

# CHINA'S SOFT POWER STRATEGY TOWARDS ASEAN IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE

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## Abstract

*This study focuses on China's response to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, examining its actions, policies, and policies in relation to the territorial claims and regional dynamics. The "Soft Power" theory of Joseph Nye has been adopted to analyze how China is trying to influence of stance of other claimant states by using its soft power. This study is conducted through the Qualitative approach of Research Methodology by using primary and secondary data sources. The approaches of qualitative research methodology are integrated to find the answers to research question. John Scott's model of documentary analysis is used for data analysis. The study aims to shed light on China's motivations, objectives, and behavior in the SCS, and the implications for regional security and stability. By analyzing China's response, this research provides insights into the evolving power dynamics in the SCS and offers a nuanced understanding of China's role as a major player in the region.*

## Introduction:

The South China Sea dispute has emerged as a complex and contentious issue, with multiple claimants asserting sovereignty over territory and rights over the waters in the region. Among the claimants, China's response to the SCS dispute has garnered significant attention due to its assertiveness and expanding influence. This study delves into China's response, investigating its motivations, objectives, and actions in the SCS. Understanding China's approach is crucial in comprehending the dynamics of the dispute and its consequences for regional security and stability (Mia & Anderson, 2024).

The South China Sea issue has presented challenges to ASEAN diplomacy in recent years. The regional organization opposes all claims to the disputed waters and instead intends to create a mechanism for conflict management through the development of a legally binding code of conduct. However, the aggravation of the situation in the semi-enclosed sea and the intensifying competition between China and the United States in Asia has weakened its neutrality. The challenge offered to the Association increases with the level of tension in the disputed waters and the level of rivalry in great power relations. The incidents at Scarborough Shoal and the Second Thomas Shoal, which occurred in 2012 and 2014, respectively, have shown how the South China Sea dispute has harmed relations between China and the Philippines (Askari & Tahir, 2021; Askari, 2023).

ASEAN's efforts to handle conflicts and maintain its neutrality have been made more difficult by China and the United States intensifying rivalry. Despite these challenging circumstances, Brunei was able to launch a consultative process on a code of conduct under the DOC implementation in 2013 while serving as the ASEAN chairmanship. In July of that year, the parties decided to undertake discussions regarding the COC process rather than negotiations. Therefore, it was believed that Brunei's chairmanship had given ASEAN diplomacy new vigor following the contentious Cambodian presidency the year before and had restored, at least to a point, its unity on the South China Sea problem. China appears to have shifted away from its initial opposition to at least consult with the ASEAN nations about future code-of-conduct negotiations (Askari, 2020; Elisha, 2024).

China and the ASEAN nations have different ideas about how to move forward. While Beijing wants to see the complete implementation of the DOC before the formal COC negotiations officially begin, Southeast Asian states would prefer to reach a COC as soon as feasible. For this reason, rather than referring to the start of official negotiations, the ASEAN-China meeting that took place in Suzhou in September 2013 mentioned a consultation on a COC within the context of the DOC implementation. What effects will the South China Sea problem have on ASEAN's decision to remain neutral in the years to come? Given the diversity of national perspectives among the ASEAN members and China's growing regional influence as a result of its developing military and economic capabilities, the risk of ASEAN becoming divided over the South China Sea problem is real in the medium future. This is particularly relevant given that Beijing is anticipated to continue to gain economic and military dominance in Southeast Asia over the next years. A rupture over the South China Sea would compromise ASEAN's objectivity and the value of the ASEAN-centric institutions in the developing security order. Such a result would have significant political, economic, and regional institutional ramifications for Southeast Asia. The possibility must be taken seriously by the member nations because a regional split would drastically erode ASEAN's influence in regional affairs. As a result, it is in ASEAN's best interests to maintain a neutral stance regarding the South China Sea and to see to it that great power rivalry is handled through institutional channels (Kong, 2024 & Wu, 2024).

#### **Research Question:**

How is China using the soft power to influence the Stance of ASEAN States on SCS dispute?

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is being undertaken by using the theoretical framework of Joseph Nye, Soft Power. The soft power denotes the dimensions of the national power of a country. Through them how do countries pursue their national interest? Soft power refers to the means a country may use to ensure that it gets what it wants without resorting to coercion. According to Nye soft power is the ability to affect others through the cooperative means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction to obtain preferred outcomes (Nye, 2023).

Through different means, a country can achieve its goals. It can attract them with payments and pursue their national interest. There are different types of soft power in accordance with specific soft power goals. States use soft power to improve the external security environment by projecting peaceful and attractive images of a country, to mobilize other countries' support for foreign and security policies, to manipulate other countries' styles of thinking and preferences, to maintain unity within a community or community of countries; and use it to increase the approval ratings of a leader or domestic support for a government (Ohnesorge, 2020 & Tella, 2021).

China has increased the use of soft power as an approach to build cooperation with ASEAN member states. The manifestation of this approach is, for example, the promotion of social-cultural exchange, encouraging capacity building and also using its economy to influence the stance of ASEAN states regarding the South China Sea dispute. Through the soft power approach China is trying to cover up its aggressive behavior about the South China Sea dispute and influencing the stance of ASEAN member states in the SCS dispute (Askari, 2021; Ngo, 2023).

Undoubtedly, China has a great contribution to the development of ASEAN from the economic and socio-cultural aspects. As one of ASEAN's important dialogue partners, the commitment to build regional peace and stability is a priority for China (Askari, 2019; Anwar, 2024).

#### **Research Methodology**

To explain China's response towards the South China Sea dispute and its dialogue partners, this study uses qualitative methods and utilizes states' documents as well as China's statements,

particularly on the South China Sea issue. The research is undertaken by using qualitative research methodology. This is a qualitative review study in which data is collected in narrative rather than numerical form. To find the answers to the question three qualitative approaches including historical, exploratory and descriptive have been used. Historical research helps to predict future events by interpreting the causes of past events, especially primary resources. Exploratory research is preliminary research which helps to identify the extent nature of the problem by reviewing the secondary data or resources. It provides the groundwork for further research by investigating the existing issues which are not fully defined.

The data is collected from both primary and secondary resources. The primary data is collected from government reports and secondary resources are books, journal articles and periodicals. The researcher has used databases including Scopus, Sage Publications, Routledge, J Store and Google Scholar. The data analysis is carried out by using the technique of documentary analysis by John Scott. The researcher has applied Scott's model of document analysis because it four tools such as authenticity, credibility, representation, and meaning are considered criteria for assessing and analyzing documents (Scott,2014).

### **Discussion**

By addressing this research question, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of China's response to the SCS dispute. It examines China's territorial claims, military activities, diplomatic engagements, and economic initiatives, assessing their impact on the regional power balance and security dynamics. Additionally, the research will explore the underlying motivations behind China's response, considering factors such as historical claims, national interests, resource access, and strategic considerations. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of China's role in the SCS dispute and inform discussions on the prospects for peaceful resolution and regional cooperation.

### **CHINA'S RESPONSE IN SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE**

The South China Sea is unquestionably one of the busiest international sea lanes in the world, with Bill Hayton (2014) describing it as 'the throat of global sea routes. However, activities within the South China Sea are not only about seaborne trade and navigation; there is also considerable exploitation and exploration of natural resources, such as natural gas, oil and fish stocks. According to Rustandi, the claimant states of South China. Sea are Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, Taiwan, Brunei and Malaysia while several international companies from countries such as the US, UK, Canada, India, Russia and Australia are also involved in commercial activities (Rustandi, 2016).

Starting with the situation in Cambodia in 2012 China's attitude towards the conflicts was reflected in Cambodia's adamant rejection of Vietnam and the Philippines' suggestion at the meeting to produce the 2012 AMM communiqué (Thayer, 2016). Furthermore, without China's pressure, Cambodia might not have insisted on this stance. However, a conflict in the member states' shared interests also contributed to ASEAN's division at the summit. The fact that all ASEAN countries support an ASEAN-led strategy and that using ASEAN-led forums or using strong language in the forums' announcements may enrage China and cause tension to rise further highlights how paradoxical these common objectives are. At the meeting, Cambodia emphasized the ASEAN region's shared goal of defusing tensions, stressing that the draft communiqué's strong language made it difficult to achieve this goal (Haacke, 2023; Şahin 2023).

This interest was also expressed by some ASEAN nations. Thailand emphasized the need to lower tensions and maintains amicable relations with China. Brunei, Laos, and Myanmar emphasized the importance of fostering regional harmony and cooperating with China. Additionally, Malaysia and Indonesia suggested the less antagonistic term "disputed area,"

which Cambodia later adopted (Buszynski, 2020). This shows that Malaysia, a negligible claimant, has compromised. This suggestion was, however, rejected by the Philippines and Vietnam, who instead cited another ASEAN interest in their defence. They emphasized that forums run by ASEAN must highlight the tension in the relevant region (Thayer, 2012).

Therefore, a close examination of the conference did not reveal that ASEAN was split in two, with Cambodia representing China's interests and the other ASEAN countries attempting to allay fears by identifying the point of conflict. Aside from the influence of China, another reason for ASEAN's division was its members' insistence on pursuing the group's conflicting objectives. Hayton stated that the majority of ASEAN nations emphasized the value of ASEAN's unity and that Cambodia's rejection was to blame for the divisiveness. Vietnam and the Philippines, however, might have also contributed to ASEAN's unification if they had agreed to the definition of a "disputed area" put out by Malaysia and Indonesia and supported by Cambodia (Hayton, 2014)

Furthermore, despite China's resistance, ASEAN countries have consistently moved on with drafting the COC and forcing China into the COC talks since 2012. According to Zhang (2018), China was particularly hesitant to support COC negotiations from 2011 to early 2013. This was demonstrated by Yang Jiechi, the country's then-foreign minister, who said in 2011 that "China would be willing to negotiate COC with ASEAN when conditions were ripe" (Ling, 2021). Nevertheless, despite China's reluctance, Cambodia declared in May 2012 that ASEAN had finished drafting the COC draft and would start talks with China (Ha, 2019; Chow, 2022). ASEAN members highlighted the need to keep moving forward at the 2012 AMM summit while generally noting the COC's success (Thayer, 2017).

At the November 2012 East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN requested that Hun Sen, the prime minister of Cambodia, signal to Wen Jiabao, the then-Chinese premier, its unity and determination to begin official COC discussions with China as soon as feasible. As a result of asking Cambodia for a favor and defying the ASEAN consensus, ASEAN wanted to make it clear that China should not anticipate being able to avoid COC meetings. After the change in Chinese leadership in 2012, ASEAN kept pressuring China to begin the negotiations. The COC was the topic of direct discussion between Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Sultan of Brunei in 2013 when Brunei was the ASEAN chair at the time (Thayer, 2013). These instances demonstrate how ASEAN countries united to put pressure on China to begin COC negotiations (De Castro, 2022; Hu, 2023).

The 2016 Kunming summit further illustrates that China has less of an impact on some ASEAN members than critics claim. At the meeting on June 14, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi did replace ASEAN's statement with China's 10-point consensus. China requested that Laos and Cambodia obstruct the statement. By requesting a favor from a few ASEAN members, ASEAN was able to avoid issuing the statement Trewa ASEAN (Thayer, 2016; Suzuki, 2021; Po, 2023; Yoshimatsu, 2023).

But this episode also showed how ASEAN was united against Chinese coercion. In accordance with ASEAN's decision, Balakrishnan, the organization's coordinator for the ASEAN-China dialogue, abstained from the news conference conducted in conjunction with the special meeting and allowed Wang to speak on his own (Ng & Li, 2023; Ian, 2023; Singh, 2024).

Making Wang travel alone to the conference was a symbol of ASEAN's ire, even though ASEAN said it did not wish to publicly disagree with Wang (Balakrishnan, 2016; Huang, 2023). This is because ASEAN's choice defied its rule of maintaining composure. It appears that China was unsuccessful in getting its ASEAN allies to attend the summit to demonstrate that China was not alone. Another example of ASEAN's cohesion is this (Foot, 2020; Hu, L. 2023).



### **The Dynamics of ASEAN-China Relations**

The findings highlight the complex dynamics in ASEAN-China relations concerning the South China Sea dispute. While ASEAN strives for unity and a collective approach, the study reveals divergent interests and perspectives among ASEAN member states. Some countries have expressed concerns over China's assertiveness, while others have pursued closer economic ties with China, leading to divisions within ASEAN. The results also indicate that China's growing economic and military power has influenced ASEAN member states' response to the dispute. Economic considerations and the desire for regional stability have often influenced ASEAN's approach towards China (Purwanto, 2024; Das, 2024; Shiddiqy; Lugo & Novarizal, 2024). The study highlights the challenges of balancing economic interests with concerns over sovereignty and territorial integrity.

This also sheds light on the ASEAN approach towards the South China Sea dispute and China's response from 2010 to 2022. The study underscores the cautious and pragmatic nature of ASEAN's approach, emphasizing unity, consensus, and adherence to international law. It also highlights the complexities in ASEAN-China relations and the influence of China's growing power on the dynamics of the dispute.

The findings provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by ASEAN in managing the South China Sea dispute and offer a basis for further analysis and policy considerations. They contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics in the region and can inform future efforts to promote peace, stability, and cooperation in the South China Sea.

Based on the data collected, it is evident that the ASEAN approach towards the South China Sea dispute has been primarily focused on maintaining regional peace and stability. ASEAN has promoted the peaceful settlement of disputes through dialogue, negotiation, and consultation. The grouping has also emphasized the importance of respecting international law in resolving disputes. However, there is a lack of consensus among ASEAN member states on the dispute, which has limited the grouping's ability to take a more assertive approach towards the issue. Vietnam and the Philippines have been the most vocal in challenging China's claim, while other ASEAN member states have been more cautious in their approach (Bøhaugen Førrisdahl, 2024; Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024).

China's growing economic and military power has also constrained ASEAN's ability to take a more assertive approach towards the dispute. China has been accused of using its economic influence to dissuade ASEAN member states from challenging its claim. China's assertive stance on the issue has also raised concerns among ASEAN member states, particularly those concerning territorial claims in the disputed waters (Muaqaffi, & Sesariato, 2024; Santoso, 2024; Amrullah, 2024).

The qualitative research methodology has been useful in examining the ASEAN approach towards the South China Sea dispute and China's response. The study found that ASEAN's approach towards the dispute has been primarily focused on maintaining regional peace and stability. The grouping has promoted the peaceful settlement of disputes through dialogue, negotiation, and consultation. However, there is no consensus among ASEAN member states on the dispute, which has limited the grouping's ability to take a more assertive approach towards the issue. China's growing economic and military power has also constrained ASEAN's ability to take a more assertive approach towards the dispute. Future research could focus on examining the impact of China's economic and military power on ASEAN's approach towards the South China Sea dispute (Prasetya, 2024; Jain & Gill, 2024; Lee, 2024).

What are the effects of asymmetry on the relations among claimant states in the South China Sea? The South China Sea disputes, especially in the Spratlys archipelago, are multilateral disputes involving overlapping claims of three or more countries. Yet the power asymmetry

between China on the one hand and Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, on the other hand, has reshaped perceptions of the multilateral disputes as if they were sets of bilateral problems that revolve around China (i.e. Philippines-China, Vietnam-China, Malaysia-China). China itself insists on this position, so that rather than being viewed as only one among several claimants, it has claimed a position as the central party with whom all others must negotiate their respective sovereignty issues. While the weaker claimants realize that a purely bilateral solution will not be feasible, and will not be advantageous to them, the institutions currently in place (e.g. ASEAN, ITLOS) lack the capacity or will to put in place realistic alternatives. Power asymmetry has allowed China to dictate the pace and approach for addressing the disputes, for instance stalling the DOC implementing guidelines for many years, pushing the issue to the backburner despite the importance the Philippines and Vietnam attached to it, refusing to bring the issue to other possible arenas for intervention such as the ARF, and playing a divide and rule game in ASEAN to further strengthen its advantage. Asymmetry, as Womack argues, also means the bigger power gets the attention of all, and each of its moves is perceived as important and purposeful, while the actions of secondary powers can be portrayed (often by the big power) or otherwise perceived as random, insignificant, or even trivial or troublesome, the way China has sought to depict Philippine moves, such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom, Friendship and Cooperation (ZoPFFC) proposal. As such the principal problematic has become managing the power asymmetry rather than seeking multilateral or cooperative solutions among the various claimants, leading to individual states developing uncoordinated strategies, at times even working at cross purposes. The Study of National Security at Fifty: Re-awakenings 223 What strategies have the small states of Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam adopted to preserve and enhance their leverage against great power China in relation to their territorial claims? Each of these states has employed different strategies, which depend on (1) the degree of threat perception or fear/suspicion of China (e.g. Malaysia being least suspicious and therefore most accommodating); (2) their strategic orientation culled from historical experience (e.g. internal balancing rather than alignment for Vietnam); (3) ideational or value preferences (e.g. institutionalism for the Philippines, non-alignment for Malaysia); or even (4) path dependence, or how history and past policies have locked in certain options (e.g. US alliance for Philippines) (Baviera, 2022).

### **China's Individual Relations with Every ASEAN State**

China has been investing in Brunei's infrastructure and energy sectors, and the two countries have signed several agreements to strengthen economic ties. In addition, China has been providing aid and support to Brunei's development projects, which has improved its relations with Brunei (Putra, 2020).

China has been Cambodia's largest foreign investor and trading partner. China has been providing aid and support to Cambodia's development projects, and the two countries have signed several agreements to strengthen economic ties. In addition, China has been supporting Cambodia's stance on the South China Sea dispute, which has improved its relations with Cambodia (Sothirak, 2022).

China has been Indonesia's largest trading partner, and the two countries have signed several agreements to strengthen economic ties. In addition, China has been providing aid and support to Indonesia's development projects, which has improved its relations with Indonesia. However, Indonesia has been critical of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and has been seeking to balance its relations with China and the United States (Jibiki, 2023 ).

China has been Laos' largest foreign investor and trading partner. China has been providing aid and support to Laos' development projects, and the two countries have signed several agreements to strengthen economic ties. In addition, China has been supporting Laos' stance on the South China Sea dispute, which has improved its relations with Laos (Yi, 2023).

Vietnam has been one of the most vocal opponents of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. China is using its soft power approach towards Vietnam by increasing economic cooperation and cultural exchanges. China is investing heavily in Vietnam's infrastructure and energy sectors, making it one of Vietnam's largest trading partners. In 2018, Chinese tourists accounted for over 30% of all international visitors to Vietnam (Reuters, 2023 ).

The Philippines has been engaging with China on the South China Sea dispute despite winning the arbitration case in The Hague. China has been using its soft power approach towards the Philippines by offering economic incentives such as investments and infrastructure projects. In 2018, China pledged to invest \$24 billion in the Philippines over the next five years. China has also been using its cultural influence by establishing Confucius Institutes in several Philippine universities (Severino, 2010).

Malaysia has been taking a more cautious approach towards the South China Sea dispute. China has been using its soft power approach towards Malaysia by increasing economic cooperation and cultural exchanges. China has been investing heavily in Malaysia's infrastructure projects, including the construction of the East Coast Rail Link. In 2018, Chinese tourists accounted for over 15% of all international visitors to Malaysia (Chiew-ping, 2020; Syailendra, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, China's response towards the South China Sea dispute using soft power has been a calculated and multifaceted approach aimed at projecting a positive image while advancing its interests in the region. Through diplomatic engagement, economic incentives, and cultural exchanges, China has sought to build relationships and influence neighboring countries in a non-coercive manner.

Despite these efforts, China's assertiveness in asserting territorial claims and its island-building activities in the disputed waters have also elicited concerns and resistance from some neighboring countries, challenging the effectiveness of its soft power approach. In navigating the South China Sea dispute, China's employment of soft power has demonstrated both successes and limitations. While it has managed to expand its influence and garner support from some regional actors, the competing interests and historical tensions have hindered an entirely cohesive and unanimous response. As the situation evolves, striking a balance between soft power strategies and the need for cooperative and respectful dialogue will be crucial for China to effectively manage the complexities of the South China Sea dispute and promote regional stability.

### **Findings**

- China is using its economic tools in relations with ASEAN countries to dictate more favorable terms where the core interests of China are concerned.
- China is engaged in a negotiation process over the CoC to give itself more time to push bilateral solutions, which may lead to friction within ASEAN and among its members. It is evident, considering recent interaction between leaders of claimant states since the beginning of 2023.

### **Recommendations**

- It is important to mention that the Chinese strategy can entail a certain risk for Beijing, as putting pressure on the countries to pursue joint development through bilateral talks and setting aside the SCS dispute can strengthen nationalist sentiments in these countries and the growth of anti-Chinese sentiments. Which can encourage them to seek protection from like-minded allies.
- In order to avoid this risk, China needs to maintain dialogue with ASEAN claimant states through the Code of Conduct negotiation to avoid the risk of these countries falling under the more significant influence of like-minded countries.

- Instead of waiting for the conclusion of the Code of Conduct negotiations, South China Sea's dispute parties should pursue parallel negotiations to address the SCS dispute and reduce the regional tensions.

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