

Security and Cooperation in the South-China Sea:
The Evolution of Military and Political Interests of the Parties Concerned

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**NORMATIVE APPROACHES
OF ASEAN MEMBER STATES AND
ASEAN DIALOGUE PARTNERS
TO THE SOUTH CHINA SEA:
IS THERE A COMMON DENOMINATOR?***

**ASEAN and the management
of dialogue partnerships**

By the mid of this decade Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional grouping of small and middle range countries, had managed to develop its strong international actorness. In addition to intra-regional integration, initiatives ASEAN had worked out a sophisticated network of external Dialogue Partnerships

* The research was carried out under the RFBR grant 15-03-00438.

**Chapter IV. ASEAN countries and their relations with China
on the conflict in the South China Sea**

with actors much stronger than ASEAN itself (like the USA, China, Japan, India, Russia).

During the discussion concerning the constellation of East Asian Summit (EAS), a macro-regional framework of ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand created in 2005 and expanded in 2010 to include the USA and Russia, ASEAN worked out a set of criteria for new EAS members. Countries willing to join EAS should have established relations of Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN, sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN and achieve a high level of economic cooperation with ASEAN. An important, though not declared requirement, was an adherence to ASEAN normative culture collectively known as the “ASEAN Way”.

It seemed to ASEAN that setting these criteria was enough to manage the political competition over South-east Asia and sustain the economic involvement of external partners at the necessary level.

By that time, ASEAN had defined the particular functions of external partners for ASEAN development. American involvement was important in terms of providing security guarantees and access to the US market. The US partial retreat from the region under George W. Bush or fluctuations of Donald Trump’s policy in the Asia Pacific caused concerns rather than desire to pay to more

Security and Cooperation in the South-China Sea:
The Evolution of Military and Political Interests of the Parties Concerned

attention to the intra-regional connections among the political elites of ASEAN member states.

Relations with Japan were fundamentally important for ASEAN because of its transnational production chains, which in the 1980s-1990s have covered many of ASEAN member states, and due to massive Japanese investments in their economies. The European Union (EU) provided an important market for ASEAN member states goods and invested heavily in the ASEAN economy. Other partners, like South Korea, India or Russia, were important in terms of sustaining due political and economic competition over Southeast Asia.

For almost two decades, ASEAN regarded Chinese economic reforms mainly as a chance for ASEAN to establish new economically profitable relations. In the 1990s, China ceased to support all communist movements in Southeast Asia and aspired to establish full-fledged dialogue partnership with ASEAN. ASEAN member states at that time believed that they could easily extrapolate normative instruments they have worked out within Association towards China and this could have helped ASEAN to manage its relations with this new partner. The Declaration of conduct in the South China Sea signed in 2002 between ASEAN and China just supported that perception.

At the turn of the centuries, ASEAN managed to retain control over expanding network of its dialogue part-

**Chapter IV. ASEAN countries and their relations with China
on the conflict in the South China Sea**

nerships mainly because of the relatively weak confrontation in the region and due to the culture of regional dialogue it has been fostering within its institutional framework since the end of the Cold War. In this logic, the very fact of participation in the regular summits and meetings sometimes was more important than the practical outcome. This latter quality became a visible attribute especially of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which included 27 participants ranging from the EU and up to North Korea. ARF, as well as ASEAN, made only consensus-based decision looking for lowest possible common denominator.

ASEAN normative culture, the “ASEAN Way”, has become an important instrument of dialogue partnerships’ management. All dialogue partners had to adhere to the certain norms and principles of ASEAN while those abstaining from it faced formal and informal criticism. An intellectual support to “ASEAN Way” was coming from the network of ASEAN member states-based Institutes of International and Strategic studies created in 1988.

Once the ASEAN-related institutional network has expended to include both new bilateral and multilateral tracks, like ARF and EAS, ASEAN has faced a necessity to invent additional instruments of this networks’ management. The idea of ‘ASEAN Centrality’ became such an additional instrument¹. Mentioning the notion of

Security and Cooperation in the South-China Sea:
The Evolution of Military and Political Interests of the Parties Concerned

‘ASEAN Centrality’ became an integral element of all official documents adopted by regional institutions.

However, the regional think-tank discussions often pondered on the idea of a flexible leadership in the region². It implied that any state or group of states could have acted as a regional leader under different circumstances. Thus, ASEAN tried to limit the leadership aspirations of bigger players and to cement ASEAN’s leading role in the regional processes claiming that ASEAN presented the dialogue platform acceptable to any regional player, be it a large or a small country.

When in 2010 ASEAN adopted Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity and, in 2015, the ASEAN Communities Blueprints (for ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community) it has started to access its external partners also from a viewpoint of their possible contributions to building greater ASEAN connectivity and ASEAN communities. This formal and informal assessment was important to stimulate competition over the infrastructural projects in the ASEAN member states and to raise the investors’ interests to the region. By that time, the external partners seemed to be manageable and ASEAN institutional network sustainable in terms of providing a relatively conflict-free regional development.

**South China Sea problems: a reflection of crisis
in the dialogue partnership management**

In the beginning of this decade China's rapid economic rise generated turbulence in the regional situation described above. ASEAN member states political elites started to perceive China's role not that straightforwardly positive as it was a decade ago.

The rising since 2011 tensions in the South China Sea between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei over Spratly and Paracel Islands just raised the concerns of small and middle-range regional actors. The US "Pivot" to Asia proclaimed in 2011 aimed at curbing China's influence by strategic and economic means deepened the existing cleavages in the region. Once China-US contradictions in the region came to the forefront, the limited abilities of ASEAN to manage the regional situation became more visible.

Despite the fact that the USA under the administration of Barack Obama (2008-2016) and during Donald Trump's presidency continued to acknowledge formally the ASEAN centrality, de facto the USA overlooked regional institutions when it no longer needed them to mitigate regional tensions. Instead, the US political leadership started to circulate the idea of making US security bilateral alliances in the region multilateral.

Security and Cooperation in the South-China Sea:
The Evolution of Military and Political Interests of the Parties Concerned

In the beginning of this century China aspired to strengthen its relations with ASEAN by all possible means. Thus, it joined all ASEAN-related institutions. In 2002, China became the first country, which managed to sign the free trade agreement with ASEAN as regional block. Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT) formed in 2003 under ASEAN+3 framework aimed at better socialization of China in the region via think tank activities and Track 2 diplomacy³.

China's economic rising, however, turned it into a more assertive regional player with own regional and even transregional strategy. In 2013, President Xi Jinping announced new Chinese initiative of "One Belt, One Road". One of its tracks, "Maritime Silk Road" was directly aimed at embracing ASEAN member states rather than China's acting as a subordinate of ASEAN-generated regional projects.

**Divergence of Normative Approaches of ASEAN
and its Dialogue Partners concerning
the South China Sea**

The rising tensions of South China Sea has highlighted the contradiction between different normative approaches to the international relations in the region - the "ASEAN Way", US vision of the regional relations and Chinese perceptions of the harmonious world.

**Chapter IV. ASEAN countries and their relations with China
on the conflict in the South China Sea**

According to Chinese perception of the harmonious relations stipulated by the Confucian tradition in case of any acute international problem Beijing could have agreed to the unilateral actions to demonstrate one's will for a compromise⁴. These unilateral actions might have even be taken in case of China's core interests, which include Taiwan, Tibet and Xingjian. Before Hong Kong and Macao's return to the PRC these territories also were a part of the core interests.

During one of the escalations of the conflict in the South China Sea in 2013-2015 years the mass media started to circulate the news that China had now included the disputed islands in the South China Sea into its core interests. After 2015 these news stopped to appear. The reverse actions in the question of the core interests should have manifested Beijing's will to reach a compromise in the conflict. In China's understanding its unilateral actions morally oblige its partner not to take actions which can escalate conflict further. The partner (in this case - ASEAN), however, might not realize its moral obligation and continue instating on a legally binding conflict resolution. This situation leads to China's formal "loss of face" (with retaining de facto strong positions). Such a formal "loss of face" took place in 2016 when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague acknowledged that China's claim for the islands in the South China Sea based on the idea of the "historical rights" did not corre-

Security and Cooperation in the South-China Sea:
The Evolution of Military and Political Interests of the Parties Concerned

spond to the International Law. As a result, the PRC had to take a more assertive position.

The US approach based on the idea of a freedom of navigation not only for civil but also military vessels in the South China Sea represent yet another normative approach which contradict to the position of China.

Not being satisfied with the way the situation has evolved after the ICJ, in August 2017, ASEAN member states and China agreed to proceed with a framework of the Code of Conduct (COC). This overall positive movement, however, has highlighted a number of remaining obstacles for the conflict resolution.

As one of the ASEAN-ISIS think tanks has noted, the decision on discussion further the COC has not actually changed the patterns of behavior of any parties involved with China and Vietnam continuing to build up facilities on the disputed islands while the US had already conducted several freedom of navigation operations near the artificial islands⁵.

The preceded analysis had demonstrated that the controversial nature of the very idea that ASEAN normative culture might have been extrapolated towards the whole region had manifested itself in the most vivid way particularly in the periods of rising tensions in the South China Sea.

**Chapter IV. ASEAN countries and their relations with China
on the conflict in the South China Sea**

An approach focused on the conflict management rather than on the conflict resolution, which worked well in case of some intra-mural contradiction within ASEAN did not work successfully in case of ASEAN relations with such bigger players as China. As a result, ASEAN had to turn to the idea of legally binding agreements concerning the South China Sea, which, however, resonate differently in case of ASEAN, China and the US.

NOTES

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² Pham Q.M. ASEAN's Indispensable Role in Regional Construction// Asia-Pacific Review. 2015. Vol.22, No. 2. P.82-101.

³ Kim H.J., Lee P.P. China and the Network of East Asian Think Tanks: Socializing China into an East Asian Community?// Asian Survey. 2017. Vol.57. No.3. P.571-593.

⁴ In more details see: Shih Ch. Sinicizing International Relations: Self, Civilization, and Intellectual Politics in Subaltern East Asia. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

⁵ Daniel Th. South China Sea: can ASEAN, China find convergence in dispute?/ The Straits Times. October 24, 2017. URL: http://www.isis.org.my/attachments/commentaries/2017/TD_NS_T_24Oct2017.pdf (accessed 17.12.2017).