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MAPPING RESEARCH TRENDS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE BETWEEN CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: A BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW

PUGUH TOKO ARISANTO
ptas002@gmail.com
PhD in Asia-Pacific Regional Studies, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan. A Senior Lecturer of International Relations Department, Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta (Indonesia)

ANDI TRI HARYONO
anditri@unwahas.ac.id
Department of Asia-Pacific Regional Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Dong Hwa University, Hualien, Taiwan.
Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Wahid Hasyim, Semarang (Indonesia).

SATRIA DARMA
satriadarma@stain-madina.ac.id
PhD in Asia-Pacific Regional Studies, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan. A Senior Lecturer of Islamic Banking, Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal (Indonesia).

MUKHAMAD ZULIANTO
81120b004@gms.ndhu.edu.tw
Department of Asia-Pacific Regional Studies, National Dong Hwa University (Taiwan).

Abstract

The South China Sea is a critical region with a complex territorial dispute fuelled by its geopolitical and geostrategic importance and rich natural resources. This dispute is mainly caused by overlapping claims involving China as a main driver and several Southeast Asia claimant states, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. Although many studies have discussed the political, economic, legal, and security dimensions of the dispute, there is a lack of a bibliometric analysis of the research landscape. This study uses bibliometric analysis from the Scopus database, obtained after database search and filtering, then processed by using the OpenRefine and VOSviewer software. The results show that 678 Scopus-indexed publications (1975-2025) appear and are used to map the intellectual structure and emerging trends in research on the South China Sea dispute. A finding reveals a significant escalation in academic publications after 2013, aligning with the Philippines' efforts to bring this dispute to international arbitrage. This study also uncovers the most productive authors and journals, the most influential articles, and a country-and institution-wise analysis. Network visualization shows seven main themes, and overlay visualization displays emerging research trends toward regional cooperation, specific bilateral relations such as China-Vietnam, and competition between major powers.

Keywords

South China Sea, Scopus Database, Bibliometrics, Network Visualization, Research Trends.

Resumo

O Mar da China Meridional é uma região crítica, palco de um complexo conflito territorial alimentado pela sua importância geopolítica e geoestratégica e pelos seus ricos recursos

naturais. Este conflito deve-se principalmente a reivindicações sobrepostas que envolvem a China como principal protagonista e vários Estados do Sudeste Asiático que reivindicam a soberania sobre a região, tais como o Vietname, as Filipinas, a Malásia, o Brunei e a Indonésia. Embora muitos estudos tenham abordado as dimensões política, económica, jurídica e de segurança da disputa, verifica-se uma falta de análises bibliométricas do panorama da investigação. Este estudo recorre à análise bibliométrica da base de dados Scopus, obtida após pesquisa e filtragem na base de dados, e posteriormente processada utilizando os softwares OpenRefine e VOSviewer. Os resultados revelam que 678 publicações indexadas na Scopus (1975-2025) são apresentadas e utilizadas para mapear a estrutura intelectual e as tendências emergentes na investigação sobre a disputa no Mar da China Meridional. Uma das conclusões revela um aumento significativo nas publicações académicas após 2013, em consonância com os esforços das Filipinas para levar esta disputa a arbitragem internacional. Este estudo identifica ainda os autores e revistas mais produtivos, os artigos mais influentes e apresenta uma análise por país e por instituição. A visualização em rede revela sete temas principais, enquanto a visualização sobreposta apresenta tendências de investigação emergentes no sentido da cooperação regional, de relações bilaterais específicas, como as entre a China e o Vietname, e da competição entre as grandes potências.

Palavras-Chave

Mar da China Meridional, Base de Dados Scopus, Bibliometria, Visualização em Rede, Tendências de Investigação.

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MUKHAMAD ZULIANTO

Introduction

The South China Sea is one of the most dynamic regions in the world due to several factors. This region is home to a complex dynamic of contesting issues regarding historical conflicts, economic-political interests, and state strategies between China and several Southeast Asia countries. This region is also a battlefield in a long rivalry between the superpower states: the U.S and China, which influences international politics and security issues in this region (Güçyetmez & Kahraman, 2025). The South China Sea has high economic potential, becomes a vital route for energy distribution, and serves as a choke point and as a potential corridor for naval power projection (Jannuzi, 2025). This region also plays important roles in sustaining international trade, in particular maritime trade and becomes a field of offshore hydrocarbon exploration and an important region for the fishery industry (Hensel, 2024). In addition, the South China Sea's rich endowment of offshore oil and natural gas reserves can be taken advantage of establishing energy security for adjacent states in the future (Boquet, 2017; Singh, 2004). In brief, the economic potential of this region is so attractive as it provides many of the resources that states need, which can be important pillars for the economies of the adjacent littoral states.

Aside from comprising abundant natural resources and serving as a vital geostrategic importance, the South China Sea is also an epicentre of disputes and tensions between China and several Southeast Asia countries as claimants such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, (Yildirim, 2025). The main cause of this dispute is basically caused by the overlapping territorial claims between China and these claimant states over ownership of islands, reefs, and maritime boundaries in the region (Yildirim,

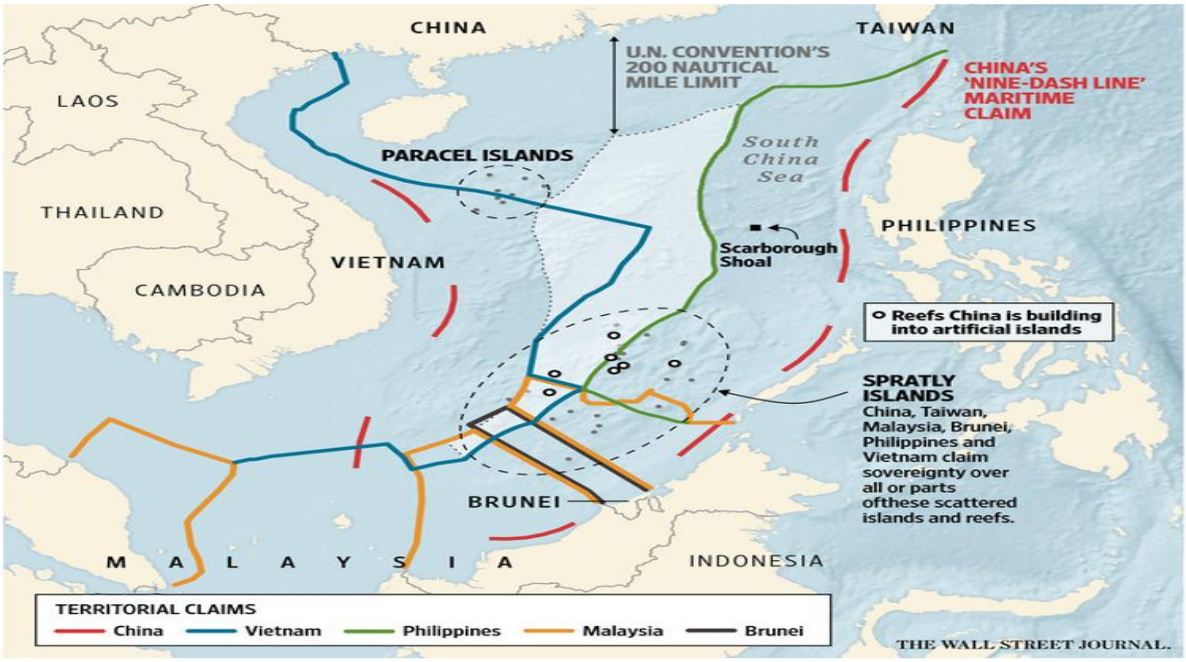
2025). The dimensions of this dispute, in fact, are not limited to China and the claimants. The dynamic of the region is also exacerbated by the presence of a strong intrusive system such as the U.S, which seeks to commit to a "balance of influence" in the region. This maneuver may depict a clear response to China's growing influence and increased military capabilities in the South China Sea, which are distinctly seen as assertive and militaristic actions that have disrupted stability in the region (Chapman, 2017; Masroor, 2018).

Basically, China's territorial claim, called a nine-dash line, is perceived as a primary source of the conflict and tension. The nine-dash line, originally referred to as the U-shaped line or the eleven-dash line, was first officially proclaimed by the China in 1947 to delineate its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the new government adopted the same line and has consistently maintained its sovereignty claims over the entire archipelago and the waters surrounding it (Chung, 2016). Historical legitimacy that narrated that China has "historic rights" to the region, is China's main argument for its sovereignty claims in the region. This claim refers to historical evidence such as several documents dating back to the Han Dynasty showing China's presence and maritime exploration for centuries (Hayton, 2018; Nair, 2022). The key finding of this history-only based argument, then, is embodied in the "nine-dash line", a graphical demarcation of its maritime boundaries.

On this basis, China confidently claimed approximately three-quarters of the South China Sea, asserting what it calls "indisputable sovereignty" over all the islands and surrounding maritime zones (Boquet, 2012). Consequently, China's claim also includes both the Paracel and Spratly Islands. These Chinese claims, however, are not legitimate according to the international law order, particularly as stated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Engelbert, 2020; Hayton, 2018; T. K. C. Nguyen & Ngo, 2023) and widely perceived to have subverted the interests and sovereignty of claimant states (Cheeppensook, 2020). Thus, many states vigorously rejected China's claim due to its illegal claim. Meanwhile, UNCLOS recognizes the ZEE or exclusive economic zone as an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea which is measured as far as 200 nautical miles from the baseline of the coast. Even as its claims were contested, China chose not to withdraw, but rather to expand them in 2023. In the year, China released the new official map that revised its maritime claims from nine to ten-dash line, with an additional segment that officially incorporates Taiwan into the China's core territory and strengthens its claims in Southeast Asia as well (Clayman, 2023).

China's effort to defend and protect the South China Sea are inseparable from the significancy of the region for the fulfilment of national interests. Aside from its abundant natural resources, the South China Sea plays a vital strategic role for China. This region becomes a crucial maritime route for global trade and military operations, sustains China's power-projection capacity, and secures its big maritime interests (Hemmings, 2011; Nair, 2022; Quyet, 2023). The strategic value of this region is also reinforced by China's geographical proximity to key Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) and its important role in China's geopolitical objectives of establishing the maritime primacy to balance against the U.S and other powers (Quyet, 2023).

Map 1. China's Nine-Dash Line



Source: Wall street Journal Online in Dipua et al., 2020

Map 2. China's Ten-Dash Line



Source: (Pmfias, 2024)

Vietnam had been involved in more confrontations with China over the Spratly and Paracel Islands than other claimant states. Vietnam principally bases its claims on two grounds: historical evidence or narrative, and international law. Historically, this claim is proven by cartographic evidence from the French colonial period, which elaborated the South China Sea as part of Vietnam's territory (Sasges, 2016). From a law perspective, Vietnam also bases its position consistent with UNCLOS to assert its sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands and the surrounding maritime zones (H. K. T. Nguyen et al., 2021; Trần et al., 2024). Therefore, Vietnam decisively declared that it has substantial historical documentation and a strong legal base to support its sovereignty claims over these islands.

The Philippines actively opposed China's claims in the South China Sea, particularly through formal ways: legal and diplomatic. In 2013, the Philippines initiated an arbitration process under Annex VII of UNCLOS to contest China's claims based on the U-shape line or nine-dash line (Pemmaraju, 2016). In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled in favour of the Philippines. This court finally stated that China's claims to almost the entire South China Sea, including those based on their nine-dash line, unlawful (Engelbert, 2020; Gunawan et al., 2022). The judgment represented a big legal victory for the Philippines' claim, although China rejected the result and continued its activities in the region. China persistently defended its claims and neglected the Philippines' diplomatic protests. In response, the Philippines has sought to grab and build regional and international support to compel China to comply with the outcome. The Philippines has also engaged in various diplomatic maneuvers, including reconciliation attempts with China under the leadership of President Rodrigo Duterte (Boquet, 2017).

Malaysia claimed specific maritime features in the South China Sea according to the principles of the continental shelf and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in accordance with the provisions of UNCLOS. On this basis, Malaysia has also built and occupied several geographical features in the Spratly Islands and has actively conducted resource exploration and drilling within its claimed maritime zones (Dai, 2024; Erkan, 2025).

Brunei committed relatively more moderate ways compared to other claimant states. Officially known as "Brunei Darussalam", the state bases its territorial claim to the Southern Spratly Islands according to the EEZ-UNCLOS. Brunei's approach is not confrontational. Brunei's maneuver tends to focus more on diplomatic means and legal channels to assert its claim over certain features in the South China Sea (Cheeppensook, 2020; Erkan, 2025).

Unlike other claimant states, **Indonesia**, to some extent, is not an active claimant in the South China Sea dispute. Indonesia's EEZ around the Natuna Islands principally overlaps with China's territorial claims, which in turn have triggered diplomatic tensions (Kaloko & Utari, 2024). In response, Indonesia has consistently engaged in dialogues and cooperations to manage the dispute, preferring soft diplomacy to hard diplomacy. Since the 1990s, Indonesia has actively facilitated informal multilateral dialogues through initiatives such as the South China Sea Workshop and pushed both Southeast Asia countries and China to settle the dispute through a Code of Conduct (Fitriani, 2020; Pedrason et al., 2024). However, Indonesia's approach tends to emphasize peaceful means and compliance with international legal norms, particularly UNCLOS.

There are numerous studies discussing the South China Sea dispute involving China and Southeast Asian countries. Although the existing literature continues to expand, a comprehensive bibliometric analysis is still missing to systematically review and map the landscape of existing studies. Previous studies have basically explored the dispute from political, law, economic, security, and interdisciplinary perspectives. However, a significant gap remains in terms of identifying the key scholars, institutions, countries, and thematic networks that define the research landscape. Therefore, bibliometric analysis allows researchers to capture the evolution and trends in research disciplines by analyzing publications (Quevedo-Silva et al., 2016). By applying this, this study aims to reveal meaningful patterns in how scientific work, such as journal articles, books, etc., has developed over time regarding the South China Sea dispute between China and Southeast Asian countries. Thus, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the publication trends over time in the South China Sea dispute between China and Southeast Asia countries?
2. Who are the leading authors contributing to this research?
3. Which articles and journals are most influential to this research?
4. Which countries and institutions are contributing to this research?
5. What are the themes and future research emerging from this research?

Methodology

The authors use bibliometric analysis to examine scientific data on research trends in the South China Sea dispute between China and Southeast Asia countries. Bibliometric analysis is defined as a quantitative approach widely used to study the evolution of knowledge across various fields of research by analyzing the topics-related publications. Bibliometric analysis is famous for its vigorous and systematic method to explore and analyze a huge number of scientific data. This technique provides valuable insights into core research areas, leading authors-journals-institutions-countries, future themes and emerging trends, etc in a form of certain visualizations (Passas, 2024). This method becomes increasingly popular in recent years in understanding various aspects of scientific and practical fields (Toaza & Esztergár-Kiss, 2024).

The process to conduct bibliometric research basically starts with collecting data from relevant databases, cleaning and refining data, and applying various bibliometric methods to generate valuable knowledge (Ertz & Leblanc-Proulx, 2019). In this study, the authors utilize data derived from the Scopus database. The Scopus database is selected due to its a broad collection of research publications with various selection criteria and its wider journal scope than other scientific research databases (Goh & See, 2021).

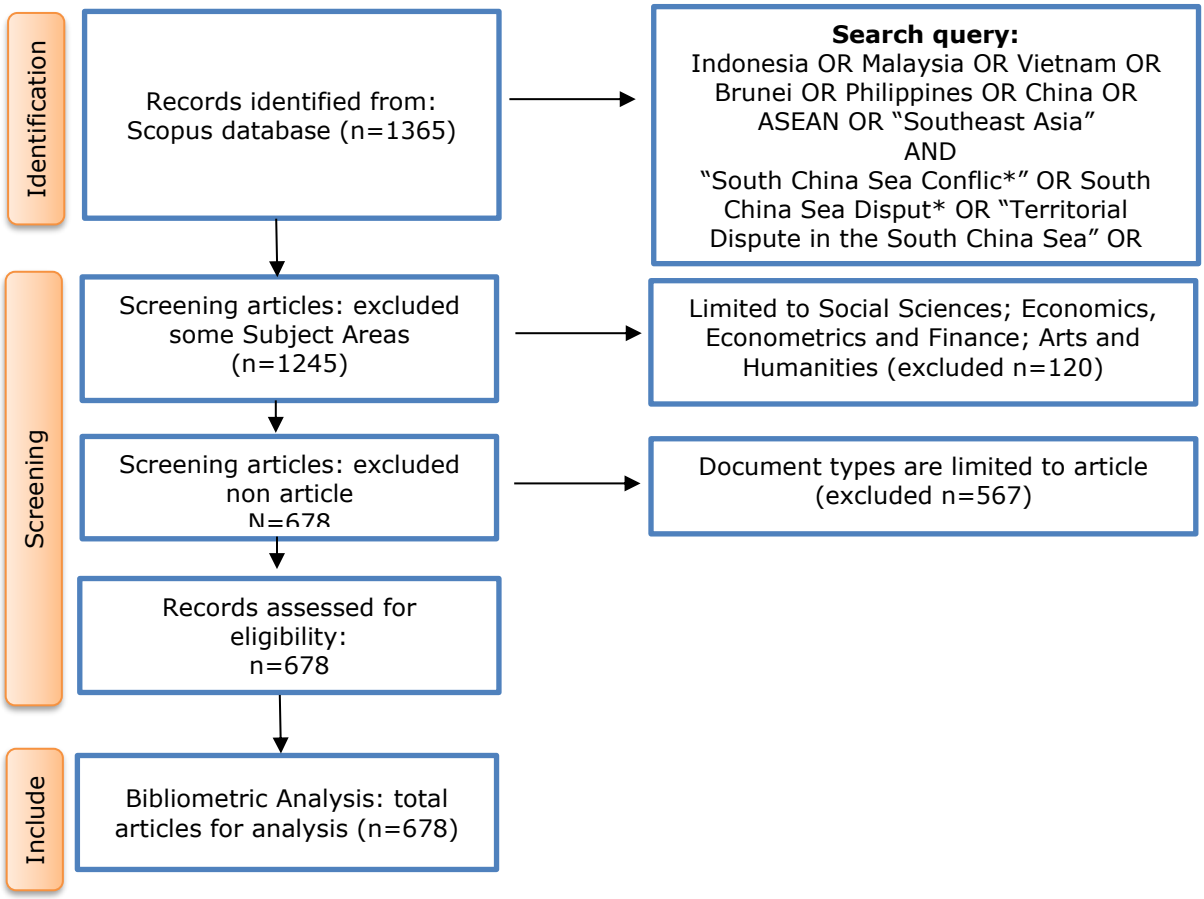
Figure 1 shows that the data tracking process started on October 15th, 2025, with two search strings: Indonesia OR Malaysia OR Vietnam OR Brunei OR Philippines OR China OR ASEAN OR "Southeast Asia" AND "South China Sea Conflic*" OR South China Sea Disput* OR "Territorial Dispute in the South China Sea" OR "conflict in the South China Sea". The first string describes the five claimant countries and China as defendant—

Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippines, and China—involved in the dispute in the South China Sea. Five of them, except China, are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The terms "conflict" and "dispute" are often used interchangeably or have similar meanings in this topic. Many scholars also refer to it as a "territorial dispute". The authors apply several filters to refine the search: Limited to Social Sciences; Economics, Econometrics and Finance; Arts and Humanities; Article. Limited to environmental science previously was included but most of the articles discussed about nature, environmental cores etc which have no discussions about the conflict, only South China Sea at glance. The filters include all languages and years. Data only covered (only) until October 15th, 2025. During the identification phase, the search query above yielded 1,365 files; after screening through the filtering process, this resulted in 678 articles that met the study's criteria. Data for these articles are then downloaded in CSV format. In the Scopus database, the authors also use the analysis data processed by Scopus to collect, starting with Research Growth and Trends, Leading Authors, Leading Journals, Most Influential Articles, Institutions-Wise Analysis, and Countries-Wise Analysis. The obtained data are then processed for further analysis.

The authors also utilized two software programmes, namely OpenRefine and VOSviewer, for data extraction. OpenRefine is an open-source tool for data cleaning, transformation, and normalization to handle messy data and convert the data into a structured format suitable for various applications. OpenRefine enables users to import data from various sources and export cleaned data into different formats (Hill, 2016). In this study, the authors undertook data cleaning on the "author keywords" column because many terms or words have the same meaning but are written in different variations (capitalization, spacing, punctuation, abbreviations, or full names), such as ASEAN/asean/A.S.E.A.N, China/PRC/People's Republic of China, the U.S/the United States, or south china sea conflict/dispute ect. Without standardization or harmonization, the system treats these variants as separate entities, causing concept frequencies to be fragmented and the analysis to become inaccurate. The authors used OpenRefine's clustering feature with the key collision and nearest neighbor methods, as well as keying functions ranging from Fingerprint to Beider-Morse, followed by manual verification or the rechecking process to avoid misclassification. As a result, the data became clean, consistent, and ready for analysis with VOSviewer.

After cleaning the data through OpenRefine, VOSviewer was exercised to generate bibliometric network maps. This software is commonly selected due to its proficiency in processing large datasets and generating visualizations of complex research landscapes, which comprise co-occurrence, citation, bibliographic coupling, co-citation, or co-authorship relations (Li & Wei, 2022). In this study, VOSviewer is used to conduct a keyword co-occurrence analysis of a body of scientific literature. Authors set author keywords as the unit of analysis, with full counting applied as the counting method and a minimum threshold of 7 occurrences to display two visualizations: network and overlay. Figure 1 shows the article selection process using the PRISMA flowchart:

Figure 1. Steps in article selection process



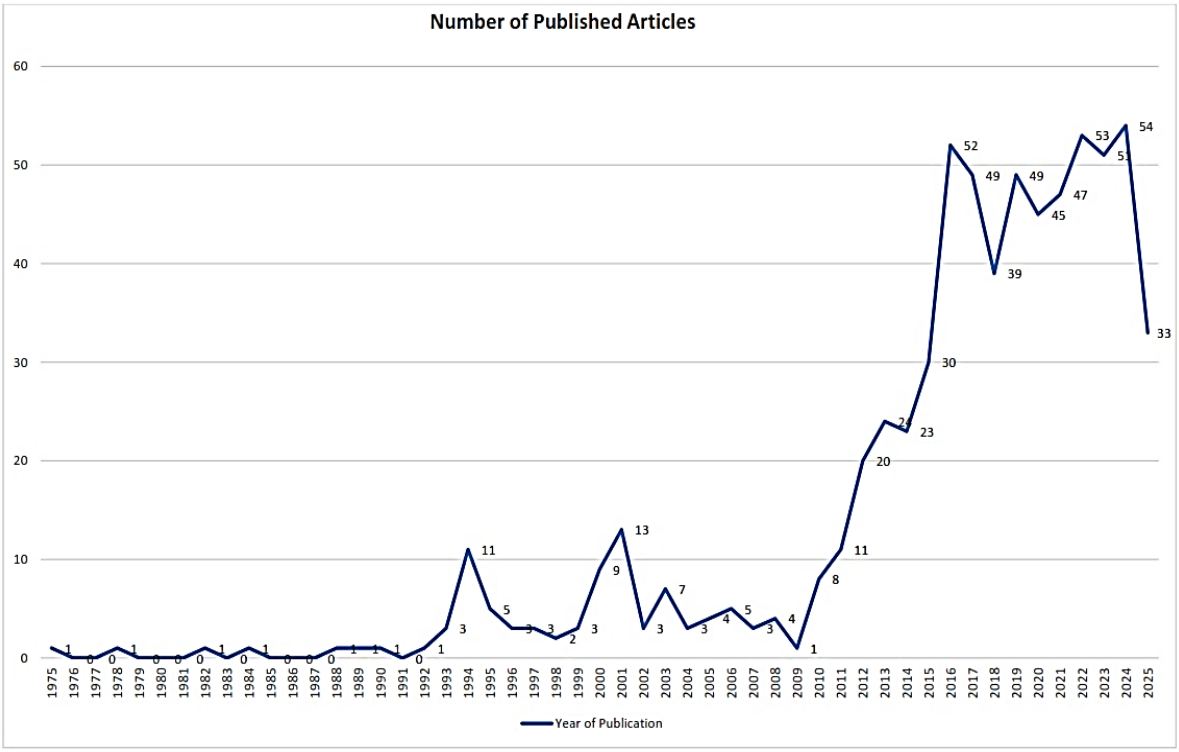
Source: Author's illustration

Result and Discussion

Research Growth and Trend 1975-2025 (October 15th)

Figure 2 shows the growth in total publications on the South China Sea dispute from 1975 to October 15th, 2025, with an average of 13 articles per year. The first article published on the South China Sea dispute was in 1975, entitled "Legal status of the Paracel and Spratly Islands" by Hungdah Chiu and Choon Ho Park. Their article highlighted the dispute over ownership of the Paracel and Spratly Islands between China and Vietnam. According to Chiu & Park (1975), historical evidence supports China's stronger claim over these Islands in its territorial dispute with Vietnam. This argument appeared because the international regime regulating the seas among states, such as UNCLOS, had not been established that year. From 1975 to 2012, academic interest on the South China Sea dispute was relatively low, with no year reaching more than 10 publications in a single year, except 1994 and 2001, with 11 and 13 publications, respectively. In nine different years 1976, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1990), there were no publications on the topic at all in the Scopus database.

Figure 2. Research Growth and Trend from 1975-2025 (October 15th)



Source: Author Analysis from Scopus Database

The total number of publications in the Scopus database has increased significantly, particularly since 2013, when publications on the South China Sea dispute exceeded 20. The dispute started to attract international public attention after brought to PCA. Chronologically, The Philippines initially submitted a notification and statement of claims to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) under UNCLOS 1982, unilaterally, without involving China on 2 January 2013. On 19 February 2013, China rejected and returned the notification, stating it would not accept or participate in the arbitration. In July 2013, a permanent arbitral tribunal was established by the President of ITLOS, chaired by Judge Thomas A. Mensah, and held its first meeting in The Hague on July 11, 2013. On 30 March 2014, the Philippines submitted a legal memorandum containing 15 claims regarding China's maritime rights and the status of geographical features in the South China Sea. On 7 December 2014, China published a position paper stating that the tribunal lacked jurisdiction because the dispute concerned territorial sovereignty beyond the scope of UNCLOS. From 7 to 13 July 2015, a preliminary hearing on jurisdiction was held; China did not attend. On 29 October 2015, the Tribunal announced it had jurisdiction over 7 of the Philippines' 15 claims. On 30 November 2015, the main proceedings concluded; the final ruling was scheduled for 2016. On 12 July 2016, the PCA issued its final ruling, upholding most of the Philippines' claims and declaring that China's nine-dash line claim was legally baseless; China rejected the ruling. In October 2016, Philippines under President Duterte changed the tone when visiting Beijing, adopting a conciliatory approach through diplomacy and economic cooperation,

which indicated an improvement in bilateral relations (Abc.net, 2016; Apnews, 2016; Cgtn, 2016; Xinhua, 2016).

Figure 3. Timeline of Philippines V. China at the PCA



Source: Author's Illustration via Gemini

Based on the timeline, the surge in scholarly publications since 2013 is strongly correlated with the escalation of the Philippines v. China case at the PCA. Each stage of the arbitration process—from the filing of the complaint in January 2013, to the interim award in 2015, to the final award in July—triggered increased academic attention to the South China Sea dispute. In other words, these international legal developments served as the primary catalyst driving researchers to publish scholarly works. Furthermore, there is quantitative evidence of this correlation: a surge in the number of publications from 30 titles in 2015 to 52 titles in 2016, immediately following the announcement of the PCA ruling. Furthermore, the high average of over 30 publications per year until October 2025 highlights that the ongoing unresolved nature of the dispute keeps this topic relevant and continues to attract academic interest. Thus, these factors collectively reinforce the finding that political and legal dynamics in the region directly shape research trends regarding the South China Sea dispute.

Leading Authors

Table 1 shows the leading authors who have published a minimum of four articles. Leading authors are measured by publication productivity, calculated according to the total number of publications (TP). If two or more authors have the same TP, they are ranked by the total citations (TC). TC is an indicator commonly used to measure the impact and academic significance of scientific work (Tokmachev, 2023). De Castro, R.C, from De La Salle University, the Philippines, is the most productive author with 23 publications, followed by Amer, R., from the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden, with 7 publications. The achievements of De Castro, R.C, from the Philippines may represent the relevance of the South China Sea dispute, in which the Philippines is China's strongest opponent, bringing this dispute to the international tribunal. There are four authors ranked 3rd to 6th, each with 6 publications, but different TCs. Among these authors, Thao, N.H. has the highest TC of 207, followed by Tønnesson, S (TC=123), Emmers, R (TC=102) and Song, Y.H (TC=69). Several authors rank 7th to 11th with 5 publications each and varying numbers of citations. They are Keyuan, Z (TC=190), Li, M (TC=81), Valencia, M.J (TC=66), Gau, M.S.T (TC=45) and Chang, Y.C (TC=31). Ranked 12th to 14th with 4 publications each are Zhang, H (TC=167), Roszko, E (TC=49), and Cuong, N.X (TC=5). According to the data, N.H. Thao from the University of Hanoi has the highest TC of 207, while H. Zhang from Nanyang Technological University has the highest citation per paper (CPP) of 41.8, which is calculated by dividing total citations by total number of publications (TC/TP).

Table 1. Leading Authors Contributing to the South China Sea Dispute Research

Rank	Author (s)	Institutions	TP	TC	CPP
1	De Castro, R.C.	De la Salle University	23	174	7,57
2	Amer, R.	Institute for Security and Development Policy	7	162	23,1
3	Thao, N.H.	Faculty of Law, University of Hanoi	6	207	34,5
4	Tønnesson, S.	International Peace Research Institute	6	123	20,5
5	Emmers, R.	S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)	6	102	17
6	Song, Y.H.	Inst. of European/American Studies, Academia Sinica	6	69	11,5
7	Keyuan, Z.	University of Central Lancashire	5	190	38
8	Li, M.	S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies	5	81	16,2
9	Valencia, M.J.	Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, Eugene	5	66	13,2
10	Gau, M.S.T.	Institute of Law of the Sea, National Taiwan Ocean University	5	45	9
11	Chang, Y.C.	Dalian Maritime University	5	31	6,2
12	Zhang, H.	Nanyang Technological University	4	167	41,8
13	Roszko, E.	Chr. Michelsen Institute	4	49	12,3
14	Cuong, N.X.	Vietnamese Academy of Science and Technology Institute of Chemistry	4	5	1,25

Note: Minimum of 4 publications.

Source: Author Analysis from Scopus Database

Leading Journals

Leading journals can often shape the research directions and guide researchers towards relevant and impactful topics by highlighting the latest trends and methods (Hussain et al., 2023). Leading journals related to the South China Sea dispute are presented in Table 2. This table lists the top ten journals by the total number of publications on the South China Sea dispute, along with their total citations (TC) and H-Index metrics. The H-index is an indicator of a scientist's performance, calculated by comparing the total number of publications (TP) with the impact of the publications. This H-Index also refers to how often other scholars cite their work, usually called citation impact (Masic, 2016). The ranking is based on TP, TC and H-index. If two or more journals have the same TP, the TC is used to break the tie.

According to Table 2, Ocean Development and International Law is the journal with the highest total number of publications, citations, and H-Index, namely TP=40, TC=1042, and H-Index=21, followed by The Pacific Review with TP=36, TC=574, and H-Index=15. Ranked 3rd and 4th are Marine Policy (TP=31, TC=385, H-Index=12) and Contemporary Southeast Asia (TP=27, TC=859, H-Index=14). Ranked 5th and 6th are the Australian Journal of International Affairs and the Journal of East Asia and International Law, with 14 publications each. However, the Australian Journal of International Affairs has a higher TC and H-Index (TC=161 and H-Index=7). The Journal of East Asia and International Law obtains TC=69 and H-Index=4. Next, Asian Politics and Policy published 13 articles with a total of 92 citations and an H-Index of 7. Ranked 8th to 10th, with the same total number of publications (12), the International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law has a higher TC of 155 and an H-Index of 6, followed by the International Journal of China Studies with a TC of 63 and an H-Index of 4. Meanwhile, the Korean Journal of Defence Analysis has a TC of 42 and an H-Index of 4. The total number of publications is not necessarily proportional to the TC. For example, although Contemporary Southeast Asia has the 4th-highest total number of publications (27), it has a larger TC of 859 than the TCs of the journals ranked 2nd and 3rd.

Table 2. Top 10 Leading Journals Contributing to the South China Sea Dispute Research

Rank	Journal	TP	TC	H-Index
1	Ocean Development and International Law	40	1042	21
2	The Pacific Review	36	574	15
3	Marine Policy	31	385	12
4	Contemporary Southeast Asia	27	859	14
5	Australian Journal of International Affairs	14	161	7
6	Journal of East Asia and International Law	14	69	4
7	Asian Politics and Policy	13	92	7
8	International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law	12	155	6
9	International Journal of China Studies	12	63	4
10	Korean Journal of Defense Analysis	12	42	4

Source: Author Analysis from Scopus Database

The Most Influential Articles

Table 3 elaborates the top 10 most influential journal articles on South China Sea dispute Research. These articles are measured by total citations (TC). The article entitled "China's strategy in the South China Sea" by Fravel (2011), published in Contemporary Southeast Asia, obtained the highest citations (TC=208). This is followed by the article, entitled "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea" by Yahuda (2013), published in the Journal of Contemporary China (TC=167), "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation 'by Glaser (2015), published in International Security (TC=129) and "Creeping Assertiveness: China, the Philippines and the South China Sea Dispute", by Storey (1999), published in Contemporary Southeast Asia (TC=112). The top four articles obtained a TC of more than 100, while those ranked 5th-10th obtained a TC of >60<100. Three of the ten articles were published in Contemporary Southeast Asia.

Most articles (six of ten) explicitly discuss China's strategy, ambitions, and policies in their titles (e.g., "China's strategy", "China's new assertiveness", "China's ambition"). According to the literature, China is considered a key player and the main driver of dynamics in the South China Sea. In contrast, several articles highlight the roles of ASEAN and regional diplomatic efforts, for example, Ruszynski (2003), about the Declaration on Conduct. The idea of multilateral cooperation and peaceful solutions is also represented in the article written by McManus et al. (2010), which proposes a "Spratly Islands International Marine Peace Park".

Table 3. The Most Influential Journal Articles on the South China Sea Dispute

Rank	Author	Title	Journal Name	TC
1	Fravel, M.T (2011)	China's strategy in the South China Sea	Contemporary Southeast Asia	208
2	Yahuda, M (2013)	China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea	Journal of Contemporary China	167
3	Glaser, C.L (2015)	A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation	International Security	129
4	Storey, I.J (1999)	Creeping Assertiveness: China the Philippines AND the South China Sea Dispute	Contemporary Southeast Asia	112
5	Beckman, R (2013)	The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea	American Journal of International Law	97
6	Morton, K (2016)	China's ambition in the South China Sea: is a legitimate maritime order possible?	International Affair	77
7	Ruszynski, L (2003)	ASEAN, the Declaration on Conduct, and the South China Sea	Contemporary Southeast Asia	76
8	Keyuan, Z (1999)	The Chinese Traditional Maritime Boundary Line in the South China Sea and Its Legal I Consequences for the Resolution of the Dispute over the Spratly Islands	The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law	69

9	Fangyin, Z (2016)	Between assertiveness and self-restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea policy	International Affair	64
10	McManus, J.W; Shao, K.-T & Lin, S.-Y (2010)	Toward Establishing a Spratly Islands International Marine Peace Park: Ecological Importance and Supportive Collaborative Activities with an Emphasis on the Role of Taiwan	Ocean Development and International Law	64

Source: Author Analysis from Scopus Database

Country-Wise Analysis

Table 4 shows the top 10 countries with highest output of journal articles on the South China Sea dispute, measured by total number of publications (TP). Thus, countries are ranked or based on TP, and if two or more countries have the same TP, TC breaks the tie. The U.S and China rank 1st and 2nd; the U.S (TP=107, TC=1610 and H-Index=23) and China (TP=97, TC=653 and H-Index=13). This rank may represent the rivalry between these two powers over the South China Sea issue and indicate their dominant role in scholarly research output. They are followed by Australia (TP=67, TC=822 and H-Index=18), the Philippines (TP=49, TC=388 and H-Index=11), Singapore (TP=48, TC=883 and H-Index=17), the United Kingdom (TP=46, TC=840 and H -Index=16), Taiwan (TP=42, TC=442 and H-Index=12), Indonesia(TP=42, TC=230 and H-Index=9), Vietnam (TP=34, TC=325 and H-Index=11), and Malaysia (TP=32, TC=176 and H-Index=8).

Three of the ten most productive countries on this list—the U.S, the United Kingdom, and Australia—are not geographically part of the South China Sea region. The U.S dominates in terms of all indicators (TP, TC, and H-Index). The U.S is also the most productive by a wide margin (107), nearly double the average compared to the TP of countries in the Southeast Asia region, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan. Conversely, Singapore and the United Kingdom are the most efficient, achieving the highest average citation per paper (CPP) despite fewer publications (TP) than the U.S and China. Australia ranks 3rd, with a higher H-index than China (ranked 2nd) despite its lower TP.

According to the quantitative findings from the country-wise analysis, qualitative reflections on the role of Chinese academics are certainly important for understanding how scientific narratives are constructed and disseminated in this highly competitive field of study. As shown in Table 4, China ranks second among the most productive countries, with 97 publications and 653 citations, indicating a significant academic works. However, Chinese scholars are not merely passive contributors to the international discourse; they actively shape narratives that align with and reinforce Beijing’s official position through indexed journal articles, e-books, and websites. For example, Li Jinming (2020), Professor Emeritus at Xiamen University, systematically articulated China’s historical and international legal perspectives on maritime boundaries, with the explicit aim of addressing the absence of a Chinese perspective in the international literature (Li, 2020). Similarly, Zou Keyuan, a Chinese maritime scholar affiliated with the University of Central Lancashire, has written extensively on China’s maritime legal system and consistently highlights the historical and legal foundations of China’s claims in the South China Sea (Zou, 2005, 2016).

Table 4. Top 10 Countries Publishing Articles on South China Sea Dispute

Rank	Country	TP	TC	CPP	H-Index
1	United States	107	1610	15,05	23
2	China	97	653	6,732	13
3	Australia	67	822	12,27	18
4	Philippines	49	388	7,918	11
5	Singapore	48	883	18,4	17
6	United Kingdom	46	840	18,26	16
7	Taiwan	42	442	10,52	12
8	Indonesia	42	230	5,476	9
9	Viet Nam	34	325	9,559	11
10	Malaysia	32	176	5,5	8

Source: Author Analysis from Scopus Database

Aside from the contributions of individual Chinese scholars, leading research institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) are also actively participating in shaping the discourse on the South China Sea. For example, Wang Junsheng highlights opportunities for China-ASEAN cooperation amid U.S.-China competition, while Zhang Jie identifies U.S.-China dynamics as the primary determinant of stability in the South China Sea and views the Philippines' military buildup on Zhongye Dao as a potential provocation. Xu Liping emphasizes that negotiations on the Code of Conduct should be led by China and ASEAN without foreign intervention. In the legal sphere, Ma Jinxing reviews dispute resolution mechanisms and arbitration cases, while Yang Xiao highlights the successes of China-ASEAN maritime cooperation while criticizing the Philippines' involvement with external powers (CASS, n.d.; Dongfang, 2025; Tass, 2024; Vscs, 2026; Xiaoyan, 2026). Overall, China's academic publications are not merely scientific but form part of a soft power strategy that integrates the intersections of science, diplomacy, and strategy to legitimize territorial claims and influence regional and international perceptions (Borton & Chen, 2025).

Institution-Wise Analysis

According to Table 5, the top 10 most productive institutions for publishing articles on the South China Sea dispute are academic institutions. De La Salle University (TP=31) and Nanyang Technological University (TP=29) are the two most productive institutions. However, Nanyang Technological University has the highest overall impact, with 530 citations (TC), surpassing the most productive institution, De La Salle University. Ranked 3rd is the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (TP=23 and TC=456). Despite having fewer publications, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies obtained more citations than De La Salle University. The institutions ranked 4th to 6th have the same TP (12), but different TC: The National University of Singapore (TC=284), The Australian National University (TC=191), and National Chengchi University (TC=66). Ranked 7th and 8th are Academia Sinica Taiwan (TP=11 and TC=168) and Vietnam

National University (TP=10 and TC=169). Ranked 9th and 10th are institutions with fewer than 10 publications: the University of Wollongong (TP=9 and TC=137) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (TP=8 and TC=26). The Australian National University and the University of Wollongong are the only two institutions from outside the Southeast Asia and South China Sea region.

Table 5. Top 10 Institutions Publishing Articles on South China Sea Dispute

Rank	Institution	TP	TC	CPP
1	De La Salle University	31	250	8,065
2	Nanyang Technological University	29	530	18,28
3	S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies	23	456	19,83
4	National University of Singapore	12	284	23,67
5	The Australian National University	12	191	15,92
6	National Chengchi University	12	66	5,5
7	Academia Sinica Taiwan	11	168	15,27
8	Vietnam National University, Hanoi	10	169	16,9
9	University of Wollongong	9	137	15,22
10	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	8	26	3,25

Source: Author Analysis from Scopus Database

Themes and future research

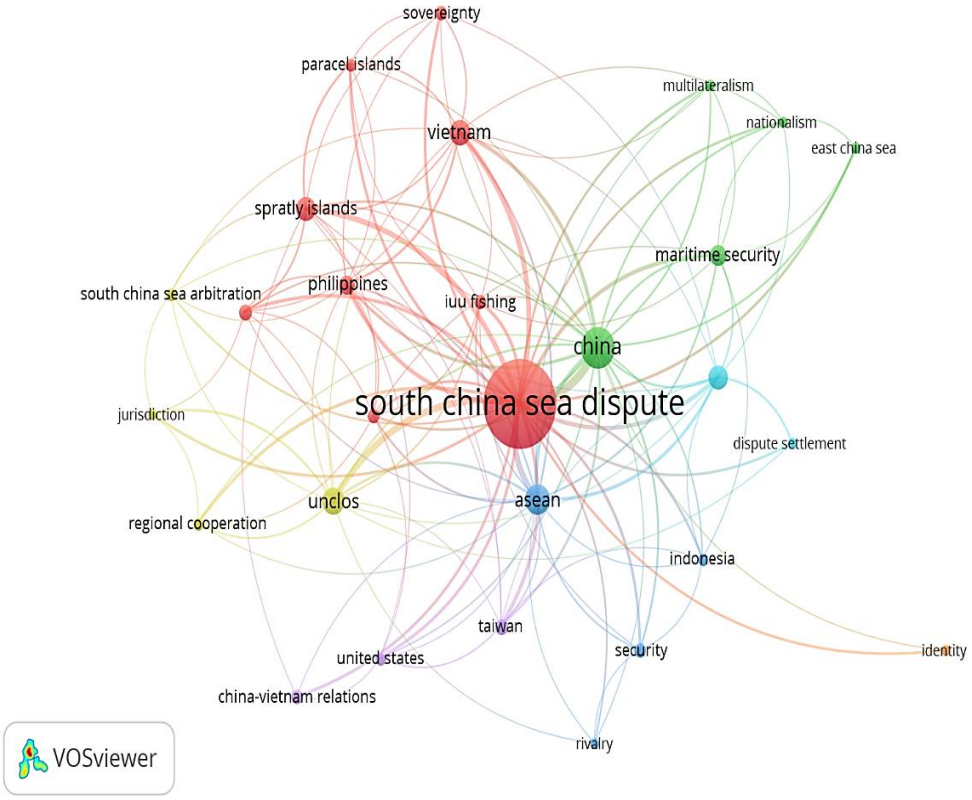
Keywords co-occurrence network analysis is a process of analysing how often keywords appear together in a collection of scientific papers. Essentially, when two keywords are usually found in the same publication, they are considered to have a thematic relationship and are connected by a network line (Deng et al., 2025). This is also used to reveal themes and emerging trends within certain research topics (Lozano et al., 2019). In this study, the authors applied two types of keywords co-occurrence network analysis generated by VOSviewer software, namely network visualization and overlay visualization.

VOSviewer's network visualization creates a graphical map of the connections between items in bibliometric data—like authors, keywords, and institutions (Al Husaeni & Nandiyanto, 2021). This feature also helps researchers find patterns, groupings, and the strength of links between these items and provides important insights into how different topics and entities are related within a research field. Meanwhile, the overlay visualization function is to display the development of bibliometric elements (such as keywords, researchers, and institutions) in a timeline. Unlike the network visualization, which emphasizes relationships or connections, this overlay visualization presents the time dimension through colour variations to reveal the dynamics of research topics over time (Soong et al., 2025; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

This network visualization on the South China Sea dispute research is displayed in Figure 4. This visualization is complemented by the structured data in Table 6, which lists all keywords categorized into specific thematic clusters. The results reveal a total of seven clusters are identified through network visualization. Cluster 1 lists 9 nodes (red) focusing

on "geopolitics", "IUU fishing", "Paracel islands", "Philippines", "Scarborough shoal", "South China sea dispute", "sovereignty", "Spratly islands", and "Vietnam". Cluster 2 displays 5 nodes (green) with keywords such as "China", "East China Sea", "maritime security", "multilateralism", and "nationalism". Cluster 3 shows 4 nodes (dark blue) comprising "ASEAN", "Indonesia", "rivalry", and "security". Cluster 4 depicts 4 nodes (yellow-green) containing keywords such as "jurisdiction", "regional cooperation", "South China Sea arbitration", and "UNCLOS". Cluster 5 shows 3 nodes (purple) comprising "China-Vietnam relations", "Taiwan" and "United states". Cluster 6 specifies 2 nodes (light blue) with keywords such as "dispute settlement" and "Southeast Asia". Finally, cluster 7, consisting of 1 node (orange), shows a keyword notably "identity".

Figure 4. Network Visualization generated by VOSviewer



Source: Author Analysis from VOSviewer

Overlay visualization maps scientific disciplines, tracks the evolution of research topics, and identifies new trends in large datasets (Carley et al., 2017). Clusters are grouped according to the average year of publication. The youngest clusters are usually marked in yellow. Overlay visualization is displayed in Figure 5, which reveals distinct trends in recent research about the South China Sea dispute. Keywords such as "regional cooperation", "China-Vietnam relations", "security", "maritime security", "identity", "rivalry", and "geopolitics" appear in recent publications. These topics indicate ongoing interests in issues related to the South China Sea dispute. These keywords reveal two

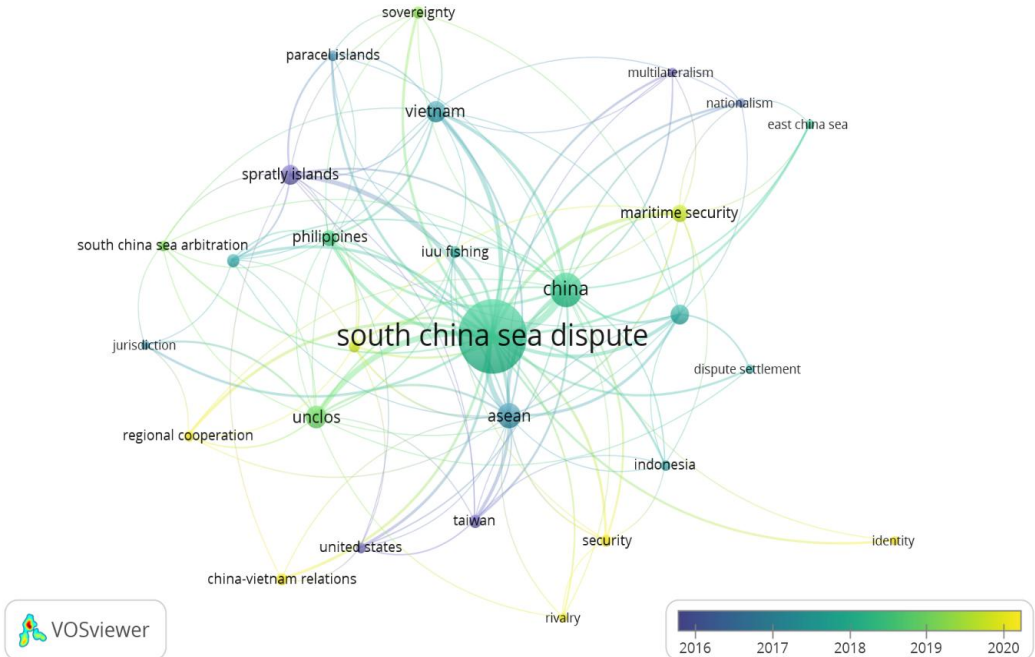
contrasting narratives in regional and geopolitical studies. Concepts such as "regional cooperation" and an emphasis on bilateral "China-Vietnam relations" represent efforts and hopes to resolve disputes through diplomatic channels, dialogues, and confidence-building. On the other hand, keywords such as "rivalry", "maritime security", and "geopolitics" show the reality of tension dominating the region, mainly driven by competition among major powers, overlapping territorial claims, and the race for militarization.

Table 6. Author keywords and themes for South China Sea dispute Research

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6	Cluster 7
Geopolitics	China	ASEAN	Jurisdiction	China-Vietnam relations	Dispute settlement	Identity
IUU Fishing	East China Sea	Indonesia	Regional cooperation	Taiwan	Southeast Asia	
Paracel Islands	Maritime Security	Rivalry	South China Sea arbitration	United States		
Philippines	Multilateralism	Security	UNCLOS			
Scarborough shoal	Nationalism					
South China Sea dispute						
Sovereignty						
Spratly Islands						
Vietnam						

Source: Author Analysis from VOSviewer

Figure 5. Overlay Visualization Generated by VOSviewer



Source: Author Analysis from VOSviewer

Conclusion

Using bibliometric analysis derived from the Scopus database, research related to the South China Sea dispute uncovers several key findings. Publication trends were relatively low and sporadic from 1975 to 2012, then experienced a significant surge after 2013. This surge coincided with the Philippine arbitration case, which escalated in 2016 (after the PCA ruling). Since then, academic interest has remained consistently high with an average of more than 30 publications/year, reflecting that the dispute remains active and unresolved.

The most productive author is De Castro, R.C. (De La Salle University, Philippines) with 23 publications. However, the author with the highest impact in terms of total citations (TC) is Thao, N.H. (University of Hanoi), with 207 citations, and the author with the highest impact in terms of citation per paper (CPP) is Zhang, H. (Nanyang Technological University), with a CPP of 41.8. The Leading journal for the most productive & influential journal is Ocean Development and International Law (TP=40, TC=1042, H-Index=21). Other major journals, such as The Pacific Review, Marine Policy, and Contemporary Southeast Asia, are the other main academic channels for publishing articles related to the topic. The most influential article is entitled 'China's strategy in the South China Sea' by Fravel M.T (2011), published in Contemporary Southeast Asia, which obtained the highest total citations (TC=208). According to leading countries and institutions, the U.S (TP=107) and China (TP=97) are the most significant contributors, followed by Australia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Singapore (18,4) and the United Kingdom (18,26) are the most efficient research impact in terms of citation per paper (CPP). Among leading institutions, De La Salle University (Philippines) and Nanyang Technological University (Singapore) are the most productive institutions, with 31 and 29 publications, respectively. The National University of Singapore and The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies are noted for their powerful citation impact (CPP=23,67 and 19,83, respectively). Chinese academics and research institutions, such as Li Jinming, Zou Keyuan, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), are actively shaping a scientific narrative aligned with Beijing's official position through publications in international journals and other platforms. These publications are not merely scientific in nature; they also serve as a soft power strategy to legitimize China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and influence regional and international perceptions.

Future themes and research based on keyword analysis reveal seven clusters generated from network visualization. Emerging future trends according to overlay visualization are likely to focus on the dynamics between regional cooperation (e.g., "regional cooperation") and geopolitical competition (e.g., "rivalry", "maritime security'). This study is primarily limited by using the Scopus database as the only source to be analyzed and excluding literature from open-access and non-indexed journals. Therefore, expanding the scope of research to include Google Scholar or Web of Science (WoS) will be the precise recommendation in future studies because this will provide a more comprehensive capture of issues or topics related to the South China Sea dispute.

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