



The South China Sea Dispute and Regional Response

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Abstract

Background: Beginning in December 2013, the South China Sea dispute has emerged as a complex and highly contested issue with significant implications for regional stability in East and Southeast Asia. The Chinese military began constructing artificial islands anchored by seven coral atolls in the Spratly Islands until it had created land that it then claimed in October 2015. The construction is over 3000 acres and houses military equipment (anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems) and personnel for the People's Republic of China.

Objective: From a realist perspective, the dispute reflects a struggle for power and influence among claimant states, driven by their desire to secure regional strategic interests. Neighbouring countries, recognizing the implications of China's rise as a significant power, have responded mainly by using soft realist methods to accommodate or counter China's growing influence in a collective setting. This paper explores the geopolitical implications of the dispute and how other powers have chosen to engage with China and other regional actors.

Methods: This article is a case study. The article analyses the case of the South China Sea dispute since 2000 through a realist lens. It first explains the lens and its focal points. Then, it examines the different facets of the dispute through this lens: economic interests, national security concerns, domestic and regional politics, and historical issues. The focus is on analysing China and ASEAN member-states as the primary parties to the conflict.

Results: This lens provides valuable insights into the power struggles, self-interest, and security concerns that underlie the conflict. This paper provides a comprehensive understanding of its multifaceted nature by critically examining the dispute's territorial claims, legal frameworks, and historical context. It also explores the geopolitical implications and the involvement of major regional powers. Liberal solutions have largely failed, while more minor actors have cooperated on limited terms when their interests intersect using soft realist diplomacy and collective action within international arenas.

Conclusion: The dispute has unveiled the limits of international diplomatic efforts brokered by organisations such as ASEAN to address aggressive behaviour consistently. Small and medium states are largely constrained from directly confronting China, have accommodated China, used international forums to advance power positions and prestige, and cooperated on other issues to indirectly address the dispute.

Keywords: South China Sea Dispute, Regional Response, Territorial Claims, Geopolitical Implications, ASEAN, Realism

Introduction

The South China Sea has been disputed for decades, with several countries claiming sovereignty over various islands and maritime territories. The disagreement emerged as a complex and highly contested issue in December 2013, with significant implications for regional stability in East and Southeast Asia when the Chinese military began constructing artificial islands anchored by seven coral atolls in the Spratly Islands. China then claimed the land it had created in October 2015. The construction is over 3000 acres and houses military equipment (anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems) and personnel for the People's Republic of China.

China claims almost the entire South China Sea and has been at the centre of this conflict, with its actions in the region raising concerns among other nations and international organisations (Simonette & Guinto, 2023). On the other hand, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines each claim to part or all of the South China Sea (Xu 2014). Furthermore, the nine-dash line reaches operating oil and gas fields in the case of Malaysia and Brunei, raising the possibility that China might one day think about claiming them, adding more states to the dispute (Montgomery 2016).

The South China Sea dispute is considered a critical issue in current world politics due to its potential to disrupt regional stability and alter the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the South China Sea crisis threatens regional stability and has broader implications for international trade, security, and the rule-based order (Amer 2014). Furthermore, it has attracted the attention of countries outside the region, such as the United States, which has expressed its commitment to safeguarding freedom of navigation and ensuring peaceful resolutions to disputes.

At the heart of the dispute lies the abundant natural resources in the South China Sea, including oil, natural gas, and rich fisheries. Control and exploitation of these resources have heightened tensions among the claimant countries, leading to diplomatic standoffs and occasional military posturing (Kim 2015). China's assertiveness in the region, mainly through its nine-dash line claim, has drawn significant scrutiny and concern (Fravel 2011:294). The PRC has constructed artificial islands, fortified them with military infrastructure, and expanded its presence, challenging the territorial claims of neighbouring nations and raising questions about freedom of navigation in the region. However, the military buildup in the South China Sea does not necessarily indicate that China will use force to occupy more islands; instead, it seeks to enhance its military presence to augment its bargaining leverage in future negotiations (Hyer 1995).

This paper will focus on the case of the ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, particularly in the period since 2000, which have led to heightened tensions and geopolitical instability in the region. Moreover, it aims to explore the importance of the South China Sea and the legitimacy of claims made by various countries. Some argue that the majority of the South China Sea claims by other countries are legitimate, and others assert that China's actions violate international law and infringe on the rights of neighbouring countries. What can be done when an international actor misbehaves? While the conflict has been covered through a realist lens to analyse the different historical, economic, and political aspects of the dispute, the responses have been mainly covered, emphasising failed liberalism and the weaknesses of the international organisations tasked with keeping such behaviour in check. This article seeks to understand the Chinese approach and the ASEAN response regarding realism.

Realism and Alternatives in International Relations

Realism is a theoretical perspective that emphasises power, self-interest, and the pursuit of national security as critical drivers of state behaviour. Realism is a set of related theories of international relations and political science that emphasises the state's role, national interest, and power in world politics (Charrette & Sterling-Folker 2013). The state's power is understood in terms of its military capabilities (Halabi 2004), and states strive to maximise their power and security in a world characterised by

anarchy where there is no overarching authority governing interactions between states (Korab-Karpowicz 2010). Realism is a dominant theoretical perspective that emphasises power, self-interest, and the pursuit of national security as crucial drivers of state behaviour (Karns & Mingst 2010:45-47), and states act to safeguard their interests and enhance their power, as power maximisation is necessary to enjoy security (Blazevic 2012; Raditio 2015). The more power a state accumulates, the more secure it is, as greater military power will provide more protection to a state, including in an offensive search for hegemony (Mearsheimer 2017; Alenezi 2020).

However, such “hard” views of realism are not the only views as there are “soft” views as well that recognise the realities of power politics but emphasise broader alternatives to military threats and the use of force (Karns & Mingst 2010:302). Morgenthau’s dictum that international politics is a “struggle for power” and that power is the immediate aim of policy appears today more as a reflection of early Cold War conditions and not as a universal law (Nobel 1995). Furthermore, the prescriptions of brutal or classical realism are inadequate for small or medium states today and appear anachronistic in the present era of interdependence (Walz 2010), with other versions of realism downplaying the idea of power and the idea of security as the highest goal in a state of anarchy. Diplomacy, mediation, and other collective arrangements short of the balance of power are considered soft realist alternatives to the threat and use of force (Karns & Mingst 2010:302). Further, domestic power also shapes and drives realist policy approaches (Hor 2022). In addition, neorealism generally recognises the emergence of international structures that shape global power struggles in ways that are no longer anarchic contests for power and stability (Walz 2010; Nguyen 2018), although other realists continue to view international structures as less shaping power struggles than serving as arenas for power contests (Mearsheimer 2017; Nguyen 2018). This includes international law, which is inherently anarchic and lacks enforcement power (Veldheer 2020:12).

This paper mainly considers realism in contrast to liberalism, which emphasises progress, justice, and cooperation among international actors to manage conflict (Karns & Mingst 2010:35-39; Narayanan 2019). Another approach within the framework of liberalism is functionalism, founded on the propensity of nations to create governance arrangements to meet functional needs (Karns & Mingst 2010:40-42). However, to understand the reasons behind the South China Sea dispute, the actual importance of this region is crucial. Therefore, the historical significance of the area and the corresponding importance of its strategic place in the region will be explored next.

South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea dispute is a complex territorial and maritime dispute involving overlapping territorial claims by several countries, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Despite having claims by these Southeast Asian states, China historically considers all territory in the South China Sea to be under its control as well. This dispute continues to be a source of tension and potential conflict between China and other countries in the region (Glaser 2015). The tensions over the region’s waters have fluctuated since the Cold War (Southgate 2019), with instances of conflict linked to a variety of factors, including surging economic growth and corresponding military modernisation in China, enhanced competition for maritime resources, China’s status as a rising power, increased rivalry with the US, and the consolidation of power under China’s current President Xi Jinping. In this regard, China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea has also been reported as raising tensions over competing territorial claims and maritime rights (*Crisis Group* 2021).

Another significant aspect of the territorial dispute in the South China Sea concerns China’s construction in the area, particularly in the past few years. Moreover, territorial sovereignty conflicts arise from competing assertions regarding the islands, rocks, and reefs in the South China Sea. These conflicts involve disputes concerning which coastal nations hold legitimate authority over the waters and seabed and disagreements regarding the appropriate distribution of rights between coastal states

and the international community regarding military activities in the seas (Dutton 2011). Likewise, China has engaged in large-scale land reclamation activities in seven reefs such as Fiery Cross Reef, Johnson South Reef, Cuarteron Reef, Gaven Reef, Hughes Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef in the disputed Spratly Islands area of the South China Sea and these projects have created seven new artificial land masses totalling over 3000 acres (Lyons et al. 2019). It is to be noted that China has embarked on a substantial modernisation of its maritime paramilitary forces and naval capabilities to enforce its sovereignty and jurisdiction claims by force if necessary (Glaser 2012). The islands are mostly uninhabited and have never had an indigenous.

Importance of the South China Sea

The South China Sea is paramount due to its strategic, economic, and geopolitical significance. The region has become a hotbed of contention, drawing global attention. The area is home to a wealth of natural resources, fisheries, trade routes, and military bases, all of which are at stake in the increasingly frequent diplomatic standoffs (Xu 2014). Understanding the multifaceted reasons behind its importance requires a comprehensive analysis.

Firstly, the South China Sea is a critical maritime trade route, facilitating the transportation of goods worth trillions of dollars annually. The strategic bottleneck formed by the Strait of Malacca has become a source of worry due to the large volume of commercial merchandise passing through it (Weblord 2019). It contains some of the world's most important shipping lanes, with \$5.3 trillion worth of goods transiting through the South China Sea annually, with \$1.2 trillion total accounting for trade with the US in 2019 (Cordesman et al. 2019). Approximately one-third of the world's maritime trade passes through these waters, connecting East Asia to the rest of the world. Any disruption or obstruction to this flow would have profound implications for global commerce, causing ripple effects in supply chains and economies worldwide. Thus, maintaining open and secure sea lanes in the South China Sea is crucial for the stability of international trade. The South China Sea route, known for its high traffic, accommodates over 60% of global annual merchant fleet activity, surpassing the traffic volume of the Suez Canal threefold and the Panama Canal fifteenfold (Schrag 2017). Moreover, an estimated \$11.3 billion worth of trade, almost a third of the world's shipping, annually passes through the South China Sea (Macaraig & Fenton 2021).

Secondly, the South China Sea is rich in natural resources, including oil, natural gas, and fisheries. In this connection, the South China Sea is one of the world's most important economic and environmental regions (Hartman 2019). Over half of the world's fishing vessels are in the South China Sea, and millions depend on these waters for food and livelihood (Weblord 2019). Regarding this, 30–60% of households in coastal Philippine towns around the South China Sea depend on fisheries for employment (Cruz-Trinidad et al., 2009). Moreover, this South China Sea is heavily fished and is the primary source of animal protein for the densely populated Southeast Asian area. The South China Sea is a global fishing hotspot, contributing approximately 12% of the world's total fishing catch in 2012 (Zhong & White 2017). This catch is valued at nearly \$22 billion in the open market, highlighting the region's economic significance (De Luce & Johnson 2016). Furthermore, the South China Sea fisheries employ over 3.7 million individuals and generate billions of dollars in revenue annually.

The region is estimated to hold vast reserves of energy resources, making it an attractive area for exploration and extraction. As of 2012, the South China Sea was estimated to contain about 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 cubic feet of natural gas, rated as reserves (Metelitsa & Kupfer 2014). Moreover, another report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the US Geological Survey estimated in 2012 that there could be another 160 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 12 billion barrels of oil undiscovered in the South China Sea (*South China Sea Energy Exploration and Development*, n.d.).

The South China Sea has significant geopolitical implications for the above reasons. The importance of the South China Sea is undeniable and multifaceted. Its strategic location, role in global trade, and abundance of natural resources make it a critical area of interest for various nations. The control and stability of the South China Sea have significant economic and security ramifications, not only for the countries directly involved but also for the international community as a whole. Efforts to address the complex issues surrounding the South China Sea must prioritise the principles of international law, peaceful resolution of disputes, and the preservation of free and open navigation to ensure regional stability and global prosperity.

Chinese Hegemony

The South China Sea dispute provides an interesting case study when examining it through the lens of realism in international relations. Multiple countries, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, have competing territorial claims over the South China Sea (Kim 2015). Various factors drive these claims, including access to valuable natural resources, control over strategic sea lanes, and national security concerns.

China's actions in the South China Sea align squarely with realist principles. China has been assertively pursuing its territorial claims by engaging in activities such as constructing artificial islands, building military facilities, and increasing its presence in the disputed waters, and if a state wins the arms race, it will rise as a hegemon in the system, which eventually guarantees its survival as well (Thayer 2011; Truong & Knio 2016).

China's actions can be considered part of its broader strategy to establish dominance and secure its regional interests. China has sought to assert its influence and challenge the regional status quo as its economic and military capabilities have grown (Li 2010). Realists think that China's rise as a global power has prompted it to pursue a more assertive foreign policy, including in the South China Sea (Goldstein 2007; Blazevic 2012; Cheng & Paladini 2014; Narayanan 2019; Zhang 2022; Alenezi 2024). Chinese actions have been raising new concerns in some capitals of Southeast Asian states and have invited countermeasures on the part of these regional states, including with implicit or explicit support from external powers (Li 2010).

On the other hand, there have been suggestions that China's strategy has been realistic but primarily defensive in protecting China's existing position rather than trying to expand its power position (Zhang 2022) offensively. Alternately, China's strategy has been assessed as incoherent, beginning as primarily diplomatic following a general policy in favour of negotiation of maritime and regional disputes but becoming increasingly assertive following 2009 and in particular since the construction of new islands started at the end of 2013 (Zhang 2017).

China's realist strategy in the South China Sea has raised a security dilemma where "how a state tries to increase its security decreases the security of others" (Jervis 1978). In this case, China's quest for security has raised alarms among other claimants to parts of the South China Sea. Realism also sheds light on the power dynamics at play in the region. China's rise as a significant economic and military power has caused concerns among neighbouring countries and other regional powers. Moreover, some realists argue that the United States, Japan, and Australia have responded to China's assertiveness by increasing their military presence and deepening regional security alliances (Narayanan 2019). This power competition further contributes to the tensions and complexities surrounding the South China Sea dispute.

Tension Rising in the South China Sea

Now the question is, why is there increasing tension in the South China Sea? According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, any sovereign state can claim an exclusive economic zone up to 200 nautical miles from its coastal baseline and up to 12 nautical miles as territorial waters.

Therefore, they enjoy the rights to exploit natural resources within this zone, conduct marine and fishery activities, and construct artificial islands. However, China's Nine-Dash Line claim is the basis for asserting jurisdiction over maritime areas hundreds of nautical miles further from the mainland than the usual 12 or 200-nautical-mile zones (Gao & Jia, 2013). This region includes several archipelagos, such as the Spratly Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and the Paracel Islands. It is assumed that creating artificial islands might create disputes and tensions for countries in the Asia-Pacific region and other major powers outside the area interested in this issue (Wu & Fu 2016).

Geographically, the South China Sea holds significant strategic importance for China. In addition, the location of the Sea mainly also makes it strategically militarily valuable for national security. This area is rich in mineral resources, oil, and natural gas and also witnesses a high volume of shipping, with nearly one-third of all global maritime trade passing through the Sea (Saiidi 2018). Another critical factor triggering disputes in the South China Sea is the oil and gas resource issue. Acknowledging the claims to sovereignty and the demarcation of islands, shoals, and atolls in the Nansha Islands and elsewhere represent the heart of the current disputes in the South China Sea, making the oil and gas resource issue at the strategic centre of the conflict for relevant parties (Guoqiang 2015).

This maritime route is crucial for China and is not limited to global or regional perspectives. China's maritime trade heavily relies on this pathway, although 55-60% of India's trade depends on this sea route (Pant 2021). Many countries outside the region are also safeguarding their interests concerning this maritime connection, and India, the US, France, and the UK do not want to see China taking complete control of this region because it would impose extra costs on other nations for commercial navigation and require China's permission (Rahn 2018).

Tension and unrest have arisen in the disputed region of the South China Sea, though tensions have long roots. The South Johnson Reef became the centre of the China-Vietnam conflict in 1988 (*Benar News* 2023). Vietnam suffered defeat in this war, and China occupied several islands. Tension has become more pronounced recently, although it has been present in this region for several decades, along with China's rise. China has been making efforts to assert its dominance in this region through the establishment of military bases, nuclear-armed warships, and artificial island construction in the South China Sea (McCoy 2016).

The United States is among the countries opposing China, with its allies in the region, the Philippines and Taiwan being particularly active (Maizland 2024). Subsequently, Washington has been working for a long time to counter China's influence in the region. Additionally, this maritime route is vital for US trade as well. Therefore, the Pentagon has focused on the Pacific Ocean and set up the Indo-Pacific Command to deal with China's regional influence (Weisgerber, 2023). The United States, Japan, Australia, and India have formed the 'Quad' to conduct military exercises and counter Beijing's dominance and power in the South China Sea (Rasheed 2000). As a result, tensions and unrest in the South China Sea have increased due to the emergence of multiple powers and their interests. The power dynamics and alignments are shifting towards the South China Sea, leading to increased international and regional tensions, often manifested as unrest.

The dispute has implications for the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and can potentially destabilise regional security. The involvement of major powers outside the area, including the United States, in the South China Sea issue further amplifies its geopolitical importance. As countries vie for influence and control, the South China Sea has become a focal point for geopolitical manoeuvring, with potential implications for the global order.

A Regional Response to Resolve the Dispute

Countries have adopted varying approaches and responses to the South China Sea dispute. Some countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, have pursued legal and diplomatic avenues to assert their claims and challenge China's assertiveness. These efforts include filing cases with international

tribunals, engaging in regional dialogues, and seeking support from other countries and international organisations.

The Philippines pursued a case and received a favourable ruling from the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at the Hague in 2016. The failure of this and other international legal efforts to resolve the dispute has led to criticisms of the failure of liberal solutions (Narayanan 2019).

Other regional actors, such as Malaysia and Brunei, have taken a more cautious and diplomatic stance, seeking to maintain good relations with all parties involved and avoid confrontation. These countries have emphasised the importance of peaceful negotiations, regional cooperation, and adherence to international law in resolving disputes.

As the most prominent claimant and most assertive party in the South China Sea, China has pursued a more forceful and expansive approach. China has engaged in extensive land reclamation, construction of military infrastructure, and patrols in disputed areas, leading to tensions with other claimant countries and drawing international criticism. While the crisis continues to evolve, here is an overview of some critical regional responses.

Diplomatic Negotiations

Diplomatic negotiations have been central to resolving the South China Sea Crisis. Countries involved, such as China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and others, have engaged in bilateral talks and multilateral dialogues to find peaceful solutions. For instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has significantly facilitated dialogue through various mechanisms, including the ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meetings and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The role of ASEAN is somewhat natural, as several members are parties to the dispute, all are impacted, and ASEAN has tried to maintain good relations with China. The lack of unanimity among ASEAN nations in its approach has led to criticisms of collective liberal responses, though the organisation is based on consensus.

Apart from that, Cambodia's diplomatic position was also crucial concerning the PCA's decision on the South China Sea dispute. China stood in a defensive position, though Cambodia became a significant supporter of Beijing (Yoshimatsu 2017). PM Hun Sen declared in a speech at the 65th Anniversary of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) that "the CPP does not support, and more so is against, any possible declaration by ASEAN to support the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration," and called on countries outside the region to cease their interference in the South China Sea issue (*Chinadaily.com.cn* 2016). The resulting lack of consensus was due to liberal efforts to use ASEAN straightforwardly.

Diplomatic and economic engagement with China and others on the dispute would work better if backed by a credible military posture (Cronin et al. 2012). On the other hand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia have been particularly keen to use ASEAN-derived regional diplomacy to embed China in a regional maritime consensus (Simon 2012). Moreover, cooperation in ASEAN has increased on non-traditional security concerns such as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and counter-piracy, while consensus on the South China Sea has been elusive (Thayer 2010:25-30).

Outside of the region, Japan has been greatly interested in the South China Sea regarding peace and stability in East Asia. However, it has taken every opportunity to participate in multilateral gatherings to emphasise the importance of securing the freedom of navigation based on the rule of law, supporting the US claim, and ASEAN's efforts to resolve the disputes peacefully (Shoji 2014). Additionally, the Japanese government has simultaneously been addressing the issue of the South China Sea in light of escalating tensions in the East China Sea. Specifically, Japan is actively promoting bilateral cooperation with ASEAN claimants Vietnam and the Philippines, intending to collectively manage China's assertive actions. However, the activities of the Quad have not resolved the dispute.

Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperation has been pursued to foster trust-building and cooperation among countries involved in the South China Sea Crisis. ASEAN facilitates dialogue, promotes confidence-building measures, and addresses regional security challenges. The Chairman's statement from the ASEAN Summit in Vientiane in September 2016 emphasised the importance of non-militarisation and self-restraint in the conduct of all activities, including land reclamation that could further complicate the situation and escalate tensions in the South China Sea (Bateman 2017). Furthermore, concerning conflict management in the South China Sea, ASEAN has tried several approaches to resolve the problem legally and through mediation workshops, which has increased the organisation's prestige (Li 2017). Most notably, ASEAN brought all disputants together in 2002 to agree to the Declaration of Conduct. Moreover, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) provides a platform for discussions on security issues, including the South China Sea, with participation from ASEAN member states and other regional and international partners.

International Engagement and Mediation

The international community has been engaged in addressing the South China Sea Crisis. Countries outside the region, including the United States, Japan, Australia, and Europe, have expressed concerns and supported a peaceful resolution based on international law. Some international actors have also played a mediation role to facilitate dialogue and negotiations between the parties involved. Significantly, the countries in the Indo-Pacific that are still aligning with the US in the South China Sea, Australia, India, and Japan, are not countries that border the Sea (Bateman 2017). Again, the talk is about the global rules-based order and freedom of the Sea to justify this position. It is noteworthy that ASEAN has not emphasised this liberal position to the same extent. Japan has also been active in the South China Sea, though not a claimant state. It has used different forums available for resolving South China Sea disputes, but its ability to affect regional events has been minimal to date. Japan has tried to work multilaterally through the ARF to solve South China Sea disputes (Rowan 2005). Japan relies primarily on the U.S.-Japan security alliance, and Tokyo has attempted to use ARF to improve its regional profile. In this connection, Japan has promoted the Workshops on the South China Sea Conflict hosted annually by Indonesia.

The EU issued a strongly worded statement in March 2016 criticising Beijing's actions in response to Chinese land reclamation and militarisation in the South China Sea (Cottey 2019). In this regard, the EU made the statement stressing "maintaining a legal order for the seas and oceans based upon the principles of international law", especially UNCLOS, urged "all claimants to resolve disputes through peaceful means, to clarify the basis of their claims, and to pursue them following international law" and encouraged "further engagement in confidence-building measures which seek to build trust and security in the region."

Environmental and Maritime Security Cooperation

Recognising the importance of environmental preservation and maritime security, countries in the region have emphasised the need for cooperation in addressing everyday challenges. Efforts from different countries and intergovernmental organisations have been made to combat illegal fishing, protect marine resources, preserve coral reefs, and mitigate environmental degradation in the South China Sea. The Southeast Asian region has also become an essential destination for Japanese manufactured goods and investment. Hence, Japan's interests in Southeast Asia depend on the free flow of maritime trade through regional strategic choke points – such as the Singapore, Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits – and the South China Sea (Storey 2013).

In the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, China and ASEAN states agreed that pending settlement of the SCS dispute, they may explore or undertake cooperative activities, including

marine environmental protection (Chircop 2010). Moreover, in this connection, there is a declaration in ASEAN that the modalities, scope, and locations concerning bilateral and multilateral cooperation should be agreed upon by the Parties concerned before their actual implementation (*Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* 2012). Sixteen countries joined the negotiation, and the initial agreement was adopted among fourteen countries in November 2004 (Sato 2007). Moreover, the Cooperative Mechanism in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore was also established under Japan's initiative in September 2007.

Discussion

It is important to note that the South China Sea Crisis remains a complex and ongoing issue, and the responses outlined above are subject to developments and evolving dynamics among the involved parties. The South China Sea dispute remains contentious, with various regional responses and approaches reflecting the complex dynamics and interests at play. The dispute has implications for regional security, international law, and the geopolitical balance in the Asia-Pacific region.

Realism offers valuable insights when examining the South China Sea dispute. By focusing on power, self-interest, and the pursuit of security, realism helps understand the motivations and actions of states involved in the dispute, including China, ASEAN members, and even the Quad from outside the region, highlighting the competitive nature of international relations.

Liberal solutions have primarily failed, from attempts to arbitrate even to minimal efforts to unite ASEAN behind a consensus position on the issue. Increasing cooperation among ASEAN nations could be seen as functional or neo-functional. However, ASEAN has not precisely been a functional success as its cooperative efforts have not promoted any unified diplomatic, arbitrated, or mediated approach and have instead been an obstacle to functional solutions to the dispute. Instead, ASEAN cooperation has primarily worked to promote the prestige and influence of ASEAN members working through ASEAN as a neorealist arena, employing soft realist diplomatic and cooperative methods to encourage the divided purposes of members, with cooperation happening where interests align and not otherwise. Likewise, Japan and the Quad's promotion of rules-based solutions have not led to more significant progress than Quad power exercises and the US backing of the Philippines and Taiwan.

China has been acting to promote or defend its power position. Diplomatic efforts, regional cooperation, international engagement and mediation, and environmental and maritime cooperation have characterised the Southeast Asian regional response. Diplomacy has not been effective in supporting or promoting the rules-based order. However, it has enhanced the prestige of regional actors, whether taking China's side (Cambodia) or supporting mediation and diplomacy in support of their claims. The regional response among ASEAN members has not been united or successful, except as it has contributed to respect for the organisation and its members. Likewise, international engagement and mediation have not done much that cannot be explained through neorealist explanations of UNCLOS and the PCA as part of arenas for advancing and competing using power politics. Environmental and maritime cooperation has provided an ostensible functional role within the purview of ASEAN but has also been part of how ASEAN addresses disputes without addressing them.

Conclusion

This research has investigated a well-covered case from a realist perspective, which has been the dominant interpretation of the dispute. However, most case analyses have focused on China, the US-Chinese conflict, individual bilateral aspects of the dispute, or the various failures of the liberal international order. This research contributes to a greater understanding of how smaller states have responded using soft realist options to address this dispute and the international act.

The South China Sea dispute has emerged as a complex and contentious issue with significant regional stability and security implications. This essay has examined the dispute and explored the responses of regional actors in the face of growing tensions based on realism.

The competing territorial claims in the South China Sea, coupled with the region's rich natural resources and strategic importance, have intensified the rivalry among claimant states. China's assertive actions have heightened concerns among neighbouring countries and the wider international community, including the construction of artificial islands and military buildup. In response, regional actors have adopted various approaches to address the dispute.

ASEAN has played a central role in facilitating dialogue and promoting a peaceful resolution. However, internal divisions and the principle of consensus within ASEAN have hindered the bloc's ability to present a united front in dealing with China's assertiveness. Nevertheless, ASEAN has made progress in developing a framework for a code of conduct in the South China Sea, which has the potential to mitigate tensions and provide a basis for peaceful negotiations.

Beyond ASEAN, other international actors, such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, have been actively involved in the region to resolve the dispute. These countries have increased their military presence, conducted freedom of navigation operations, and deepened security partnerships with regional allies. Their involvement aims to deter China's assertiveness and maintain a rules-based international order in the South China Sea.

However, the South China Sea situation remains highly volatile, and the risk of miscalculation or escalation persists. The lack of a comprehensive and legally binding resolution leaves room for potential conflicts and tensions to escalate. Moreover, China's growing economic and military power continues to shape the dynamics in the region, influencing the behaviour and responses of other claimant states.

Finally, the South China Sea dispute represents a complex challenge with far-reaching implications for regional security. Efforts by regional actors, such as ASEAN, and external powers to manage the tensions and promote peaceful resolutions are essential steps toward stability. However, a durable and comprehensive solution to the dispute requires sustained dialogue, trust-building, and the commitment of all parties involved. Pursuing a rules-based order, respect for international law, and open communication channels should be crucial in ensuring a peaceful and cooperative future for the South China Sea region. However, realist approaches continue to play a much more significant role even in addressing the conflict.

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