

**OPINION**

# *Ocean sanctuaries to shape geopolitics in S China Sea*

ASEAN and China are set to chart a new course for marine protected areas

By **JAMES BORTON**

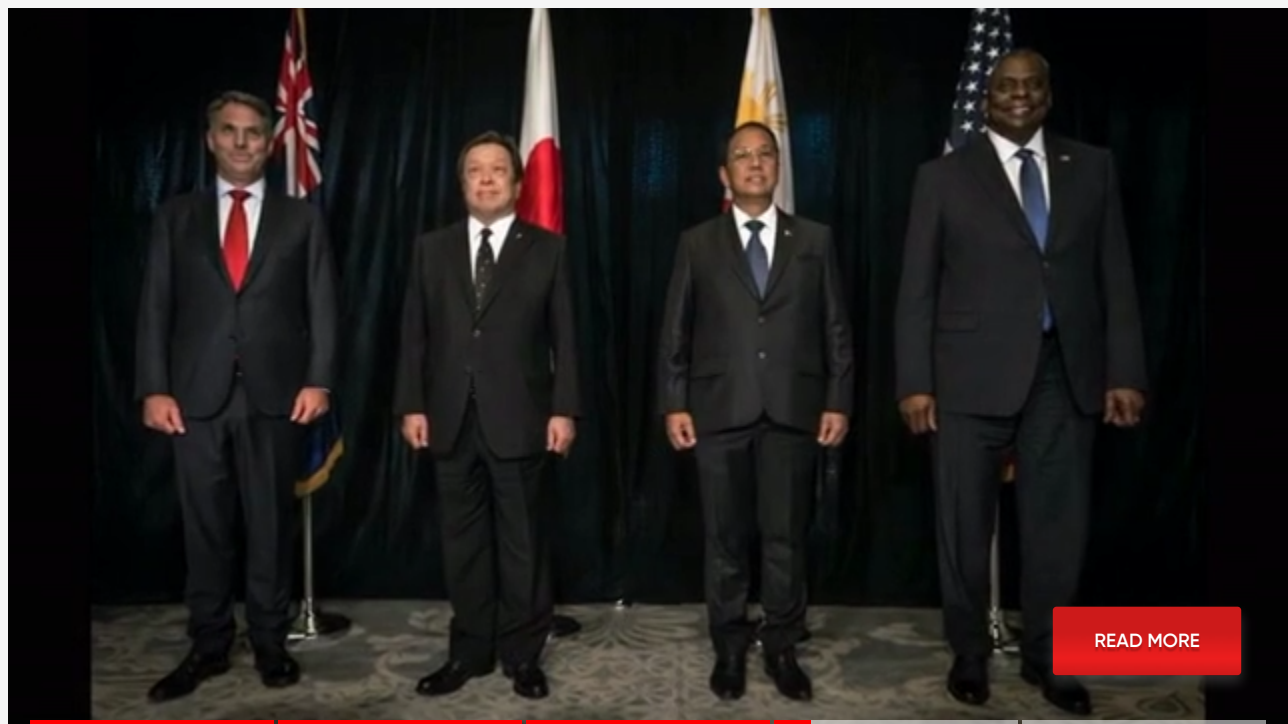
JUNE 6, 2023



Filipino fishermen aboard their boats overlooking Chinese fishing vessels in the South China Sea. Photo: Reuters / Erik De Castro

Ahead of June 8, World Oceans Day, marine scientists and ocean stakeholders continue to sound alarms over the state of the oceans amid threats from climate change, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, rising sea levels, and habitat destruction.

[The Economist World Ocean Outlook](#) offers grim news about fish stocks, one-third of which are overexploited, while the anticipated global warming by 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels spells ecological disaster.



In response to these grave ecological challenges, the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations](#) (ASEAN) and China are set to chart a new course for marine protected areas (MPAs) to support the health of the South China Sea and to shape a science-based multilateral cooperative agenda to preserve its marine resources.

The science is clear: Create a place of refuge in which marine life can thrive, providing more fish for all. It's a practice that offers promise. In the face of dire environmental challenges, more governments are committed to protecting up to 30% of the ocean territory by 2030.

According to the [World Resources Institute](#), this is especially important in Southeast Asia, which is home to nearly 34% of the planet's most biologically diverse coral reefs.

The region's global center for coral-reef fish, mollusks and crustaceans has experienced unprecedented threats. China has been at the forefront of the unsustainable exploitation of fish stocks and increasingly assertive in its destruction of marine habitats.

With 2,000 blue-water commercial trawlers and more than 100,000 fishing vessels, the evidence is compelling that Chinese fishing operations are contributing to the collapse of fisheries in the region.

Marine protected areas offer a safety net that is proving to be a non-threatening measure for claimant nations to support. With the stakes becoming so much higher in the contested South China Sea, these ocean sanctuaries integrate economic growth, instill environmental sustainability and sustain the seas.

## Beijing faces reality

China knows that it is in dangerous waters since it has already hit its [Ecological Conservation Red Line](#) that now reflects Beijing's urgency to protect marine spaces from development.

Over the past two decades, it has lost more than 73% of its mangrove cover and more than 80% of coral reefs. There's increasing evidence from Chinese scientists that the marriage of policy and science is essential to navigate the perilous waters.

"I think ocean science cooperation is the best way to move, collecting and stimulating the common interests in the region to address the challenges of ocean science, regional climate, extreme weather and climate disaster and marine ecosystems," Yu Weidong, an oceanographer and professor at Sun Yat-sen University's School of Atmospheric Sciences, said in an e-mail communication on July 9, 2021.

In an era of rapid environmental shifts, and unprecedented economic development, China has joined ranks with ASEAN in undertaking the systematic rollout of marine protected areas. Within these no-development zones, conserving and restoring degraded coastal ecosystems are priorities. This stepped-up protection of its designated marine areas is visible in its more than 270 MPAs.

For Beijing to achieve its objectives of mitigating habitat degradation and reining in the overexploitation of resources, all stakeholders must be engaged. It will take international cooperative action for China to improve the effectiveness of its maritime management and ocean governance.

My publication *Dispatches from the South China Sea: Navigating to Common Ground* notes that China and its neighbor Vietnam engaged in collaborative marine workshops in the autumn of 2021 in response to the serious damage done to the "Global Commons."



Chu Manh Trinh, a senior Vietnamese marine biologist and an effective advocate for marine protected areas, especially on Cu Lao Cham, an archipelago off Vietnam's central coast, says, "The coral reefs in the Paracel and Spratly islands need to be carefully protected for the whole East Sea region," as Vietnam refers to the South China Sea.

In conversations with me in March in the company of a film crew on the protected island, he spoke about the need for more marine scientists to hold dialogues to protect and conserve natural resources.

Meanwhile, the Marine Conservation Institute initiative for [blue parks](#) reveals that only 3.7% of the world's oceans (2% in strict no-take zones) are protected by 11,169 implemented global MPAs. In Southeast Asia there remain many challenges in implementation of these sanctuaries because of the lack of resources to control catch size, quantity, and management capability.

According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the top challenges for creating MPAs include poor prioritization of marine areas to protect, faulty implementation of protection measures, and unequal distribution, and loss of income for local communities due to the creation of no-take zones.

Despite these obstacles and disparities revealed in a "[Paper Park Index](#)" (PPI) completed by Veronica Relano and Daniel Pauly at the University of British Columbia, which focuses on MPAs that are legally designated but ineffective, their tool offers hope for improved conservation outcomes.

These marine protected areas not only contribute to biodiversity conservation, but also succeed in promoting peace and cooperation. This is particularly true with trans-boundary protected areas, or peace parks, which can be used to solve border disputes, secure or maintain peace during and after an armed conflict, and promote stable and cooperative relationships between neighboring states.

There are excellent models for marine science collaboration in cross-jurisdictional areas, such as the Arctic Council, where Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States promote cooperation on sustainable development.

Also, let's not forget the [Mediterranean Action Plan](#) and the [Red Sea](#), where competing nations have also managed to collaborate and foster sustainable practices seen in networked marine protected areas.

In a regional body of water with very complicated territorial and maritime disputes like the South China Sea, the development of a regional network of MPAs with marine peace parks as components offers the real possibility of decreasing tensions and enhancing cooperation between among claimants. Simply put, this brand of science diplomacy offers a crucible to avoid the worst while looking for the best.

From a political point of view, cooperation in MPAs in a disputed area might be accepted by relevant claimants more easily than in other issues. Unlike oil and gas exploitation and fisheries, the development of a regional network of MPAs does not require commercial extraction and exploitation.

“The practice of networking of MPAs can help protect an ecosystem along with the species that cannot be adequately protected in one country and promote cooperation between neighboring countries to address common issues,” Vu Hai Dang, a researcher at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, wrote in his PhD dissertation at Dalhousie University in July 2013.

There are policy advances derived from cooperative marine science projects in the South China Sea. For instance, at the regional level, with the support of the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a first [Common Fisheries Resource Analysis relating to Skipjack Tuna](#) in the South China Sea was completed in September 2022 with the full participation of fisheries scientists from China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam.

At the bilateral level, the Philippines and Vietnam plan to resume the [Joint Oceanographic and Marine Scientific Research Expedition in the South China Sea](#). This action was initiated from 1994 to 2007 and helped acquire important data about the alarming decline in coral reefs and reef fish in the South China Sea.

The second phase may include additional participants such as China and ASEAN coastal states, which translates into more data for a South China Sea–based network of ecological reserves.

These projects are stellar examples of the compliance with [Article 242 of the UNCLOS](#) that obligates states and international organizations to promote international cooperation in marine scientific research for peaceful purposes.

While there remain plenty of obstacles for regional marine scientific research cooperation, the prospects for a trusted chart toward networked marine protected areas contributes to peace-building, offers a surplus of goodwill and provides fish for future generations.