

# Territorial disputes, and the changes of names: A framing study of the South China Sea's news coverage

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## Abstract

One of the most consequential territorial disputes today is the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, involving Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Drawing on Communication Geography and a qualitative framing analysis of 533 English-language news articles from state-affiliated outlets in these six countries, this article shows how media actively reshape the definition and contestation of geographical space. The analysis reveals that Chinese state media project stability and a preference for peaceful resolution, while other claimants remain skeptical and carefully avoid actions that might provoke Beijing, given its global influence. Across outlets, naming practices and repeatable symbolic devices are used to align the SCS with national interests, reinforcing competing territorial imaginaries and amplifying the salience of the dispute. Focusing on state-affiliated English coverage highlights how official media articulate policy positions, signal diplomatic red lines to international audiences, and shape the legal and rhetorical resources available to negotiators.

## Keywords

ASEAN, China, communication geography, South China Sea (SCS), territorial disputes

## Introduction

As the South China Sea (SCS) is a significant contentious geopolitical space, different governments have employed several methods to secure their claims, including the support

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of a dominant reality through the use of different names to refer to the same territory, as well as the support of dogmatic narratives that silence different opinions and media coverage initiated by the states. Many aspects of SCS have been studied (Blazevic, 2012; Fravel, 2011; Gao and Jia, 2013), but not much attention has been paid to the ways the state-affiliated news media cover the disputes in the region and how the coverage reshapes the way we think about the SCS as a geographical space (Fong and Koon, 2019; Vujakovic, 2020). In addition, despite extensive legal and diplomatic work on the SCS, we still lack a cross-national account of how state-affiliated English-language media actively reframe the sea as competing national spaces. *How do state-affiliated news outlets in Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam frame the South China Sea in English-language coverage?* (RQ). We show that each state's media uses naming, symbolic devices, and selective framing to produce competing spatial imaginaries that reinforce national claims while managing the risk of provoking China.

State-affiliated English-language media perform distinct political functions that make them analytically valuable despite a pluralistic regional media ecology. They: (a) articulate and legitimize official policy positions for both domestic elites and international audiences; (b) provide low-cost signaling of red lines and diplomatic posture that can constrain negotiators; and (c) offer a relatively stable, comparable corpus across countries for cross-national frame analysis. While non-state and non-English outlets can be more innovative or adversarial, focusing on state-affiliated English coverage allows this article to trace how official names, catchphrases, and exemplars are routinized and exported beyond domestic publics (Fang, 2022; George and Venkiteswaran, 2019; Wright et al., 2020).

This article addresses a research gap by being one of the few cross-national studies examining media coverage in the SCS. It employed a qualitative framing analysis to examine 533 English news articles from six countries (Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) and assess how the state-owned news media framed and reinforced the dominant reality promoted by governments regarding the SCS. In this way, the article also enhances our understanding of the concept of Communication Geography by addressing the calls for more empirical studies, revealing how the media can influence the way a geographical space is communicated, perceived, and redefined (Adams and Jansson, 2012), as well as providing empirical findings on how the state-owned media influence the debates regarding the SCS.

The next sections offer an overview of the SCS disputes and naming practices, situate the study in Communication Geography and framing literature, describe the qualitative framing method and data, present the findings, and conclude with implications for regional politics and media studies.

## South China Sea and territorial names

Literature on the SCS highlights its geopolitical significance but pays little attention to how media shape the debate. Most studies focus on territorial and sovereignty disputes—China's historical "Nine-Dash Line" claims and legal frameworks such as UNCLOS and the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling (Beckman, 2017). Researchers have also

examined bilateral and multilateral diplomatic approaches, conflict-resolution methods, and the challenges encountered in multilateral discussions within ASEAN and other regional forums. ASEAN has sought to address the SCS issue through dialogue and consensus-building, particularly through the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and ongoing discussions on a Code of Conduct (COC). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of ASEAN's methods has come under scrutiny. Analysts contend that ASEAN's non-interference principle and consensus-based decision-making have impeded a cohesive stance, as member states tend to prioritize bilateral relations with China over collective action (Acharya and Desai, 2021; Emmers, 2014). The internal rifts within the bloc—between states making territorial claims and those that do not, as well as those that are more or less economically reliant on China—have diminished its negotiating strength (Haacke, 2023; Storey, 2013).

Moreover, in territorial disputes such as the SCS, using a different name to refer to the same territory is of great significance. Place names can be associated with powerful nationalistic narratives and with a country's territorial claims (Karyotakis, 2023, 2025; Yorgason, 2017). The first country in the SCS to adopt that tactic was the Philippines, which changed following the Spratly Islands Dispute in 2011. According to the Philippines, an oil exploration vessel was disturbed by a Chinese patrol, prompting President Benigno Aquino III and his administration to formally protest to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). Furthermore, the Philippines ceased using the name "Luzon Sea" to refer to its portion of the sea and adopted the term "West Philippine Sea" (WPS). More specifically, in September 2012, all government agencies were ordered to refer to the disputed sea exclusively as the WPS to reinforce the country's rightful claims in the national consciousness (Morton, 2016; Sidel, 2015).

Following the Philippines' tactic of changing the name, Indonesia renamed its portion of the sea to the "North Natuna Sea," aiming to strengthen its claims against Malaysia, Vietnam, and China. In addition to securing energy reserves, the North Natuna Sea also plays a crucial role in fishing, particularly for local communities. Indonesia has repeatedly stated that there are no territorial sovereignty issues, but that there are maritime rights disputes and other regional interests. Indonesia argued that China has no authority to negotiate international matters and appeared to adhere to a similar argument advanced by the ASEAN countries (Siregar, 2023).

In Indonesia, the use of a different name for the SCS does not appear to be as ideologically charged as in the Philippines and Vietnam. If we take a closer look at the latter, we will see that Vietnam has been vocal about China's actions in the SCS, including its use of the name "East Sea" to refer to its waters. Despite a good relationship between the two countries regarding the Gulf of Tonkin, outside that area, there are overlaps and violations of maritime and continental shelf sovereignty (Loi and Van Nga, 2023).

As we can see, communication plays a significant role in maintaining the delicate balance within the SCS among competing interests, as well as in heightening tensions and provoking the public. This is why the following section focuses on presenting the concept of Communication Geography and how communication and news media coverage can shape a geographical location.

## Communication Geography, and media framing in the SCS

In Communication Geography, communication is regarded as a process that creates and maintains spatial realities such as place and space (Hillis, 1998). As Adams (2011) emphasizes, Communication Geography underscores that communication encompasses both the context and the content of dialectic structures. Geographical space is an essential component of communication that is often overlooked, as it shapes how we research, write, and discuss space. Although Communication Geography originated in geography, it is an interdisciplinary approach that underscores that geographers, like communication scholars, are interested in how shared information and experiences shape an individual's perception of a geographical location (Adams, 2011). Communication processes can create imaginaries and abstract locations that, although intangible, may be sufficient in the meanings they carry to influence the shared beliefs of communities (Lefebvre, 1991).

In Southeast Asia, media coverage is shaped by historical, political, and cultural contexts, as well as the strategic interests of both state and non-state actors. Framing the dispute as a security challenge often invokes external threats (e.g., China's militarization) or the need for internal unity. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on resource utilization, fishing rights, and economic prospects, as well as a focus on international law, arbitration, and multilateral diplomatic efforts (Fong and Koon, 2019; Trần et al., 2024). More specifically, in Vietnam and the Philippines, state-aligned media consistently depict the SCS conflict as an issue of national sovereignty and a response to foreign aggression. For instance, Vietnamese media often cite historical narratives and UNCLOS rulings to support Vietnam's claims, while portraying China's actions as breaches of international law (Borton, 2024; Rfa.org, 2022). Similarly, Philippine media have leveraged the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling to garner domestic and international backing, depicting China as aggressive and the Philippines as a protector of the rules-based order, particularly under Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (Ragragio, 2025). Malaysia and Brunei appeared more restrained than Vietnam and the Philippines, reflecting their governments' cautious diplomatic approaches aimed at avoiding aggravating China (Fong and Koon, 2019; Putra, 2024).

On the other hand, Chinese state-run media, such as *CCTV* and the *Global Times*, represent the SCS as a matter of historical justice and national rejuvenation, depicting China's activities as defensive and its claims as indisputable. The "Nine-Dash Line" is presented as both a historical and legal boundary, while competing claims are characterized as provocations instigated by the West (Shambaugh, 2013; Trần et al., 2024).

The promotion of these dominant views by the involved countries through the media demonstrates how important global actors can challenge the knowledge we have about a geographical location, reform spaces that can be controlled, and disseminate convenient truths. Thus, the discussion about enhancing the studies related to the communication processes that shape a geographical location had already started in the 1970s and differed from framing theory, when Abler (1974) pointed out that geographers paid too much attention to the physical aspect of geographical space, neglecting people's perceptions regarding a location. The rapid evolution of communication networks has been reshaping social relations among individuals, making it challenging to provide comprehensive insights into these phenomena (Hillis, 1998). To investigate these new developments, the geographers had to move beyond the dominant research paradigm, which focused on the

physical aspects of a place, and examine people's perceptions and the co-creation of knowledge about it, indicating that imaginaries shape the physical space of a place. For the geographical research of that time, space should be accessible through the study of facts that were not perceived as social constructs. It was evident that people's reality and the media shape the facts about a geographical location. As a result, Communication Geography offers a holistic approach to the transformation of space shaped by subjective beliefs and discourses.

Communication Geography emphasizes the importance of examining the discourses that shape social life and influence the politics of space (Lindell, 2016). As geography and communication can both contribute to understanding such issues, scholars have called for integrating literature from the two fields to provide deeper insights into the politics of space and to prompt more relevant theoretical and empirical research (Adams and Jansson, 2012). Therefore, the way the SCS is portrayed in the media provides empirical evidence for understanding how a geographical location is shaped through communication, particularly from the perspective of a powerful actor, such as the state.

State-affiliated media in the region occupy a spectrum ranging from party-organ newspapers and tightly controlled broadcast networks to state-owned news agencies and government-linked English-language outlets that target international and elite audiences. These outlets routinely perform functions that differ from commercial or independent media: they legitimate official policy, frame diplomatic posture, and signal red lines to foreign governments and investors. In many Southeast Asian polities, the state media model coexists with commercial and digital outlets, producing a hybrid media ecology in which state channels remain central for official messaging and agenda-setting (George and Venkiteswaran, 2019; Walker and Orttung, 2014).

Focusing on state-affiliated English-language coverage is analytically valuable for three reasons. First, these outlets are the most direct public articulations of government priorities and thus reveal the discursive resources available to policymakers. Second, English-language state outlets are explicitly international-facing, so their naming practices and frames function as low-cost diplomatic signals that can harden expectations and constrain negotiators. Third, sampling comparable state outlets across countries produces a stable corpus for cross-national frame comparison, enabling systematic identification of repeatable symbolic devices (names, catchphrases, and exemplars) that would be harder to isolate in a heterogeneous mix of commercial and vernacular sources (Cull, 2009; George and Venkiteswaran, 2019).

Studying state-affiliated media does not imply that they are the only or the most innovative actors in the region's information environment. Indeed, independent and digital outlets often push boundaries and introduce alternative framings. Yet state media matter for democratic journalism because they set the official baseline against which independent reporting operates: they shape the legal, political, and rhetorical constraints within which journalists and editors work. Understanding state media practices therefore helps explain the structural limits on press freedom, the incentives for self-censorship, and the discursive resources available to civil society and independent media—making the study directly relevant to debates about media governance, pluralism, and democratic journalism in Southeast Asia (George and Venkiteswaran, 2019; Walker and Orttung, 2014).

## Methods

Following the research question stated in the Introduction (RQ), this section describes data collection and the qualitative framing approach. The current article adopted a qualitative framing approach, which aimed to present a comprehensive approach to investigating the meanings and context of news coverage based on the news articles collected by six different news outlets (see Table 1).

A total of 533 news articles were collected from June 2022 through the end of February 2023, covering nine months of SCS-related events. The timeframe was intended to cover the ASEAN meeting in Cambodia (10 to 13 November 2022) and the period immediately before and after it. As shown in Table 1, the search keyword for China, Brunei, and Malaysia was the South China Sea. In the cases of the Philippines and Vietnam, the keywords West Philippine Sea and East Sea were chosen, as the countries tend to refer to their geographical location in the SCS by these names. In the case of Indonesia, though, the keywords South China Sea and North Natuna Sea were used, as there were not many related news articles. In addition, in the Indonesian case, the timeframe was extended from January 2021 to February 2023 to include more relevant articles. The search showed that Indonesia's news agency preferred the use of the SCS, as there were eleven collected news articles and only three second keywords during the year 2021. This may be because 2021 was among the most active years for events in the SCS (Nguyễn et al., 2024).

The study deliberately sampled state-affiliated English outlets to capture official framing practices and international-facing messaging, and to ensure comparability across countries. This design isolates the media channels most likely to reflect government priorities and diplomatic signaling while acknowledging that non-state and vernacular outlets may offer contrasting or more adversarial framings; those outlets are identified as important avenues for follow-up research.

Frames are integral to public discourse, forming a broader "package" that encompasses signifiers and policies from which "symbolic devices" emerge. Journalists play a vital role in this process (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). The study focused on how state-affiliated media portrayed the SCS, particularly by emphasizing the use of a different name for the same territory. As a result, the research possibly exaggerated official accounts and downplayed internal opposition or dissenting perspectives. As some countries are more democratic, it is evident that there is greater freedom of expression, greater tolerance for diverse opinions, and more diverse media coverage, offering a wider range of views regarding the SCS. As George (2016) underscores, freedom of expression is a fundamental pillar of democracy, relying on the unrestricted exchange of diverse information and perspectives.

By selecting the most influential state-affiliated news media, the study emphasized how states seek to portray the SCS as a geographical space, silence dissent, and dominate public discourse with a dogmatic version of reality, thereby supporting their claims regarding the SCS. At this point, it is worth noting the paucity of research on cross-national media discourse in the region.

The "symbolic devices" that shape the frames include: (a) catchphrases; (b) representations; (c) examples; and (d) visual images (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Qualitative framing analysis was employed to explore the socio-political and cultural implications

**Table 1.** The study's news articles and news media profile.

Country	News outlet	No. of news articles	Keyword search	Ownership/political alignment, primary audience & role	Notable features
Brunei	<i>Borneo Bulletin</i> (BB)	8	South China Sea	Published by Brunei Press: English-language daily for local elites and expatriates	Main English daily; conservative, pro-establishment orientation
China	<i>China Daily</i> (CD)	163	South China Sea	Owned/overseen by CCP: international and elite audiences, China's principal English national paper	Large overseas reach; explicitly presents official positions to global readers
Indonesia	<i>Antara News Agency</i> (ANA)	14	South China Sea & North Natuna Sea	National news agency, statutory corporation owned by the state: wire service for domestic media and international audiences	State newswire with broad distribution across Indonesian media
Malaysia	<i>Bernama News Agency</i> (BNA)	7	South China Sea	Malaysian national news agency; statutory corporation under government: domestic and international; official national wire service	Government news agency with broad domestic distribution
Philippines	<i>Philippine News Agency</i> (PNA)	133	West Philippine Sea	Government news agency; supervised by Presidential communications: domestic and international; official government wire and public information	Direct channel for government statements and policy framing
Vietnam	<i>Nhân Dân</i> (ND)	208	East Sea	Central organ of the Communist Party of Vietnam: Domestic and diaspora; official party voice	Party newspaper with explicit ideological role

associated with complex meanings (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2008; Gitlin, 2003). More specifically, qualitative framing analysis “investigates the keywords, metaphors, narratives, and other elements within the context of the text as a whole” (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2008: 369). It also “determines what was excluded from the frame as well as what was incorporated”. In this article, the “symbolic devices” found in the examples are emphasized in bold and italics.

This study pairs Communication Geography with qualitative framing analysis because the article’s empirical aim is to trace how routine state news practices—naming, catchphrases, exemplars, and metaphors—cumulatively produce competing spatial imaginaries, rather than to catalogue only high-level interstate messaging or to map deep linguistic structures; Communication Geography foregrounds the communicative production of space and place, showing how discourse helps constitute territorial realities, while framing analysis operationalizes the micro-discursive devices that instantiate those imaginaries and makes them comparable across outlets (Adams and Jansson, 2012; Hillis, 1998). Framing scholarship provides clear tools for identifying symbolic devices and interpretive packages in news discourse (script, thematic, and rhetorical structures) that are directly applicable to state news coverage (Entman, 1993; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). By contrast, critical discourse analysis (CDA) excels at exposing ideology and power in language as well as detailed linguistic critique, but its focus on language structure and ideological reproduction makes it less efficient for cross-sectional, comparative mapping of discrete frame elements and naming practices across hundreds of articles (Fairclough, 1995). Securitization theory is indispensable when actors perform speech acts that elevate issues to existential threat, yet many of the naming practices and routine frames examined here operate through quotidian symbolic devices rather than explicit securitizing moves, so securitization would risk over-pathologizing ordinary media practices and missing subtler spatial production processes (Buzan et al., 1998).

Moreover, strategic narrative frameworks illuminate coordinated interstate storytelling and the projection of geopolitical order, but they presuppose sustained, actor-level narrative coordination and are therefore less well suited to capturing dispersed, routine naming practices across multiple state outlets within a single cross-sectional window (Miskimmon et al., 2014). Narrative analysis (plot, temporality, protagonists) is powerful for tracing longitudinal story arcs and coordinated narratives, yet it is less precise for isolating the short, repeatable symbolic devices (names, catchphrases, exemplars) that cumulatively reshape territorial imaginaries in everyday news coverage (Lefebvre, 1991; Riessman, 2008). Finally, classic work on media framing and the construction of public meaning shows how interpretive packages travel through media systems and shape public understandings—an analytic move that aligns directly with Communication Geography’s emphasis on the production of space through communication (Adams and Jansson, 2012; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

Communication Geography treats space and place as communicative constructs (Adams, 2011; Adams and Jansson, 2012): media and political discourse do not merely report geographic facts but actively produce territorial imaginaries that shape political behavior and policy choices. The approach foregrounds three core claims: (a) discursive production—language and symbols create and stabilize spatial meanings; (b) performative effects—these meanings influence actors’ expectations and actions; and (c) scalar politics—competing narratives reconfigure local, national, and international scales of

authority. Paired with framing analysis, Communication Geography enables us to trace microdiscursive devices (names, catchphrases, exemplars) through which state media instantiate and export territorial imaginaries (Adams and Jansson, 2012; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

Since the study analyzed 533 news outlets, it was not feasible to provide a detailed overview of each news story. Therefore, the most relevant examples (exemplars) were selected to illustrate the primary dominant frames identified through the examination of all the full articles in the study (Table 2).

## Findings and analysis

### *The need to work together, the USA and its allies, and the weather events in the SCS*

Most of the news articles from the collected sample 310/533 framed the news articles related to the SCS as an opportunity for the competing countries to keep working together to finally find a peaceful solution for the region that will further stabilize the SCS and help all of the countries to maintain their financial status and even expand their gains. In the articles, it was evident that there are two major groups in the SCS. The first one is the countries with claims in the SCS that are in dispute, mainly with China, and belong to ASEAN. By taking a careful look at the news coverage, these countries were highlighting how they are in constant communication with each other and other countries to promote the common agreements that have been accomplished in ASEAN summits and to communicate that they are not willing to cross their red lines, meaning to give in to the “Nine-Dash Line.” Such a stance has been identified in former research, with a more unified opinion about the SCS from these countries that try to find ways of dealing successfully with China without aggravating the country, as they need collaboration with it for further financial and socio-political gains (De Castro, 2020; Loi and Van Nga, 2023; Raymond and Welch, 2022).

Accepting China’s “Nine-Dash Line” policy would lead to losses in the region, which seems unacceptable to countries that are more aggressive towards China, such as Vietnam and the Philippines. These two countries appeared to have clear red lines that they could consider crossing if violated. The more aggressive rhetoric was coming from the Philippines. Still, in the examined news coverage, reactions appeared mild, consistently emphasizing the need for a peaceful solution and noting that the country, like Vietnam, is working closely with China to find one. However, to achieve a solution, there must be explicit acceptance of the red lines imposed by ASEAN, which include respect for international law and rejection of the “Nine-Dash Line.” More specifically, in an article by the state news agency of the Philippines titled “DND hails EU support for PH disaster relief ops,” it was highlighted that, in a meeting with the EU ambassador, the two sides agreed that there must be a peaceful solution that respects international law and secures the freedom of navigation within the SCS (exemplar 1).

Exemplar 1: Regarding the *South China Sea/West Philippine Sea issue, both officials agreed on the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the preservation of freedom of navigation, and the peaceful settlement of disputes.* (Pna.gov.ph, 2022a)

**Table 2.** The dominant news frames of the study.

Dominant frame	No. of news articles	Description
Work together for a peaceful solution	310: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ND – 182</li> <li>• CD – 58</li> <li>• PNA – 55</li> <li>• ANA – 10</li> <li>• BNA – 3</li> <li>• BB – 2</li> </ul>	The stories underlined the need for the countries to work together and find a peaceful solution for the SCS while respecting each country's red lines.
The USA and its allies endanger the region	71: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CD – 71</li> </ul>	<i>China Daily</i> was the only news outlet whose articles focused so much on the USA. The USA, with its allies, is to be blamed for destabilizing the SCS.
Weather events	43: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ND – 17</li> <li>• PNA – 18</li> <li>• CD – 5</li> <li>• BB – 2</li> <li>• BNA – 1</li> </ul>	These news stories dealt with weather events related to the SCS.
Armed forces promote security	29: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PNA – 20</li> <li>• CD – 8</li> <li>• BNA – 1</li> </ul>	The news articles focused on the military developments of countries in the SCS, focusing on the aspect of security.
The Chinese illegal presence threatens the Philippines	25: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PNA – 25</li> </ul>	The news outlet highlighted China's violations in the SCS and the fact that it threatens the Philippines.
Financial concerns and the significance of the SCS	17: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CD – 11</li> <li>• PNA – 3</li> <li>• ND – 2</li> <li>• BNA – 1</li> </ul>	These news articles dealt with financial troubles and the importance of protecting each country's rights in the SCS, as the sea can bring significant financial benefits.
Fishing rights are essential for food security	14: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PNA – 8</li> <li>• ANA – 3</li> <li>• CD – 2</li> <li>• ND – 1</li> </ul>	The framing emphasized the problems in the SCS regarding fishing rights and their importance for the lives of the local population.
SCS as a space for leisure events and tourism	7: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ND – 3</li> <li>• PNA – 2</li> <li>• BNA – 1</li> <li>• BB – 1</li> </ul>	These news articles focused on tourist attractions related to the SCS and leisure events organized in the region.
Others (self-defense – 6, events at SCS – 3, national security – 2, governmental stance – 5, and Taiwan's illegal presence – 1)	17: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CD – 6 &amp; 2 (self-defense &amp; national security)</li> <li>• BB – 3 (events at the SCS)</li> <li>• ND – 1 &amp; 2 (Taiwan's illegal presence &amp; governmental stance)</li> <li>• PNA – 2 (governmental stance)</li> <li>• ANA – 1 (governmental stance)</li> </ul>	The news articles did not fit into the former categories, and they underlined different issues in the SCS, such as China's need for self-defense or Vietnam's dissatisfaction with Taiwan.

However, it is worth mentioning that the differences in the new coverage, as well as the harsher rhetoric, reveal that the ASEAN countries are not so unified and are often troubled by internal conflicts, especially as some of them are more keen on working with China (Acharya and Desai, 2021; Emmers, 2014; Haacke, 2023; Storey, 2013). In addition, there was a great emphasis on the freedom of navigation. A possible Chinese domination of the SCS would prevent them from passing through the sea. Thus, China was portrayed as the region's most important competitor and as not belonging to the ASEAN group. Nevertheless, throughout its coverage, *China Daily* emphasized its openness to discussions with ASEAN countries and finding a solution that would benefit the region. China was presented as respecting the wills of other countries and adhering to international law. For example, in a representative news story titled "Demonstrably good neighbors," China made clear that there is strong cooperation with other countries to realize a Code of Conduct for settling disputes in the SCS (exemplar 2).

Exemplar 2: *Thanks to the joint efforts to safeguard stability, the two sides have been promoting cooperation on security at a steady pace.* The Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea has been fully implemented, and consultations on *a code of conduct in the South China Sea are being actively promoted.* (Yujing, 2022).

Despite Chinese news promoting a sense of stability and the country's openness to peace in the SCS, it is evident that other countries do not believe these claims and seek to avoid aggravating China, given its global reach and power (Borton, 2024; Hayton, 2014; Putra, 2024). For China, the non-importance of the other claimants in the SCS was evident in news coverage, which placed significant emphasis on how the USA and its allies sought to continue destabilizing the SCS to maintain tensions between the countries. China appeared to perceive the USA as a troublemaker rather than as a country that could help broker a peaceful agreement that would benefit all the disputing parties. China's behavior is an outcome of the USA's aggressive attitude (exemplar 3):

Exemplar 3: *China is thousands of miles away from Europe, and has never in history posed any security challenge to the organization.* Rather, *the security challenge comes the other way round, with NATO in recent years flexing its muscles in the Asia-Pacific region* by sending warships and military aircraft to the South China Sea. (Chinadaily.com.cn, 2022)

Chinese news coverage overemphasized the USA and its allies' influence on the SCS relative to other news outlets (71 news articles), suggesting that *China Daily* portrays the SCS as a peaceful geographical space, provided there is no interference by the West. On the contrary, Vietnamese coverage did not share that viewpoint, underscoring the need for peaceful collaboration based on ASEAN decisions (182 news articles), indicating that, for Vietnamese news outlets, the SCS is a contested geographical space primarily due to China's activities. These elements provide empirical evidence on how a geographical space is defined by communication efforts, thereby enhancing the relevant bibliography (Adams and Jansson, 2012; Lindell, 2016). Also, the Vietnamese stance is evident in the fact that, in 132/208 news articles, *Nhân Dân* used both the terms East Sea/South China Sea, seeking to maintain its own nationalist narrative regarding the territorial dispute, as we have seen in other cases worldwide (Karyotakis, 2025).

Apart from the discussion of the USA, it is worth noting that 43 news articles collected and analyzed focused on weather events, such as typhoons, occurring within the SCS. The emphasis was on providing instructions regarding events, such as a weather forecast, rather than including them as part of the territorial dispute. However, the Philippines continued to refer to the SCS as the West Philippine Sea to maintain its claims. In addition, this aspect of the study highlights the persistent marginalization of news coverage of severe environmental damage in the SCS, intensified by reclamation projects, the dispute, and the dogmatic focus of state-affiliated news outlets on the territorial conflict (Hiebert, 2022; Sato et al., 2023).

### ***Armed forces, Chinese illegal presence, and the financial concerns and significance of the SCS***

The Philippines' news agency (20/29 news articles) distributed news articles highlighting the country's investments and preparedness to address extreme events in the SCS and to protect its territorial claims. It was evident that the country redeveloped its armed forces through close collaboration with U.S. military personnel. For instance, the news articles, such as the one titled "US to give \$70-M aid for AFP infrastructure improvements," underlined the good relations between the country and the USA, supporting the Philippines even through financial aid (exemplar 3).

Exemplar 4: *The US has committed more than USD625 million over the past five years to Philippine defense and security enhancements that are largely designed to bolster capacity in Philippine maritime areas in the South China Sea.* (Pna.gov.ph, 2022b)

The Philippines was more vocal than the other countries in the study in blaming China for its illegal presence in its territory within the SCS. The 25/27 new articles framed the SCS dispute as a matter of China's unlawful presence in the SCS, as reported by the Philippines' news agency. These news stories included declarations and warnings against China, violations in the SCS, and governmental actions aimed at protecting the West Philippine Sea, showing that the country's depiction of China runs counter to its narrative of creating a peaceful geographical space that is disrupted by the USA and its allies. Apart from that, it demonstrates the Philippines' efforts to show that the WPS is a space often violated by China's illegal activities. Thus, under Ferdinand Marcos Jr., it has become more vocal and focuses on demonstrating that it adheres to international law, findings that align with similar academic research (Ragragio, 2025).

Regarding the financial impact and the concerns related to the SCS, *China Daily* was the news outlet that framed 11/15 news articles as a region for substantial financial gains. The other news outlets that covered the financial implications and developments of the SCS originated from the Philippines (3/15) and Malaysia (1/15). Furthermore, there was an emphasis on how China is developing the SCS and aiming to significantly improve financial activity in the region, thereby reinforcing the view that China has a significant role to play in what is happening in the SCS, contradicting its narrative of a peaceful geographical space. For instance, an article titled "Deep-water platform develops oil and gas" explained how China overcame the challenges and realized an ambitious project

(exemplar 6) without mentioning the fact that its activity might create further environmental damage.

Exemplar 6: “Our team *overcame a series of challenges including strong internal waves in the South China Sea, giant sand ripples and sand ridges at the bottom of the sea, and accurate positioning of giant structures under water,*” said Wu, noting many technologies were applied for the first time in this project. (Nan and Xin, 2022).

### *Fishing rights, leisure events, tourism, and other frames*

Moreover, some news articles primarily focused on problems with fishing in the SCS and on stories from regional fishermen, indicating that food security is another issue common to the SCS dispute. Except for the Philippines, fishermen’s stability and access to the sea are considered essential for their survival; in Indonesia, this is the only time the country has expressed concerns about China’s actions in the region. For Indonesia, news coverage indicated that the SCS is a vital fishing area and, thus, the country is compelled to assert its rights, adopting a relatively mild approach that has been observed in the past (Beckman, 2020; Siregar, 2023). In the news article titled “Encourage fishermen to be active in North Natuna Sea: Expert,” there was an extended criticism of the Chinese stance in the SCS, and the fact that the government must respond to secure the fishing activity (exemplar 7).

Exemplar 7: “*The government could also deploy our Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) boats to ensure the safety of our fishermen when they are active in the EEZ,*” Juwana noted in a statement received here, Saturday (En.antaraneews.com, 2021).

Apart from articles that primarily focused on political events, a few addressed leisure events associated with tourism across the region, including parts of the SCS. The Vietnamese news outlet had the most (3/7), followed by the Philippines (2/7), Malaysia (1/7), and Brunei (1/7). One of the examples was the news story titled “Da Nang welcomes visitors with food festival,” which offered an overview of the festival, mentioning that “the event held at Bien Dong (East Sea) Park, Son Tra District, Da Nang City” (En.nhandan.vn, 2022).

After the news articles aimed to present leisure and touristic events associated with the SCS, six news stories from *China Daily* framed the events and disputes in the region as a legitimate action of the country’s self-defense against those threatening its territorial integrity in the SCS. Similarly, the other two news articles included the SCS among the regions of China that must be protected, and they considered interference by other states and powers a threat to national security. Related to national security were also the five articles from Indonesia (1/5), the Philippines (2/5), and Vietnam (2/5), which addressed governmental acts. The governmental actions aimed at securing territorial claims in the SCS, protecting national interests, and safeguarding the people. Although the rhetoric is harsh, tensions do not seem as intense as those in other territorial disputes worldwide. The SCS remains a site of power struggles and contention, with the involvement of several major global actors. As Hayton (2014) has demonstrated, some actors might not be as influential as they think in the SCS dispute.

The *Borneo Bulletin* published three articles reporting on diverse events in the SCS without taking sides, and *Nhân Dân* published an article highlighting the Vietnamese government's strong discomfort with Taiwan, which it perceived as violating its rights in the SCS by exploring the region for possible energy exploitation. The findings reveal that Malaysia and Brunei were not so vocal in expressing their concerns regarding the SCS. Their stance appeared to align with previous studies indicating that, despite these countries' increased activity in the SCS, they remain less vocal than Vietnam and the Philippines (Loi and Van Nga, 2023; Putra, 2024).

The findings show that state-affiliated English-language media do not merely report the SCS dispute; they actively produce competing territorial imaginaries through routine naming and repeatable symbolic devices. These discursive practices perform distinct political functions—legitimizing national claims (through names and historical references), managing risk (through calls for cooperation and respect for law), and mobilizing domestic constituencies (through frames about fishing and resources). Understanding these functions explains why outlets with similar institutional constraints nonetheless emphasize different frames: each outlet balances domestic legitimation, international signaling, and the political costs of provoking a stronger power.

These patterns are best explained by a combination of state interests, audience targeting, institutional media incentives, and the broader great-power discursive environment. Theoretically, the results operationalize Communication Geography by showing how micro-discursive framing elements cumulatively reshape spatial meaning, and they extend framing scholarship by demonstrating a replicable method for cross-national comparison of symbolic devices. Practically, the study suggests that diplomats and analysts should treat naming trends and frame distributions as low-cost signals that can harden red lines and constrain negotiation.

## Conclusions

This article makes three distinct contributions. First, it provides a cross-national empirical inventory of naming practices and symbolic framing devices across 533 English-language articles from six state-affiliated outlets, addressing a gap in comparative media work on the SCS. Second, it operationalizes Communication Geography by linking identifiable micro-discursive elements (names, catchphrases, and exemplars) to the production of competing territorial imaginaries. Third, it offers a replicable qualitative framing protocol for comparative studies of state media in territorial disputes. These claims are bounded by the study's design: the analysis focuses on routine English-language state coverage between June 2022 and February 2023 and does not attempt to measure coordinated state messaging, non-English domestic media, or direct effects on public opinion.

More specifically, the study collected and analyzed 533 news articles from six different countries (Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) and state-affiliated news outlets (*Borneo Bulletin*, *China Daily*, *Antara News Agency*, *Bernamea News Agency*, *Philippine News Agency*, and *Nhân Dân*) that participated in the SCS disputes. It sheds light on how the state-backed news media report on the conflicts in the area, how this coverage modifies our perception of the SCS as a geographical entity, as

well as the dogmatic conflicting realities that they try to impose by using a different name to refer to the exact geographical location in the news coverage of the SCS.

Across the eight dominant news frames, the most prominent, endorsed by the majority of countries, emphasized the need to work together to find a peaceful solution to the SCS, with ASEAN member states emphasizing the importance of respecting their territorial claims and international law. However, these arguments do not align with the countries' conflicting realities, each of which defines the SCS differently as a geographical space. The research revealed that, despite internal conflicts, ASEAN countries attempt to assert their rights in the SCS and challenge China's claim of sovereignty over the SCS. China is often portrayed as the primary problem in the region and as the country seeking to define the SCS according to its own will and objectives. Furthermore, despite China's accusations against the USA and its allies regarding the dispute, it is evident that other countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, produce counternarratives and become more aggressive in protecting their geographical space, even using their own names to refer to their part of the SCS. Even Indonesia, which is less vocal than the others, expressed dissatisfaction regarding its fishing rights in the region.

Vietnam, according to news coverage, emphasized collaboration among the different sides while also expressing concerns primarily about China's actions in the SCS. Also, Vietnam used the names East Sea and South China Sea interchangeably to refer to the region. The Philippines was the country that was more aggressive toward China, underscoring the need to respect its territorial claims, warning China for crossing red lines, and promoting strong efforts to improve its armed forces, even with the support of the USA. In addition, the Philippines appeared to emphasize the importance of its SCS claims, referring to the region as the WPS, indicating that the territory is integral to the nation. The way the geographical space, SCS, was defined by the news coverage enhances our understanding of the concept of Communication Geography. By tracing how routine state news practices produce competing spatial imaginaries, this article reframes the SCS not only as a legal and strategic contest but as a communicative one—where names and frames are instruments of territorial politics with real diplomatic and policy consequences.

Apart from these facts, it was evident that all the countries sought to balance asserting their rights with avoiding provoking China's aggression, as such action would affect them politically and financially. Interestingly, the weather events were another vital aspect identified in the study. However, it was clear that environmental problems related to the SCS were not considered as important as spatial claims and interstate conflicts. As extreme climate change phenomena intensify, future coverage of the SCS is expected to focus more on these events.

Regarding the study's limitations, the current article employed a qualitative framing analysis to investigate news coverage of the SCS across six countries, as reported by state-affiliated news outlets, over a 9-month period. That focus might have led to the limited range of narratives promoted by other news media, particularly in more developed, democratic countries with broader press freedom, even on sensitive matters such as the SCS. A broader timeframe and news analysis, including countries outside the region such as the U.S. and other U.S.-aligned states, could yield new insights into regional disputes. Also, findings are constrained to routine English-language, state-affiliated coverage between

June 2022 and February 2023 and do not capture non-state, vernacular, or social-media dynamics that may contest or amplify these frames. Future work should study these aspects, including interviews with editors and policymakers, longitudinal data to detect narrative shifts, and audience research to assess reception and effects.

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