

ASEAN's Dilemma: China and Its South China Sea's Stance

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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to analyze the ongoing territorial disputes between China and various ASEAN countries occurring in the South China Sea, and it highlights detrimental effects of these disputes on the political and military stability of the ASEAN region. The paper contends that China's military excursion into the southern part of the South China Sea, which occurred earlier this year, appears to be in symbiosis with its increased economic influence over the ASEAN region. Although numerous political and military threats have directly contributed to the creation of ASEAN, the unparalleled economic rise of China spanning the past four decades in general, and China's remodeling into the single largest trading partner of ASEAN over the past decade in particular, have presented ASEAN with both a unique security challenge as well as an inescapable economic dilemma: How to defend the regional bloc's territorial integrity without upsetting its strategic economic partner? The paper also indicates that China's assertive behavior with regard to the South China Sea territorial disputes will only intensify in the post-pandemic environment, emboldened by the enormous economic ties it has constructed with its Southeast Asian partners. Lastly, the paper argues that ASEAN's sole prospect of defending its territorial integrity in the South China Sea depends on the ability of its member states to find a unified stance over this issue. This, however, will not be feasible without seeking a deeper integration among ASEAN countries. The paper relies primarily on historical, comparative political, economic, and military analysis.

Keywords: ASEAN, China, South China Sea, Political stability, Economic influence, Territorial disputes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, just when the ASEAN bloc was confronted by an unprecedented health challenge in the shape of a global pandemic, another crisis started looming hundreds of miles away from its shores in the southern part of the South China Sea.

A standoff, occurring between Chinese and Malaysian vessels in the South China Sea, was the latest development in a series of targeted harassments by Chinese vessels of drilling operations in five oil blocks off the Malaysian coast (Waran, 2020). This event coincided with a similar standoff between Chinese and Indonesian vessels taking place in the Natuna Regency, which was triggered by Chinese fishing activities inside Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (Westcott & Lendon, 2020).

Understandably, given the long history of territorial disputes in the contested waters of the South China Sea, such incidents are hardly surprising as they tend to occur rather periodically, especially in close proximity to the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands. As a result, ASEAN countries such as Vietnam and the

Philippines have become regular victims of China's maritime harassment.

However, the fact that these latest incidents took place off the coast of Borneo, in the southern point of the South China Sea – thus directly challenging the territorial integrity of Malaysia and Indonesia, and indirectly putting neighboring Brunei and Singapore on alert – represents a new and much more dangerous phase in the ongoing territorial disputes between China and various ASEAN countries. What is even more worrying is the fact that these maritime standoffs occurred at the height of the pandemic, when ASEAN countries' healthcare systems were overwhelmed by the sudden spread of the coronavirus.

It appears that these incidents were not random acts. Quite the contrary, they point to the fact that China's advertised intention and determination to claim the South China Sea is relentless. More broadly, its latest campaign comes at a time of increased hostilities happening on the Indian-Chinese borders, and coincides with yet another standoff with Japan over the status of the Senkaku Islands in the neighboring East China Sea.

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More specifically, China's ability to penetrate into the southern tip of the South China Sea does not only indicate the level of its overall military preparedness. It is also a reflection of its confidence, stemming from the economic realities sensed across the ASEAN region and beyond. The unparalleled economic rise of China spanning the past four decades in general, and China's remodeling into the single largest trading partner of ASEAN over the past decade in particular, underpins China's assertive behavior with respect to the South China Sea. Thus, a compelling argument can be made here that China's military excursion into the southern part of the South China Sea is in symbiosis with its increased economic influence over the ASEAN region.

It is therefore reasonable to expect that China's venturing into the contested waters of the South China Sea will only intensify in the post-pandemic environment, emboldened by the enormous economic ties it has constructed with its Southeast Asian partners. This situation presents the ASEAN region with both a unique security challenge as well as an inescapable economic dilemma: *How to defend the regional bloc's territorial integrity without upsetting its strategic economic partner?*

It seems that China's economic leverage over ASEAN is here to stay for the foreseeable future. The Forest City in Johor, Malaysia, and Sihanoukville in Cambodia – probably the most obvious symbols of such influence over ASEAN – are just the tip of the iceberg. Finding the right answer to the posed question will not be an easy task. Nonetheless, answering this question matters: For it is not only deeply associated with the very reason why this regional bloc was created a little over five decades ago, but because it also indicates how relevant ASEAN wishes to be in the twenty-first century's turbulent international politics. The purpose of this research paper is to understand how ASEAN's dilemma came about.

2. ASEAN

Given the history of ASEAN, various political, security and military challenges appear to be faithful companions of this organization. Born amid the turbulent times of the decolonization process, and shaped by the realities of the Cold War, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967.

The founding member states – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – were at that time facing the same political and security

problem that threatened the stability of their political systems – the spread of communism across Southeast Asia. It was this external security threat – posed by the nation-state actors – that became one of the key determinants of ASEAN's establishment. Although mutual international relations among ASEAN countries were often plagued by the existence of territorial disputes and constant suspicion, the expanding threat of communism forced them to find a common ground. Thus, a political and economic agreement was achieved in 1967 and ASEAN came into being. Containing communism became the overreaching goal of the organization and in this ASEAN succeeded (Sviatko, 2019).

Looking back at the turbulent times of the 1960s, an argument can be made that ASEAN's founding members simply rose to the occasion having recognized an historic opportunity brought about by the end of colonial rule.

Accordingly, with the end of the era of colonial control, Southeast Asians have, for the most part, been able to make their own decisions and determine to what extent they should rely on their own values and the lessons they have drawn from history (Osborne, 2016).

But ASEAN's successful establishment was also enabled by some other factors. Using its sea routes, trade has always been vital to the development of the region. And while military strategists tend to consider oceans and seas to be large geographical barriers – difficult to overcome – merchants look at them through very different lenses. The Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait and the South China Sea have been used as trade and shipping routes for centuries. From this perspective, seas do not divide. Quite the contrary: They bring geographically-dispersed communities a little closer. Consequently, ASEAN's establishment can also be interpreted as the continuation of an entrepreneurial culture which has always been a distinct hallmark of the region (Sviatko, 2019).

Being relentlessly anti-communist and loyal to its long-established and widely-practiced religious traditions, ASEAN benefited from an increased economic integration that gradually took off across Asia during the 1970s and 1980s, and, with the deepening cooperation among its member states, ASEAN has gradually begun delivering that kind prosperity and stability to its citizens that its African counterparts, who embarked on a postcolonial journey just about the same time, could only dream of. As a result, the

chance of a communist takeover of ASEAN countries was effectively eliminated.

With Mao Zedong's passing in 1976, China was suddenly presented with an opportunity to put its own house in order. Domestically, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China embarked on a colossal economic transformation, which shook the ideological foundations of the People's Republic to the core, as the changes deviated from the doctrinaire principles postulated by the republic's founding father – Mao himself.

For Deng, the whole point of socialism was to increase people's living standards. His practice of communism was not of the utopian genre; for him, it was simply the practical means by which one could raise production levels and eliminate poverty. This was a long way from the utopian purity demanded by Mao (Pike, 2010).

Internationally, the transformation sent shockwaves across the region and beyond. China's domestic political and economic reforms initiated by Deng resulted in a thaw in international relations between ASEAN and China as a logical progression from the new political reality that has swept across the region. It seemed that those days when ASEAN's overall stability was threatened by the actions of a hostile nation-state were gone. And although the Cold War was still far from over, the security risks China once posed appeared to have been substantially reduced – at least from the perspective of ASEAN's founding members. The remaining asymmetric threats to ASEAN's security, such as piracy, drug trafficking and terrorism, were perceived as marginal, non-existential threats posed by non-state actors.

As China opened its gates to what became the largest consumer market to date, ASEAN became increasingly outward-looking – recognizing the immense opportunities offered by economic cooperation with a former enemy. Thus, on the one hand, significant structural shifts happened within ASEAN, which eventually led to ASEAN's northbound expansion with the incorporation of its new members: Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. On the other hand, as ASEAN's economic ambitions gradually gained preeminence over its political concerns, a road was, inadvertently, paved for the emergence of those forces which first propelled China's economic rise and, eventually, imposed and expanded its economic influence over the ASEAN region.

3. A 'NEW' CHINA

Deng's economic reforms produced the desired outcomes. With a real GDP growth rate of almost 10 per cent per year throughout the 1980s, China emerged as the giant among the world's developing economies. By 1994, the value of output produced by the private sector accounted for 50 per cent of GDP compared to less than 20 per cent a decade earlier (Pike, 2010).

China's ability to rediscover the effectiveness of market forces, which had been erased from its economic memory after 1949, coupled with its means of attracting foreign direct investments (FDI), played key roles in China's economic transformation. On top of which, in a bid to secure the critical arrival of FDI, China became and remains an outward-looking nation – a dramatic departure from the narrative pursued by Mao.

As a result, it is estimated that in the period between 1990 and 2000, investments from Southeast Asia, dominated by the Chinese diaspora, were responsible for as much as USD 90 billion in FDI (Heydarian, 2015). In fact, it is estimated that the Chinese diaspora collectively contributed as much as 80 per cent of all FDIs in the country (Kurlantzick, 2007).

On the one hand, the continuing stream of foreign direct investments was one of the factors that enabled China's integration into the global economy. On the other hand, from a regional perspective, foreign direct investments deepened economic cooperation between ASEAN and China at the turn of the twenty-first century. However, as China's investments in ASEAN has begun outpacing those that came to China from this regional bloc, and with China becoming ASEAN's top trading partner a decade later, such economic cooperation entered a new stage. Thus, in little over three decades since its economic transformation began, China has been able to successfully reposition itself from being a recipient of foreign investments coming from various ASEAN countries into becoming a major investor in ASEAN. Understandably, such economic repositioning had significant political implications for ASEAN and beyond.

Internationally, China's rise to become an economic and political powerhouse in East Asia has transformed its relations with Southeast Asia. This has not only affected those countries which share a border with China – Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam – but the Southeast Asian region as a whole, as China has

increasingly made it clear that its interests cannot be ignored, not least because of its direct economic interaction with the region (Osborne, 2016).

While an argument can be made that there are some parallels between China's ascendancy and the post-war economic recovery of Germany and Japan, China's economic emergence still differs markedly from the two. Being fully aware of the new economic reality and its political implications for ASEAN-China relations at the start of the twenty-first century, Beijing has slowly begun sounding that kind of political rhetoric which bears a striking resemblance to the pre-1976 era. Moreover, the South China Sea has gradually become a frequent subject of such rhetorical declamations.

There are a variety of reasons why the South China Sea has become a focal point of the Chinese government. Firstly, controlling the many tiny islands is in part a matter of controlling the wealth assumed to lie beneath the sea in various forms: From unexploited minerals and oil and gas to the immense fisheries that exist in these waters. Secondly, for China, it is a matter of increasing the country's sense of security, by dominating the maritime approaches to its long coast, and securing sea lanes to the open Pacific. Thirdly, it is also a matter of overcoming historical grievances. And finally, it is about becoming a power that is at least on par with the US: A goal that Chinese leaders are themselves somewhat coy about, but which is now increasingly entering the public discourse (French, 2015).

4. THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Strategically located in Southeast Asia, the South China Sea is an integral part of the Pacific Ocean. With the exception of Laos and Myanmar, which are landlocked countries, and Cambodia and Thailand, which are located in the vicinity of the Gulf of Thailand, the South China Sea washes the shores of the six remaining ASEAN members: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Roughly a third larger than the Mediterranean Sea – covering an area of about 3.5 km², the South China Sea has been home to various maritime trade routes for a very long period of time. And just as the Mediterranean Sea has been able to bind together various countries of diverse political cultures over the past centuries, the same can be stated about the South China Sea – primarily for its ability to link countries stretching from the Strait of Malacca to those located along the Strait of Taiwan. Moreover,

if we continue to assess its north-south divide, then we can see that the South China Sea is connecting Indonesia – a country of seventeen thousand islands, located in its southern tip – with Taiwan and China, both positioned in its northern waters. It also connects the Philippines, which is located in its eastern part, with Singapore – a country located in its western cartographic tip. Owing to these briefly outlined geographical realities, the South China Sea binds China with the ASEAN region.

Also known for its abundant natural resources and a rich marine biodiversity, the warm sea has provided livelihood for its coastline communities since ancient times. Accordingly, various explorers or merchants of those times, as well as modern-day decision-makers have always attributed an immense strategic importance to its waters. Therein lies a potential for both international cooperation and military conflict. This, perhaps, also constitutes the reason why countries of this region are currently locked in ongoing territorial disputes concerning the South China Sea.

The current discord in the South China Sea has been a long time in the making – it has not erupted abruptly. In order to explain the historic origins of the current disputes, we will give a brief historical analysis.

The fact that Deng's cordiality was not offered to every nation of the region could already be seen in 1979, when China invaded neighboring Vietnam. The overreaching goal of this brief invasion was the Chinese effort to force Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia – a move, which according to China's calculation, would precipitate Pol Pot's return to power. However, China's land invasion in the northern part of Vietnam failed. As the Vietnamese forces were set to remain in Cambodia for another decade, with Pol Pot never being able to set foot in Phnom Penh again, this brief conflict signalled the start of intensified territorial disputes between the two countries in the South China Sea.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, China managed to expand its control across the South China Sea, primarily at the expense of Vietnam. When its goal to consolidate its control over the Paracel Islands was achieved in 1980, China made the decision to establish a permanent physical presence in the Spratly Islands in 1987 (Heydarian, 2015). This is where the origins of the current crisis can be traced to, as it is in the area of the Spratly Islands, where China started the construction of artificial islands in 2013 as part of its reclamation activities which escalated tensions

with ASEAN and negatively affected the marine biodiversity of the area.

It is also fair to note that it was not only China that asserted its claims in the disputed waters of the sea; various ASEAN countries made their own competing claims in the sea, too. Although ASEAN countries have frequently shown their ability to come together in times of common threats of a military nature, the bloc's stability has – from time to time – been rocked by its members' mutually opposing territorial claims over the South China Sea. This led, in 1992, to an agreement between the members of ASEAN to exercise restraint in their actions in the South China Sea (Hayton, 2014).

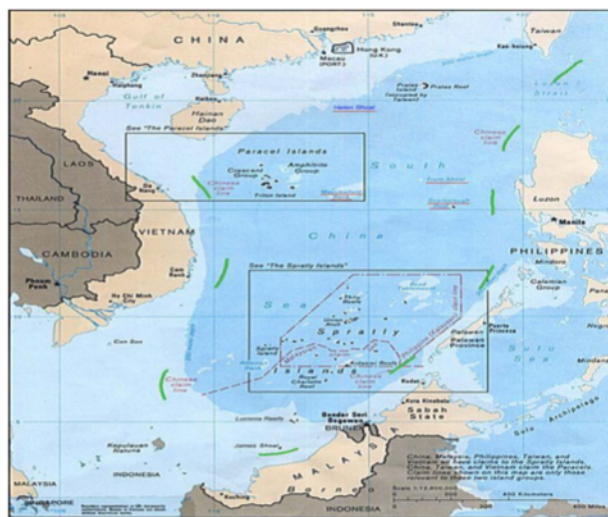
While this move significantly mitigated the potential for a possible military conflict between the ASEAN countries, reaching the same kind of agreement between ASEAN and China has so far proved elusive.

At the heart of the current discord between ASEAN and China is the latter's claim to roughly 80 per cent of the sea. To make its case, China's state officials have continuously referred to 'historic rights', contending that Chinese explorers and fishermen have roamed the waters of the South China Sea for centuries and that those activities provide a basis to claim all the land – and all the sea – within the 'U-shaped line' (Hayton, 2014).

A map seen on the following page indicates the so-called 'U-shaped line', also known as the 'Nine-dash line' – which covers an extensive area of the sea, stretching from Hainan to Borneo (Malaysia). It also incorporates the already mentioned Paracel and Spratly Islands, which have long been the subjects of maritime confrontation between China and Vietnam. China has also set the stage for a wider confrontation over the contested waters, involving other countries, such as the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.

China has not precisely articulated – in terms that would make it clear to diplomats or legal experts – what its 'Nine-dash line' means – leaving many to interpret the line as a maximalist claim to sovereignty and control over all the features, land, water, and seabed within the area bounded by the Nine-dash line (Tsibras, 2016).

It is precisely this lack of clear definition which continues to generate international tensions until today. As we will point out later, broader economic realities are set to play in China's favor and are poised to further strengthen China's claims in the area.



In order to further back its territorial claims with regard to the South China Sea, China refers to various geographical documents, such as maps used in the 1940s, which define the disputed area of the sea as China's. It is important to note here that when the Chinese current political system was born in 1949, most of ASEAN countries were at that time still administered as colonies. This fact, however, does not hamper China's determination to claim what it perceives as its legitimate territory.

What is also quite intriguing when we look back at the historic origins of this discord between ASEAN and China is that just about the time ASEAN launched its northbound expansion in the 1990s – offering its full membership to Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia – China moved in the opposite direction by shifting the focus of its maritime attentiveness south of Hainan province, which had long been considered as China's main gateway to the South China Sea.

Up until January 1995, Chinese expansion in the South China Sea had only really affected Vietnam. The features China had seized were all either in the Paracels or along the western side of the Spratlys, far from the other claimants. But by taking Mischief Reef on the eastern side, China had, for the first time, encroached into waters claimed by other members of ASEAN. After the Chinese move, not just the Philippines but Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia all felt directly threatened. In April 1995, at the first ever ASEAN-China Forum, which might have been the obvious place to discuss the matter, Beijing simply refused to have it on the agenda (Hayton, 2014).

Shortly afterwards, economic realities began contributing to the complexity of the issue, further aggravating the problem for ASEAN. Significantly

weakened by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, ASEAN countries shifted their focus to planning their economic recoveries. As a result, China managed to keep its economic momentum going and further strengthen its hand in the South China Sea – achieving its broader objectives.

Then, as China became ASEAN's largest trading partner in 2009 (Frohlich & Loewen, 2017), ASEAN's dilemma was fully exposed. With China becoming a prime market for ASEAN's products, decision-makers in the ASEAN countries' capitals would have to ask some sensitive questions. Will China continue buying ASEAN products if the export-dependent ASEAN decides to adopt a tougher stance in the South China Sea? Will Chinese visitors go to see the tourism-dependent ASEAN countries if ASEAN comes with a unified stance over the South China Sea dispute? It is important to bear in mind that it would not be the first time for China to use outbound tourism, with its formidable force of 129 million Chinese tourists making overseas trips in 2017 alone, as a coercive tool with few effective countermeasures (Coca, 2018).

There are no easy answers to these questions. Especially as China's additional economic programs, such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – literally encompassing all the ASEAN countries – are poised to further shift the balance of power in its favor. For example, China's investment and construction contracts associated with the BRI projects in ASEAN accounted for USD 38.2 billion in 2017 alone, significantly outpacing China's investments in the United States (The Business Times, 2019). Understandably, China's growing confidence that this brings is being reflected elsewhere – including the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

While showing a complete disregard for international law, China's ongoing reclamation activities, particularly in the construction of artificial islands, and the subsequent militarization of these islands in the area of the Spratly Islands has contributed to fast-changing geopolitical realities. When it comes to projecting its power into the southern part of the sea, China does not have to rely exclusively on its military bases located in Hainan. The successful completion of the artificial islands has provided China with new options: Its military activities can be planned, launched and sustained from the man-made islands deliberately constructed at the heart of the South China Sea. The last time this region witnessed such rapid change was when the maritime operations of

the Imperial Japanese Navy set off World War II in the Asia-Pacific

5. CONCLUSION

In order to summarize the outlined development, a compelling argument can be made: China's military excursions into the South China Sea appear to be in symbiosis with its increased economic influence over the ASEAN region. Its latest drives into the southern part of the South China Sea, causing discomfort in Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore, demonstrate that these are part of a wider military strategy designed to forcefully claim the contested waters of the region.

China's assertive behavior with respect to the South China Sea is underpinned by a mixture of historical grievances, sense of territorial entitlement, and national pride stemming from its rising political and economic power. Its self-assured behavior in the region coincides with the ongoing US-China trade war, which as of July 2020 is far from over. It also coincides with the fatal skirmishes that occurred in June 2020 on the border between India and China. Finally, China's tightening control over Hong Kong, its recurring threats against Taiwan, as well as its recent economic tensions with Australia complete a dismal geopolitical picture that is emerging in the region. Having recognized the ASEAN's current dilemma, other regional players, Australia in particular, are increasingly opposed to the idea of forging closer economic ties with China at the expense of its political security or at the expense of sacrificing its political values.

Looking ahead, ASEAN will find it difficult to navigate its international relations with China, considering the enormous economic connectivity that has developed between the two over the previous decades. While it is very difficult to estimate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on China's economy at this moment, it appears that its determination to claim the South China Sea remains intact.

As the regional bloc's efforts to reach consensus with China over the issue have so far proved fruitless, ASEAN's hope of defending its territorial integrity in the South China Sea depends on the ability of its member states to find a unified stance over this issue. This, however, will not be feasible without seeking a deeper integration among its member states. Given the enormous economic disparities among its member states, and the fact that for some poorer ASEAN countries, China has become 'a creditor of

first resort' – ASEAN faces significant headwinds in this area, too.

Lastly, we would like to point to the fact that while China largely played by those rules set by the international community when it came to building its economic ties with the outside world after 1976 – effectively moving China's status from a low-income country to becoming a high-income one – it has shown a complete disregard for international law when it comes to its maritime disputes in the South China Sea.

Thus, questions can be raised as to what China's intentions were really like back in the late 1970s, given the fact that Deng Xiaoping never undertook a complete overhaul of the Chinese political system. Although sweeping economic changes occurred within China's economic system – allowing China to rise to where it is now – opening its political system to slightly more democratic principles has never taken place, neither under the watchful eye of Deng Xiaoping nor under the leadership of China's succeeding leaders.

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