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Abstract:

is paper examines the shi ing histories of the relationship between main land Chinese regimes and their southern coast, Hainan Island, and the South China Sea. While Beijing today claims that Chinese regimes have adminis tered the South China Sea in some form for 2,000 years, from the perspec tive of successive dynasties' centers of power, the far regions of the Sea were in fact culturally alien territory, and o en far beyond their administrative

Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- e United States should ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) through a two-thirds US Senate vote for advice and consent. is is among the most common-sense and bene cial treaties in US history, and a great achievement of the legal team of US President Ronald Reagan, as led by John Norton Moore. Failure to ratify UNCLOS, in spite of numerous e orts, and a er all reservations and real concerns and arguments against the treaty have already been completely addressed, is causing Washington and US businesses loss of revenue, security, and international credibility. At the time of writing, Washington remains outside of the framework, and is a signatory but not a rati ed member. Several recent works, including one by Moore, enumerate the bene ts of accession to the treaty, and the daily losses of remaining outside of it.

- e United States should continue to support the claims of regional states to their sovereign maritime territory and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) according to UNCLOS, especially where those claims are violated by Beijing's refuted nine-dash line. While some in the United States may

Introduction

For a week in February of 2023, an alleged spy balloon launched from China's Hainan Island captured the attention of the American public as it dri ed over the United States. Beijing claimed that it was a weather balloon.[3] It was nally shot down by an AIM-9X Sidewinder (air intercept missile), red by a Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor.[4] Comparisons abounded, in sensational headlines and punditry, to the 1957 Soviet Sputnik satellite launch, a reminder of technological and military rivalries and tensions.[5] e brief ight of Sputnik became part of the impetus for more urgency in the funding of American science, technology, and higher education in general, culminating in the successful moon mission of 1969 and enduring American leadership in education and military prowess. e Chinese balloon incident, on the other hand, may remain a relatively trivial

> province's land (mainly including Hainan Island, Xisha, Zhongsha, and Nansha Islands) has a total area of 35,400 square kilometers and a sea area of about 2 million square kilometers.[7]

Hainan's and thus China's unilateral claim to nearly all of the South China Sea is based on a maritime claim by the Republic of China (RoC) government in the 1940s on several maps, prior to the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Beijing has carried over these maritime claims, asserting them as "historical" and claiming that they go back not only to the RoC claims, but indeed centuries and even millennia as the Ministry of Foreign A airs noted in a 2016 statement:

> e activities of the Chinese people in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago. China is the rst to have discovered, named, and explored and exploited Nanhai Zhudao and relevant waters, and the rst to have exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over them continuously, peacefully and e ectively, thus establishing territorial sovereignty and relevant rights and interests in the South China Sea.[8]

For its part, today the Republic of China (Taiwan) echoes the sweeping maritime sovereignty claims, but it also encourages adherence to UNCLOS, which would e ectively honor several of the regional challenges to Beijing's nine-dash line claims.[9] It seems likely that Taipei's articulation of this claim is part of the "strategic ambiguity" that marks so much of its policy, since any change to these "historical" claims could mean opening a larger cultural and historical can of worms with Beijing.

e United States and others have asserted that Beijing's current claims

Looking further back, this paper summarizes the historiography of Chinese mainland interests and control in Hainan and the South China Sea based on the most recent scholarship and political developments. Beijing's new narrative, or new mythology, re ects its priorities and aspirations in the region, and for its future more broadly. While the 2023 spy balloon incident may not seem as grave as Sputnik was in 1957, we are likewise in a moment of reckoning with a rival power whose ascent requires clear comprehension and priorities for the future. is is not only a question of quibbling over antique maps or cultural relics. e South China Sea is where these antiquarian claims intersect with current geopolitics, navigation rights, and access to natural resources.[13] Understanding the histories and mythologies of the region will hopefully o er a clear framework for an equitable and rules-based future in

CE, who have gone on to become national heroes in modern Vietnam.[19]

What followed in some of the Han-conquered regions has sometimes been termed "Sinicization" or "Sini cation" ("becoming Chinese," or *Hanhua*) by some historians, entailing the enforcement of Han bureaucratic rule and adop tion of Han customs and language. e question of Sinicization is a ashpoint of contentious debate throughout Chinese history, including this early period as well as the governance of later "conquest" dynasties like the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing.[20] e question of Sinicization is an emotional one not only for conquered peoples, but also for Chinese students and scholars, as his torian Xin Fan has noted.[21] Sporadic resistance to Han rule continued, and not all of the distinctive Yue customs disappeared, which had included a sepa rate language, short hairstyles, facial and body tattooing, and great ability in boat-building and sailing. Indeed, the Yue distinguished themselves from the Han people in their abilities and interests in seafaring.[22]

ere is perhaps no more extreme alienation of a fellow human than to make beasts of them. u's nal line above is a clear indication that the inhabitants of the southern coasts and southern seas were not only uncivilized, they were considered to be utterly foreign and indeed subhuman. ese examples serve to show, from earliest times, that the people of what is today southern China were long considered beyond the pale of Chinese civilization.

In his classic analysis of Hainan's relationship with early mainland regimes,

China Sea and discovered what they called Nanhai Zhudao (aka the South China Sea islands). Well documented by both Chinese and foreign historical materials and archaeological digs, there is evidence of ancient crops, wells, houses, temples, tombs, and inscriptions le by Chinese shermen on some of the islands and reefs of the South China Sea islands. Many foreign documents illustrate clearly that for a lengthy historical duration, only Chinese people lived and worked on these South China Sea islands. roughout this long process of explor ing and developing the South China Sea islands, the Chinese people have gradually increased and improved China's side rights in the South China Sea. ese include historic claims, which have in turn been upheld by successive Chinese governments.[27]

e activities, artifacts, and records referred to here are not those of of cial Han embassies, since those did not extend beyond the coast of Hainan Island. It is more likely that these are artifacts of locals, and as noted above, it is contestable that these southern barbarians could be considered culturally "Chinese" in the continuous sense that is suggested here. e foundation of the claim rests on the contention that Chinese cultural or civilizational con tinuity through this period is su cient for contemporary geopolitical claims. Some archaeological nds suggest trade in Chinese goods through the re gion, but this does not mean the area was governed by a mainland regime.[28] One rather recent claim to continuity of Chinese presence in the region has come in the form of "route books" (*gelubu*) used by shers especially from Hainan to navigate the sometimes-dangerous shoals. Johannes L. Kurz re counts the contrast between the careful scholarship by historians compiling these texts, like Zhou Weimin and Tang Lingling, and the more bombastic and totalizing claims made in the popular press and by o cials about the "route books." Ultimately, Kurz nds that no evidence of the books' claims of a 600-year legacy is o ered in any of these accounts.[29] Authenticating the "route books" would not serve to establish administration of the South China Sea, but rather maritime knowledge on the part of Hainanese shers, far from the northern centers of imperial culture.

With the brief Sui (581–618 CE) and longer Tang (618–907) dynasties, the southern regions of the current PRC map, including the coast and Hainan,

were more thoroughly incorporated into the northern-based empires. Still, the southern coast remained a distant place within the imperial worldview. It was considered to be fraught with dangers from diseases and hostile local people. is perception is evident in the use of southern regions, especially the island of Hainan, as a destination of banishment for ministers and scholar of cials. Historian, Zhou Quangen, in his study of Sui and Tang o cialdom on Hainan, notes that the location of “banishment” on a list of punishments falls between torture and decapitation, which provides a clear sense of the island’s political and cultural place within the realm.[30] A series of high-ranking o cials were banished to Hainan as a result of factional struggles in the court, or the act of “loyal remonstrance,” the dangerous Confucian act of publicly lec turing an emperor on his failings, and accepting the ensuing punishment for this patriotic opposition.[31] Today in Haikou, the provincial capital of Hainan, the Temple of the Five Ministers honors those o cials banished to the island.

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map that began to take the shape of the current PRC, including what is today Xinjiang, Tibet, and northeastern China. In this way, quintessential aspects

> Unlike the PRC government in the present century, no exact boundary such as the nine-dash line had been established for the maritime space the Qing court claimed. Instead, time and space, coupled with relationality, malleability, mutuality, and contrariety, were the foundations of the Qing's justifications for its sovereignty across the western end of the Pacific Ocean.[39]

Also in this new collection, Daria Dahpon Ho writes about the colorful and complex maritime world of the High Qing, and how personal vendettas, shifting identities, and of course piracy shaped a diverse region. Ho vividly recounts attempts to secure trading ports (or pirate nests, depending on one's perspective), and explains episodes of violence and betrayal involving the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Japanese, and then the Zheng regime (Koxinga) on Taiwan, followed by the English as "the world's first great drug dealers."[40]

Following the "High Qing," imperial decline in the nineteenth century is

even beyond the 1950 Communist takeover, carried on a perennial island resistance to outsiders, including mainland Chinese.[47] In terms of official Party histories of Hainan written during the PRC, one typical summary is found below, in the Party history of ethnic struggles, compiled by the Hainan Provincial Gazetteer/Chronicle Office:

> During the nearly 2,000 years from the Western Han to the Qing Dynasty, the ethnic minorities in Hainan continued to fight against the oppression of the feudal dynasties and strive for national survival [my emphasis]. There were more than 70 uprisings large and small…In modern times, Hainan has become a place where imperialism and feudal warlords have competed for plunder. Therefore, the ethnic minorities of Hainan and the local Han people have fought heroically against imperialism and feudal warlords to protect their homeland.[48]

This account goes on to cite the shared struggle of the Hainan Li people with the Communist guerrilla fighters on Hainan, against the Nationalists and the Japanese, effectively placing the alienation and exploitation of the southern island in the realms of previous regimes, with the Communists making common cause not with the authorities, but with the ethnic rebels who fought to overthrow them. While this fits neatly with revolutionary propaganda, it certainly does not square with claims to cultural or administrative continuity of maritime claims. The lineage of resistance here is with those who fought the administrators and efforts at control.

In the early days of the PRC, Beijing's decision to join the Korean War on the part of the Democratic Republic of Korea, or North Korea, also had implications in the South China Sea. Amidst the Communists' threat of taking Taiwan and the revolutionary movements in French Indochina and throughout the wider region, anxieties about the spread of communism shaped the politics of the day, leading to the blockade of the Taiwan Strait by the US Navy's Seventh Fleet.

Within the South China Sea, although Beijing was not capable of projecting power on air or at sea, it projected a narrative of strength and emergent regional power status, inheriting the bold maritime claims of the Republican regime it had banished to Taiwan. Beijing also asserted that this was the end

Qi, the Party chief of Haikou, for corruption made it still more emblematic of systemic challenges not only in Hainan, but throughout the PRC. Recent moves to make all of Hainan a massive “free-trade zone” have shown the is land to be open for global business, even as Beijing’s recent actions in Hong Kong have threatened to chill the economy there.[53]

Hainan’s role in reproducing Beijing’s narrative of the region has also become increasingly important as more mainland tourists visit the island. Recently, a spectacular new Museum of the South China Sea has opened near the shing village of Tanmen, which is also near the site of the annual Bo’ao Forum for Asia. is forum was initially touted as the “Asian Davos,” but in about two decades, it has become largely an opportunity for recitation of talk ing points and the occasional diplomatic ap caused by “wolf warrior” diplo mats violating protocol in an attempt to assert dominance. e proximity of Bo’ao and the new museum is deliberate, since the museum is a convenient af ternoon outing for Forum attendees. One recent visitor to the Forum and the museum remarked that the latter was “a vast, empty, museum concerning the South China Sea. e investment in the museum must have been huge, it was almost totally devoid of visitors, and the sheer scale of the museum indicated that China was not going to move on South China Sea issues in a thousand years, guratively speaking.”[54] is nal line indeed re eySan.5 9 Tm4.8 (1.6 (t)8.2 (o.

scholars, historians, and political scientists emphasize the importance of fully endorsing the rules-based order, especially as Beijing continues to out it in the South China Sea. Better understanding the history of the region and the ways in which that history is distorted and deployed to bolster Beijing's claim may not resolve the real threats to stability and peace in the region, but it will help to counter that distorted narrative and present one that is based on the rules-based international order that all parties are so deeply invested in.

As far as American activities, Gregory Poling notes in his recent book, "Forging a network of agreements to manage the South China Sea will be dif cult and drawn out. But it is the only way forward."[56] Understanding the PCA ruling is essential, but it is also important to understand the historical, cultural, and legal perspective of regional players like the Philippines, as ex pressed by advocates like Justice Antonio T. Carpio.[57] Recent scholarship ar gues for a richer understanding of Southeast Asian players in the region and resisting the easy narrative of a US-China rivalry. Indeed, some would argue that there is neither a Chinese nor an American solution to the South China Sea. e only solution will come through hearing multiple actors in the re gion, and together charting a sustainable path forward.[58]

ese diverse views are not as well funded as the positions of either Washington or Beijing. Beijing's narrative, as represented by the nine-dash line, has even found its way into the background of recent blockbuster lms, including *Abominable* (2019), and perhaps more dubiously, *Barbie* (2023), where an inexplicable dotted line in a brie y shown child-drawn map was enough to convince Vietnamese authorities that the lm should not be re leased in their country.[59] While the line has been dismissed as an unintentional coincidence by representatives of the *Barbie* lm, the lack of awareness of, and sensitivity to, regional players like the Philippines, Vietnam, and oth ers is unfortunate. Furthermore, the trend of accommodating the political, historical, and cultural preferences of PRC audiences and censors in the pur suit of pro ts has been a common theme for major American cultural exports, including lm and television.

Americans should also be mindful of the ways in which, intentionally or not, some public diplomacy proclamations, scholarly publications, and other cultural interactions can similarly pander to Chinese o cial audiences. is is more subtle than *Barbie*, perhaps, but equally welcome in Beijing. It may in

clude the simple con ation of the Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party; or it may entail assuming a attering (but monolithic) timeless cultural mindset of the Chinese people, which serves to describe the ancient past as well as it does the current regime. While most cultural essentialism is funda mentally racist and ignorant, this particular brand can be attering, since it reinforces the place of the current regime within the long duration of Chinese history, portraying the PRC as the latest to hold the Mandate of Heaven. Not only does it ignore the regime's half-century attempt to pulverize most rem nants of that culture and history (from burning books to desecrating the tomb of Confucius), but it atters the current leaders that they draw on the wisest traditions in their imperial past.[60]

While some observers of China see a con dent rising superpower, anxieties about history naturally plague a regime that has done so much to demolish its own culture and is reluctant to reckon with that destruction. While some for eign observers, from elder statesmen to professional wrestlers, help Beijing to smooth over the cracks in an e ort to control the past, silencing the voices of history will perhaps prove to be an impossible challenge.[61] Less cultural anxi eties re ect China's desire to retroactively impose continuity on a long histori cal record that is much more complex than any continuous and homogenous culture or civilization. In concluding a 2006 lecture titled "Qing Culturalism and Manchu Identity," Frederic Wakeman asked "Can Panglossian global capitalism coexist with a fragile and even touchy Chinese nationalism?... Citizens of China, I think, have every reason to be proud of their country's international progress during the 1980s and 1990s. But their pride has not yet produced a serene con dence about the future of the Han nation."[62]

Understanding this insecurity and the "touchy nationalism" is essential to understanding Hainan, the South China Sea, and Beijing's role there. Alarm at the brinksmanship and regular confrontations that take place on the sur face of the seas can crowd out discussions of deeper currents in history and cultural identity; but they are certainly interwoven and cannot be fully under stood without each other.

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