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# Local Perspectives of Five Southeast Asian Countries

*-Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam-*

## Toward China in the South China Sea Dispute

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Open Source, Foreign Perspective, Underconsidered/Understudied Topics

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### **Author Background**

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# **Local Perspectives of Five Southeast Asian Countries– Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam – Toward China in the South China Sea Dispute**

*Anthony Ortiz*

## **Introduction**

The South China Sea connects one third of the world’s shipping and encompasses 1.4 million square miles from the Malacca Straits to the Strait of Taiwan. According to excerpts from Southeast Asian news sources, China seeks to control 90% of the South China Sea and regularly crosses jurisdictional maritime boundaries with aggressive practices that are detrimental to the sovereignty of Southeast Asian states that claim parts of the South China Sea. As a result, the maritime territorial dispute in the South China Sea continues to be a source of tension between China and its Southeast Asian claimants.

As the primary legal mechanism used by ASEAN member states to resolve the dispute, the Declaration of Conduct (DoC), signed in 2002 by China and ASEAN member states, according to excerpts from cited articles, has not been an effective tool in preventing China from implementing its practices in the South China Sea. It aims to “enhance favorable conditions for a peaceful and durable solution of differences and disputes among countries concerned” and its goal is to “resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force”.<sup>1</sup> According to Mingjiang Li of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, the DoC, in the views of many analysts, was essentially a compromise between the two positions of doing nothing and having a legally binding agreement.<sup>2</sup> Currently, ASEAN member states are working on a Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea, which, according to Singapore Foreign Minister K.

Shanmugam, has been disappointing since there hasn't been a clear agreement on a negotiation schedule and there has yet to be significant progress of its content.<sup>3</sup>

With a vast disputed maritime area, the South China Sea is likely to continue to be contentious until the CoC or another resolution, such as the current proceedings before the United Nations Tribunal, is finalized. Until then, to have a better understanding of individual country viewpoints, we can

examine local foreign policy perspectives to identify the positions of claimants in the region. The purpose of this monograph is to examine local foreign policy perspectives of five Southeast Asian countries – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam – toward China on

the South China Sea

dispute. Brunei, Malaysia,

the Philippines, and Vietnam are selected since they have a majority of maritime territory at stake in this dispute. Singapore is selected due to its ethnic ties with China, regional ties with



Figure 1 China and Southeast Asia countries have different interpretations of how to distribute maritime territory. The red dotted line outlines China's territorial claims and the blue dotted line outlines claims of Southeast Asian countries.<sup>4</sup>

other Southeast Asian countries, and past experience in serving as diplomatic intermediary in the region. The final section of this monograph provides an analysis of current diplomatic rebalancing in Southeast Asia as a whole.

## Brunei

Richard Javad Heydarian, a lecturer in political science at Ateneo De Manila University and policy advisor at the Philippine House of Representatives, describes Brunei’s ambitions in the South China Sea dispute as mixed between its foreign policy goals and economic relations

with China. “Brunei generally has a low-key foreign policy, where it has consistently avoided controversy by maintaining neutrality in regional affairs” says Heydarian. Its bilateral relations with China demonstrate a two-way economic partnership with trade to China and business development in Brunei.

For Southeast Asian claimant states, according to Heydarian, “there are certain reasons for optimism of Brunei’s

positions. [...] Since its traditional hydrocarbon resources are now heavily depleted, Brunei also

<b>Summaries of Local Perspectives</b>	
<b>Brunei</b>	Brunei has a low-key foreign policy, where it has avoided controversy by maintaining neutrality in regional affairs; its bilateral relations with China demonstrate a two-way economic partnership.
<b>Malaysia</b>	Malaysia is perceived as taking a middle ground to continue its positive bilateral relationship with China and to appease its regional neighbors in the South China Sea dispute.
<b>Philippines</b>	Local perspectives believe that the Philippines need to fight back against their bigger neighbor by using available legal mechanisms while remaining concerned about armed conflict.
<b>Singapore</b>	As Singapore has relatable interests with all parties in the South China Sea dispute, local perspectives see the city-state as an independent party that can guide China and its regional neighbors.
<b>Vietnam</b>	Local perspectives see China as a compromise to their sovereignty with a “pretty high” risk of conflict and expect that China will continue to undermine relations with other countries to take over the South China Sea.
<b>Southeast Asia Region</b>	The region is going through a diplomatic rebalancing as a result of China’s reputational damage it has done to itself, particularly by its refusal to have its maritime territory claims tested against international law.

has a long-term interest in developing offshore oil and gas fields, both within the country's territorial waters as well as within its contested Exclusive Economic Zone. Neither an armed conflict over the contested areas nor a move towards total Chinese domination is in Brunei's national interest.” Regarding the DoC, Heydarian says, “Crucially, they affirmed their commitment to the 2002 DoC and the development of a regional CoC.”

Despite this optimism, Heydarian comments that neighboring countries are also concerned about Brunei's considerable economic ties to China. “Beijing [...] has become increasingly involved in Brunei's crucial oil and gas sector. Brunei is heavily dependent on its soon-to-be-depleted hydrocarbon resources, which currently account for around 60% of gross domestic product and 90% of total export earnings. In the absence of strong democratic institutions, Brunei's ruling royal family depends heavily on hydrocarbon earnings to prop up its security apparatus and appease the population through generous welfare and subsidy schemes.” Brunei has “recently exported between 13,000 to 20,000 barrels of oil per day to China, accounting for as much as one-eighth of its total crude exports. Meanwhile, Chinese energy companies, ranging from the Zhejiang Henyi Group and Sinopec Engineering Inc to the Chinese National Offshore Oil Corp, are involved in large-scale multi-billion dollar downstream, refinery, and exploration projects in Brunei.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Malaysia**

While Malaysia remains fully committed to a ‘common ASEAN position’ in terms of engaging China on the South China Sea disputes”, local perspectives reflect that Malaysia does not want its ASEAN position to affect its positive bilateral relations with Beijing. As a result, according to the excerpts from articles, Malaysia is perceived as taking a middle ground to

continue its bilateral relationship with China and appease ASEAN over the dispute in the South China Sea.

According to Nguyen Huu Tuc, a Vietnamese researcher at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Malaysia “is unlikely to abandon its hedging policy in managing the South China Sea disputes and emulate the more confrontational approach of Vietnam and the Philippines unless China decides to push the envelope by asserting its rights to islands and reefs claimed by Malaysia.”<sup>6</sup> In foreign policy, hedging is “a set of strategies that aim to cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side [or one straightforward policy stance] at the obvious expense of another.”<sup>7</sup>

Characteristics of Malaysia’s hedging policy, according to Nguyen, are twofold: 1) Malaysia’s relationships with ASEAN neighbors and 2) Malaysia’s relationship with China. With its ASEAN neighbors, “Malaysia has accelerated efforts to work with its fellow claimants in the South China Sea, including Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam to coordinate a joint approach on the dispute. Moreover, Malaysia has also announced efforts to boost its own capabilities. In addition to stepping up patrols around the area, Malaysia once stated that the country would set up a marine corps and establish a naval base 96 kilometers away from the James Shoal in Bintulu, Sarawak, as well as agreed to more United States ship visits to Malaysian ports in the future.”

With China, Malaysia has been adopting a relatively low profile on the South China Sea disputes, says Nguyen. “Kuala Lumpur seems unwilling to jeopardize its traditionally warm ties with China [...]. China and Malaysia are not only large trading partners but their friendship has been improving over the years. Malaysia was the first ASEAN state to normalize ties with China

at a time when some other members were still concerned about the threat Beijing posed. Since then, Malaysia's ethnic Chinese community has been playing an important role in bridging the two countries' trade and cultural exchanges.”<sup>8</sup> Regarding bilateral relations over the South China Sea dispute, according to the Borneo Post, “Malaysia is [also] convinced that the CoC is the best way to govern the competing claims to the waters and has urged that consultations be intensified.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Philippines**

Throughout the South China Sea dispute, the Philippines have been in a defensive position against China. Local perspectives in excerpts from articles reiterate this viewpoint, which is the need to fight back against their bigger neighbor using available legal mechanisms while remaining worried about armed conflict. Throughout the dispute, the Philippines have used the 2002 DoC as the main legal tool against China.

Richard Javad Heydarian, who provided Brunei's perspectives earlier in the monograph, depicts a negative image of the South China Sea dispute. The current situation is a fragile one according to Heydarian. He says, “This fragility should come as no surprise, given the absence of a legally-binding Declaration of Conduct to govern the behavior of disputing parties in the Western Pacific.” According to Heydarian, “China-ASEAN negotiations over a legally-binding maritime regime have largely stalled, with both parties yet to finalize the guidelines of a proposed Declaration of Conduct.” Heydarian further states that the DoC is not a successful legal mechanism. “Contrary to the principles of the Declaration of Conduct, China has also admitted that it has been engaged in construction activities on the Johnson South Reef, which falls within the Philippine's Exclusive Economic Zone.”

Heydarian sees that the current “status quo of the Declaration of Conduct as unsustainable. Claimant states, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, are increasingly overwhelmed by China’s rising territorial assertiveness and expanding naval capabilities.” Heydarian explains “For decades, China has pursued its territorial claims through a carefully calibrated strategy, shunning coercive measures as much as possible. Combining astute diplomacy and economic incentives, China offered the prospect of ‘joint development’ to forestall an uncontrolled escalation of territorial disputes.”<sup>10</sup>

While Heydarian discusses Filipino foreign policy practices, local perspectives suggest fear of armed conflict with China. In June 2015, The Manila Times reported that eight in 10 Filipinos are worried that the South China Sea territorial dispute could lead to “armed conflict” with China. “Manila-based Social Weather Stations said this sentiment had weighed on people’s minds since the Philippines backed down from a tense standoff with China over control of rich fishing grounds around Scarborough Shoal in 2012. [...] The Scarborough Shoal standoff ended with Beijing taking control of the fishing area, which lies 140 miles off the main Philippine island of Luzon.” This study highlights that 84% of 1,200 respondents are “worried” about armed conflict with China. Approximately half of respondents were “worried a great deal” and more than one third were “somewhat worried”.<sup>11</sup>

## **Singapore**

In a review of Singaporean perspectives, according to the excerpts from articles, the city-state’s attitudes toward China are based on a number of factors, including diplomatic relationships with other ASEAN countries, its Chinese-Singaporean identity, and past experiences with China. Although Singapore has little maritime territory at stake in the South

China Sea dispute, with 74.2% of the total population having Chinese ethnicity, the large make up of Chinese-Singaporeans in Singapore has an impact on its relationship with China. Thus, as Singapore has relatable interests with all parties in the South China Sea dispute, local perspectives see the city-state as an independent party that can guide China and its ASEAN neighbors.

According to Daniel Wei Boon Chua, with its background in regional diplomacy, Singapore can mitigate the South China Sea dispute and benefit all parties involved. Chua is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, a unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Chua says that Singapore serving as an intermediary “is a necessary step that reflects the continuity of Singapore’s pragmatic commitment to regional stability that benefits all Southeast Asian nations. [...] Having close to 50 years of experience in active diplomacy, both in regional and international arenas, Singapore is known to often ‘punch above its weight’. To protect its vital interests, it has taken risks at appropriate times, and prevailed through sheer commitment and skillful diplomacy. To passively watch as the South China Sea disputes spiral into a full blown maritime conflict will severely damage Singapore’s economic development and diplomatic relations.”<sup>12</sup>

In another analysis, Bilahari Kausikan discusses Singapore’s identity and emphasizes the importance of Singapore not being a “Chinese country” and one who should determine its own foreign policy agenda that does not follow orders from China. Kausikan – a former permanent secretary for foreign affairs, Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations and ambassador to the Russian Federation – views China as a manipulating influence on Singapore who uses its shared Chinese ethnic majority to pressure Singapore. “Chinese leaders and officials

repeatedly refer to Singapore as a ‘Chinese country’ and argue that since we ‘understand’ China better, we should ‘explain’ China's policies to the rest of ASEAN. Of course, by ‘understand’ they really mean ‘obey’, and by ‘explain’ they mean get other Southeast Asian countries to fall in line.”<sup>13</sup>

Wang Gungwu further examines past Singapore-China positive bilateral relations as a result of Singapore’s shared ethnicity with China. Of Chinese ethnicity, Gungwu was born in Indonesia, raised in Malaysia and educated in China, Malaysia and London, and he is a historian of Chinese nationalism and the overseas Chinese. Gungwu says, “Towards the end of the Cold War, Singapore's trade with China grew [quickly].” This turning point China pushed forward “many entrepreneurs of Chinese origin in the region [to become] interested in China again. Alert to its neighbors’ sensitivities concerning the country's demography, Singapore monitored its business with China with great care. Its leaders established special projects in China to benefit both countries.” At the same time, Singapore was equally aware of its relationships with the west and “remained true to the historic norms that connected it to the economic and security chains of the Western world. Even as it sought to be more active in China, it paid close attention to how the United States and European Union responded to China's needs. Nevertheless, China appeared to understand Singapore's constraints and appreciated its many initiatives.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Vietnam**

Two Vietnamese experts – Tran Cong Truc, the former chief of the Government's Border Committee, and Major General Le Van Cuong, former director of the Strategy Institute under the Ministry of Public Security – view China as an aggressor that intends to compromise Vietnam’s sovereignty with a “pretty high” risk of escalation to conflict. According to Truc and Cuong from

excerpts in Vietnamese news articles, China's actions are a part of larger scheme to take over the South China Sea and will not listen to the international community regarding the dispute.

Tran Cong Truc discusses the risk of armed conflict, China's attempts to split relations among countries, and China's violation of Vietnam's sovereignty. The risk of armed conflict "is pretty high, especially when China is now ignoring all multilateral and bilateral political agreements. China will continue to ally with other countries or try to split the relations between countries in the region and in the world in order to realize its scheme to exclusively possess the East Sea." He also comments "China has been invading some entities in the northwest of the islands since 1988. Its acts to turn these reefs into islands for military purposes in order to dominate this area have not only violated the sovereignty of Viet Nam, but also broken the commitments recorded in articles 4 of the DOC. Their illegal acts cannot be compared to Viet Nam's legitimate activities."

Truc further provides recommendations for Vietnam to take right now. "Viet Nam needs to mobilize its national unity and support from regional and international friends by showing its clear point of view and transparency in all relevant information. It also needs to act in time to protest China's violations of international laws. Enhancement of accurate, timely, subjective and peaceful communications is also essential."

Similar to Truc's comments, Le Van Cuong says that China has planned a larger scheme to overtake the South China Sea region. He says, "China's placement of the giant oil rig 981 in Viet Nam's exclusive economic zone raised huge opposition from the international community. However, I believe the placement of the oil rig was just meant to distract the international community and our attention away from their reef construction and expansion in the East Sea."

Cuong “believes only strong opposition from Viet Nam and the rest of the international community will prevent further complications to the situation.”

### **Diplomatic Rebalancing in Southeast Asia**

As Ravi Velloor, the Associate Editor of Global Affairs at The Straits Times, explains, there is a rebalance of the Southeast Asia-China relationship and as a result of China’s reputation in the region. Velloor’s temperament throughout the article is that China’s actions are causing more consequences for China than benefits.

The Philippines had once defined its nationalism in anti-American terms. “Today, the target is China”, says Velloor. “The sentiments in the archipelago underscore how Southeast Asia, which had begun to shed its old fears of the mainland, is feeling fresh unease about it.” Velloor continues that Vietnam, “which has the closest historical and political links with China among ASEAN states, is rapidly warming up to India and the United States and signing defense agreements whose details have not yet been made public.”

Velloor also comments “China should be aware of the reputational damage it has done itself, particularly by its steadfast refusal to have its claims tested against law.” He pities China and adds that “it must be embarrassing too that when foreign militaries brief journalists on prospective exercises with China they explain it in terms of a need to ‘socialize’ it, as though China is an unpredictable ogre that needs to be taught to eat with its mouth closed.”

Velloor concludes with points about the world economy and China’s economic impacts on Southeast Asia. As the world economy slows, “China is poised to lose some of its swagger.” He adds, “Indonesia and Thailand - Southeast Asia's biggest economies - may have China as their top trading partner. But they buy more from it than send the other way.” This indicates that

Indonesia and Thailand have a larger enough consumer base and they do not need to export products to China, but they continue to import from China. “Singapore has been the largest foreign direct investor in China in the past two years, given that much of the Chinese slowdown comes from the steep drop in investments since 2009”, says Velloor.

## **Conclusion**

Local perspectives demonstrate the varying viewpoints from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam in their approach to the dispute in the South China Sea. The findings in this monograph suggest that 1) Brunei and Malaysia are taking the middle ground to their bilateral relations with China, 2) the Philippines and Vietnam are taking a firm stance against China’s maritime territorial claims with concerns of armed conflict, and 3) Singapore has relatable interests with all parties and sees itself as the diplomatic intermediary to the dispute. As discussed in the final section on diplomatic rebalancing, Southeast Asia is also undergoing a regional rebalance in its relationship with China that is a result of China’s reputational damage in the region.

## **Notes**

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