, explores applications to the Korean case, and considers the study's limitations.

II. Theoretical Background

1. The South China Sea Dispute and Target-Differentiated Discourse

The South China Sea is a multi-party contested maritime area where China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan all claim

sovereignty. Although not a direct claimant, the United States has also emerged as a major party to the dispute, invoking freedom of navigation and alliance security as its grounds for engagement. Within this contested space, China has incrementally reshaped the status quo, a pattern that exemplifies what Mazarr (2015) calls the gray zone: efforts to achieve strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of war, distinguished by revisionist intent, strategic gradualism, and unconventional means. One of the most influential scholarly analyses of China's South China Sea strategy comes from Fravel (2011), who argues that since the mid-1990s China has pursued a delaying strategy: postponing resolution of the dispute while incrementally consolidating its own claims and deterring other claimants from strengthening theirs.

The gray zone literature, however, has largely asked what China does, giving comparatively little attention to how a single coercer differentiates its behavior, and especially its discourse, across targets. Where differentiation has been examined, the focus has remained on the action dimension. Velasco (2026) argues in a comparative case study that China's South China Sea behavior varies systematically across claimants rather than unfolding uniformly, a pattern he conceptualizes as 'differentiated assertiveness': a coercive strategy toward the Philippines alongside greater restraint toward Vietnam, which he attributes to Beijing's reading of each target's alliance configuration and openness to legal resolution—crisis-management trust with the non-aligned, party-linked Vietnam, hardening coercion against the U.S.-allied Philippines. Yet his comparison remains bilateral and behavioral.

A second line of work asks why. Ravindran (2012) located an early answer in economic vulnerability, arguing that Vietnam's greater exposure to Chinese economic pressure is offset by political factors while the Philippines' is amplified, making Manila the more likely to concede. More recently, Taffer (2024) advances a complementary perspective, attributing this differentiation

to differences in strategic cost: the magnitude of costs that the Philippines and Vietnam can impose on China is, in his view, the key variable. He argues that Vietnam, by maintaining non-alignment, retains the latent option of forging a U.S.-Vietnam alliance and can therefore impose greater costs, whereas the Philippines, already a U.S. ally, has exhausted that latent leverage. Taken together, these studies make clear that target-differentiated Chinese coercion is a pattern of considerable scholarly and policy significance.

This study addresses these gaps through an analysis of the *Global Times* corpus described below. It traces target-differentiated discourse along three dimensions that prior work has left open: in discourse rather than action, across three targets rather than two, and dynamically across regime change rather than as a static comparison.

2. The Theory of Coercive Diplomacy

The core theoretical resource for this study is the theory of coercive diplomacy developed by Alexander L. George. Coercive diplomacy has become a standard subject in international relations since Schelling (1966) first distinguished the concept of compellence from deterrence. Whereas deterrence aims to prevent an adversary from initiating an action, Schelling defined compellence as inducing a desired action through the adversary's fear of consequences. Building on this foundation, George (1991) reframed the concept as the defensive use of coercive diplomacy and developed it into a more specific analytical framework. He defines coercive diplomacy as the imposition of a demand on an adversary, backed by a threat of punishment that the adversary perceives as credible and sufficiently potent to compel compliance. This study limits its application of coercive diplomacy to its defensive uses — that is, efforts to halt or reverse an action that the adversary has already begun — which constitute a distinct domain from

deterrence, where the aim is to prevent an action from starting in the first place.

In this framework, coercive diplomacy does not exist in a single fixed form. Rather, it is composed as a combination of four variables — what George calls “empty boxes” — that policymakers must fill in according to context: (1) what to demand, (2) whether and how to generate a sense of urgency for compliance, (3) whether and what punishment to threaten in case of non-compliance, and (4) whether to rely solely on the threat of punishment or to combine it with conditional inducements. The fourth variable — whether to pair the stick with a carrot — is treated separately as the carrot-and-stick approach and constitutes the key element shaping the negotiating flexibility of coercive diplomacy.

Depending on how these four variables are filled in, he derives four variants of coercive diplomacy. First, the *Ultimatum* is the strongest form, combining a clear demand, an explicit time limit, and a credible, strong threat of punishment. Second, the *Tacit Ultimatum* is a variant in which an explicit time limit is absent but urgency is conveyed through other means, and the threat of punishment, though not explicitly stated, is credibly transmitted through action. Third, the *Try-and-See* approach delivers only a clear demand without time pressure, carrying out a single limited threat or action and then observing the adversary’s response. Fourth, the *Gradual Turning of the Screw* communicates a threat of progressive escalation at the outset and implements it incrementally, but without an explicit time pressure. The four variants can be organized along two axes — urgency and threat strength — as visualized in Table 1.

Two fine-grained distinctions among the variants prove decisive for the analysis. First, the *Ultimatum* and the *Tacit Ultimatum* are similar in the intensity of urgency and the threat of punishment, but they diverge in the explicitness with which these are communicated. The latter delivers

Table 1 George's Four Variants of Coercive Diplomacy

	Urgency	One-shot threat	Sustained threat
present	via time limit	-	Ultimatum
	via other means		Tacit Ultimatum
	absent	Try-and-See	Gradual turning of the screw (incremental)

Note: Reconstructed as a matrix based on George (1991).

equivalent pressure without explicit time limits or declared punishments, conveying urgency instead through actions, surrounding circumstances, and repeated lexical markers. Second, Try-and-See and Gradual Turning of the Screw share the absence of the urgency, but the former amounts to a single limited probe of the adversary's response, whereas the latter communicates a threat of progressive escalation from the outset and implements it on a sustained, incremental basis. These two distinctions form the analytical core of two diagnoses developed in Chapter IV: the Marcos Jr. period (Tacit Ultimatum vs Ultimatum) and the Aquino III period (Gradual Turning of the Screw vs Try-and-See).

The asymmetry of motivation is introduced in George's framework as a separate concept, distinct from the four variables. He argues that the success of coercive diplomacy depends decisively on which side — the coercer or the adversary — has the greater stake in the issue and the greater willingness to accept risk. In other words, asymmetry of motivation is not a variable for choosing a variant, but a condition for its success. This study draws on this distinction again in the analysis of the U.S. case in Chapter IV, where it shows that whichever variant is applied to the United States, the operative effect is constrained whenever the coercer fails to hold the advantage in asymmetry of motivation.

Since its publication, George's framework has anchored a substantial body of coercive diplomacy research. Two strands bear directly on this study. Art and Cronin (2003), analyzing post-Cold War U.S. cases, show that out-

comes diverge by target and circumstance even when the same coercer acts, prefiguring this study's concern with differentiated variants across targets. More recently, Hanson et al. (2020) document 152 cases of Chinese coercive diplomacy against 27 countries (2010~2020); notably, their finding that no cases against the Philippines were recorded after Duterte's 2016 inauguration parallels the non-deployment this study diagnoses at the discourse level. This study extends that trajectory through a new source of evidence: public-media discourse.

A final clarification: this study does not claim that Chinese policymakers consciously applied this framework. The aim of the analysis is to identify how the observed discourse patterns end up matching the definitions of the four variants, and how this pattern of correspondence diverges across targets.

3. Methodological Foundations

This study selects the English-language *Global Times* as the medium of analysis, on two scholarly grounds. First, it is a recognized organ of official intent. Zeng and Sparks (2020) analyze *Global Times* as a central Party organ that represents the official views of the CPC leadership in popularized form, and use it as a primary source for their analysis of the U.S.-China trade war. Wilbur (2021) likewise analyzes *Global Times* as functioning not merely as a news outlet but as a strategic tool for transmitting agendas, providing additional grounds for this study's interpretation of *Global Times* discourse as systematic signaling. Second, it is a documented channel of state signaling. Hanson et al. (2020) identify *Global Times*, *China Daily*, and *Xinhua* as the principal channels through which state threats are communicated, and note that the editor-in-chief of *Global Times* has repeatedly implied that the paper reflects the views of Chinese authorities,

remarking that ‘they can’t speak willfully, but I can.’ Taken together, these accounts support treating *Global Times* discourse not as arbitrary media content but as deliberate state signaling.

At the same time, *Global Times* occupies a distinct position within China’s state-media ecology. Unlike People’s Daily, the CPC’s flagship organ that articulates authoritative policy in measured, official language, *Global Times* is a commercially operated tabloid under People’s Daily that addresses external audiences in a more assertive, nationalistic register. This study therefore treats its discourse not as the literal text of official policy, but as a semi-official space in which China justifies and amplifies its external messaging which makes it especially suited to reading how coercive signaling is framed toward different targets.

A further consideration is whether public-media discourse in authoritarian regimes is suitable as evidence for analyzing coercive diplomacy. The theory of audience costs proposed by Fearon (1994) rests on the premise that leaders in democratic regimes incur political costs when they retract diplomatic statements, but subsequent research has shown that this mechanism also operates in authoritarian regimes, albeit in different forms. Weeks (2008) demonstrates that audience costs operate in authoritarian regimes when elite groups possess the coordination capacity to punish their leaders, and her empirical analysis shows that democracies do not enjoy a signaling advantage over most authoritarian regimes. Ramadhani (2019), analyzing the South China Sea case directly, confirms that Beijing’s coercive statements and actions generate domestic audience costs in a way that reinforces regime legitimacy. Wong (2024) likewise reports that Beijing manages audience costs by deploying social creativity strategies in its propaganda during episodes of international humiliation. Taken together, these studies provide scholarly support for this study’s premise that authoritarian media discourse functions as an instrument of signaling in

coercive diplomacy. This choice carries a limitation: as the most assertive and nationalistic of China's state outlets, *Global Times* cannot be taken to represent the whole of official Chinese discourse. Comparison with People's Daily, Xinhua, and Foreign Ministry statements would allow a more fine-grained account of variation within official discourse, a task this study leaves to future work.

For the additional quantitative measurement of discourse, this study employs the Conflict-Cooperation Index (CCI), an article-level adaptation of the long-established Goldstein (1992) conflict-cooperation scale, generated through dual LLM coding (Claude and Gemini). The full scale definition, measurement procedure, and validation metrics are detailed in Chapter III. In addition, Structural Topic Modeling (STM) is employed as a robustness check, cross-verifying whether the conflict-cooperation intensity patterns captured by the CCI are also supported by qualitative shifts in topical structure. Methodologically, this study follows George's approach of diagnosing coercive variants through qualitative matching.

III. Research Design

1. The Qualitative Matching: Diagnosing Coercive Variants

This study analyzes South China Sea-related articles from the English-language *Global Times*, collected through a keyword search for "South China Sea" and screened for substantive relevance to the dispute. The analysis covers the Xi Jinping era, comprising the 7,005 relevant articles published between 2013 and 2025.

Three considerations converge on 2013 as the analytic baseline. First, the consolidation of leadership under Xi Jinping from late 2012 marked a shift

in China's South China Sea posture that scholars widely distinguish from the approach of the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods. Second, China's large-scale artificial-island construction in the Spratlys began in 2013, initiating the sustained, cumulative alteration of the maritime status quo that this study's discourse analysis tracks. Third, the Philippines' filing for arbitration at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in January 2013 brought the dispute into a phase of open legal and diplomatic contestation. The convergence of a leadership transition, a decisive escalation in physical status-quo change, and the opening of formal legal confrontation marks 2013 as the point from which China's coercive discourse toward each target can be read as a coherent, era-consistent whole.

Each article was classified into one of five categories based on the frequency of target-country mentions in its body: Philippines, Vietnam, United States, Mixed, and Other.¹ The analysis focuses on the three countries for which a primary target can be unambiguously identified — the Philippines ($n=1,739$), Vietnam ($n=521$), and the United States ($n=1,180$) — while the Other category, comprising articles on Malaysia or ASEAN in general, is excluded from the analysis. For the Philippines, the period is further divided by moments of regime change into the Aquino III period (2013~2016), the Duterte period (2017~2021), and the Marcos Jr. period (2022~2025).

The analytical approach follows George's qualitative matching. In analyzing seven historical cases such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, he did not measure core variables on separate quantitative scales. Instead, he identified, in the speech and actions of each case, the markers that fit the definitions

¹ A country was designated as the primary target when its mention frequency was at least twice that of the second most-mentioned country; articles falling below this threshold were classified as Mixed.

of the coercive variants he proposed. Following the same approach, this study diagnoses coercive variants by locating, in the texts of representative articles for each period, the lexical and substantive markers that constitute the variant definitions.

Therefore, the diagnosis proceeds in four steps. First, drawing on the definitions of the four variants — Ultimatum, Tacit Ultimatum, Try-and-See, and Gradual Turning of the Screw — the criteria distinguishing each are specified. Second, the overall discourse pattern of each period is mapped through the yearly mean CCI, the composition of the top STM topics, and the share of conflict and cooperation topics. Third, the texts of representative articles are examined for the lexical and substantive markers that meet these criteria. Finally, the diagnosis assesses which variant the discourse corresponds to, and clarifies its boundary with the adjacent variants it might be confused with.

Identifying these markers rests on two procedures: classifying who speaks in each article, and selecting which articles to read closely. First, who speaks, and through how many channels, serves as an important clue: the cumulative coercive effect differs between a demand voiced only by the Foreign Ministry and the same demand repeated simultaneously across the Foreign Ministry, experts, editorials, and government agencies. The primary speaker of each article was therefore classified into five categories: (1) official statements and spokesperson remarks from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (2) statements from government agencies such as the Ministry of National Defense and the China Coast Guard, (3) remarks by academic institutions and experts, (4) editorials, and (5) general news reports. Classification was performed automatically by keyword matching on the speaker-identifying expressions at the opening of each article body, followed by additional manual verification of the representative articles cited in the main text. The keyword dictionary and period-by-period distribution are presented in

Appendix A.

Second, representative articles for each period were selected using two criteria in combination: articles with a high share of the period's core STM topic were drawn as candidates (for the Aquino III period, for example, articles with a high share of 'The PCA Arbitration' topic), and from this pool, articles with CCI scores meaningfully below or above the period mean were selected for citation, so that both the typicality and the extremity of the period could be captured.

2. Supplementary Analytical Tools:

Conflict-Cooperation Index (CCI) and Structural Topic Modeling (STM)

If qualitative matching is the primary analytical procedure of this study, the Conflict-Cooperation Index (CCI) and Structural Topic Modeling (STM) serve as supplementary tools that support it. Both tools are grounded in the Text as Data paradigm articulated by Grimmer and Stewart (2013), which combines automated content analysis of large political text corpora with qualitative interpretation. The CCI enables quantitative comparison of discourse intensity across periods and targets, while the STM shows how the thematic composition of that intensity differs. Both tools are employed at the stage of descriptive pattern identification, which is the starting point of qualitative matching; the variant diagnoses themselves are then established through lexical matching with the article texts.

The CCI is based on the conflict-cooperation scale developed by Goldstein (1992). Developed to weight and aggregate events coded in the World Events Interaction Survey (WEIS), the scale ranges from -10 (military attack, clash, or assault) to +10 (maximally cooperative action) and has served for over three decades as a standard instrument for measuring behavioral intensity in political science and international relations. To operationalize

this scale at the article level, each text was scored independently by two large language models (Claude and Gemini), neither of which had access to the other's judgments. Both were given an identical rubric that weighed conflict-side cues (sovereignty threats, censure of external actors, military provocation, confrontational framing) against cooperation-side cues (affirmation of established jurisdiction, conciliatory language, appeals to peace, connectivity narratives), and returned a single composite value on the -10 to +10 continuum. Agreement between the two coders was high,² and the per-article CCI is taken as the mean of the two LLM scores. The full scoring prompt appears in Appendix B.

Structural Topic Modeling, introduced by Roberts et al. (2014), is designed to estimate how the prevalence of latent topics shifts across documents grouped by covariates such as period or target. The model was fit with the stm package in R at $K = 20$, a solution chosen by weighing semantic coherence against topic exclusivity. The 20 topics were reclassified into three categories: Conflict, Cooperation, and South China Sea-unrelated (Non-SCS). The convergence between the CCI and STM is confirmed by a Pearson correlation of $r = 0.87$ between the annual mean CCI and the annual mean STM, computed across the full corpus, and this study treats this high convergence as external validation of the robustness of its analytical tools.

All statistics reported in this study are computed at the article level. The mean CCI for each target country is the average of articles classified under that primary_target, and period-specific means are likewise computed as article-level averages of articles satisfying the period-and-target conditions. STM topic distributions are similarly the group-level averages of each article's topic shares. Time-series graphs visualizing annual trends display year-and-target averages, but the statistical statements in the main text are based on article-level means.

² Pearson $r = 0.919$; mean absolute deviation 1.32 points

IV. Findings

China's South China Sea discourse toward the three targets differs not only in mean values but in the shape and trajectory of variation across the thirteen-year time series. Discourse toward the Philippines swung between extremes over 13 years. Discourse toward Vietnam stayed in relatively the same place. Discourse toward the United States slowly but steadily accumulated hostility. The three curves in Figure 1 capture this difference at a glance. The Philippines surges from -5.12 (2014) to $+4.24$ (2018), then plunges to -5.78 (2024), a range of nearly ten points. Vietnam oscillates near the zero line throughout the 13 years, with only brief disturbances at specific moments such as the HD-981 incident in 2014 or the Xi Jinping state visit in 2023. The United States slides gradually downward from its starting point of -1.03 (2013) to -5.28 (2022). Even as the U.S. administration changes four times over this period, the curve maintains the same direction.

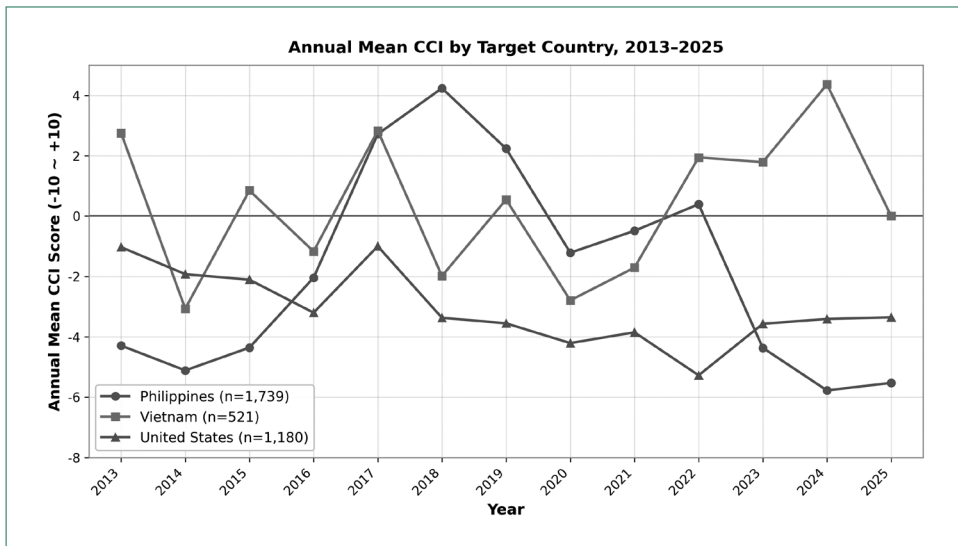


Figure 1 Annual Mean CCI by Target Country (2013-2025)

This chapter interprets the three patterns through George's theory of coercive diplomacy. For each period and target, the analysis first identifies the operative variant against the definitions of his four — Ultimatum, Tacit Ultimatum, Try-and-See, and Gradual Turning of the Screw — then traces the overall trajectory through the mean CCI and STM topic distributions, and finally locates, in the texts of representative articles, the vocabulary and content that confirm the diagnosis and distinguish it from adjacent variants.

To state the conclusion in advance: the three targets are subject to different variants. Toward the Philippines, the variant is replaced at each change of administration — Gradual Turning of the Screw (Aquino III), non-deployment (Duterte), Tacit Ultimatum (Marcos Jr.). Toward Vietnam, coercion is never activated across the 13 years; the dispute is managed instead along George's carrot axis, through positive inducements rather than the threat of punishment, in what this study terms sustained non-deployment. Toward the United States, Gradual Turning of the Screw applies throughout, but as an extra-regional power rather than a claimant, its application and effect appear in separated forms.

1. The Philippines: Dynamic Rotation of Coercive Variants

China's discourse toward the Philippines exhibited the widest variation across the 13 years. The mean CCI is -2.91 , comparable to the U.S. level, but year-on-year figures swing from -5.12 (2014) to $+4.24$ (2018), a jump of nearly nine points, and then drop again to -5.78 (2024), a range of about ten points.

This amplitude cannot be explained by the consistent application of a single coercive variant. The variation aligns precisely with regime change in the Philippines. The Aquino III government (2010~2016) pushed forward the South China Sea arbitration in the latter half of its term and brought a hard-

line China policy to the fore; the Duterte government (2016~2022) reversed course immediately upon taking office, pursuing rapprochement with China and distancing from the United States; and the Marcos Jr. government (2022~) returned to a hard-line stance toward China while restoring the U.S. alliance. Chinese discourse, at each of these moments of regime change, replaces the very coercive variant being applied.

1) The Aquino III Period (2013~2016): Gradual Turning of the Screw

The latter half of the Aquino III government was when the South China Sea arbitration rose to the center of Chinese discourse, and the variant operating in this period was *Gradual Turning of the Screw*. George defines it as the variant in which a threat of progressive escalation is communicated from the outset and executed incrementally, while explicit time pressure is absent; he distinguishes it from 'Try-and-See', which administers a single limited test and then observes the adversary's response. As the sections below show, the Aquino III discourse satisfies both core elements of the variant, the absence of an explicit time limit and the cumulative incremental application of pressure, across its overall trajectory and its representative texts.

The overall trajectory bears this out. The mean CCI moved from -4.29 (2013) to -5.12 (2014), -4.36 (2015), and -2.04 (2016); the apparent easing toward the ruling is a dilution effect from the 2016 sample-size surge (561 articles) that brought in additional general news, since the share of extreme-conflict articles ($CCI \leq -7$) in fact rose from 8% (2013) to 22% (2015). Over the same span, from the Philippines' filing at the PCA in January 2013 to the ruling in July 2016, the share of the 'PCA Arbitration Dispute' topic rose overall, with a dip in 2015, from 9% (2013) to a peak of 26% (2016). The 876 articles in this period, more than twice the average of the two subsequent Philippine periods and roughly three times the Duterte period (259), mark

the point at which agenda-setting of the target was maximized.

The representative texts of the period bear out both elements of the variant in turn. First, an explicit time limit is absent. The December 2014 “Chinese government’s Position Paper on Matter of Jurisdiction in South China Sea Arbitration” (CCI -6.5) criticizes the Philippine submission in forceful terms but imposes no deadline in the form of ‘do X by when.’ The December 2015 editorial “Unjust arbitration disregards facts” (CCI -8) likewise condemns the arbitration as ‘a political provocation under the cloak of law,’ yet here too no deadline appears. Pressure operated not through ‘do X by when’ but through the continuous denial of legal legitimacy.

Second, pressure accumulated incrementally through two mechanisms. The first is serialization: “the Chinese government’s Position Paper” was distributed across *Global Times* in eleven installments, with a mean CCI of -5.89, well below the period mean, so that a single document became the repeated accumulation of one demand. The second is the expansion of the speaker pool over time. Signaling originated in the diplomatic channel — Foreign Ministry statements account for 20% of the period’s articles, the highest of the three periods, followed by editorials at 15%, while action agencies account for only 3% — and then widened: immediately after the 2013 filing, Foreign Ministry spokesperson protests dominated; in 2014 the official Position Paper was added; in 2015 editorial and commentary condemnation became routine; and just before the July 2016 ruling, declarations of legal invalidity such as the Chinese Society of International Law’s “The Tribunal’s Award in the ‘South China Sea Arbitration’ Initiated by the Philippines Is Null and Void” (CCI -8) joined in. The same demand, the invalidation of the arbitration and a return to bilateral dialogue, was repeated and amplified across a steadily widening range of speakers.

This diagnosis also clarifies the boundary with Ultimatum and Tacit Ultimatum, not only Try-and-See. Ultimatum presupposes an explicit time

limit and a strong threat of punishment, both absent here. Tacit Ultimatum conveys time pressure implicitly through action, but China's physical actions in this period (the Scarborough Shoal seizure was already complete in 2012, and artificial island construction, though ongoing, amounted to cumulative status quo change rather than a direct threat against the Philippines) did not function as action-borne signals of time pressure. What operated was 4 years of sustained, incremental signaling alone, which fits the definition of Gradual Turning of the Screw. This period also coincided with the onset of China's institutional consolidation of maritime law enforcement — the 2013 unification of its fragmented maritime agencies under the State Oceanic Administration — discussed further in the conclusion.

2) The Duterte Period (2017~2021): Temporary Non-Deployment of Coercion

Immediately after the Duterte government took office, China's discourse toward the Philippines reverses course, and this period fits none of George's four variants of coercive diplomacy. Ultimatum and Tacit Ultimatum presuppose either a time limit or strong threat signals, Try-and-See presupposes a single limited threat, and Gradual Turning of the Screw presupposes a threat of progressive escalation from the outset; the Duterte discourse displays none of these. The threat of punishment itself is absent, and in its place only conditional inducements, the fourth of George's four variables, operate unilaterally. This study designates this state as the *Temporary non-deployment of coercion*: a condition in which the coercive instrument is retained but not activated, the coercive channel temporarily closed in order to preserve a friendly relationship.

The overall trajectory bears this out. The mean CCI turned to +2.72 (2017) and peaked at +4.24 (2018), the most cooperative reading across the entire 13 years and the only period among the three targets in which the mean remained in positive territory. Duterte's pivot toward China, widely read

as a populist turn against the foreign policy of his predecessor (Heydarian, 2017), coincided with the most cooperative discourse of the entire period. The STM distribution shows the same pattern as well: conflict topics fell to 44% (2017) and 36% (2018), while cooperation topics overtook them at 47% and 58%, with ‘Bilateral Cooperation’ and ‘ASEAN Regional Engagement’ emerging as the top topics. The contraction was quantitative as well: at 259 articles, roughly one-third the Aquino III level (876), the very agenda-setting of the target shrank.

The representative texts confirm the absence of coercion directly. In November 2017, Premier Li Keqiang’s signed article in the *Manila Times*, “Chinese premier’s signed article lauds China-Philippines relations” (CCI +7.5), characterized the bilateral relationship as “a good momentum across the board.” In November 2018, President Xi Jinping’s signed article in *Philippine newspapers*, “Full text of Xi’s signed article on Philippine newspapers” (CCI +7.25), likened the relationship to ‘a rainbow after the rain.’ Later that same month, the joint communiqué “China, Philippines chart course for future relations in joint statement” (CCI +7.5) explicitly articulated a commitment to cooperative management of the dispute. The representative signals of this period came from the highest-level summit speech or joint communiqués, all concentrated on conveying friendly signals.

What is notable is that non-deployment toward one target does not entail the erasure of all conflict discourse. Even during the Duterte period, conflict discourse toward the United States remained active: the four articles with the lowest CCI scores, including “US meddling disrupts peace in S. China Sea” (2017, CCI -7.25) and “Freedom-chanting Washington imposes autocracy in S. China Sea affairs” (2017, CCI -7), are all critiques directed at the United States. China’s coercive channel was not shut down but operated through a selective opening and closing depending on the target.

A fracturing of this non-deployment appears in the latter half of the

period. The CCI moved through +2.24 (2019) and then declined to -1.21 (2020) and -0.49 (2021), while conflict topics returned to the lead, reaching 65% (2020) against 22% for cooperation. This timing coincides with the shift in Duterte's China policy late in his term: in February 2020 he notified the United States of the termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), but in July 2021 he reversed that decision and retained the agreement, signaling that the pro-China line was fracturing. The period mean CCI (+2.56), however, remained in positive territory, and this fracturing did not extend to a full reactivation of coercion accompanied by a change of variant. Full reactivation appears only after the regime change, in the Marcos Jr. period.

Notably, even as the discourse turned conciliatory, China's maritime enforcement apparatus was quietly strengthened in these years — the Coast Guard's 2018 transfer to the People's Armed Police and the 2020 revision of the People's Armed Police Law — a divergence between softening discourse and hardening institutions.

3) The Marcos Jr. Period (2022~2025): Tacit Ultimatum

Immediately after the Marcos Jr. government took office, Chinese discourse reverses course again, and the operating variant was *Tacit Ultimatum*. In the typology, Tacit Ultimatum is the variant in which an explicit time limit is absent but urgency is conveyed through other means, and the threat of punishment, though not explicitly stated, is credibly transmitted through action; it resembles Ultimatum in core intensity but differs in the explicitness of communication. As the sections below show, the Marcos Jr. discourse satisfies both core elements, the implicit transmission of urgency and the credible transmission of threats through action.

The overall trajectory bears this out. From the Duterte period mean CCI of +2.56 to the Marcos Jr. mean of -5.20, the drop reaches 7.76 points, a sharp shift qualitatively different from the gradual descent of the Aquino

III period and occurring almost simultaneously with the regime change. By year, the discourse moves rapidly into the conflict zone, from +0.39 (2022) to -4.37 (2023), -5.78 (2024), and -5.53 (2025), then settles in the -5 range. In the STM distribution, 'China-Philippines Tensions' and 'Sovereignty & Island Building' emerge as the central conflict topics, the latter more than doubling from below 5% under Duterte to over 9%, returning territorial sovereignty to the forefront. One analytical point deserves attention: the highest-share topic is labeled 'Deep-Sea Scientific Exploration' (24%), but a reading of the high-share articles shows that most concern Chinese Coast Guard operations against Philippine vessels rather than exploration, since the topic's word distribution (e.g., guard, gas, fish, submers) is common to coast guard, fishing, and submersible activity. The surge in this topic therefore reflects a surge in coast guard operation reporting, consistent with the Tacit Ultimatum diagnosis.

The structure of signaling in this period is fundamentally different from that of the Aquino III period. The share of Foreign Ministry statements drops by almost half, from 20% (Aquino III) to 12% (Marcos Jr.), while the share of action agencies such as the Ministry of National Defense and the China Coast Guard surges nearly eightfold, from 3% to 26%. The very center of gravity of signaling has shifted from pressure through words to pressure through action. Erickson and Kennedy (2016) show that China increasingly relies on irregular forces — its maritime militia — to press its South China Sea claims, since their civilian appearance allows Beijing to deny involvement and complicates other states' rules of engagement. This surge in Coast Guard and Defense Ministry voices coincides with China's institutional reorganization of maritime enforcement, in which the Coast Guard was placed under the People's Armed Police in 2018, and its enforcement authority was codified through the 2021 Coast Guard Law and the 2024 maritime law-enforcement procedures, the latter invoked in the Second Thomas

Shoal confrontations of that year.

The representative texts confirm each element in turn. First, implicit urgency is conveyed through vocabulary that emphasizes the absence of alternatives. The September 2024 *Global Times* editorial “The only choice for Manila is to withdraw its ship, personnel from Xianbin Jiao [Sabina Shoal]” (CCI -7.75) mentions no time limit, yet it likens the Philippines to a pawn of the United States and presses the case that withdrawal from the South China Sea is the country’s only option. The October 2023 article “Philippines’ dream of overpowering China... is just wishful thinking” (CCI -8) affirms China’s resolve with the expression ‘China will firmly fight to the end.’ Both produce the effect of urgency without imposing any explicit deadline.

Second, the transmission of threats through action is the most striking feature of this period. The September 2024 editorial cited above addresses an actual clash: Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels collided in the waters around Sabina Shoal, and the editorial characterizes the incident as the Philippine side deliberately ramming Chinese vessels engaged in lawful control measures, signaling that the same response could recur. Particularly telling is the repeated obstruction, through water cannons, blocking maneuvers, and physical collisions, of Philippine resupply operations to the BRP Sierra Madre grounded at Second Thomas Shoal: this activates the irreversible physical processes of the ship’s corrosion and eventual collapse as a form of time pressure. How long the Philippines can resupply and maintain the vessel is a physical deadline determined by action, generating urgency without any explicit deadline being stated.

This structure aligns with what Patalano (2018) conceptualized as China’s hybrid strategy of maritime coercion, integrating military (PLA Navy) and paramilitary (coast guard, maritime militia) activity with diplomatic statements. It recurs across the period: “PLA conducts routine patrols in South China Sea...” (2025, CCI -6.50) frames PLA Southern Theater Command patrols as a

response to Philippine provocations, paired with the command spokesperson's warning to stop escalating tensions, transmitting statement and action as one and the same signal.

This diagnosis also clarifies the boundary with Ultimatum and Gradual Turning of the Screw. Ultimatum presupposes an explicit time limit, absent here. Gradual Turning of the Screw accumulates a graduated threat over years, but the Marcos Jr. period exhibits a sharp entry into high intensity, a drop of 4.76 points in a single year, from +0.39 (2022) to -4.37 (2023). This abrupt entry and subsequent settling at the -5 level, rather than gradual accumulation, fits the definition of Tacit Ultimatum precisely.

2. Vietnam: Sustained Non-Deployment of Coercion

China's discourse toward Vietnam presents an entirely different landscape from the Philippine case, and the operating mode is one that George only partially formalized through his carrot-and-stick approach. He argued that coercive diplomacy need not rely solely on the threat of punishment (stick); combining it with conditional positive inducements (carrot) increases the likelihood of compliance. The Vietnam case pushes this logic to its limit: across the 13 years China sends virtually no signals of punishment, managing the dispute instead through the institutionalized positive inducement of the inter-party channel. This study designates this state as the *Sustained non-deployment of coercion*, distinguishing it from the temporary non-deployment observed under Duterte.

The overall trajectory bears this out. The thirteen-year mean CCI is -0.43, far less intense than either the Philippines (-2.91) or the United States (-2.71), and Vietnam is the only one of the three targets for which cooperation topics (51%) exceed conflict topics (33%), with the mean remaining in territory close to positive throughout. Year-on-year variation makes this flatness

clearer: the CCI moves between -3.07 (2014) and $+4.37$ (2024) but shows no trend, with only two temporary extremes, the HD-981 oil rig incident of 2014 and Xi Jinping's state visit in 2023, around a series that otherwise oscillates near the zero line. This is fundamentally different from the Philippines' swings between extremes or the United States' long-run downward trend. The contraction is quantitative as well: at 521 articles, only 30% of the Philippine sample (1,739) and 44% of the U.S. sample (1,180), Vietnam is rarely taken up as an agenda. General news reports reach 60%, the highest of the three targets, while the Foreign Ministry and government agencies combined account for only about 16%; the institutional signaling channels are scarcely activated as well.

The representative texts locate this management in the inter-party channel. The central topic of Vietnam discourse is 'China-Vietnam Party Relations', holding the top position at 13% and concerning the party-to-party relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The most cooperative articles across the period all relate to this channel: Xi Jinping's 2017 signed article in Vietnamese newspapers, "Full text of Chinese President Xi's signed article on Vietnamese media" (CCI +7), characterizes the relationship as "camaraderie-plus-brotherhood," an expression that recurs at the December 2023 summit, where Xi's visit served as the occasion for reaffirming the 'comprehensive strategic partnership.' The inter-party channel functions as the principal operating conduit of the relationship, and within it, disputes are managed in a way that does not surface in public media.

What makes the case striking is that even amid clear physical confrontation, the discourse does not shift into a coercive mode. The HD-981 incident of May 2014 began when China deployed the large oil rig Haiyang Shiyu 981 in waters claimed by Vietnam as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) near the Paracel Islands, leading to repeated vessel collisions and water-cannon

exchanges at sea and to anti-Chinese riots on the Vietnamese mainland that produced casualties, the largest China–Vietnam confrontation in the South China Sea. *Global Times* reported the events, and strongly critical articles such as “China protests Vietnam riots” (CCI -7.75) and “Hanoi’s actions around oil rig are reckless” (CCI -7.5) appeared. Yet such articles were concentrated in 2014 alone; in 2015 the CCI immediately recovered to +0.85, and flatness returned. Action-level confrontation did not lead to a shift in the discursive variant.

Whether such non-deployment has elicited concessions, however, is a separate question. Even during Xi Jinping’s 2023 state visit, Vietnam refused to recognize the nine-dash line claim, declining to make concessions at the action level. The non-deployment toward Vietnam is therefore not the absence of coercive instruments but a sustained mode in which coercive diplomacy is operated along the positive-inducement axis, with the punishment axis held in reserve.

3. The United States: Gradual Turning of the Screw

China’s discourse toward the United States exhibits a single pattern across the 13 years, and the operating variant is *Gradual Turning of the Screw*. As the sections below show, U.S.-directed discourse satisfies both core elements, the absence of an explicit time limit and the gradual accumulation of pressure, though the case also carries one decisive qualification: here the application of the variant and its operative effect appear in separated forms.

The overall trajectory bears this out. The discourse follows a long-run downward trend, sliding into the conflict zone from a mean CCI of -1.03 (2013) to -3.35 (2025) and deepening to -5.28 (2022), though punctuated by periodic rebounds. The thirteen-year mean of -2.71 is comparable to the

Philippines (-2.91), but the form of variation differs fundamentally: where Philippine discourse swung between extremes with regime change, U.S.-directed discourse accumulates in the same direction, largely undisturbed by changes of administration. The independence from administration change is clearest in the period means: -2.46 under Obama's second term (2013~2016), -2.66 under the first Trump administration (2017~2020), -3.96 under Biden (2021~2024), and a slight recovery to -3.35 under the second Trump administration in 2025, still deeper than the thirteen-year mean. As Democrats and Republicans, multilateralism and unilateralism, alternated in the White House, the discourse kept accumulating hostility along the same curve.

The STM distribution reveals the substantive core of this accumulation. 'US-China Hegemonic Rivalry' accounts for 21% of U.S.-directed discourse, by far the highest concentration of any target's core topic, overwhelming even the core topics of Vietnam (China-Vietnam Party Relations 13%) and the Marcos Jr. Philippines (China-Philippines Tensions, around 14%); China treats America not as a counterpart in the dispute but as a rival for hegemony. The topic's trajectory is itself telling. During the Obama and first Trump administrations, 'US-China Hegemonic Rivalry' dominated at 22~23%, but from the Biden administration its share fell to 13% while 'Indo-Pacific Strategic Competition' surged from 2% to 12%, and under the second Trump administration the latter (9%) fully overtook the former (2%). The threat agenda expanded from a single bilateral contest for hegemony to a strategic competition staged across the entire Indo-Pacific, a substantive accumulation in which not only intensity deepens but the geopolitical stage of the threat gradually widens.

The structure of signaling channels lends further support. The share of editorials in U.S.-directed discourse, at 23%, is the highest among the three countries, but its distribution is asymmetric across administrations: 21% under Obama, 28% under the first Trump administration, 15% under

Biden, and 17% under the second. Editorials peaked under the first Trump administration and then declined sharply, yet this decline does not signify weakening pressure. The CCI in fact reaches its deepest point under Biden, and the space vacated by editorials is filled by a rising share of general news reports (48% under the first Trump administration to 67% under Biden). The mode of signaling shifted from explicit pressure in commentary to factual accumulation through everyday reporting; the channel changed, but the direction and intensity of signaling kept accumulating.

This diagnosis is clearly distinguished from the other variants. Try-and-See administers a single limited test and observes the response, but the 13 years of U.S.-directed discourse are not a one-off test but sustained accumulation. Ultimatum presupposes an explicit time limit, and Tacit Ultimatum presupposes implicit time signals communicated through action, but both are absent: across the 13 years, *Global Times* has not transmitted toward the United States any signaling in the form of ‘do X by when’ or in the vocabulary of no alternative.

Across the 13 years, then, the United States is subject to a single, consistent variant. Unlike the Philippines, where the variant is replaced at each change of administration, and unlike Vietnam, where coercion is withheld altogether, U.S.-directed discourse holds to Gradual Turning of the Screw, accumulating pressure in the same direction across four administrations despite periodic rebounds. Whether this sustained pressure has actually altered U.S. conduct is a separate question of effect, which lies beyond the diagnostic scope of this study; what the discourse itself establishes is the variant in continuous operation.

V. Conclusion

This study analyzed 13 years of English-language *Global Times* discourse on the South China Sea and confirmed that China differentiates its discourse by target while addressing the same dispute. Among George's four variants of coercive diplomacy, different variants operated simultaneously across targets, and for the Philippines, the very variant applied was replaced over time, across successive periods marked by regime change. Table 2 synthesizes these diagnoses.

These findings offer three implications for coercive diplomacy research. First, the simultaneous operation of multiple coercive variants is empirically confirmed. While China applied different variants to the Philippines across periods, it refrained from deploying coercion against Vietnam and applied Gradual Turning of the Screw against the United States over the 13 years. These three variants did not operate at different points in time but ran in parallel at the same point in time. This finding suggests that coercive diplomacy can operate not as a single decision at moments of crisis, but as a target-differentiated strategic portfolio that is run on a continuous basis.

Second, the variant applied to a single target can change over time. The Philippine case shows this most clearly: across 13 years in which the nature of the dispute, the identity of the coercer, and the medium of analysis all remained constant, the operative variant still moved from Gradual Turning of the Screw under Aquino III, to Temporary Non-deployment under Duterte, to Tacit Ultimatum under Marcos Jr. George's original cases concentrated on transitions within a single crisis episode and did not address how the variant directed at one target can rotate across successive periods. By tracing this rotation through 13 years of time-series data, this study extends the empirical reach of the framework from the single crisis to the *longue durée* of routine, peacetime discourse.

Table 2 Diagnoses of Coercive Variants by Target

Target	Period	n	CCI	Core Topic	Speaker	Coercive Variant
Philippines	Aquino III (2013~2016)	876	-2.96	PCA Arbitration (22%)	MFA (20%) + Editorials (15%)	Gradual Turning of the Screw
	Duterte (2017~2021)	259	+2.56	Bilateral Cooperation (14%)	General News (55%)	Temporary Non- Deployment
	Marcos Jr (2022~2025)	604	-5.20	Philippines Tensions (14%)	Govt. Agencies (26%)	Tacit Ultimatum
Vietnam	2013~2025	521	-0.43	China-Vietnam Party (13%)	General News (60%)	Sustained Non- Deployment
United States	2013~2025	1,180	-2.71	US-China Rivalry (21%)	Editorials (23%)	Gradual Turning of the Screw

Third, the application of a coercive variant and its operative effect prove to be separable, and this holds across all three targets. Diagnosing the variant in operation is distinct from establishing that it changed the target's conduct, and across the 13 years none of the three targets altered its course in response to Chinese discourse: Vietnam refused to recognize the nine-dash line even at the height of party-to-party engagement, the Philippines hardened rather than yielded under Marcos Jr., and U.S. policy never retreated despite the sustained accumulation of Gradual Turning of the Screw. The United States makes this gap clearest, because here George's own condition for success is visibly absent. George holds that coercion compels only when the coercer's motivation is the stronger of the two, willing to bear greater cost and risk; yet China treats the South China Sea as a core interest while the United States treats freedom of navigation and alliance credibility as foundations of its global standing, so that neither side can concede and even continuous pressure yields no movement. What this study identifies, for all three targets, is therefore the variant in operation, not a verdict on its success: the correspondence between discourse and a variant's definition establishes which variant is at work, not whether it

worked. The two dimensions must be kept analytically distinct.

China's differentiated discourse has unfolded alongside a decade-long institutionalization of maritime law enforcement. Beijing consolidated its fragmented maritime agencies under the State Oceanic Administration in 2013; when that reorganization left the predecessor bodies loosely integrated (Martinson, 2021), the Coast Guard was re-established in 2018 under the People's Armed Police, and its authority to use force against foreign vessels was codified through the 2021 Coast Guard Law and the 2024 enforcement procedures. This trajectory coincides with the shift from words to action documented in Chapter IV — most visibly the surge of Coast Guard and Defense Ministry voices under Marcos Jr. It bears most directly on the Philippines: toward the non-confronted Vietnam and the extra-regional United States, the same apparatus is not the operative instrument.

This analytical framework can also be extended to Chinese discourse toward South Korea. Although the corpus, being limited to South China Sea-related articles, contains no articles in which South Korea is the primary target, meaningful signals surface in the 65 articles where it is mentioned in passing. The nine articles published during the 2016~2017 THAAD deployment decision show a mean CCI of -6.72, more hostile even than discourse toward the Philippines under Marcos Jr. (-5.20); pieces such as “Seoul underestimates China's counter-THAAD resolve” (2016, CCI -8.25) and “Strike deployment against THAAD must be planned” (2016, CCI -8.25) share with the Marcos Jr. editorials a vocabulary of implicit urgency and threat transmission through action. A dedicated South Korea-focused corpus, analyzed through the same framework, could diagnose the coercive variants directed at South Korea period by period.

The findings also carry direct policy implications for the partners drawn into South China Sea security cooperation, including Japan, Australia, India, and South Korea. Two points stand out. First, because the intensity and

form of China's coercive discourse vary across targets and shift over time, policymakers should attend not to the current level of intensity but to its direction of change and to shifts in the composition of signaling channels. Second, a falling share of Foreign Ministry statements alongside a rising share of action agencies is a decisive marker of a shift from words to action.

This study has two limitations. First, what this study has identified is only the resultant correspondence between discourse patterns and the definitions of coercive diplomacy variants; it does not claim that Chinese policymakers consciously applied these variants. Verifying intent would require separate sources such as internal documents or elite interviews. Second, the analysis draws on a single source, the English-language *Global Times*. While its status as a state-aligned outlet makes it well suited to reading official signaling, a fuller picture would require comparison with Chinese-language outlets and other state media such as *People's Daily*, which may address domestic and international audiences differently.

Taken together, these findings invite a reconsideration of coercive diplomacy as something a state conducts not in a single crisis against a single adversary, but continuously and selectively across many targets at once. Reading that conduct in the everyday texture of public-media discourse, rather than in moments of crisis, is where this study locates its contribution, and where further work on China and beyond can build.

Appendix A. Speaker Classification Keyword Dictionary

This study constructed a keyword dictionary for five speaker categories — the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, government action agencies, academic experts, editorial/opinion, and general news — and performed automated speaker classification by matching these keywords through a Python script.

The dictionary was constructed by the researcher based on the recurring expressions through which *Global Times* identifies the source of each article, and was manually verified against the 17 representative articles cited in the main text.

1. Keyword Dictionary

1) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mfa)

Foreign Ministry spokesperson; MFA spokesperson; China's Foreign Ministry; Chinese Foreign Ministry; Foreign Minister Wang Yi/Qin Gang/Yang Jiechi/Li (Zhaoxing); State Councilor and Foreign Minister; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; MFA said/statement; spokesperson Hua Chunying/Mao Ning/Wang Wenbin/Lin Jian/Zhao Lijian/Lu Kang/Hong Lei/Geng Shuang; China's ambassador; Chinese embassy spokesperson

2) Government Action Agencies (govt_action)

Ministry of National Defense; Defense Ministry spokesperson/said/statement; PLA spokesperson; People's Liberation Army; PLA Navy; Southern Theater Command; PLA Air Force; PLA Daily; China Coast Guard; CCG said/statement/spokesperson; Maritime Safety Administration; spokesperson Wu Qian/Tan Kefei/Ren Guoqiang/Zhang Xiaogang/Yang Yujun; Ministry of Public Security

3) Academic Experts (expert)

Chinese expert(s); expert said/told; scholar said; analyst said/told; researcher said; told the Global Times; Fudan University; Tsinghua University; Peking University; Renmin University; China Foreign Affairs University; Chinese Academy of (Social Sciences); China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations; South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing

Initiative; National Institute for South China Sea Studies; professor at/of

4) Editorial/Opinion (editorial)

At the end of the article body: “opinion@globaltimes.com.cn” (email address); “The author is..” (author identification); “is a guest professor” / At the beginning of the body or in the title: “Global Times editorial”; “Editorial:”; (Editorial); “Opinion:”

5) General News (general)

Articles without any of the markers listed in the four categories above.

2. Period-by-Period Distribution of Speakers (%)

Period · Target	n	MFA	Govt. Agencies	Experts	Editorial/ Opinion	General News
Philippines (Aquino III, 2013~2016)	876	19.9	3.2	8.1	14.7	54.1
Philippines (Duterte, 2017~2021)	259	18.5	2.3	6.9	17.0	55.2
Philippines (Marcos Jr, 2022~2025)	604	12.1	26.3	1.2	4.0	56.5
Vietnam (2013~2025)	521	12.1	3.6	6.0	18.4	59.9
United States (2013~2025)	1,180	11.0	6.4	5.8	22.5	54.2

Appendix B. LLM CCI Scoring Prompt

The scoring prompt below was developed and validated in Kim (2025) and is reused here without modification to ensure measurement consistency across the two studies.

“You are an expert analyst in international relations and media discourse, specializing in the South China Sea disputes and China’s maritime strategy. Your task is to read each news article from China’s Global Times (2009~2025) and evaluate its conflict-cooperation tone on a continuous scale from -10 to +10.”

SCORING SCALE:

The -10 to +10 scale follows the Goldstein Conflict-Cooperation Scale (Goldstein, 1992, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 36(2), 369-385).

- 10 = Extremely conflictual (e.g., military threats, war rhetoric, ultimatums)
- 7 = Highly conflictual (e.g., strong condemnation, military deployment reports)
- 4 = Moderately conflictual (e.g., diplomatic protests, criticism of foreign interference)
- 1 = Mildly conflictual (e.g., expressing concern, subtle disapproval)
- 0 = Neutral / purely factual reporting
- +1 = Mildly cooperative (e.g., calling for dialogue, expressing goodwill)
- +4 = Moderately cooperative (e.g., joint development proposals, COC progress)
- +7 = Highly cooperative (e.g., bilateral cooperation achievements, win-win narratives)
- +10 = Extremely cooperative (e.g., comprehensive partnership declarations)

SCORING GUIDELINES:

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Grounded in Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Key question: does the article frame the SCS situation as a LOSS or GAIN?
2. LOSS FRAME INDICATORS: threats to sovereignty, accusations against claimants/external powers, military provocations, defensive rhetoric, confrontation descriptions, crisis framing, zero-sum language.
3. GAIN FRAME INDICATORS: established presence/jurisdiction, routine administration, cooperative rhetoric, settled historical rights, regional peace emphasis, COC progress, infrastructure narratives, *fait accompli* language.

4. CONTEXT SENSITIVITY: Consider overall framing, not individual words.

Mixed framing → weigh dominant tone.

OUTPUT FORMAT:

{"score": [-10 to +10, increments of 0.5], "frame": "loss"/"gain"/"neutral",
"confidence": "high"/"medium"/"low", "primary_theme": [one of 12 categories]}

MODEL SPECIFICATIONS:

Both models were accessed via API: Claude Sonnet 4.6 through the Anthropic Messages API v1 (identifier: claude-sonnet-4-6), and Gemini 2.5 Flash through the Google REST API v1beta (identifier: gemini-2.5-flash). Temperature was set to 0 (deterministic) for both models. All 7,005 articles were batch-processed in Google Colaboratory using Python 3.12.

Appendix C. STM Topic Labels and Classification

The STM analysis in this study draws on the topic model developed in Kim (2025), employing the stm package in R with the number of topics set at $K = 20$ based on a balance between semantic coherence and exclusivity. Topic labels were assigned by reviewing the highest-probability words and the FREX (Frequent and Exclusive) words for each topic, and then validating these labels by directly reading three to five representative documents per topic.

Category	Topic	Label	Top FREX Terms
Conflict	T1	MFA Diplomatic Protest	<i>ministri, said, spokesperson, hua, press</i>
	T2	PLA Naval Exercises	<i>pla, navi, fleet, flotilla, train</i>
	T5	PCA Arbitration Dispute	<i>arbitr, tribun, unclo, pca, jurisdict</i>
	T8	China-Philippines Tensions	<i>dutert, aquino, manila, filipino, rodrigo</i>
	T9	Sovereignty & Island Building	<i>nansha, reef, sovereignti, xisha, provoc</i>
	T13	Indo-Pacific Strategic Competition	<i>indo-pacif, australia, nato, quad, canberra</i>
	T15	China-Japan / Diaoyu Dispute	<i>abe, diaoyu, japan, tokyo, shinzo</i>
	T16	Military Buildup & Defense	<i>militari, defens, carrier, missil, pentagon</i>
	T17	US-China Hegemonic Rivalry	<i>power, conflict, war, rivalri, sbowdown</i>
Cooperation	T7	China-Vietnam Party Relations	<i>vietnam, hanoi, cpc, nguyen, sino-vietnames</i>
	T10	Bilateral Cooperation	<i>cooper, mutual, partnership, peac, dialogu</i>
	T11	BRI & Economic Diplomacy	<i>india, belt, road, invest, infrastructur</i>
	T12	Diplomatic Visits & Summits	<i>visit, meet, minist, dialogu, summit</i>
	T14	Sansha Administration (Fait Accompli)	<i>bainan, sansha, xisha, tourism, yongx</i>
	T18	ASEAN Regional Engagement	<i>asean, coc, china-asean, doc, cambodia</i>
Non-SCS	T3	US Domestic Politics	<i>trump, obama, taiwan, korea, peninsula</i>
	T4	Deep-Sea Scientific Exploration	<i>guard, gas, fish, submers, deep-sea</i>
	T6	COVID-19 Pandemic	<i>covid-, coronavirus, vaccin, patient, pandem</i>
	T19	MH370 Search	<i>search, miss, flight, malaysian, airlin</i>
	T20	Domestic Public Opinion	<i>kong, patriot, netizen, popular, post</i>

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