

## Overviewing the Context of Balance of Power to the South China Sea Issue in ASEAN

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### Abstract

The issue to raise is that the South China Sea has potential resources not only natural resource but also the geostrategy and geopolitics concerns. Geographically, the sea is a waterway for any activities for Asia Pacific countries and part of it is in the region of South East Asia. The tension emerges when China unilaterally claims that the all area of SCS is part of China based on the nine-dash line of historical Chinese fishing ground drawing. The claim definitely prompts protest and condemnation from other countries which claim have the authority in the water as well. As a result, the countries in South East Asia like Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines launch their objections against China. This situation ignites another 'world's great power' to intervene. The United States proclaims to form Quadrilateral Security Dialogue consisting U.S., India, Australia and Japan as the members. Indeed, the dialogue's intention is to confront China's activity in the waters. Therefore, the inquiry to look at is how should ASEAN play its role to create balance and stability in the waters, or extensively in the South East Asia region? To answer this question, it will observe the issue using the realism paradigm since the issue concerns the state's foreign politics and the effort to create order and stability. Through the realism paradigm, the balance of power will be the concept to address the issue. Thus, it is ASEAN's effort of the balance of power within the conflict and domination of unilateral interests.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, balance of Power, ASEAN

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## INTRODUCTION

Locating at the heart of the South East Asia region, the situation in the South China Sea (SCS) waters is still far from the expectation of peace. China's unilateral claim contributes to heightening the tension in the region, even igniting the other form of offensive act. Some analysts even see that the waters is possibly to become the 'battleground' of dispute over sovereignty, security, and a huge amount of natural resources between two great powers – and each allies – and the South East Asian countries that ring the waters.

China's aggressive activities seems to flashback the previous dispute occurred in the water caused by China. The history shows in 1974 there was an incident over sovereignty to Vietnam in Paracel islands. In 1988, China claim some atolls and reefs in Spratly island that lifted up a clash with the Philippines, and continue to 1994 when China built structure in Mischief Reef – at the time, it is claimed as a part of the Philippines – and the dispute is getting peak in 2012 for the Scarborough Shoal incident when China compelled to the Philippines for the control of fishing ground in the area. It does not stop there regarding the Spratly islands, in 2013, China started to build the infrastructures, especially some military installations. Seemingly, the past incidents in the SCS area becomes the China's foothold to launch its aggressive activities in the waters recently. China might perceive that the countries involved in those disputes were unable to perform impactful countermeasures to China since the Chinese military troop's activity keeps going in those islands. However, the conflict and its aftermath also left an outsize and lasting legacy in Asian international relation, including for ASEAN in the intention to address the similar situation currently.

From what the history said about the conflict involving China and to understand the current dispute, there are three severable categories of disputes, each with its own parties, rule sets, and politics (Dutton, 2011). There are disputes over territorial sovereignty, in the overlapping claims to the SCS's islands, rocks, and reefs; disputes over which coastal states claim rightful jurisdiction over waters and seabed; and disputes over the proper balance of coastal-state and international rights to use the seas (Dutton, 2011). Realizing the unstable situation in the waters, Association of South East Asia Nation (ASEAN) is of the view that the necessity to push ASEAN role is pivotal. Not only ASEAN and China involved in the tangled knot of intractable situation on the sea, but also other entities like Japan as the United States allies and Taiwan who have also the political and security interest.

As the only collective organization in the region, ASEAN should employ any of international relations (IR) instruments for keeping the stability and security in the region. Doing so, ASEAN itself has declared ZOPFAN, the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality in November 1971 to ensure ASEAN free from armed races and lead-to-war conflict. The implementation of ZOPFAN is not only limited to Southeast Asia, but also the Asia Pacific region, and also involves the role of major powers (Putri, 2021). ASEAN's statements reaffirming ZOPFAN can be viewed as another form of risk management that acts as a protective option positioning ASEAN equidistant between the Great Powers (Southgate, 2021). In addition, ASEAN Member States signed the Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty) on 15 December 1995 as a commitment to preserve the Southeast Asian region as a region free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (ASEAN, 2012). With some adjustment, SEANWFZ will hinder China's interests in claiming sea territory (Anwar, 2018). Those two declarations regard as the norms in ASEAN security issue which can be the ASEAN's 'weapon' to keep the regional security in peace and stable. These two concepts can be the other topics to research.

Apart of that, taking the perspective of realism which focuses on the notion of state is the main actor in international relations, conflict as the nature of interaction, and the balance of power, this writing will try to discuss the case happened in the waters by addressing the element of international relations, namely *actor*, the main player in the interaction; *issue*, to understand the scope of event; *process*, to define the form of interaction between actors. After delineating the element of IR, thus, as the part of analysis, the context of power will be outlined to provide an overview of the interrelationship. Defining power is necessity since it is the form of state's capacity, tangible or intangible, to use of force to persuade others. Thus, the problem inquiry raised in this research will be how the IR elements and the concept of power exists in the SCS situation.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This writing uses descriptive qualitative method to explore the phenomenon of the dispute in the South China Sea. Since it attempts to investigate the phenomenon from the researcher's viewpoint, the said method is suitable to implement. Qualitative descriptive research aims to describe existing phenomena regarding the quality of the object regarding change, relationships, similarities, and differences between various objects (Ikbar, 2014, p. 18). As is defined in Creswell and Creswell (2018) that "*the process of qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data*" corresponds to the course and framework of this research. In this writing, it will use also several related literatures to review.

To strengthen the argumentation, literature study to the related documents is necessary to confirm the data and information obtained.

It focuses on the analysis or interpretation of written material based on its context. It can use documents to get an idea from the subject's point of view through written media or other documents written or made directly by the subject (Herdiansyah, 2019). During the process, the researcher may collect qualitative documents, either public documents (e.g., website, newspaper, official report, minutes of meeting, electronic source) or private documents (e.g., personal journal, official letter, diaries) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 263). Thus, in this research, the documents used for study and analysis will be all material related to the ASEAN statements on the South China Sea issue, electronic newspaper, and other related documents which is in the corridor of the research topic

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **The Actors, the Process, and the Issue Relating to the South China Sea Dispute**

*The Actors.* From a realist perspective, what happened in this world is a result of the interaction between state actors. The state, as a main player in international relations, seeks to use all of its capacities and resources in shaping the global constellation or dealing with the dynamics changes of its external environment in order to achieve its national interests. Every occurrence of events involving political, economic and security issues, there is a form of hegemony related to the desire for domination and existence. Regarding the current dispute situation in the SCS, there are several state actors who have the interest in the region.

*China.* As one of the dominant powers in the Indo-Pacific, China is clearly seen as the point of attention in dealing with the issue of SCS. China's intentions in the waters seems to be in line with Xi Jinping's global initiative called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which attempt to revive the past economic glories. Based only on historical maps of fishing areas, China unilaterally claims almost the entire area of the waters. As one of the world's emerging powers, China dares to take strategic steps to show its dominance starting from the 'neighborhood'. On the other hand, while claiming the waters, China is also intensively building economic cooperation with countries around the waters in terms of infrastructure investment program. A long understanding but it seems still relevant that in the waters, China's policies consist of two parts (Guoxing, 1998), *first*, to defense its territorial sovereignty and its maritime rights and interests, and as mentioned earlier. *Second*, to maintain good-neighbor with the South East Asian Country. However, China's aggressive activity in the waters has damaged the economic relations built within the BRI.

*Japan.* Not only about the Quad, Japan's intention in the SCS is to ensure the safety of Tokyo's important Sea Lines of Communication that lies beneath the sea and Straits of Malacca. Cited by Evan A. Laksmana (2020), Japan sees the Quad Plus is beneficial to strengthen its "strategic synergy" in the maritime defense and seek to create a sustainable economic in Asia. Since the waters area are the global trade lines, it is crucial for Japan's domestic stability. It is about 88% of Japan's oil import passes these both waters (Midford, 2015). Thus, for the economic interest, Japan feels the necessity to be engaged in handling the issue of China's hegemony in the sea. Currently, China and Japan are still on the dispute over the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea (Evn, 2020). Both countries claim the ownership of the islands which comes up with the military patrol in the islands by Beijing, while Tokyo is in proposing the law regarding the islands' status and name. From this context,

arguably, Japan takes an intensive action towards China's activity in the SCS is for bargaining its position to address the East China Sea conflict with China.

*Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.* The main issue of this dispute is the recurrence of sovereignty breach of Vietnam, the Philippines, and now with Malaysia as well, which is not the first time for China doing this as the history has recorded. However, many has claimed that these three countries seem to have no bargain position with China, so for those three rely on ASEAN would be the best way to fight against China. It is impossible to stand alone encountering China. Due to this condition, for example the Philippines seeks support from the US to deal with China in the case of Spratly islands. We are, at this point, seeking additional support from the United States in terms of being able to take a stronger position in defending our position, which is to uphold the rule of law," Albert del Rosario, Manila's foreign minister (Reuters, 2015).

*Taiwan.* It is interesting that Taiwan has an interest in the contestation of SCS. Geographically, the SCS northern tip is in Taiwan straits, and it is a part of Taiwan's ZEE. One argument that can give a basic perception to confirm Taiwan's involvement in the SCS dispute is about the Taiwan's occupation of several islands in the Spratly Islands where there are natural resources such as fish, oil, and gas. Taiwan's claim in the SCS is basically similar to that of China [...] Taiwan has occupied Itu Aba since a couple of decades ago but appears not to have expanded its occupation (Djalal, 2000). The relation between China and Taiwan has recently been in the high tension due to China's statement that considers Taiwan is part of China and will carry out peaceful reunification for Taiwan. Seeing China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea, it is arguable that there is Taiwan's concern if China's hegemony is dominant in the waters, so it will be a threat for Taiwan where Beijing will have a strong position to raise the reunification issue. If successful (China's aggression), Beijing will be in a better position not only to threaten its neighbors militarily, including Taiwan, but also to control a great number of commercial traffic passing through this area (Santoro, 2019).

*Indonesia.* Since the dispute happened in the South China Sea, the Indonesian government confirmed its official position in addressing the South China Sea conflict. Indonesia will remain in its position as a mediator between countries in conflict or dispute over the region [...] encouraging the achievement of a Code of Conduct (CoC) between ASEAN and China regarding the region (Maulana, 2015). It shows that Indonesia seems to not have a problem with China's claimant. In fact, Indonesia clearly has a border problem regarding the nine-dash line in the North Natuna Sea, but the government has yet again shown an indecisive reaction in responding to China's actions to enter the territorial waters of the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone in the Natuna Islands without permission (Sulaiman, 2020). Nonetheless, President Joko Widodo and his ministers, in this regards, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defense has declared protest and statements to China.

Accordingly, there are four points of action in responding China's reaction against Indonesia's activities in the North Natuna Sea (Rahayu, 2020). *First*, there has been a violation by Chinese ships in the Indonesian EEZ area. *Second*, Indonesia's EEZ area has been determined by international law, namely through UNCLOS 1982. *Third*, China is a part (member) of UNCLOS 1982. Therefore, it is an obligation for China to respect the implementation of UNCLOS 1982. *Fourth*, Indonesia will never recognize the Nine-Dash Line, a unilateral claim made by China that has no legal grounds recognized by international law, especially UNCLOS 1982. From those points, what we can derive is actually Indonesia possesses a 'hard' protest against China, but there might be other considerations by the government to keep taking a neutral position against the South China Sea issue, and particularly towards China as the country of strategic partnership for many cooperation.

Again, Indonesia has made no territorial claims in the South China Sea and, thus, is not a claimant state (Heiduk, 2016, p. 34). There are also efforts from President Joko Widodo not to draw Indonesia into the conflict, even under the Ministry of Defense, Ryamizard Ryacudu suggested to ASEAN in Shangri La Dialogue, May 2015 to establish “joint peace patrol” in the waters. In this sense, Indonesia appears trying to maintain peace and stability in the region as well as to secure Indonesia's national interest by playing as the mediator of conflict. It is a little bit confusing when on one hand Indonesia seems to be neutral for the dispute, but on the other hand, Indonesia condemned also China's activities in the North Natuna Sea. The main way for Indonesia regarding the issue is by keeping holding onto the international law (UNCLOS 1982) as the four points of intervention above. It is the interest of Indonesia to enact sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea in addition to the natural resources contained in the region.

Indonesia choose the diplomatic way against China by realizing that the armed confrontation with China seems impossible. Indonesia will lose because its own hard power, though immense when compared to its smaller neighbors (ASEAN), is inferior to China's. Again, taking a look at the four points of intervention, it is a little difficult to see what actually Indonesia has against China for the North Natuna Sea issue. It will come up with Indonesia's act of rejection to China's pressure. Probably, the reason behind this is that Indonesia and China currently have a number of economic cooperation which must be mutually maintained. Hence, Indonesia needs to keep the bilateral relation with China stable.

For the international scope, Indonesia sees the opportunity to play neutral or as the mediator of the dispute to show its leadership role in the region of ASEAN. A writing from Felix Heiduk (2016) depicted that relating to the South China Sea issue in ASEAN, Indonesia has played a leading role – appears to be a good way to keep the country committed to its leadership role, while at the same time providing additional benefits for the whole region (Heiduk, 2016, p. 37). Indonesia is about to stand out its sovereignty while maintaining the stability of the ASEAN region and Indonesia's own bilateral relations with China, although there is a threat from China's aggression in the waters that may pressure the Natuna region.

*ASEAN.* As mentioned earlier, ASEAN plays a very important role and has a very crucial position in defining where the game will go. ASEAN's effort to ensure its stability and security in the region come up with the notion of ASEAN centrality. A number of viewpoints to take a deep look at the notion of ASEAN centrality resulted that the core of ASEAN centrality lies on the effort to ensure the existence of ASEAN's role in the region. The normative purpose behind ASEAN centrality was closely tied to the notion of ASEAN's core beliefs and identity (Acharya, 2017). It is called ASEAN Way consisting of 4 elements (Hazmi, 2020). The way aims to seek and preserve guarantee the right of sovereignty for ASEAN members and avoid the exclusion to the emerging situation happened in the region. In addition, another significant notion that ASEAN has is about the ASEAN neutrality. It is about ASEAN statement not to pursue any of great powers surrounding and entering ASEAN region. The manifestation is this neutrality, as aforementioned, is ZOPFAN and SEANWFZ. ZOPFAN serve as an articulation of an often-expressed belief in not having to choose between the Great Powers, be it the US and Uni Soviet during the Cold War, or China, the US, Japan and India today (Emmers, 2018). However, the practice is quite complicated, due to each ASEAN member has their own foreign policy to engage with one great power like the US, particularly for the defense link.

*The Process.* The orchestration of conflicts in the SCS does not only involve countries in the region, but other major powers such as the United States (US), Japan and Taiwan also take a role in the competition to fight against China domination through the Quadrilateral Cooperation (Quad). It has one function to be an important collective counterbalance to

expansionist China, although the intention of Quad to fight against China is actually still arguable (Kompas, 2021) It is clearly seen, the interaction occurred in the SCS seems to be in the nuance of rivalry for respective countries. The China's unilateral claims in the water obtain protest and condemnation as the sovereignty violence for some ASEAN countries. This conflict situation causes the raising of tension in the region that influence the countries' behavior to others. For example, Japan sees China is threatening through its aggressive activity in the waters, and possibly this perception is perceived also by Vietnam and the Philippines who has the past experience with China. Dealing with China, it maybe only Japan who has the capacity. Thus, for other countries like Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia may use collective power through ASEAN to fight against China considering the historical events among them explained above. Then, Taiwan is another case.

*The Issue.* Referring to the description above, the competition happened in the waters is a multidimensional issue. It is not only about the natural resources lying down in the waters but also the geopolitics and geostrategy aspects of state actors in the region. Geographically, the SCS stretches from the south of China to the Southeast Asia region, which is directly adjacent to most of the ASEAN members such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. This geographical form of the waters then became the background for the involvement of these countries in encountering China's unilateral claims regarding the nine-dash line.

The hegemony of China seems to be dominant in this contestation, and Japan with the Quad attempts to balance China position. Thus, where is ASEAN? Within the competition in the waters, ASEAN can be said as the vortex of the region who is trying to find a position and to show a collective power as its role. Regarding this matter, ASEAN realizes the difficulty to establish ASEAN's centrality and neutrality towards these great powers since they are also important cooperation partners in several ASEAN forums. Aside from the argumentation that the ASEAN centrality is as much a product of external players in Southeast Asia [...] the most ambitious and elaborate projection, (Acharya, 2017) ASEAN is of the view that the concept of centrality, along with neutrality, should still be put forward to deal with the external players in ASEAN. It aims to foreign countries for willing to follow the ASEAN Way when employing their interest in the Southeast Asia region. This will direct to the concept of balance of power that ASEAN should consider to put forwarding its position.

For the analogy, ASEAN as the small boat will try to balance its position from the big ship like China and Japan, on other medium ship like ASEAN countries. Why is ASEAN the small boat? Although ASEAN try to define its centrality as the main collective organization in the region, there are some dilemmas that affect the ASEAN's power position. First, the rival states are the ASEAN strategic partners in several ASEAN forums. Second, not all ASEAN members who gets their territorial breach and sovereignty violated. Third, each ASEAN members also has a strong interest, cooperation, and even conflict bilaterally with those rival states. This condition makes ASEAN seems to look powerless, but it could be the most powerful power owned by ASEAN when all members realize that the unstable situation in SEA region will affect all members' domestic situation and push them look back to the agreed commitment in ASEAN.

### **The Context of Power, The Objective to Balance of Power**

Hedley Bull in 1977 stated that the international order consists of several elements, including diplomacy, international law, the balance of power, institutions and norms (Hanada, 2019). Based in the perspective of realism paradigm, the main consideration for the state actor is about struggle from power. The search of power within the interaction among states may lead to the competition and, even conflict. The order and stability in international relation can

only be achieved by the distribution of power (power politics) (Perwita, 2017). To obtain the world's rules-based order and stability, the concept of balance of power should be employed, otherwise the world will be dominated by a particular hegemony. The balance of power is intended to maintain countries' independence, avoid hegemony, and perhaps preserve the general status quo (Levi, 2004). However, in practice, the embodiment of balance of power towards the issue or situation has different manifestations and points of view depending on who the state actor is involved in and where the issue occurs. Ultimately, the result of balance of power will be the set of norms and behavior which will regulate how each state-actor behaves and interact.

Regarding the dispute, it is perceivable that as the new emerging power in the world, China feels confident to conduct its activity in the SCS. Having such this power, China unilaterally claims the waters territory to fulfill its interests under the global BRI initiatives. A great power may lead to domination or hegemony. Other realist authors share the idea which defines leadership/ hegemony as a situation in which one country possesses greater power and can dominate all other countries in the same system (Vu, 2016) or it can control over or govern the system (Gilpin, 1981). What about Japan in this issue? Having the similar capacity with China, Japan is in the intention to encounter China's hegemony. As the one of economics powers in the world, and backing up by Quad, Japan takes position as the balancer while of course deploying its interest in the region. Arguably, those superpower countries conduct their power in the region due to realize the capacity of ASEAN. for some ASEAN member states involved in this circle of power, have to consider that they cannot stand alone facing this hegemony. They should harness ASEAN as a collective power in the region. Dealing with China one-on-one seems impossible, plus that China also has a bilateral contribution to the economy of several ASEAN countries. It is ASEAN should take a place.

Thus, what is the ASEAN's power? As the vortex of the conflict in the region, the notion of ASEAN centrality should be earned. ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan in 2009 stated that ASEAN centrality and leadership need to be earned [...] it must be based on the inner strength of ASEAN Community [...] it requires ASEAN Member States to stay united, increase coordination, and participate as a cohesive group with clear common objectives (Pitsuwan, 2009). It is ASEAN's power efforts to balance of power among the superpowers. will result to a set of norms and behavior, the current notion about ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (ASEAN, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific , 2019) will viable solution. As the collective power from its member states, ASEAN has the mechanism to bring those superpowers connected to the ASEAN centrality. For the external powers, ASEAN centrality was a convenient and mutually acceptable way to engage themselves in Southeast Asia without raising the suspicions and opposition of its nationalistic governments and peoples (Acharya, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The dispute in the South China Sea will keep going, even escalating. This multidimension issue involving many nation-states' interests seems to come up with unpredictable dynamics situation. However, the contestation is about the superpower's hegemony in the region. Either China or Japan is treated as the powerful nation contesting their hegemony in ASEAN. Realizing its position, ASEAN should take its place as a collective power by putting forward the notion of ASEAN centrality. Doing so, although some ASEAN members are increasing and improving cooperation with superpower country, like the US, as one of the ways, ASEAN should be united and neutral to keep the faith of centrality. It will be

the effort to uphold the existing law of conduct and ASEAN mechanism for the effort of balancing of power in the dispute. Country like Indonesia, or else which claims has no dispute with China in terms of the South China Sea, should play mitigative role to encourage ASEAN. Furthermore, what seems to be seen from the above overview is that the notion of ASEAN Centrality manifested to ASEAN Outlook in Indo-Pacific can be a further concern since it needs all ASEAN members strong commitment.

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