

A study on new changes in Vietnam's fishery harvest policies in the South China Sea and their impacts

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Abstract

After To Lam assumed the office of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in August 2024, Vietnam has further established an interlocked policy system covering economic interests, domestic governance, maritime territorial claims, deployment of maritime security forces, and external maritime cooperation in the fisheries sector of the South China Sea. On the one hand, to lift the “yellow card” warning imposed by the European Union in 2017 over Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, Vietnam has successively revised supporting laws and regulations. It has strengthened vessel position monitoring for fishing boats over 15 meters, port entry-exit registration, catch traceability and cross-provincial law enforcement, and promoted the application of electronic fishing logbooks and electronic traceability systems. On the other hand, Vietnam has not abandoned sustaining its physical presence in disputed maritime areas through fishing activities. Instead, it continues to expand its operational space in the South China Sea by subsidizing offshore fishing operations, regularizing the development of maritime militias, upgrading the capacity of its coast guard, and carrying out maritime cooperation with neighboring countries and extraterritorial powers. As of April 2026, the European Commission completed its fifth on-site verification mission to Vietnam yet declined to revoke the yellow card, which reveals an obvious gap between Vietnam's institutional rectification and grassroots enforcement. The above changes have rendered Vietnam's fishing activities characterized by coexisting strengthened compliance governance and persistent maritime claim enforcement, adding complexities to China's maritime law enforcement, fishery resource conservation, public opinion interpretation and dispute management. On the basis of sorting out relevant institutional and operational shifts, this paper analyzes the internal and external driving forces behind such changes, their impacts on the South China Sea situation and China's maritime rights and interests, and puts forward targeted countermeasures.

Keywords: Vietnam; The South China Sea; Fishery Policies; IUU Fishing; Maritime Rights Protection

1. Introduction

The South China Sea constitutes a pivotal maritime space for China to safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests, while also serving as a global hub for shipping, marine resource exploitation and regional security interactions. Fishery resources feature renewability yet vulnerability to depletion, transboundary mobility and difficulties in precise demarcation. Fishermen from surrounding coastal states have long conducted overlapping operations in adjacent waters, generating intertwined tensions stemming from resource competition, law enforcement frictions and sovereignty disputes. Compared with official platforms such as naval warships and coast guard vessels, fishing boats boast larger quantities, higher operational frequencies and prominent livelihood attributes. They can sustain continuous maritime presence, yet easily trigger personnel safety incidents, diplomatic representations and international public opinion disputes during law enforcement encounters. Therefore, fishery policies are far more than industrial policies; their practical effects often spill over into maritime governance, maritime security and inter-state regional relations.

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After To Lam assumed the post of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 2024, Vietnam has sustained the flexible balancing logic of its “Bamboo Diplomacy”, while attaching greater importance to the executive capacity of its party-state system and maritime governance competence. Within the fisheries sector, such adjustments advance along two parallel tracks. Externally, Vietnam centers on fulfilling EU-mandated IUU rectification requirements, preserving aquatic product exports and shaping an image of responsible fisheries. Domestically, it prioritizes consolidating local government accountability, enhancing vessel controllability, boosting offshore operational capacity and upholding its unilateral maritime claims. Decree No. 37/2024/NĐ-CP, Prime Minister’s Directive No. 49/CĐ-TTg and the special IUU rectification plan issued in 2024 all elevate the priority of vessel monitoring, emergency response for missing vessels, port inspections, catch certification and liability pursuit for illegal activities. Concurrently, Vietnam continues to deploy maritime militia squadrons, deepen coast guard cooperation and subsidize offshore fishing operations, giving rise to new characteristics including stricter governance, centralized organization, long-term persistent operations and standardized external normative narratives.

This indicates that analysis of Vietnam’s South China Sea fishery policies cannot merely focus on increased penalties or vessel monitoring equipment installation. It is equally critical to examine how relevant institutions reshape fishing boat organization models, law enforcement force deployment, international cooperation networks and operational intensity within disputed waters. Systematic assessment of these shifts enables China to refine targeted law enforcement precision while upholding its fundamental principles, avoiding conflation of routine fishery violations with organized claim-enforcing activities. It also delivers operable policy foundations for China–Vietnam maritime dispute management, fishery resource conservation and the construction of regional maritime norms.

2. New Shifts in Vietnam’s Fishery Harvest Policies in the South China Sea

Since To Lam took office as General Secretary, Vietnam’s fishery policies have demonstrated compound characteristics including mounting external compliance pressures, devolved domestic governance accountabilities, continued integration of maritime forces, and expanding channels for international cooperation. The EU’s yellow card forces Vietnam to enhance the traceability of fishing vessels and catches, otherwise facing shrinking export orders, rising corporate costs and mounting pressures on coastal employment. Meanwhile, given the South China Sea disputes, Vietnam is reluctant to simply scale down its offshore fishery industry. Instead, it attempts to transform previously scattered and unregulated fishing activities into controllable forces serving its maritime strategy through technological supervision and organized administration. Accordingly, Vietnam’s rectification drive is not merely a contraction of fishery operations, but a simultaneous reshaping of its fishery governance model and modes of maritime presence.

2.1. Adjusting Policies to Safeguard Export Interests amid EU IUU Fishery Compliance Pressures

The EU IUU yellow card constitutes the most direct and sustained external driver prompting Vietnam to overhaul its fishery governance system in recent years. Vietnam boasts a large volume of aquatic product exports, with its industrial chain covering fishing, aquaculture, processing, logistics and massive coastal employment. An escalation from a yellow card to an import-ban red card would not only hurt its access to the EU market, but also generate spillover effects on other markets via procurement audits and elevated compliance costs. Against this backdrop, Vietnam rolled out comprehensive institutional upgrades in 2024: Decree No. 37/2024/NĐ-CP elaborates detailed requirements for vessel registration, vessel monitoring system (VMS) tracking, port administration and fishing licensing; Prime Minister’s Directive No. 49/CĐ-TTg mandates rigorous crackdowns on tampering with, shutting down or relocating VMS equipment. Multiple directives issued by the Prime Minister and central coordinating bodies oblige coastal provinces to eliminate unregistered, unlicensed and unmarked fishing boats, compile rosters of missing vessels, and trace liabilities back to vessel owners, captains and grassroots administrative departments. Technologically, Vietnam prioritizes mandating installation and uninterrupted online operation of VMS on all fishing vessels over 15 meters. It also promotes electronic fishing logbooks, port entry-exit declarations and electronic catch traceability at designated fishing ports, aiming to build a complete data chain linking vessel identity, operational trajectories, landing volumes and processing exports.

The primary bottleneck of Vietnam’s rectification lies not in insufficient central legislation, but inconsistent implementation across coastal localities. While some provinces conduct vessel-by-vessel verification of missing boats and complete electronic records at ports, others suffer from overlapping vessel registration information, delayed deregistration, vessels docking in foreign provinces, and disconnected penalty records. The timeliness of shore-based authorities’ outreach to vessel owners, border guards and coast guard units once vessels lose VMS signal beyond the statutory time limit directly determines the effectiveness of the VMS regime. EU verification missions have also placed growing emphasis on case closure loops, namely whether anomalies trigger formal investigations, whether penalties carry sufficient deterrent effects, and whether implicated catches are excluded from export supply chains. Therefore,

Vietnam's subsequent governance reforms will focus more on cross-provincial data cleansing, full port digitalization and criminal accountability, with supervisory authority likely further centralized at the central government level.

2.2. Leveraging Fisheries to Consolidate De Facto Presence in the South China Sea

Vietnam continues to regard fisheries as a vital instrument to sustain maritime presence, support coastal livelihoods and advance its maritime strategy. Its policy focus does not rest on simply expanding the number of fishing vessels, but on boosting the endurance, communication, formation coordination and logistical support capacity of offshore fishing fleets. By sharing vessel data among fishery administrations, border defense forces, coast guard agencies and local governments, Vietnam improves its capacity to organize and deploy fishing fleets. Certain offshore vessels operate in production teams, mutual aid groups or cooperatives, enabling sustained intensive fishing operations over extended periods, alongside rapid information sharing, assembly or evacuation in response to foreign law enforcement interventions. Vietnam also keeps upgrading coastal fishing ports, sheltered anchorages, communication stations and logistical services to deliver stable backing for offshore fishing activities. For China, this shift from scattered individual operations to data-driven management and organized fleet activities renders fishery presence in disputed waters more persistent. It also demands that maritime law enforcement evolve from single-vessel handling to comprehensive assessment of fleet organization, activity patterns and shore-based support networks.

2.3. Developing Maritime Militias to Reinforce Paramilitary Fishery Presence in the South China Sea

Vietnam's all-people national defense system has long positioned maritime militias as a core component of maritime defense and grassroots mobilization. In recent years, the institutionalization of standing maritime militia squadrons has accelerated. Information released by Vietnam's military authorities reveals that such squadrons are equipped with standardized vessels, personnel and communication devices, receiving regular training in maritime patrol, reconnaissance observation, search-and-rescue support and national defense education. In 2024, provinces including Quảng Trị and Đà Nẵng continued to form standing maritime militia fleets and crew teams. Though distinct from ordinary fishing boats for commercial production, militia craft feature prominent civilian attributes in terms of crew backgrounds, vessel appearances and operational scenarios, allowing them to undertake intelligence reporting, maritime coordination and presence demonstration under low-intensity maritime circumstances. Their strengths include relatively low operational costs and long deployment durations, with flexible interpretation of official affiliations. Meanwhile, they blur the boundary between productive fishing and security operations, complicating on-site identification, evidence collection and standardized law enforcement responses. When militia vessels operate alongside ordinary fishing boats, isolated maritime frictions can be framed as pure fishery incidents, raising China's public opinion and diplomatic costs in law enforcement responses.

It is critical to distinguish standing maritime militia units from civilian fishermen via institutional differences, rather than drawing hasty military judgments solely based on civilian-looking hulls. Key indicators worthy of sustained attention include fixed formation and training requirements, dedicated communication networks, and compliance with ordered patrol, observation and coordinated missions. Long-term tracking of these characteristics delivers more reliable assessments than judgments based on isolated standoff incidents. Vietnam classifies standing maritime militias as local armed forces while assigning them concurrent production, rescue and national defense tasks. This multi-purpose vessel model facilitates sustained maritime activities in non-war scenarios, and compels China to establish refined target identification criteria to avoid misjudging ordinary fishermen or overlooking organized paramilitary operations.

2.4. Courting Selected ASEAN States to Build a Fishery Presence Bloc and Expand Regional Check-and-Balance Leverage

Vietnam's external cooperation priorities have shifted from mere pursuit of political solidarity to constructing multi-layered collaborative frameworks centered on IUU governance, maritime law enforcement, search and rescue, and personnel training. In 2024, Vietnam signed coast guard cooperation and maritime incident prevention documents with the Philippines, and held ongoing discussions with Indonesia and other states on fisherman management, hotline communication and joint IUU enforcement. Extra-regional powers including the United States and Japan have expanded their involvement through patrol vessel donations, training programs, maritime situational awareness projects and capacity-building initiatives for law enforcement. Such cooperation bears practical functions in combating transboundary illegal fishing and reducing misjudgment risks, and cannot be unilaterally interpreted as targeting China. Nevertheless, Vietnam may capitalize on these partnerships to accumulate maritime law enforcement resources, normative experience and international narrative materials, garnering greater understanding and support on South China Sea issues. Compared with its previous vague advocacy for a unified ASEAN stance, current approaches prioritize stacked bilateral mechanisms, aligned technical standards and coordination on specific incidents, featuring stronger

operability and sustainability. Objectively, this may raise China's external coordination costs when handling relevant fishery disputes.

3. Driving Forces Behind New Adjustments to Vietnam's South China Sea Fishery Harvest Policies

Vietnam's recalibration of South China Sea fishery policies is not driven by a single government department, but arises from the combined interplay of export interests, local governance, fishery resource depletion, coastal employment pressures and maritime strategic objectives. The EU yellow card imposes clear rectification deadlines and market sanctions, while dwindling inshore fishery resources push fishing fleets further offshore. Local governments are forced to strike a balance between safeguarding resident livelihoods and bearing accountability for IUU violations. At the strategic level, Vietnam seeks to integrate strengthened fishery supervision with enhanced maritime organizational capacity, ensuring compliance rectification serves both trade interests and its maritime governance and maritime claim objectives.

3.1. EU Yellow Card Warnings Prompt Overhaul of Vietnam's South China Sea Fishery Policy Orientation

Since imposing the IUU yellow card on Vietnam in 2017, the EU has dispatched multiple verification missions, with the rectification cycle far exceeding Vietnam's initial expectations. Vietnam's aquatic product exports rebounded to approximately USD 10 billion in 2024, yet its market share in the EU declined markedly compared with the pre-yellow card era. Domestic enterprises also face heavier costs for fishing certification, raw material segregation and third-party audits. Following the fifth on-site EU verification mission in April 2026, Vietnamese authorities issued further mandates to revise legislation, optimize VMS data systems and prosecute transboundary illegal fishing cases, confirming the yellow card remains in place. Sustained market pressure has elevated IUU governance from an industrial affair to a central government priority task, prompting Vietnam to subject unregistered, unlicensed and unmonitored vessels alongside cross-border illegal fishing to stricter administrative and even criminal liabilities.

3.2. Rectifying the Negative Image of Illegal Fishing to Rebuild International Credibility for Its Fishery Sector

Vietnamese fishing vessels have long been detained or expelled by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and other neighboring states for cross-border fishing violations, incurring losses to crew members and undermining its self-proclaimed identity as a responsible fishing nation. For export processing enterprises, failure to verify legal raw material sources will disqualify products from EU market access, even if processing procedures meet regulatory standards. Therefore, Vietnam's promotion of electronic traceability, designated port landing and cross-provincial data verification essentially aims to rebuild trust among international buyers in its supply chains. Meanwhile, by tightening domestic law enforcement, Vietnam attempts to shift partial accountability to individual vessel owners and inadequate local implementation to mitigate reputational damage at the state level. International recognition of its rectification efforts ultimately hinges on sustained declines in overseas illegal fishing cases, effective enforcement of penalties and mutually verifiable data, rather than the volume of legislative documents or VMS installation rates.

3.3. Distorting Discourse to Conceal Illegal Fishing Practices and Maintain Its Self-Framed Identity as a South China Sea Ecosystem Steward

Ecological conservation and sustainable fisheries have become core pillars of Vietnam's external narrative on South China Sea affairs. By highlighting climate change, marine plastic pollution, coral reef protection and small-scale fishermen's livelihoods, Vietnam easily captures attention from international organizations, environmental NGOs and coastal states, reframing complex maritime sovereignty disputes as issues of resource conservation and fisherman survival. This narrative carries partial factual grounding, as regional cooperation is indeed required to address depleted South China Sea fishery resources. However, Vietnam selectively emphasizes the impacts of foreign law enforcement on its fishermen while evading its own fleets' transboundary incursions, deliberate VMS shutdowns and deployment of destructive fishing gear. Such framing dilutes the controversial nature of its unilateral maritime claims through environmental and livelihood rhetoric, cultivating favorable international perceptions of its maritime operations.

3.4. Obscuring Maritime Boundaries to Heighten the Complexity of Maritime Sovereignty Disputes

Vietnam aligns fishery planning and marine economic development with its unilateral maritime claims, striving to establish de facto permanent presence through long-term, repeated and organized fishing operations, backed by domestic legal instruments including fishing licenses, production subsidies and internal law enforcement documents. Logically, fishing vessels absorb coastal labor, collect maritime intelligence, expand the operational scope of official law enforcement forces, and generate factual evidence for diplomatic negotiations. Enhanced VMS supervision does not necessarily translate into reduced fishing activities in disputed waters; instead, it strengthens Vietnam's capacity to track fleet locations and operational rhythms. If such vessel data are selectively deployed to substantiate its alleged

traditional fishing grounds or exclusive jurisdiction, fishery governance tools will be weaponized to advance its maritime rights narratives. This will further widen cognitive divergences between China and Vietnam over jurisdictional scopes, historical fishing activities and the legitimacy of law enforcement, and create mutual spillover effects between fishery frictions and the consultation atmosphere of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).

4. Impacts of Vietnam's Adjustments to Its South China Sea Fishery Harvest Policies

Overall, Vietnam's policy adjustments exert dual effects. The mandatory vessel registration, real-time monitoring and catch traceability help curb unregulated fishing and align with shared regional fishery governance interests. Nevertheless, when paired with its unilateral maritime claims, maritime militia development and maritime capacity building, such policies may render fishing activities in disputed waters more organized and sustained. The impacts on China cannot be simply summed up as a growth in the number of foreign fishing vessels; instead, they require comprehensive evaluation covering law enforcement target identification, fishery resource conservation, diplomatic and public opinion management, crisis control and normative competition.

4.1. Normalization of Fishery Infringements Raises China's Maritime Supervision Difficulties

After Vietnam tightened its regulatory framework, the operational space for completely unregistered and unmarked fishing boats may shrink. However, registered offshore vessels equipped with VMS and under organized management are more likely to enter disputed waters in a steady manner. Their methods of evading supervision have also evolved from simple unlicensed sailing to more covert tactics, including deliberate VMS disconnection, identity borrowing, temporary signal shutdown, offshore transshipment and scattered landing. When conducting on-site disposal, China Coast Guard must judge whether vessels cross maritime boundaries or deploy destructive fishing gear, while identifying whether fleets operate in coordinated groups or carry out non-production activities such as intelligence collection and law enforcement interference. Handling vessels solely on individual violations fails to expose organized operational chains; overly forceful disposal, by contrast, can be hyped by Vietnam as an act undermining fishermen's livelihoods. Hence, a complete evidence chain consisting of continuous navigation tracks, fishing gear and catches, communication records and shore-based organizational information is essential to enhance the accuracy and persuasiveness of maritime law enforcement.

From Vietnam's domestic structural perspective, its oversized fishing fleets, depleted inshore fishery resources and heavy reliance of coastal communities on fishing constitute root barriers to eliminating transboundary illegal fishing. Institutions including the World Bank have long pointed out a mismatch between Vietnam's inshore fishing capacity and resource carrying capacity, and harsher penalties alone cannot eliminate fishermen's economic incentives to operate offshore. Meanwhile, compliance costs stemming from VMS installation, fuel fees, insurance and port declarations have surged. Small-scale vessel owners may shut down monitoring equipment, use borrowed licenses or bypass designated landing ports to cut expenditures. Some vessels deploy destructive fishing methods such as bottom trawling and electrofishing, aggravating damage to coral reefs, seagrass beds and benthic organisms. Without complementary policies for vessel reduction, industrial transition and alternative employment alongside resource restoration, Vietnam's rectification may merely push illegal activities offshore underground, creating long-term pressure on resource conservation within China's jurisdictional waters.

4.2. Exploiting the Rhetoric of "Ecological Protection" to Disrupt China's Maritime Rights Protection Public Opinion Landscape

Vietnam increasingly employs narratives centered on "fishermen's livelihoods", "humanitarian safety", "ecological conservation" and "rule-based law enforcement" to frame maritime incidents. Once China conducts legitimate boarding inspections, expulsion or detention operations, Vietnamese media tends to broadcast clipped conflict footage while omitting key facts including cross-border locations, destructive fishing gear and VMS disconnection records, framing isolated incidents as a major power suppressing small-country fishermen. Such narratives are easily repackaged and disseminated by extra-regional media and research institutions, transforming law enforcement issues that ought to be judged based on location, behavior and evidence into narratives of power imbalance and regional security risks. Its harm lies not only in single public opinion incidents, but also in the long-term accumulation of negative prejudices against China's maritime law enforcement, narrowing the international interpretive space for China's legitimate maritime rights protection operations.

This narrative logic clashes with the reality that Vietnam remains under the EU's yellow card sanction. The core concerns of successive EU verification missions are Vietnamese vessels' overseas illegal operations, frequent VMS signal loss, inadequate port supervision and incomplete catch certification, demonstrating that Vietnam's actual compliance falls far short of its external propaganda. China has repeatedly carried out maritime rescue and humanitarian assistance

when handling Vietnamese fishing vessels, proving that legitimate rights protection and life safety protection are not mutually exclusive. Regrettably, positive facts such as rescue operations, verbal warnings and evidence handovers receive insufficient media coverage, while confrontational footage spreads rapidly online. Without a multilingual rapid evidence release and regular case briefing mechanism, Vietnam can seize the information time gap to set the narrative tone in advance, solidifying labels such as “ecological steward” and “victimized fishermen” and skewing third-party perceptions of South China Sea fishery disputes.

4.3. Leveraging Policy Adjustments to Deepen Collusion with Extra-Regional Powers

Under the pretext of combating IUU fishing, conducting maritime search and rescue and upgrading law enforcement capacity, Vietnam continuously expands cooperation with the United States, Japan, the European Union and neighboring coastal states. Japan provides maritime law enforcement vessel projects, while the United States delivers maritime policing training and equipment support. The Philippines, Indonesia and other ASEAN nations have established coast guard liaison, incident prevention and fisherman management mechanisms with Vietnam. Such cooperation inherently delivers positive outcomes such as curbing transboundary crimes and reducing maritime misjudgments, yet it also boosts Vietnam’s capabilities in maritime situational awareness, long-distance law enforcement and international coordination. Drawing on EU compliance standards, Vietnam further advocates a “rules-based maritime order”, integrating aquatic product market access, IUU governance and South China Sea disputes into a unified rhetorical framework. More notably, extra-regional powers may exploit technical assistance and capacity-building programs to obtain Vietnam’s maritime data and expand security ties, intertwining fishery governance issues with geopolitical competition. Treating such partnerships as ordinary fishery cooperation will lead China to underestimate their long-term effects on normative discourse and capacity accumulation.

Another consequence of international cooperation lies in the gradual convergence of governance norms and data interfaces. The EU prioritizes electronic catch certification; the United States and Japan focus on maritime situational awareness and law enforcement training; ASEAN coastal states emphasize hotline communication, vessel repatriation and case transfer. Despite operating through separate channels, these programs jointly push Vietnam to form standardized procedures covering target detection, evidence collection and external public explanation. If Vietnam embeds its own maritime data, case records and normative interpretations into regional mechanisms first, it will gain a strong first-mover advantage in discourse over IUU issues. China must distinguish between legitimate public goods cooperation and partnerships deployed to advance unilateral maritime claims. Rather than rejecting international fishery governance mechanisms outright, China should proactively participate in standard-setting discussions and share more standardized public maritime data.

4.4. Obscuring Maritime Boundaries and Exacerbating the Complexity of Maritime Sovereignty Disputes

Vietnam regulates its self-claimed fishing zones through domestic laws, fishing licenses and maritime law enforcement documents, and cites long-term fishing activities to justify its alleged “historic usage rights” and de facto jurisdiction. Such domestic legislation cannot alter the international legal status of relevant islands, reefs and waters, yet it forms mutually reinforcing documentary evidence for domestic law enforcement, diplomatic statements and international publicity. With the improvement of VMS and electronic traceability systems, Vietnam may selectively display vessel navigation tracks, fisherman interviews and historical fishing records to reinforce its biased narratives. The coexistence of fishing boats, coast guard vessels and maritime militia craft at sea heightens risks of collisions, detentions, crew injuries and equipment damage. When isolated fishery frictions coincide with major diplomatic events, domestic political milestones or joint extra-regional military operations, minor maritime incidents may rapidly escalate into diplomatic disputes, eroding China-Vietnam political mutual trust and creating additional disturbances to the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea consultations and bilateral maritime cooperation mechanisms.

5. China’s Countermeasures Against Vietnam’s Adjusted South China Sea Fishery Harvest Policies

Faced with the new reality that Vietnam tightens domestic fishery governance while organizing long-term coordinated fishing operations in disputed waters, China must uphold its sovereign stance alongside refined maritime governance. It shall lawfully handle infringing fishing and non-production maritime activities, while avoiding uniformly framing livelihood-driven civilian fishermen as security threats. The core work should shift from isolated on-site expulsion to a full-cycle mechanism covering detection, identification, evidence collection, disposal, official notification and post-incident review, accompanied by parallel upgrades in fishery resource conservation, diplomatic communication and international public interpretation.

5.1. Strengthen Law Enforcement and Maritime Supervision to Curb Infringing Activities

First, implement hierarchical and categorized supervision of key maritime zones. Relying on coordinated efforts of the Coast Guard, fishery administration, maritime authorities, natural resources bureaus and local fishery departments, establish basic archives and risk profiles for Vietnamese fishing vessels. Differentiate ordinary fishing boats, repeat cross-border vessels, vessels with abnormal VMS signals, coordinated fleet groups and craft suspected of undertaking non-production missions to carry out targeted tracking and differentiated disposal. Second, optimize on-site evidence chains. Standardize the recording of vessel positions, navigation tracks, fishing gear, catches, communication logs, warning procedures and crew conditions, compiling complete verifiable materials for diplomatic representations and international public release against acts such as monitoring device shutdown, destructive fishing and violent resistance to law enforcement. Third, enhance cross-departmental law enforcement coordination and safety standards. Organize joint patrols by coast guard and fishery authorities during high-risk periods, and refine humanitarian rescue contingency plans covering vessel collisions, man overboard, crew injuries and severe weather emergencies. Fourth, maintain consistent law enforcement standards. Prioritize verbal warnings and expulsion with evidence retention for minor violations, while imposing strict legal sanctions on organized and repeated infringements. This narrows Vietnam's room for repeated maritime probing while preventing isolated incidents from spiraling out of control.

A three-tier response framework shall be formulated based on the severity of violations to clarify disposal thresholds: for vessels entering jurisdictional waters for the first time without obvious confrontation and willing to cooperate, focus on inspection, verbal warning and expulsion; for repeat cross-border operators, vessels with disabled monitoring equipment, craft carrying banned fishing gear or vessels refusing inspection, intensify tracking and evidence collection, and adopt mandatory law enforcement measures in accordance with the law; for fleets surrounding law enforcement platforms, ramming official vessels, covering accomplice vessels' escape or suspected non-production missions, launch inter-departmental joint disposal and formal diplomatic notification procedures. Stable implementation of tiered standards improves on-site command efficiency and clarifies to the international community that China's law enforcement targets specific illegal and dangerous acts rather than particular nationalities or ordinary civilian fishermen.

5.2. Improve Institutional and Technical Support to Standardize Fishing Operations and Supervision

First, upgrade China's institutional framework governing South China Sea fishery production and resource conservation. Dynamically release legitimate fishing guidelines and risk nautical charts based on fishing moratorium schedules, resource density and marine meteorological conditions to guide domestic fishing vessels away from high-friction sensitive zones and risky time windows. Second, build a cross-departmental maritime information service platform to push real-time updates of meteorology, sea conditions, law enforcement bulletins, foreign vessel activity alerts and emergency contact information to fishing vessels, improving fishermen's early warning and risk avoidance capabilities. Third, accelerate the upgrading of communication, positioning, video evidence collection and lifesaving equipment for domestic offshore fishing vessels. Provide preferential policies on insurance, vessel maintenance and fuel subsidies for law-abiding fishing operators cooperating with official supervision. Fourth, reinforce catch traceability and marine ecological monitoring, and publish verifiable data demonstrating China's achievements in fishing moratoriums, stock enhancement and release, coral reef protection and crackdowns on destructive fishing. Integrating maritime rights protection with ecological conservation elevates China's fishery governance performance and limits Vietnam's room to weaponize environmental issues against China.

5.3. Upgrade Public Opinion Guidance and Secure Discourse Initiative

A rapid factual release mechanism for South China Sea fishery incidents shall be established. For major law enforcement operations, release verified details including time, location, vessel misconduct, number of warnings, legal basis and humanitarian rescue measures promptly without compromising operational security or evidence integrity, supplemented by navigation track diagrams, on-site footage and multilingual Q&A documents to prevent unilateral framing of incidents by Vietnam. In response to Vietnam's narratives of "ecological stewardship" and "vulnerable fishermen", counterarguments shall be grounded in tangible evidence including EU IUU verification findings, VMS disconnection records, footage of destructive fishing gear and regional fishery resource assessment reports instead of abstract slogans. Organize experts specializing in maritime law, fishery resources and maritime law enforcement to deliver briefings to ASEAN member states, international organizations and professional media. Continuously release verified cases of China's resource conservation and maritime rescue to accumulate long-term international credibility, rather than issuing one-off rebuttals after public opinion crises erupt.

5.4. Boost Support and Cross-Border Collaboration to Mitigate Maritime Rights Protection Risks

First, refine the China-Vietnam emergency communication mechanism for maritime fishery incidents. Push competent authorities of both sides to update hotline contacts, standardize notification formats and clarify official response time limits, establishing direct communication channels to handle crew injuries, vessel malfunctions, detention investigations and emergency sheltering during severe weather. Second, appropriately decouple fishery resource conservation from sovereignty disputes. On the premise of reserving respective maritime claims, launch technical cooperation on banned fishing gear regulation, juvenile fish protection, maritime search and rescue and cross-border illegal fishing crackdowns to reduce resource depletion-driven cross-border fishing incentives. Third, strengthen legal and safety training for domestic fishermen, formulating standardized response protocols for encounters with foreign law enforcement vessels, fleet blockades, equipment failures and crew falling overboard, and improve supporting mechanisms for fishing vessel insurance claims and legal aid services. Fourth, institute a post-incident review system led by foreign affairs, coast guard, fishery and publicity departments to jointly assess law enforcement outcomes, diplomatic feedback and public opinion dissemination, and adjust contingency plans in a timely manner. Parallel progress in diplomatic communication, maritime law enforcement and fishermen livelihood security reduces risks of misjudgment and conflict escalation.

6. Conclusion

Since To Lam took office as General Secretary, Vietnam's fishery policies concerning the South China Sea have not merely shifted from unregulated fishing to compliant fishing. Instead, Vietnam has tightened its governance under market pressure from the European Union, while retaining the policy function of sustaining maritime presence and advancing its maritime strategy through offshore fishery operations. Decree No. 37/2024/NĐ-CP, special rectification campaigns for VMS, electronic catch traceability systems and the fifth verification mission conducted by the European Commission all demonstrate that Vietnam is building a stricter digital supervision system. Meanwhile, the development of standing maritime militia units, coast guard cooperation and capacity assistance from extra-regional powers have provided stronger organizational and logistical support for its maritime activities. The parallel advancement of these two lines of work has transformed Vietnam's fishing operations from scattered, extensive and easily identifiable activities into more controllable, long-lasting yet covert operations.

China should not merely respond to the above shifts by increasing patrol frequencies. Instead, it shall integrate maritime rights protection, fishery governance, evidence dissemination and diplomatic risk management into a unified framework. Infringing fishing and organized probing activities shall be handled in accordance with the law based on continuous monitoring and complete evidence chains. Necessary restraint and consistent humanitarian rescue shall be maintained when dealing with ordinary fishermen and maritime emergencies. Verifiable governance data shall be proactively released on issues including IUU fishing, ecological conservation and regional maritime norms. As for China-Vietnam maritime disputes, risks shall be contained through steady hotline communication and technical cooperation. Only by combining firm adherence to principles with refined on-site disposal can China safeguard its sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, while mitigating spillover impacts of isolated fishery incidents on bilateral China-Vietnam relations and regional stability.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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