

China-ASEAN Approaches towards the South China Sea Disputes

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Abstract: *The South China Sea (SCS) dispute has been a contentious issue in the Asia-Pacific region, with multiple claimants vying for territorial control and access to its abundant resources. This study examines the ASEAN approach towards the SCS dispute and China's soft power response from 2010 to 2022. The "Soft Power" theory of Joseph Nye has been adopted to analyze the ASEAN approach towards the SCS dispute and China's response to influence the member states. Moreover, the Qualitative approach has been used for collection of data through primary and secondary data sources. John Scott's model of documentary analysis is used for data analysis. This study explores ASEAN's multilateral diplomacy, consensus-building mechanisms, and conflict resolution frameworks utilized to address the dispute. Additionally, it investigates China's deployment of soft power tools, such as economic investments, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic engagements, aimed at influencing the regional changing dynamics. The research findings shed light on the effectiveness of ASEAN's approach in managing the SCS dispute and evaluate China's soft power response within the context of its regional ambitions. Ultimately, this research offers insights into power dynamics and potential future developments within the SCS region.*

Keywords: ASEAN, South China Sea, China's Response, Members States, Territorial Control and Access

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) dispute has remained a contentious issue for several decades, with multiple claimant states vying for control over the strategically significant waterway. Amid this complex and delicate situation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has emerged as a crucial regional organization, striving to maintain peace, stability, and cooperation among its member states. This thesis aims to examine ASEAN's approach towards SCS dispute and China's response from 2010 to 2022. By analyzing the evolution of ASEAN's stance, diplomatic efforts, and the corresponding reactions of China, this study seeks to shed light on ASEAN's role in managing this prolonged conflict. Furthermore, it seeks to provide insights into the dynamics and implications of China's behavior in the South China Sea, which has significant implications for regional security and international relations.

Background of the South China Sea Dispute

The dispute of the SCS is not new and the activities of China can be dated back to almost 2000 years in the region. From the very early of 2nd century, some of the sailors of China discovered some new islands in the SCS and called these islands "Nanhai Zhudao" which literally translates into the islands of China. Some historians and archaeologists believe that life on these islands started quite early and the remains of some crops and coral reefs have been seen in the territory of SCS which backs the claim that there was some kind of sovereignty over these islands before the proper disputation on these territorial waters started. Chinese provide documentaries and ancient writings to prove their claim that it was the Chinese who discovered these islands, and the different Chinese Governments have always stuck to this view (Erbas, 2022).

In the timeframe between 1930 and 1940, there was military involvement from France and Japan in the Xisha and Nansha Islands of China. China being a country faced with so many difficulties kept its stance intact and fought well but as a result of the Cairo Declaration in 1943 and the Potsdam in 1945 after World War II, controversies like Taiwan were created in the region.

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Now it was the era of 1948 when China decided to come up with a political map of the region, China gave this map in 1948, and the origin of Nine-dash line came into existence. This idea, however, not so welcoming for the claimant States was opposed by nobody and even the international community accepted the map or in simple words the sovereignty of China in SCS one way or another. This further motivated the Chinese State to keep claiming its sovereignty over these areas when no objection neither from the bordering countries nor from the international community was raised (Shaheen, [2024](#)).

In Fact, after World War II, not only was any objection raised but this concept of the nine-dash line was used by different countries including the major powers of that time and the map that China had given was used in the political discussions of the World. Among these powers were the Soviet Union, Japan and the US.

This whole scenario provided the confidence to China in 1958 that it needed and now it was the time that China issued a Declaration demarcating all the territorial areas of the SCS and to the utmost surprise the Xisha and Nansha islands that were taken over by military invading was again claimed by China as a part of its territory. With oral Declarations and announcements China also started to use these concepts and claims in books, documentaries, news and journals (Darmawan, [2021](#)).

In 1998, to further exercise and check its authority China imposed the law of China over these Economic Zones so it could give a message to the world that it is quite successful in maintaining its power and laws on its self-claimed territories. China has taken the steps calculatedly so it can maintain its hegemony over these Islands not only over debates but by making policies that will benefit it in the long run.

Now the discussion arises about what policies China made about the dispute and to what extent they proved beneficial for the country. To determine the sovereignty of the States over the disputed areas was never a focus, neither from China's side nor from the bordering States, till the external invasion disrupted the peace of the region. China has to take strict actions to protect the sovereignty of its Islands not only from external invasion but also within the region. China made some core policies which were criticized by many but that was a measure that China took as a last option to the matter. Another aspect of the notion is found in the origination of the conflict keeping in view the policies and geo-strategic position of China (Shaheen, & Askari, [2020](#)).

In the historical perspective before 1970, China had complete authority and sovereignty over the South China Sea islands. This sovereignty over the South China Sea islands had remained predominantly occupied and controlled by China without any influence and competition to control by any of the other external actor. After 1970s, conflicts and disputes started to emerge owing to the fact that the states in those proximities started invading the islands. This illegal occupation by the external forces came as a challenge for China, as the sovereignty of these region was possessed by China, with the invasion and illegal occupation of the islands. Disputes started to emerge as the sovereignty over islands and reefs of Nansha islands by China was challenged by these external neighboring states. After that the initiation of the UN charter under CLOS, the rights and interests over the economic exclusive zones and continental shelves become more significant for all the states and especially for China (Buszynski, [2003](#)).

Within the SCS, sovereignty, rights and interests of China have always remained the topmost priority. For sustaining the elements of peace and stability within this region, China needs to devise such mechanism through which these conflicts and disputes are brought to an end. Resolving these disputes demand a higher level of commitment through peace talks, negotiations and consultancy. Management of differences of rights and interests are only possible through application of laws and principles. In order to bring lasting peace navigation and overflights must be maintained through mutual consensus, only a peaceful solution where win-win becomes applicable is through benefitting both the conflicting parties (Beckman, [2022](#)).

Throughout the history, China has not tried to bring control through creating an empire in the SCS, instead China has always adopted the policy of non-interference and non-intervention policy. Furthermore, China has always developed a peaceful state of affairs with all the states. For its neighboring states, China has treated all of these states on equal footing. China has always followed the international laws and principles for freedom of navigation and overflight from the Sea. Until now, China has adopted

the policy of equality with all and refrained from any conflict. China safeguarded sovereignty, rights and interests within the South China Sea (Merino, 2023). In statement of the declaration on the conduct of Parties is pertinent to mention here, which was carried out on 4th November 2002. This declaration has categorically shown the political contours, which have been signed by both China as well as the ASEAN states. This DOC is a cornerstone in bringing forth peace and stability within the South China Sea. This is the reason; China is working properly with the states within ASEAN for applying a working mechanism in the region. The DOC provides a strong basis for peaceful means and dialogues to further peace and stability. On the other side, this declaration is the step taken in the right direction because through these negotiations any escalating element is channelized to divert instability within this region. The declaration furthers a complete Code of Conduct (COC) for China as well as ASEAN states to work for sustenance of peace and stability. The COC is the upgraded form of DOC, as the code of conduct is brought in conformity with the international law. Nevertheless, this also provides foundational basis for considering the rights and securing interests of the states in the geographic proximity. Having said that the COC through profound consideration and complying with the international principles is the hallmark achievement for furthering peace, friendship and cooperation within this region (Strangio, 2023; Wu, Y. 2024)

It has been observed that the SCS is considered as the safest and open sea route for carrying out trade and sea passage. Moreover, China has always followed the international standards of freedom of navigation and international principles. From the laws of navigation to the issues of overflight, China has strictly followed the international laws and principles. According to various estimations, almost half of the world's merchant ships pass through the same sea route, this means that above 100 000 merchant ships use the sea route as a sea passage. In addition to that the third part of the world global trade passes through SCS. 60% of the global trade of China and almost 85% of the energy imports are carried out through South China Sea. In this way, the freedom of navigation and overflight within SCS has never emerged as an issue for China (Akram, 2022).

Historically, China has remained in conflict with the neighboring states due to the emergence of dispute of maritime rights and strategic interests. These rights and interests have brought dispute among China and the other states, but the freedom of navigation and overflights have not become the reason of conflict and dispute. At the base of everything, SCS is located at the doorstep of China, which makes it the lifeline for securing maritime interests of China. The sea routes are the lifeline for China and China has celebrated the harmonious nature within South China Sea. Significantly, China is more interested in keeping the region safe and uninvaded because of the maritime strategic interest of China. At the same time, China is always ready to oppose any act against China within the sea because any such act or law can become a hurdle for a prosperous state like China (Peiwu, 2020)

ASEAN: A Prologue

It was 8th August 1967, when the foreign minister of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand met in Bangkok, Thailand for signing an agreement. Through this document ASEAN was established (Buszynski, 2024)

The members were Adam Malik, Narciso, Abdul Razak, Rajaratnam and Khoman who became the founding fathers of the inter-governmental organization. This ASEAN has become one of the well-established groups in the contemporary affairs. The signed declaration became the foundational base of ASEAN, and this is known as ASEAN declaration.

The inter-governmental organization focuses on fostering economic coordination as well as stability among its member states namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The combined GDP is worth 3.2 trillion dollars. The group has come a long way to strength economic ties and bring forth trade agreements at a global scale. 6 free trade deals with the regional economic powers are the landmark achievement of ASEAN (Wood, 2017)

Having said that the impact and influence of ASEAN is still limited in its scope as per the critique. The criticism is associated with the lack of strategic vision, divergent interests and targets with the void of leadership in this group. With all these considerations, still the most glaring challenge lies in competing

with China and dealing with developing a unified front against China. They are not having a unified approach to China keeping in view the territorial disputes in the South China Sea with Myanmar's civil war at hand (Agussalim Wicaksono, [2024](#)).

ASEAN is headed by a chair who is supported by a secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia. ASEAN adheres to the policy of non-intervention and non-interference in the internal matters of its members' states. For any conflict in priorities and interests, the member states firmly believe in consultation, negotiation and consensus. Many critiques are of the view that the ability to decide and implement becomes problematic owing to this structural flaw. Therefore, this mechanism of decision making is a drawback for proper functioning of the organization (Editors, 2013; Salleh, [2022](#)).

The territorial disputes within the region have remained for many decades among China and the neighboring states. The complexity of issue in the Asia-Pacific region is not a naïve problem, but it has extended for a long time between the neighboring states. The key concern is the maritime basis and excessive resources available in the region, which attracts the strategic maritime interest of the neighboring states towards the abundance of natural resources. The South China Sea comprise of many states at its geographic proximity such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The competing territorial claims, overlapping maritime boundaries, and strategic importance of the region have led to tensions and conflicts over the years (CRS, [2022](#); Kausar, [2023](#)).

ASEAN has played a significant role in addressing the SCS dispute and facilitating regional cooperation. Comprising ten member states, ASEAN has sought to promote peace, stability, and dialogue among claimant states and other stakeholders. China, as one of the major claimants, has been closely watched for its response and actions in relation to the dispute (Rossiana, Y. S. [2022](#); Hu, [2023](#)).

The aim of this thesis is to examine the ASEAN approach towards SCS dispute and China's response during the period from 2010 to 2022. The study seeks to analyze the strategies, policies, and diplomatic efforts employed by ASEAN in managing the dispute and the implications of China's response to regional dynamics. The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

To address the research questions and achieve the objectives of the study, a qualitative approach has been adopted. The research involves a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary data sources, including official documents, policy statements, scholarly articles, and media reports. Qualitative data analysis technique is applied to examine the narratives, perspectives, and policy directions of ASEAN and China in relation to SCS dispute.

ASEAN's Approach Towards South China Sea Dispute

ASEAN is playing an important role in the unfolding of the events and disputes within the SCS. In 2011, both the parties agreed to sign the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS (DOC) that is not strictly a binding principle for both the parties. However, the signed document fostered peaceful means and brought political and economic stability within SCS. But the DOC remained unable to resolve the issues in an amicable way and tension started to emerge again and again in the region. These escalating tensions brought more and more complexity for the territorial disputes existing in the region. It was back in 2016, the PCA gave a verdict which was for Philippines that the claims of China are totally invalid over the South China Sea. This ruling was rejected by China, and tensions between China and ASEAN countries escalated. (Clare, [2021](#); Ma, [2023](#)). In response to the PCA ruling, ASEAN released a joint statement expressing concern over the tension in the region and calling for a peaceful resolution. ASEAN also reaffirmed the importance of the DOC and called for the early conclusion of a Code of Conduct (COC) in SCS. The COC is a legally binding agreement that aims to prevent the escalation of tensions in the region. However, the COC negotiations have been slow, and China's reluctance to accept a legally binding agreement has been a major obstacle (Amer, [2014](#); Şahin, [2023](#)).

China's Response Towards SCS Dispute

The argument or claim that China gives is based on the jurisdiction of China over these disputed territories was always there and it was practicing its sovereignty from ever and called it "ancestral properties" inherited from the generations of the past. China is the oldest state having its roots over 2000 years ago

with discovering, exploring and utilizing the resources with the sovereign authority within this territory. The state of China has exercised its sovereign power over this region for such a long time. China has supported the claims by mentioning the instance that even in the different dynasties such as the Ming as well as Qing, the maps that were drawn included all these disputed territories in China's and China was exercising its sovereignty over it. (Mushkat, R, [2020](#); Yi, 2022; Akinga, [2023](#)).

The Chinese activities in the region have always been keenly observed by the world powers and other countries. These states blame China for escalating disputes in the region because they believed that China was always on the back of these controversies and the strategies of China caused these but on the other side China claims that it has never been a reason for rising escalations in the region rather the states which are claimant are the actual cause of all this disputation and disturbing the peace of the region. China also blames the United States for its interference in regional matters without any cause (Zaidi & Saud, [2020](#)).

In the timeframe of early 1990s, two authors named Wu Shicun and Fu Ying in writing the paper "*The National Interest*" mention which have advancement of unilateral occupation that natural resources found in many states particularly in Malaysia and Vietnam. Also, the steps taken by the Navy of the Philippines, for instance, interfered in the Chinese fishing territory in April 1997 and also destroyed a Chinese territory named Huangyan Island which was a monumental place for China and replaced it with the Flag of the Philippines. These actions of the Philippines further aggravated the situation in the region and instigated a country like China which is not so weak to take these tactics without any response (Oztuna, A, [2024](#)).

Keeping in view all this rising tension in the region a Declaration of Maintaining the peace in the region was signed by the ASEAN countries in 2002, this Declaration was called the "Code of Conduct" for ASEAN countries. The Chinese authors argued that it was the other states who were making the situation bad in the region by doing tactics that somehow questioned the sovereignty of China, but China still abided by the Declaration and did not showcase its power to keep the peace in the region intact. The Chinese Ambassador, Yang Yanyi in the EU also claimed that instead of being the cause of all the controversies, China was a victim in the whole dispute (Stubbs, [2019](#)).

However, many Chinese saw presidency in the white house announcement of the United States' restructuring the power in the Asian region from 2010 onwards for the diverging focus in escalating the tussle between the oppositional forces. Through U.S. it has been found that the United States is taking the sides of the neighboring states of the region in competition with the rival state China. The US is having tilt towards the other states while having a competition with these states. This rebalancing phenomenon has provided with the opportunity to the other states to play and act in a confident manner. There are the states which are claimant states of the SCS region, and the rise of territorial disputes is the outcome of the claimant of these states. The Foreign Minister has aptly stated about the unfolding of the events in 2012, that has brought much tussle and conflict in the oil and fishing activities of the territories. The decision of Philippine to go to international tribunal for getting decision has alarmed the bell and exposed the vulnerability as well as the sensitivity of the incident. The international tribunal has decided in favor of the aforementioned state making the issue more and more complex as well as controversial during 2013 as well as the media sensation of 2016 through interviews and highlighting of the incidents in the disputed territories of the SCS has exposed the international dispute at global level and resulted into further complications of the issue at a global scale.

The idea furthered coined by the extra territorial power about the law of navigating from the troubled regions and sea routes have resulted into more complex challenge for the state of China and its sovereignty. Following the suit the laws and principles have come in line with the interests of the extra-regional power that has become more assertive in its actions within the region. The US keeps on patrolling in pursuit of actions in the region for pursuing the maritime security law. The excessive involvement of China is considered as a security threat to the US. The illegal movements are observed which infringes the sovereignty of China. China feels threatened by the acts taken by the US in pursuit of the international norms under the ambit of freedom of navigation law and international maritime law. An example of this that the USS Lassen, according to a spokeswoman for the external affairs of China, reached the water unlawfully on October 27, 2015, within 12 miles of Zhubi Reef. The United

States is also seen as attempting to strengthen the allies and its powerful base camp for exercising in the SCS through continuous military and maritime grills as well as expeditions with the neighboring states including Phillip maritime forces and turning down the sanctions of Vietnam from the exchange and transfer of the arms as well as ammunitions in the aftermath of 2016 media hype and interviews. The development of the US naval forces and activities as well as China's intentions have brought more misery to the local disputes. In the wake of these geostrategic competitions between the extra-regional powers, the states as well as the claimant states have observed the issues and disputes that have not only emerged but also escalated to a greater extend (Wirth, [2021](#); CRS, [2022](#); Askari, [2023](#)).

The representative Zhenmin explicitly focuses on the fact that the regional as well as the extra regional power has been the last state which has worked hard for rebuilding the region in a more advanced form. The issue of blaming came in the wake of the developments in 2013, when China was blamed for working on reefs and islands on the Nansha Island. The pressure mounted and the correspondent responded that the developments carried out are especially in compliant with the facilities provided for civilian regarding the laws of navigation and services. The purpose is peaceful, and no effort is made for militarization of the area. China responded that the efforts made by the claimant states have been the areas falling in the territory of China and they are belongings of China which have got interference by the claimant states. The Fact of the matter is that these territories are really the part of China which remained under their sovereign authority (Rashid, [2022](#); Li, [2024](#)).

The SCS DOC includes all the representatives from both the parties. By signing the document in 2002, both parties reaffirmed their commitment to 10 rules which have been the part and parcel of the standard procedure. These elements are refraining policies, defending the ecosystem, research-oriented task and pursuit of obedience in the international norms and values. The states work together for fostering trust and confidence in the neighboring states for developing and strengthening states relationships. 2015 was designated as the international year for the maritime security and coordination with the help of the Summit conducted by China along with the member states of the group. This summit firmly believed in the fact that there is a need of building consensus among the states for working together and implementing DOC to keep up the spirit of COC. The regional power focuses on the application of the DOC as per the need of time and requirement for that it believes that the oppositional forces have strayed. Moreover, the states consider that no actual discussions concerning the specifics of any solutions have taken place in light of the DOC (Xiaolu, [2022](#); Simoes, [2022](#); Wu, [2024](#)).

The regional power has always adopted the policy of peaceful means to resolve the issues between the states amicably. The bilateral relation has been strengthened by China for providing a strong basis for peaceful resolution of the disputes among the neighboring states. In the same frame, China has always adopted the policy of adhering to the United Nation charter, so China has signed the document of convention of law of seas, which allows the policy of safe exit to the sea passage and sea routes. China is strongly abiding the principle of the UN Charter regarding the law of navigation. And China never tries to take inappropriate measures in this regard. Legitimacy and legal obligation of China is observed in its strict compliance of the UN law of seas. The state machinery has made a strong commitment to follow the international law and principle and Point 30 during the year 2014 exemplifies the same fact, the policy of negotiation would be adopted for any sort of issue emerged between China and any other state. China wants to resolve the issues in a peaceful manner through direct linkage and connection in the form of consultation and negotiation between China and the claimant state (Miranda, [2022](#)).

Even though US, has not become the part of any of aforementioned accords, Washington and Beijing have adopted confidence-boosting measures. Both parties ratified the conduct and unplanned countering on the sea during the 2014 agreement. Both the president of the US and China's president have signed a pact outlining guidelines for military air-to-air engagements in September 2015. Although the United States make a strict statement regarding the pursuing of policies, China claims that the U.S. shouldn't do so. Beijing instead requests that Washington cooperate with China in such a way that the states get the resultant outcome without any direct conflict or confrontation. Following mutual respect and coordination to get a win-win situation for both the states in interaction with each other. Both the states are looking

forward to each other for amicably resolving the issues based upon respect and fruition for both the parties (Bahney, [2022](#); Strating, [2023](#)).

The regional power firmly believes in the notion that the states have the choice to abide by the international standards and norms for pursuing their interests as well as following the laws of navigating from the sea routes. The laws of navigation and overflights from the sea routes are the laws provided to all the nations and the nations have the authority to follow the same. China obeys the laws of navigation and overflights having said that the state of China follows the policy of negotiation for resolving all sorts of issues through peaceful means. Therefore, China keeps the door of diplomacy open for negotiating with its neighbors to resolve the problems in a peaceful way. Such a peaceful mechanism is the need of the hour for bringing forth peace and stable condition in the region. With a peaceful approach, China is suspicious about the acts of the other states that the other states should not compromise security and sovereignty on the same bases become of the peaceful notion of China. China also believes in carrying out joint programs for progress and prosperity without affecting security and sovereignty of China at any instant. China has the power as well as the authority to defend its territories, moreover, the states is developing a common zone of fishing since 2000, which has been noticed as the most daunting task than that of the natural resource extractions (Simoes, [2022](#)).

Research Questions

This study tries to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What is ASEAN's approach towards South China Sea? To what extent ASEAN's approach towards SCS is effective?
2. How is China using the soft power to influence the stance of ASEAN states on SCS dispute?

Theoretical Framework

The study is being undertaken by using the theoretical framework of Joseph Nye, Soft Power. In 1990 Joseph Nye tried to differentiate between hard power and soft power. These two dimensions denote the dimensions of the national power of a country. Through them how countries pursue their national interest? Soft power is the diplomacy without any force of exerting of force or threat. As for as the concept of Joseph Nye is concerned, the states use the tool of soft power in order to frame the narrative, persuade and attract the choices and preferences for bringing resultant outcome as per need and demand that is the selected option for getting the most suitable result (Nye, [2023](#)).

Through different means, a country can achieve its goals. It can coerce them with threats. It can attract them with payments and pursue their national interest. In addition to that the states use the soft diplomacy for creating a conducive environment while propagating the state's interests in a peaceful way, so that the states can influence the actions and responses of the other states (Al Suwaidi, [2021](#); Askari, [2021](#)).

China has increased the use of soft power during the COVID-19 pandemic as an approach to build cooperation with ASEAN member states. The manifestation of this approach is, for example, the promotion of social-cultural exchange, encouraging capacity building and also using its economy to influence the stance of ASEAN states regarding the South China Sea. During the pandemic of COVID-19, it used health as a tool of diplomacy and tried to build its diplomatic relations with ASEAN member states. Through the soft power approach, China is trying to cover up its aggressive behavior in the South China Sea (Van Dijk, [2023](#)). However, it is pertinent to state that China is the one non-ASEAN state that has a signed an agreement with the member states (Masatoshi, [2024](#)).

Research Methodology

The study used qualitative method with paradigm of post-positivism and utilized the documents of states as well as of ASEAN members, particularly on the South China Sea issue to describe the policy of ASEAN towards the South China Sea and its dialogue partners. The researcher used the qualitative research method because of several reasons. As this was a qualitative review study in which data was collected in narrative rather than numerical form. To find the answers to the questions three qualitative approaches including historical, exploratory and descriptive have been used. Historical research helps to predict future events

by interpreting the causes of past events, especially primary resources. Exploratory research is preliminary research which helps to identify the extent nature of the problem by reviewing the secondary data or resources. It provides the groundwork for further research by investigating the existing issues which are not fully defined.

The data was compiled from both primary and secondary resources. The primary data was collected from government reports and secondary resources are books, journal articles and periodicals. The researcher has used databases including Scopus, Sage Publications, Routledge, J Store and Google Scholar.

The data analysis was carried out by using the technique of documentary analysis by John Scott by comparing articles. Document analysis is a more efficient research method because it consumes less time as compared to other research methods. Besides document analysis is an attractive option for qualitative researchers because of the availability of documents in the public domain and there is no need for getting the permission of the author. The document analysis is appraised in the context of cost-effectiveness as the gathered information is always there in the document and the researcher just has to analyze the quality and content of the document.

The researcher has applied Scott's model of document analysis because its four tools such as authenticity, credibility, representation, and meaning are considered criteria for assessing and analyzing documents. First of all, Authenticity is the most fundamental criterion of documentary research which addresses that the material of the document is original and genuine. For the credibility of qualitative data, the researcher must confirm the authorship, place and time of the document before starting the work on the document. The material in the document becomes valid after realizing that the document is "genuine and of unquestionable origin, whether its content is incorrect or questionable.

In this way, the second tool credibility eradicates distortion and error in the documents. The third criterion is representation which demands access to all relevant documents. The fourth criterion is meaning which states that the extent to which the evidence and document is clear and comprehensible to the researcher. In the last phase of data analysis, data is divided into smaller pieces and then integrating those pieces of information to generate the major themes to reach a conclusion.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier ASEAN was established in 1967, with the methods and policies that the States follow in ASEAN made this region a center of attraction for every other region of the World, because the region of Southeast Asia was progressing by following its mentioned policies and the progress of this region was well-admired by the major powers.(Stubbs, [2019](#))

Moreover, the difficulties facing ASEAN in forging strong regional security in Southeast Asia have been exacerbated by many significant international political processes in that region and its neighboring regions (Putra, [2019](#)). In addition to that the states have always tried to adopt such policies for getting trouble through disagreeing to the notions causing confrontation at large (Askari, [2021](#); Kumar, [2022](#)).

ASEAN countries have learned not only to hedge many political risks from the neighbourhood with such a powerful power as China but also to benefit from its rise considerable benefits. The member states have been looking for pragmatic solution, yet there are problems in reaching to regional maritime strategic apparatus (Agastia, [2021](#)). Despite the potential difference between them, a stable economic interdependence has developed. China has taken an active part in the formation and activities of all the regional security institutions that have been established by the ASEAN countries, including the ASEAN groups, the context of the confrontation between the US and China so the elites of the ASEAN countries feel extremely uncomfortable. Non-alignment remains ASEAN's overall strategy. As the conflict of Cambodia during 1980s, the SCS is not an intra-ASEAN conflict (Acharya, [2013](#)). According to some scholars for ASEAN, under all circumstances, it is better to avoid choosing between them. In 1996, in his book "The Conflict of Civilizations", the famous American political scientist S. Huntington named SCS among the possible centers of the third world war. This, fortunately, did not happen, but the SCS indeed became a dangerous hotbed of international tension (Lokshin, [2020](#)).

In recent years, no international maritime dispute has attracted more attention than the disputed islands within the sea routes. ASEAN is not enthusiastic about joint development proposals; this reluctance is very serious for ASEAN countries because they believe that China is oppressing them to share what is theirs. A hallmark of ASEAN's joint position on the dispute is the ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea, based on self-control, non-use of force, and peaceful dispute resolution. After China became ASEAN's dialogue partner, its attitude became more moderate. Beijing plans to refrain from deepening economic and diplomatic ties with Southeast Asia and softening China's perception of threats to the region (Kim, [2015](#)).

In such cases, ASEAN member states need to manage their disunity to minimize hindrances to the realization and implementation of the plan. Damayanti, Alden Aran stated that, as the Virus War was ended and the SCS has gained importance in an aspect of global security. Some countries also stated that the islands, the rocks, and neighboring waterways as their own, but these claims continue to be fiercely contested. The South China Sea is among one of the largest ocean lines of communication (SLOCs) on the planet, intricately located in terms of military and exchange stream, and packed with marine regular assets, the valuations of which are likely to rise sharply once the assessments of the area's resources which included oil and gas resources are completed and the extraction activities are on the way. People from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei) make up four of the principal inquirers (ASEAN). Beijing has been the most treacherous to residents of ASEAN of the two excess petitioners, PRC and ROC on the issue of Taiwan, having been accountable for a series of events beginning in 1974 (Aran, 2016; Askari, [2020](#)).

Numerous Southeast Asian governments began attempting to set up transnational gatherings for provincial fortitude using the Bandung Meeting of 1955 as inspiration. A socialist enemy gathering was offered by the Philippines, and this was followed by numerous comparative Manila recommendations. The majority of these initiatives had a cultural or rather strict component, which restricted enrolment and prevented the regionalization project from progressing as quickly as it should have. However, the abundance of initiatives indicated a desire to nudge the region toward some sort of coordination mechanism. The Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), which included Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaya, was formed in 1961 despite several disputes arising from a post-pilgrim sense of patriotism (Lee, [2022](#); Karupiah, [2022](#)). In addition, the real challenge is unification of ASEAN states against China because the claimants' states have overlapping claims over the SCS region (Maizland, [2019](#)).

The More Prominent Malayan Confederation, or Maphilindo, was formed in 1963 by the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaya with the similar essence of seeking cooperation and strength between the Malay people (presently Malaysia). Nevertheless, neither of the initiatives was successful. Maphilindo was not successful in supporting the conflict between two of its members, and also the ASA suffered as a result of the insufficiency of genuine relationships between two of its three members. By and by, follies patriotisms would hold up traffic of a Southeast Asian local affiliation.

Since the 1990s, as China started its transformation to a market-oriented economy, attention has been turning to ASEAN, despite the East Asian economy having been at the forefront of study on Asia for decades. Similar to how competing nations have contested claims in the SCS since the early 1900s, the area has received increasing attention recently as tensions have risen. The abundance of writing on both topics is connected to China's economic ascent and the consequent US political turn to Asia in 2009. A wide range of themes, including the perspectives of various countries and the worldwide forums that ASEAN has established, are covered in many publications about the region using both qualitative and quantitative data (Zhao, [2021](#)). The material has been useful in understanding emerging situation within the same territory with the other member states in the group might complement China's, the US's, and Japan's plans to settle the conflicts (Ishaq & Askari, [2015](#); Zhou, [2016](#)).

Defensive realism is the primary theoretical framework through which the South China Sea can be analyzed, however, liberalist and constructivist theories also provide explanatory factors for the ongoing disputes. In accordance with Ji Hyun Kim's essay for Strategic Studies titled Quarterly, Fangyin Zhou's predictions for the future of East Asia and Sino-US ties are not entirely optimistic, the security dilemma's

character, which is crucial to defensive realism. This indicates that China has a motivation to preserve and express its influence in the region even if it does not intend to annex the entire region. To obtain resources, China will therefore continue to assert its influence in the SCS. However, it will also keep an eye on the activities of other players and may even make concessions to other claimant states. Southeast Asian states will defend their interests in the event of perceived Chinese aggression (Kim, [2017](#); Askari, [2019](#)).

Despite the vast quantity of studies on the East Asian economy and the major actors namely China, and Japan as well as the other member states of the group, there is little information on how effective ASEAN is as a direct arbitrator in SCS issues. I believe that a large portion of the existing literature downplays the significance of the diplomatic channels established by ASEAN to settle the maritime conflict. By directly using ASEAN's diplomatic talents to solve the problems in the South China Sea, this study makes an effort to close that gap (Rowan, [2005](#)).

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