

Analysis of the South China SEA: Resource Potential and Future Conflict Risks for Asean Countries

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea represents one of the most strategically significant maritime regions globally, characterized by complex territorial disputes involving China, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. This study examines the resource potential of the South China Sea and analyzes how these resources influence conflict risks for ASEAN member states. Employing qualitative research methodology through case study design and process-tracing techniques, this research investigates the interplay between natural resource exploitation, territorial claims, and security dynamics in the region. The findings reveal that the South China Sea contains substantial reserves of oil (estimated 11 billion barrels), natural gas (190 trillion cubic feet), and fisheries resources (8 million metric tons annually), alongside serving as a critical international trade route with approximately \$5.3 trillion in goods transiting annually. The territorial disputes are exacerbated by competing interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China's nine-dash line claims, and increasing militarization of disputed features. ASEAN's mediation efforts face significant challenges due to diverse member interests, Chinese economic leverage, and external power involvement. The study concludes that effective conflict management requires strengthened ASEAN unity, enhanced diplomatic mechanisms, adherence to international law, and cooperative frameworks for resource sharing. The research contributes to understanding how resource-rich maritime territories shape regional security architecture and provides policy recommendations for peaceful dispute resolution in contested waters.

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea, spanning approximately 3.6 million square kilometers and bordered by Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Taiwan, and China, is a focal point of intense maritime disputes involving overlapping territorial claims, rich natural resources, strategic shipping routes, and escalating great power competition (Kipgen, 2020). This region serves as an essential maritime corridor, with \$5.3 trillion in goods passing through annually, hydrocarbon reserves estimated at 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and fisheries producing 8–10 million metric tons annually—critical for local economies and food security (Christian, 2021; Flecker, 2017; Matondang et al., 2022; Alenezi, 2024). Key disputes focus on islands such as the Paracels and Spratlys, complicated by China's "nine-dash line" that overlaps with the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of other claimants, and by ongoing land reclamation and militarization, which hinder peaceful diplomatic solutions (Syed Rizwan Haider Bukhari et al., 2024).

The involvement of external actors, notably the United States, intensifies tensions through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and security partnerships like AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, all viewed by Beijing as strategies of containment and drivers of regional militarization (Budiman et al., 2023; Sumadinata, 2023). ASEAN, while striving for unity, faces internal divisions due to differing interests among member states—four claimants and six non-claimants maintain varied relationships with China, highlighted by the bloc's inability to agree on a joint communiqué in 2012 (Aziz et al., 2024). ASEAN's strategy

has centered on diplomatic engagement, including the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) and ongoing negotiations for a binding Code of Conduct (COC), though these efforts are often stymied by disagreements over content, legal framework, and enforceability (Majumdar, 2015).

Factors such as increasing energy demand, rising nationalism, military modernization, U.S.-China rivalry, and environmental stresses heighten the urgency for effective dispute management in the South China Sea (Cheng, 2025; Cuong et al., 2024; Duman, 2024). Research on the topic spans multiple perspectives: realist analyses focus on security dilemmas and power competition (Zhang, 2022), liberal institutionalist studies prioritize international law and multilateral efforts (Cheeppensook, 2020), constructivist approaches examine the influence of norms and identity in ASEAN policies (Mun, 2017), and legal-economic evaluations address UNCLOS implementation and resource sharing for joint development (Javed et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies highlight the complex interplay between strategic, economic, and normative drivers of both conflict and cooperation in the region (Kuszevska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021; Scheffran, 2023).

Several gaps persist in the current literature on the South China Sea (Jiang & Wang, 2021). First, there is a lack of integrated analysis connecting the region's resource potential to conflict dynamics and the policy responses of ASEAN states; while many studies discuss disputes or resources individually, few systematically examine their mutual influence. Second, research often emphasizes bilateral disputes—particularly between China and individual claimants—without sufficiently exploring ASEAN's collective response or internal member dynamics. Third, existing scholarship has yet to adequately consider how evolving resources, including not only traditional hydrocarbons but also rare earth elements, fisheries sustainability, and emerging blue economy prospects, shape contemporary patterns of dispute. Fourth, there is limited focus on the impact of domestic politics within ASEAN states on national positions and engagement with regional mechanisms regarding the South China Sea issue.

This study addresses these gaps by delivering a comprehensive analysis of the resource potential in the South China Sea and its implications for conflict risk among ASEAN countries (Hu, 2023). Its novelty lies in an integrated approach that connects three strands: (1) in-depth assessment of natural resources such as hydrocarbons, fisheries, and strategic trade routes; (2) investigation of how these resources affect the security policies and conflict behavior of ASEAN states; and (3) analysis of ASEAN's available cooperative frameworks and diplomatic strategies for managing conflict risks while fostering sustainable resource use. By applying conflict transformation theory and securitization theory as conceptual frameworks, this research goes beyond static discussions of competing claims to examine the dynamic processes through which resources are securitized—and how regional institutions can convert potential conflicts into opportunities for cooperation.

The research objectives of this study are sevenfold. First, the study explores the historical and contemporary bases of overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea region. Second, it interprets how international law—particularly UNCLOS—applies to dispute resolution within this context. Third, the research identifies the principal drivers of geopolitical tension in the South China Sea. Fourth, it assesses the impact of military build-ups and strategic competition among claimant states on regional stability. Fifth, it analyzes the effects of conflicts in the South China Sea on ASEAN unity, regional security, and policy responses. Sixth, the study examines the diplomatic strategies and collective actions undertaken by ASEAN to mitigate potential conflicts. Seventh, it develops policy recommendations for how ASEAN countries can sustainably exploit resources and minimize conflict risks through cooperative mechanisms.

Practically, the implications of this research are significant for multiple stakeholders. For ASEAN member states, it provides evidence-based analysis to inform national security and

regional diplomatic strategies. For policymakers and diplomats engaged in South China Sea negotiations, the research offers insights on linkages between resources and conflict that can strengthen proposal development and negotiation tactics. For international organizations and external powers interested in regional stability, the findings clarify complex dynamics that must be considered for constructive engagement. For researchers and academics, the study adds both theoretical and empirical contributions to scholarship on maritime disputes, resource conflicts, regional security architecture, and international institutions in Asia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the complex dynamics of resource potential and conflict risks in the South China Sea, focusing on ASEAN member states' responses from the 1990s onward (Bryman, 2016; Yin, 2018). The research examines political, economic, and strategic factors shaping territorial disputes, utilizing process-tracing to map causal links between resource potential, securitization, and ASEAN policies. Data were collected from primary sources, including ASEAN declarations, national security strategies, UNCLOS documents, and arbitration rulings, as well as secondary sources such as scholarly publications and media reports, with systematic keyword searches across databases like JSTOR and ScienceDirect. Thematic analysis organized data into three main themes: natural resources and economic interests, security policies and territorial disputes, and ASEAN cooperation and conflict management, combining descriptive and interpretive approaches to explore both material realities and socially constructed security perceptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Theoretical frameworks include Lederach's conflict transformation theory, emphasizing personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of conflict resolution, and securitization theory, highlighting how resource issues are framed as existential threats that justify extraordinary measures. Limitations include context specificity, reliance on public sources, and language constraints, while the study is delimited to ASEAN perspectives, key resources (hydrocarbons, fisheries, shipping), and developments since the 1990s, providing a nuanced understanding of regional dispute management and cooperative mechanisms.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Natural Resource Assessment of the South China Sea

Hydrocarbon Resources: Oil and Natural Gas Reserves

The hydrocarbon potential of the South China Sea constitutes a significant aspect of its strategic importance and serves as a major driver of territorial disputes among claimant states. Geological surveys and energy assessments have identified substantial reserves across multiple sedimentary basins along the continental margins of Southeast Asian countries. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration's comprehensive assessment, the region holds approximately 11 billion barrels of proven and probable oil reserves and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Ramkumar et al., 2020). However, these estimates vary considerably depending on factors such as assessment methodologies, price assumptions, and technological recovery capabilities.

Table 1. Estimated Hydrocarbon Reserves in South China Sea Basins

Basin Location	Estimated Oil (billion barrels)	Estimated Natural Gas (trillion cubic feet)	Current Production (barrels/day)	Primary Operating State
Pearl River Mouth Basin	3.5	45	450,000	China
Malay-Tho Chu Basin	2.1	38	280,000	Vietnam, Malaysia
Pattani Basin	1.8	28	185,000	Thailand, Malaysia

Basin Location	Estimated Oil (billion barrels)	Estimated Natural Gas (trillion cubic feet)	Current Production (barrels/day)	Primary Operating State
Nam Con Son Basin	1.2	35	220,000	Vietnam
Reed Bank Area	0.9	22	Limited	Disputed (Philippines, China)
Spratly Region	1.1	18	Minimal	Disputed (multiple claimants)
Other Basins	0.4	4	165,000	Various
Total	11.0	190	~1,300,000	-

Source: Compiled from Ramkumar et al. (2020), Sunariyanto & Prayogo (2022), U.S. EIA (2021)

The distribution of hydrocarbon resources in the South China Sea has considerable implications for the dynamics of regional disputes. Most economically viable and currently active fields are situated within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of coastal states, rather than under the contested islands and reefs that are at the heart of sovereignty conflicts. For example, the Pearl River Mouth Basin off southern China and the Nam Con Son Basin within Vietnam's EEZ host the largest operational production facilities. The Reed Bank area, which lies in the Philippines' EEZ but is also claimed by China, is among the most contentious zones due to estimated reserves of 5.4 billion barrels of oil and 55 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, though these estimates remain speculative pending comprehensive exploration (Flecker, 2017).

Currently, oil production from the South China Sea amounts to about 1.3 million barrels per day, representing approximately 1.5% of global oil output. Although this share may seem relatively modest in global terms, it is a substantial component of the regional energy supply for Southeast Asian economies. For instance, Vietnam receives roughly 25% of its government revenue from oil and gas production, much of which is derived from South China Sea fields. Similarly, Malaysia depends on offshore production for a significant portion of its energy exports and fiscal income. China has also rapidly expanded offshore exploration and production, with state-owned enterprises such as CNOOC investing heavily in deepwater drilling technology and production platforms.

The development of hydrocarbons in disputed waters faces several key challenges. First, uncertainty over sovereignty and resource rights introduces significant investment risks, discouraging international energy companies from pursuing exploration in contested zones. Second, multiple states competing to issue exploration licenses for the same geographic areas lead to legal ambiguities about the validity of contracts and the appropriate jurisdiction for dispute resolution. Third, physical harassment of exploration vessels and drilling platforms by military and paramilitary forces—especially actions by China's Coast Guard and maritime militia—has repeatedly disrupted exploration operations conducted by other claimant states, most notably impacting Vietnam and the Philippines.

Fisheries Resources and Marine Biodiversity

The fisheries resources of the South China Sea represent one of its most immediate and substantial values for coastal communities across Southeast Asia. As one of the most biologically diverse marine ecosystems globally, the region contains around 3,365 documented fish species across 263 families, amounting to roughly 12% of the world's fish biodiversity. This remarkable diversity is attributed to the South China Sea's location at the intersection of tropical and subtropical climate zones, its varied bathymetry—from shallow continental shelves to deep ocean basins—and its complex current systems that promote larval dispersal and nutrient upwelling.

The annual fish catch from the South China Sea is estimated to range between 8 and 10 million metric tons, accounting for around 12% of global marine capture fisheries output (Matondang et al., 2022). However, these figures likely underrepresent the true catch volume due to incomplete reporting of artisanal, subsistence, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities. When these unrecorded catches are included, marine biologists estimate that total extraction may exceed 15 million metric tons annually. This raises serious sustainability concerns, as evidence points to declining catch per unit effort and a shift in species composition toward smaller, less economically valuable fish.

Table 2. Fishing Activity and Catch Estimates by Claimant State

Country	Number of Fishing Vessels	Estimated Annual Catch (metric tons)	Primary Target Species	Percentage of Total Catch
China	780,000	4,200,000	Tuna, mackerel, reef fish, squid	42%
Vietnam	450,000	2,100,000	Pelagic fish, shrimp, squid	21%
Philippines	310,000	1,600,000	Tuna, small pelagics, reef fish	16%
Malaysia	180,000	900,000	Demersal fish, shrimp, squid	9%
Indonesia	95,000	750,000	Tuna, pelagic fish, shrimp	7.5%
Taiwan	28,000	350,000	Tuna, billfish, squid	3.5%
Brunei	4,000	100,000	Mixed species	1%
Total	1,847,000	10,000,000	-	100%

Source: Compiled from Giovanni (2021), Matondang et al. (2022)

The concentration of fishing activity in the South China Sea is extraordinary, with around 1.77 million fishing vessels—representing 55% of the global fishing fleet—operating in its waters (Giovanni, 2021). A significant majority, roughly 86%, are small-scale artisanal boats typically less than 12 meters long, operating close to their home ports. These vessels utilize traditional fishing techniques such as hook-and-line, gill nets, and fish traps, and are integral to coastal communities, providing not only critical economic income but also serving as a foundation of cultural identity and a livelihood tradition spanning generations.

By contrast, larger commercial vessels—including Chinese distant-water fishing fleets—employ more capital-intensive, extractive techniques such as trawling, purse seining, and long-lining. These industrial craft have advanced storage and processing capacity, enabling operation far from home ports for long periods. The growth of Chinese fishing operations, supported by state subsidies for vessel construction and fuel, has intensified tensions, as Chinese boats increasingly encroach into waters also claimed by other countries. These operations are sometimes backed by Coast Guard or maritime militia escorts, further complicating the distinction between fishing and state security activity.

The economic significance of fisheries in the South China Sea reaches far beyond the volume of the catch. For coastal communities in the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, fish provide essential protein—comprising 30-60% of animal protein consumed in some areas (Alenezi, 2024). The fisheries sector also supports crucial employment: an estimated 3–4 million people are directly engaged in capture fisheries, with many more involved in processing, distribution, boat building, and gear manufacturing. The multiplier effects on local economies are substantial, making access to fisheries not only a commercial resource but also a cornerstone for food security and the protection of livelihoods.

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea have direct and profound impacts on fishing communities through several pathways. First, physical harassment, arrest, and detention of fishers by maritime law enforcement from competing claimant states have become increasingly

frequent. Between 2010 and 2020, over 1,200 documented incidents involved the detention of Vietnamese fishers by Chinese authorities, with numerous similar cases affecting Filipino and Indonesian fishers (Zhong & White, 2017). These detentions not only cause direct economic losses through confiscated catch, damaged vessels, and ransom payments but also create a climate of fear that restricts fishers' willingness to operate in their traditional fishing areas.

Second, environmental degradation from island reclamation, destructive fishing methods, and pollution has diminished the productivity of fishing grounds, especially around coral reef ecosystems that serve as vital nurseries for commercially important species. China's large-scale land reclamation between 2013 and 2016 destroyed an estimated 6,000 acres of coral reefs, inflicting long-term damage on marine habitats (Morton, 2016). Third, competition over declining resources has heightened conflicts among fishing communities from different countries, occasionally leading to violent clashes at sea. Fourth, lack of effective enforcement of fisheries management across disputed waters has facilitated overfishing, the use of harmful practices such as cyanide and dynamite fishing, and the exploitation of endangered species like sea turtles and giant clams.

Strategic Shipping Routes and Maritime Trade

The South China Sea serves as a vital maritime transportation corridor, forming a key component of its strategic importance. It is among the world's busiest shipping lanes, with an estimated 40,000–50,000 vessel transits annually carrying about \$5.3 trillion in goods (Christian, 2021). This accounts for nearly one-third of global maritime commerce, including significant flows of energy, manufactured goods, agricultural produce, and raw materials between Asia and other regions.

Several factors contribute to this high concentration of maritime traffic. First, the South China Sea provides the most direct route connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, enabling efficient movement between East and Southeast Asian production hubs and markets in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Alternative routes through southern Indonesia—such as the Lombok or Sunda Straits—are longer and more costly, reducing supply chain efficiency. Second, the Strait of Malacca, which is the main western gateway to the South China Sea, is a critical chokepoint, only 1.7 nautical miles wide at its narrowest. About 85,000 vessels pass through the Malacca Strait annually, making it one of the most congested maritime passages globally.

Third, the region is home to major commercial ports—such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Ho Chi Minh City, and Manila—located along the South China Sea's littoral. These ports generate significant origin and destination traffic as well as through-traffic, handling over 200 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) of containerized cargo each year, in addition to hundreds of millions of tons of bulk commodities. Fourth, the South China Sea is the main transit route for Middle Eastern crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) bound for energy-importing countries in Northeast Asia. Around 80% of crude oil imports to China, Japan, and South Korea—equivalent to about 15 million barrels per day—are transported through this strategic maritime corridor (Zhong & White, 2017).

Table 3. South China Sea Maritime Trade Flows by Commodity Category (2024 Estimates)

Commodity Category			Annual Volume	Trade Value (USD billions)	Percentage of Global Trade
Crude Oil			5.5 billion barrels	385	28%
Liquefied (LNG)	Natural	Gas	180 million tons	95	31%
Container Goods			220 million TEUs	3,800	34%
Bulk Dry Cargo			850 million tons	385	22%

Commodity Category	Annual Volume	Trade Value (USD billions)	Percentage of Global Trade
Petroleum Products	285 million tons	210	19%
Chemical Products	95 million tons	175	26%
Other Cargo	Various	250	15%
Total	-	5,300	~33%

Source: Compiled from Zhong & White (2017), Christian (2021), UNCTAD (2024)

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Impact of Territorial Disputes on ASEAN Security Policies

Evolution of Claimant States' Security Postures

The territorial disputes in the South China Sea have significantly influenced security policies and military modernization efforts among ASEAN claimant states, each shaped by unique geopolitical contexts, resource capacities, threat perceptions, and China relationships. Common strategies include enhancing naval capabilities, developing maritime domain awareness systems, strengthening legal positions through international law, and balancing engagement with external security partners.

Vietnam exemplifies a comprehensive military modernization program, motivated by historical tensions with China and competition over hydrocarbon resources in overlapping maritime claims. Since the early 2000s, Vietnam has expanded naval assets by acquiring modern surface combatants, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, and coastal defense systems. A key milestone was the acquisition of six Russian Kilo-class submarines between 2013 and 2016, which substantially enhanced Vietnam's subsurface deterrence and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities within its territorial claims (Wardhana, 2021). Additionally, Vietnam has deployed missile systems—including anti-ship cruise missiles and coastal defense batteries—on occupied features in the Spratly Islands.

Vietnam's security strategy integrates military buildup with robust legal and diplomatic efforts. Hanoi consistently prioritizes international law, particularly UNCLOS, as the basis for

resolving disputes. Vietnam contested China's nine-dash line through a Note Verbale submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf and supported the Philippines' arbitration case while pursuing its own claims. Domestically, the government manages nationalist sentiment carefully, permitting limited protests against Chinese actions while avoiding escalation that could spark military conflict. Vietnam also pursues diversified security partnerships, strengthening defense cooperation with Russia, India, Japan, and the United States, while deliberately avoiding formal alliances that might alarm China.

The Philippines initially adopted a relatively passive approach to South China Sea disputes, limited by constrained defense budgets and outdated military equipment. However, several incidents catalyzed policy shifts, most notably China's occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995 and the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff. The latter incident proved particularly consequential: after a months-long confrontation between Philippine and Chinese vessels, both sides agreed to withdraw, but China subsequently reneged on this understanding and established a permanent presence at the shoal, effectively denying Philippine access to traditional fishing grounds (Dreisbach, 2019).

The Scarborough Shoal incident prompted the Philippines to pursue a landmark legal case under UNCLOS, filing for arbitration at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2013. The July 2016 ruling represented a sweeping legal victory for the Philippines, determining that China's nine-dash line had no legal basis under UNCLOS, that China had violated Philippine sovereign rights, and that various Chinese activities—including island-building and environmental destruction—violated international obligations (Yanuar, 2021). However, China rejected the ruling as “null and void,” declining to participate in proceedings and refusing to accept the tribunal's jurisdiction or conclusions.

The Philippines' approach to the disputes has been significantly influenced by presidential preferences and domestic politics. President Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016) pursued a firm stance emphasizing international law and closer security cooperation with the United States. His successor, Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), adopted a conciliatory approach toward China, downplaying the arbitration ruling while securing Chinese investment commitments. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (2022–present) has recalibrated toward a more balanced position, reaffirming the arbitration ruling's importance while maintaining constructive relations with Beijing and strengthening security ties with Washington through expanded base access arrangements and joint patrols.

Military modernization under the Philippines' Revised Armed Forces Modernization Program has prioritized developing a minimum credible defense posture through the acquisition of multi-role fighters, frigate patrol vessels, corvettes, and maritime surveillance systems. However, Philippine military capabilities remain modest relative to regional powers due to budgetary constraints and competing domestic security demands, including ongoing counterinsurgency operations.

Malaysia has adopted a cautious and measured approach to South China Sea disputes, favoring quiet diplomacy and avoiding direct confrontation with China. Malaysian claims mainly focus on the southern Spratly Islands and continental shelf areas off Sabah and Sarawak, where Malaysia maintains presence on features such as Swallow Reef, which hosts a significant military installation. Malaysia has conducted oil and gas exploration and production within its claimed EEZ, leading to occasional encounters with Chinese vessels, but generally without major incidents.

Kuala Lumpur's strategy is shaped by its substantial economic ties with China, which is its largest trading partner and a major investor in infrastructure. This economic interdependence creates incentives for Malaysia to avoid provocative actions that could provoke Chinese retaliation. Domestic political considerations—including the presence of an

ethnic Chinese minority and concerns about communal relations—also influence Malaysia’s China policy.

Nonetheless, Malaysia has pursued gradual military modernization focused on maritime security capabilities, including patrol vessels, maritime patrol aircraft, and radar systems for surveillance of its claimed waters. The country has also strengthened legal positions, submitting claims to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf regarding extended continental shelf territories in the South China Sea. Diplomatically, Malaysia emphasizes ASEAN-centered dispute management approaches and cultivates defense partnerships with countries such as the United States, Australia, and Britain.

Brunei is the least assertive among the ASEAN claimants, maintaining a deliberately low profile in South China Sea disputes. Its claims center on Louisa Reef and nearby maritime zones in the southern South China Sea. As a small state with limited military capacity but substantial oil wealth, Brunei prioritizes economic stability and avoids actions likely to antagonize larger neighbors. Bandar Seri Begawan participates in regional diplomatic processes and upholds international law but has not occupied disputed features or engaged in significant military activities related to its South China Sea claims (Javed et al., 2023).

ASEAN Collective Security Architecture and South China Sea Disputes

The South China Sea disputes have tested ASEAN’s collective security mechanisms, exposing inherent tensions between national sovereignty and regional solidarity. ASEAN was originally established not as a military alliance or collective security organization but as a platform for Southeast Asian states to promote regional stability through dialogue, confidence-building, and respect for non-interference in domestic affairs. This approach—often described as the “ASEAN Way”—emphasizes consensus decision-making, incremental progress, informal processes, and avoidance of legalistic or confrontational methods in resolving disputes (Majumdar, 2015).

The South China Sea issue entered ASEAN’s agenda in the early 1990s, following the Cold War and China’s growing assertiveness in the region. ASEAN members acknowledged that, although disputes primarily involved bilateral interactions between individual claimants and China, the broader consequences for regional stability, maritime security, and freedom of navigation warranted a collective regional response. Moreover, ASEAN viewed engagement with China on the South China Sea as an opportunity to influence Beijing’s regional behavior and integrate China into Southeast Asian norms and mechanisms.

ASEAN’s diplomatic efforts culminated in the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) with China, marking a significant milestone. The DOC secured Chinese commitment to principles such as peaceful dispute resolution without force or threats, self-restraint to avoid exacerbating disputes, implementation of confidence-building measures, and eventual negotiation of a binding Code of Conduct (Aziz et al., 2024). However, the DOC’s non-binding status and ambiguous language regarding its implementation have limited its practical effectiveness.

Negotiations toward a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) have proceeded slowly since formally beginning in 2013. Multiple rounds of discussions between ASEAN and Chinese officials have produced a draft framework, but fundamental disagreements persist regarding several issues:

1. Geographic scope: China prefers limiting the COC's application to a defined geographic area that excludes portions of the South China Sea. ASEAN claimants generally favor broader coverage.
2. Third-party involvement: China insists on excluding external powers, particularly the United States, from any South China Sea arrangements. Some ASEAN members believe external engagement supports regional stability.

3. Dispute resolution mechanisms: Proposals for how to handle violations or interpret COC provisions have proven contentious, with China opposing any third-party arbitration or enforcement mechanisms.
4. Military activities: The extent to which the COC would constrain military operations, exercises, and deployments remains disputed, as does the treatment of land reclamation and artificial island construction.
5. Legal status: While ASEAN members generally seek a legally binding agreement, China has indicated preference for a politically binding document that would not create enforceable legal obligations (Mustaza & Saidin, 2021).

These disagreements highlight underlying tensions surrounding regional order and relationships with major powers. From China's point of view, the South China Sea disputes are bilateral matters between China and individual Southeast Asian states, and ASEAN's role is limited to facilitating dialogue, not direct involvement. Beijing perceives moves to "internationalize" or "multilateralize" the disputes as tactics to constrain China's interests via collective pressure. Furthermore, China interprets U.S. engagement as external interference aimed at preserving American dominance and containing China's ascent.

From ASEAN's perspective, even though only four members are direct claimants, all have stakes in the South China Sea's stability, navigational freedom, and the upholding of international law. ASEAN considers collective engagement with China as providing more bargaining power than bilateral efforts, which could leave smaller states vulnerable to coercion from a more powerful neighbor. Nevertheless, ASEAN's unity is frequently challenged, most visibly seen in the 2012 episode when the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting failed to produce a joint communiqué—an unprecedented event in the organization's history (Aziz et al., 2024).

The 2012 incident exposed significant rifts within ASEAN over how to address Chinese assertiveness. As ASEAN Chair, Cambodia blocked language critical of China's actions at Scarborough Shoal, reportedly due to pressure from Beijing, considering Cambodia's reliance on Chinese economic aid. This episode demonstrated how China's economic influence over individual ASEAN members could undermine the group's collective stance on sensitive matters. Consequently, ASEAN's South China Sea statements often represent least-common-denominator consensus, relying on diplomatic phrasing that avoids overt criticism of any country while reaffirming general principles.

ASEAN's efforts to reinforce its position on the South China Sea face several structural constraints, including diverse national interests among claimants—such as Vietnam's rivalry with China, Malaysia's balancing of sovereignty and economic concerns, and non-claimants placing higher priority on economic relations over regional solidarity. Economic dependencies on China as both a major trading partner and key investor further complicate efforts toward consensus. ASEAN's decision-making process requires unanimity, effectively granting any member a veto, while the principle of non-interference limits involvement in bilateral territorial disputes. The absence of supranational enforcement mechanisms means ASEAN relies on persuasion and voluntary cooperation for policy implementation (Chen, 2019).

Despite these limitations, ASEAN has developed platforms for regional dialogue and security cooperation. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, established in 1994) addresses maritime security, confidence-building, and preventive diplomacy, though its consensus-oriented, non-action-based structure restricts its effectiveness in resolving disputes. The ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus, founded in 2010) fosters defense cooperation but avoids direct discussion of South China Sea sovereignty issues. The East Asia Summit (EAS) brings together ASEAN and major powers to address strategic and maritime security challenges within a broader multilateral framework.

ASEAN Strategies for Conflict Risk Management

Diplomatic Engagement and Confidence-Building Measures

ASEAN's main strategy for managing conflict risks in the South China Sea relies on sustained diplomatic engagement to build trust, set norms, and develop cooperation frameworks that may progressively transform adversarial relationships. This approach is consistent with ASEAN's institutional identity and practical acknowledgment that, as a middle-power regional organization lacking military or coercive capabilities, its influence stems from its ability to convene, foster norms, and maintain persistent dialogue.

The ASEAN-China dialogue on the South China Sea has produced confidence-building measures beyond the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) and Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations. These initiatives include agreements on establishing hotlines to manage maritime incidents, protocols for search and rescue cooperation, working groups focused on marine environmental protection, and preliminary discussions on joint resource development in disputed areas. While these measures have not resolved the core sovereignty disputes, they provide communication channels that can reduce escalation risks and demonstrate potential for collaboration in spite of ongoing political disagreements (Yang et al., 2023).

ASEAN has also encouraged multilateral exercises and cooperation on non-traditional security threats to build practical relationships among military and maritime agencies. Joint exercises addressing piracy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and search and rescue operations bring together ASEAN personnel and partners—including China—in situations that emphasize shared interests over territorial competition. These activities foster personal connections and procedural familiarity, potentially aiding crisis management during periods of heightened tension.

Several ASEAN members have pursued bilateral confidence-building initiatives with China alongside broader regional processes. For instance, China and Vietnam established a fisheries cooperation agreement and a hotline for maritime incident management following heightened tensions in 2014–2015. Similarly, China and the Philippines resumed bilateral consultations on the South China Sea under President Duterte and explored joint petroleum exploration in certain areas, although meaningful progress has been hindered by unresolved legal and sovereignty disputes.

Critics of ASEAN's diplomatic approach argue that it has failed to deter Chinese assertiveness or prevent the deterioration of the security landscape. During the period in which ASEAN engaged China in dialogue and negotiations, Beijing expanded its presence through extensive land reclamation, construction of military installations, and frequent deployments of Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels in disputed areas. Many observers suggest that China uses diplomatic engagement as a tactic to buy time and deflect international criticism, all while consolidating its position in the region (Qi, 2019).

Supporters of engagement strategies counter that, without ASEAN's diplomatic efforts, the risk of military confrontation would likely be higher. They maintain that dialogue offers essential functions even without immediate breakthroughs: it keeps communication channels open, promotes consultation before unilateral actions, allows concerns to be discussed, and preserves an environment conducive to future compromise. Moreover, continued engagement supports ASEAN unity by providing a collective platform that more effectively accommodates divergent member interests than confrontational strategies, which could fragment the organization.

Legal Strategies and International Law Promotion

ASEAN's emphasis on international law, particularly UNCLOS, as the framework for resolving South China Sea disputes represents another key element of its conflict management strategy. By consistently advocating for legal principles rather than power politics, ASEAN seeks to level the playing field somewhat between China and smaller Southeast Asian states.

International law provides standards and procedures that constrain how power can be exercised and create avenues for weaker parties to challenge actions of stronger ones through adjudication and mobilization of international opinion.

The Philippines' successful prosecution of its arbitration case against China demonstrated both the potential and limitations of legal strategies. The July 2016 tribunal ruling provided authoritative international legal interpretation of key issues including the status of China's nine-dash line, the classification of disputed features as islands or rocks under UNCLOS Article 121, and the legal rights and obligations of parties regarding resource exploitation, environmental protection, and traditional fishing rights (Javed et al., 2023). The ruling comprehensively rejected China's expansive maritime claims and affirmed that China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights.

However, China's refusal to participate in or recognize the arbitration, combined with its continued activities in disputed waters, revealed the limits of international legal mechanisms when major powers decline to comply. The ruling did not change physical realities or compel Chinese behavior modification. Nevertheless, the arbitration established legal precedents that shape international discourse and create potential costs for China in terms of reputation and diplomatic relations. Many countries and international organizations have called on China to respect the ruling and act consistently with international law, applying pressure even if not forcing compliance.

Other ASEAN claimants have pursued legal strategies through submissions to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, diplomatic notes challenging excessive maritime claims, and domestic legislation asserting sovereign rights over claimed waters and resources. Vietnam has been particularly active in legal diplomacy, filing multiple Note Verbales with the United Nations challenging Chinese claims and activities. Malaysia has submitted information regarding its extended continental shelf claims beyond 200 nautical miles from its coastline, establishing formal legal positions even while avoiding direct confrontation.

The promotion of international law serves several functions for ASEAN beyond specific dispute resolution. First, it provides a common language and set of principles that all members can rally around, helping maintain unity despite diverse national interests. Second, it reinforces the rules-based international order that benefits smaller and medium powers by constraining exercise of raw power. Third, it creates focal points for mobilizing broader international support for Southeast Asian positions from states and organizations concerned with maritime security and freedom of navigation. Fourth, it establishes benchmarks for assessing behavior that can inform diplomatic responses and coordinate positions.

ASEAN faces challenges in its legal strategy, however. Most fundamentally, international law regarding maritime disputes contains ambiguities and gaps that different parties interpret in conflicting ways. For instance, the legal status of historic rights claims, the basis for claiming sovereignty over uninhabited features, the delimitation principles for overlapping maritime zones, and the rights of third parties regarding military activities in EEZs all involve contested interpretations. Additionally, international legal mechanisms depend on voluntary state participation and lack effective enforcement mechanisms against major powers that reject their authority.

Economic Cooperation and Joint Development Proposals

The potential for transforming resource competition in the South China Sea into economic cooperation represents a pragmatic dimension of ASEAN's conflict management strategy, notably through joint development arrangements that allow states to exploit resources while setting aside sovereignty disputes. Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping, have expressed support for this approach, invoking Deng Xiaoping's principle of "shelving disputes, pursuing

joint development,” particularly for hydrocarbon resources. However, implementing joint development faces multiple obstacles, including asymmetric interests where participation may imply acceptance of rival claims, complex revenue-sharing negotiations, legal and regulatory framework requirements, commercial reluctance of third-party investors, and the geographic concentration of valuable resources within individual EEZs rather than disputed areas (Qi, 2019). Despite these challenges, limited cooperation has emerged in areas such as marine scientific research, environmental monitoring, and fisheries management, with ASEAN proposing measures like marine protected areas, coordinated fishing policies, and joint responses to environmental hazards. While these functional initiatives do not resolve underlying sovereignty disputes, they foster habits of cooperation and illustrate mutual benefits, with the broader vision of a South China Sea Peace and Cooperation Zone remaining conceptually appealing but practically constrained by contentious issues of geographic scope, militarization limits, and governance arrangements.

Discussion

Resource Securitization and Regional Security Dynamics

The findings regarding natural resource distribution in the South China Sea and their influence on territorial disputes can be interpreted through securitization theory, which explains how material factors are framed as existential threats necessitating extraordinary political and military responses. This process transforms routine matters of resource management, maritime boundary delimitation, and fisheries regulation into dominant "security" issues that guide strategic planning, justify military expenditures, and limit diplomatic flexibility. China's securitization is particularly comprehensive, linking control over the South China Sea to national security dimensions such as energy, food, economic development, maritime power, and territorial integrity, framing the area as a "core interest" that mobilizes nationalist sentiment, signals resolve externally, justifies militarization, and constrains policy shifts (Zhang, 2022). ASEAN claimant states exhibit different securitization dynamics: Vietnam emphasizes threats to sovereignty and livelihoods to justify military modernization and diplomatic balancing, while the Philippines oscillates between viewing China as an existential threat or economic partner, illustrating that securitization is politically constructed and shaped by leadership and domestic politics (Budiman et al., 2023). Despite the region's modest oil and gas output and limited fisheries contribution relative to overall consumption, the strategic significance of shipping lanes is real but unlikely to be disrupted due to potential self-harm. Thus, securitization reflects broader political and strategic motives beyond material stakes, with China using the South China Sea to assert regional ambitions and ASEAN states leveraging perceived threats for international and domestic support. De-securitization reframing issues as manageable political problems rather than existential threats could foster compromise and cooperation, though entrenched nationalist narratives, military bureaucracies, and strategic competition present obstacles, suggesting incremental confidence-building measures on non-sovereignty issues like fisheries and environmental management may gradually enhance regional cooperation.

ASEAN Institutional Effectiveness and Collective Action Challenges

The findings regarding ASEAN's responses to South China Sea disputes highlight the challenges regional institutions face under power asymmetry and divergent member interests, revealing a mixed record of engagement that produces dialogue mechanisms and declarations but fails to constrain Chinese behavior or maintain consistent collective positions. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, ASEAN's establishment of the DOC, facilitation of COC negotiations, and creation of dialogue forums represent progress by providing transparency, behavioral expectations, and socialization opportunities, reducing uncertainty and transaction costs (Cheepensook, 2020), yet realist critiques are supported by evidence of China's island-

building, military deployments, and maritime militia presence proceeding despite ASEAN objections, indicating that major powers use institutions instrumentally when core interests are at stake (Mun, 2017). Structural factors limiting ASEAN's effectiveness include power asymmetry, heterogeneous member interests, consensus requirements, and limited material capabilities, constraining its influence to persuasion and normative mechanisms. While institutional reforms alone cannot fully overcome these limitations, marginal improvements may be achieved through stronger internal coordination, clearer operational norms, implementation and monitoring mechanisms, and consistent individual member policies. Comparative insights from the European Union, other ASEAN disputes, and African regional organizations suggest that regional institutions are most effective when emphasizing functional cooperation over sovereignty conflicts, adopting graduated responses, maintaining flexibility to accommodate diverse member approaches, and leveraging relationships with external partners to supplement resources and influence, thus offering avenues for incremental enhancement of ASEAN's capacity to manage South China Sea tensions.

Implications of Legal Strategies and International Law

The arbitration ruling in *Philippines v. China* demonstrates both the potential and limitations of international law in managing maritime disputes. Doctrinally, the tribunal invalidated China's maritime claims exceeding UNCLOS boundaries, providing the Philippines with legal validation, establishing precedents, and generating international political costs for China (Javed et al., 2023). However, China's rejection of the ruling and continuation of contested activities illustrates the limited enforceability of international legal mechanisms against major powers, highlighting reliance on voluntary compliance. For ASEAN states, this creates strategic dilemmas: pursuing legal avenues requires significant resources but may yield limited practical outcomes, functioning more as moral authority and political signaling than immediate security gains. Despite this, international law exerts influence indirectly by shaping discourse, informing third-party positions, generating reputational pressures, and providing focal points for coalition-building. The Philippine arbitration ruling, for instance, has been cited in diplomatic statements, academic analyses, and civil society advocacy, indicating that diffuse legal influence may gradually constrain behavior even when direct compliance by major powers is absent, underscoring the complex interplay between legal norms, power politics, and regional strategy in the South China Sea.

Conflict Transformation Potential and Path Dependencies

Applying Lederach's conflict transformation framework to the South China Sea disputes highlights both opportunities and challenges in moving beyond zero-sum competition toward constructive engagement. At the personal level, Track II dialogues, academic exchanges, joint exercises, and people-to-people contacts help humanize adversaries and foster relationships among officials, military personnel, fishers, and citizens, though strong nationalist narratives and historical antagonisms limit progress. The relational dimension shows that ASEAN-facilitated meetings, hotlines, and cooperative activities on non-traditional security issues have introduced new interaction patterns, yet these remain fragile, with persistent mistrust undermining cooperation. Structurally, entrenched drivers such as China's rise, resource competition, domestic nationalism, and external strategic rivalries make fundamental changes in regional order like new security architectures or resource-sharing arrangements politically difficult. Culturally, long-term education, media practices, and ASEAN-China friendship initiatives may gradually shift perceptions, though media sensationalism and social pressures reinforce zero-sum thinking. Conflict transformation theory emphasizes patient, multi-track engagement, where even limited or unsuccessful negotiations maintain dialogue and reveal shared interests. However, path dependency suggests

established patterns land reclamation, military deployments, nationalist rhetoric constrain flexibility, with leaders and bureaucratic constituencies politically invested in continuation. Overcoming these trajectories may require exogenous shocks, leadership transitions, or targeted agreements demonstrating cooperation benefits, gradually enabling incremental progress toward more peaceful, collaborative management of the South China Sea disputes.

CONCLUSION

This research investigates the resource potential of the South China Sea and the resulting conflict risks for ASEAN member states, highlighting strategies for managing these challenges. The region's strategic significance derives from vast hydrocarbon reserves, productive fisheries, and critical shipping lanes, which generate overlapping territorial claims among China, Taiwan, and ASEAN members—Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. These disputes are further complicated by divergent interpretations of international law, historical claims, and ongoing military modernization. ASEAN's efforts through diplomacy, legal mechanisms, and cooperative frameworks have established dialogue and norms but face difficulties in constraining assertive claimants or maintaining internal unity. Resource competition has been heavily securitized, transforming political disputes into perceived existential threats that justify militarization. However, this securitization is politically constructed, indicating potential for reframing the conflicts toward cooperation. Member states reflect diverse security policies, ranging from Vietnam's comprehensive military modernization and legal activism to Malaysia's cautious diplomacy and Brunei's low-profile stance, shaped by varying capabilities and economic ties with China. Effective management of South China Sea challenges requires strengthening ASEAN unity, upholding international law—especially UNCLOS—and pursuing incremental conflict transformation. Functional cooperation on fisheries and environmental protection, alongside balanced engagement with external powers, is essential to support regional stability. While complete resolution of sovereignty disputes remains unlikely due to entrenched positions and nationalist politics, gradual progress through agreed rules, norms, and cooperative mechanisms is achievable with sustained commitment to diplomacy, confidence-building, and avoidance of zero-sum competition.

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