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Enter the Vanguard State: Reinterpreting ASEAN's Response to the South China Sea Issue

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's (ASEAN) interactions with China over the South China Sea issue since the end of the Cold War. A neo-realist understanding of ASEAN's international relations is advanced. This approach highlights the degree of security maximizing interest convergence between key ASEAN actors and an extra-regional actor, the United States, to explain the varying outcomes in the empirical record. Our approach is contrasted to alternatives in the existing literature that either over-emphasize or under-emphasize ASEAN's autonomy in regional politics.

Keywords

ASEAN; South China Sea; Regional Autonomy; Vanguard State Theory; External Interference.

Introduction

A notable development in Asian international relations studies since the end of the Cold War has been the development of a significant body of theoretical literature to explain the evolution of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Thus, analysts have debated whether ASEAN is a security community (Acharya, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Emmerson, 2012; Khoo, 2015); engaged in theoretical reflections on the relevance of non-material as opposed to material determinants in regional affairs (Jones and Smith,

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2006, 2007a, 2007b; Peou, 2002); and considered whether the region or the state is the appropriate level of analysis (Ba, 2009; Jones, 2012; Jones and Smith, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). This article continues this debate. Its point of departure is the claim that while the analysts cited above have considerably advanced the theoretical debate on the role of ASEAN in regional politics, a gap remains. In particular, theorists have tended to adopt unnecessarily polarized positions on ASEAN's autonomy in regional politics. On one hand, an identifiable group of theorists, associated with constructivist theory, have emphasized the organization's autonomy from external interference (Acharya, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Ba, 2009). On the other, theorists of a realist and critical theory persuasion, contend that ASEAN has highly circumscribed autonomy from external interference (Jones, 2012; Jones and Smith, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). What has not been sufficiently explored is the conceptual space that examines the relationship between regional states and extra-regional states.

This article attempts to do precisely this, with reference to a case study of ASEAN's policy on the South China Sea since the end of the Cold War. It is our contention that ASEAN's record on the South China Sea is not adequately explained by reference to existing perspectives. Instead, we seek to advance an alternative explanation, rooted in neo-realist theory, and to develop a theory of regional politics, which involves the interaction between ASEAN as an organization and the ASEAN vanguard state(s), in respect to the South China Sea issue. According to this vanguard state theory, ASEAN's autonomy is a contingent one, reflecting the interests of what we call a vanguard state and an extra-regional state, in this case, the United States (U.S.). Thus, ASEAN's travails with China over the South China Sea are a reflection of its vanguard states' inability to secure external great power actor guarantees to counter China's territorial advances. To the extent

ASEAN has made some limited progress in defending its regional autonomy from China's intervention since 2013, it is a consequence of a convergence of interests between its vanguard states and an external actor, the United States, all of whom have agency.

Contending Explanations

There are three existing explanations that are relevant to explaining ASEAN's policy on the South China Sea since the end of the Cold War. The first of these approaches, represented by the constructivist perspective, has emphasized ASEAN's ability to uphold the principle of regional autonomy from external interference by external powers (Acharya, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Ba, 2009; Haacke, 2003). A second approach, reflected in the realist school, takes a contrary stance. According to this view, ASEAN has severely limited ability to uphold regional autonomy from external interference (Jones & Smith, 2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, Leifer, 1991, 1999, 2000). A third approach, associated with critical theory, also views ASEAN's autonomy as limited, but in a different way from realists. Here, outcomes are contingent on intra-state struggle between socio-political forces (Jones, 2012). As our analysis will show, each of these explanations has limitations. In this article we offer an alternative understanding, rooted in realist theory, where ASEAN's autonomy is highly dependent on the convergence of interests between ASEAN and an external actor.

The Constructivist Argument

Central to the constructivist view is the belief that norms coordinate values among states (Acharya, 2009a, p. 26). In this view, norms are mutually reinforcing and mutually constituted (Acharya, 2009a, p. 26). Thus, Haacke (2003, p. 7) contends that ASEAN norms help to 'build trust in the interaction context among ASEAN leaders and to promote interstate and regional stability'. A strong theme in the constructivist literature is the claim that despite challenges, ASEAN has successfully upheld the norm of regional autonomy. Thus, Acharya (2009a, p. 62) highlights the growing importance of the regional autonomy norm during the Cold War period, when the 'need for greater self-reliance in managing the region's security problems emerged as a key ASEAN norm'. For Ba (2009, pp. 11-12), ASEAN's founding narrative about its relationship to intervention and the need for unity has pointed 'states towards regional, *Southeast Asian* [italics in text] solutions in response to insecurity'.

These authors concede that the South China Sea dispute has tested ASEAN's norms. For Ba (2009, p. 161), the South China Sea dispute 'would in fact become the defining issue of ASEAN-China relations in the 1990s'. Similarly, Haacke (2003, pp. 122-123) argues that China, in seeking to enforce its territorial claims, has appeared to challenge ASEAN's norms on the non-use of force and restraint. Acharya (2009a, p. 157) admits that the South China Sea dispute 'posed a serious test of ASEAN's unity and of its norms concerning the peaceful settlement of disputes'. However, all authors see ASEAN as upholding its norms, and maintaining its autonomy. For Haacke (2003, p. 126, p. 125), China has 'incrementally allowed discussions on the Spratlys to deepen', and ASEAN has 'succeeded in allaying the remaining fears of the Chinese about the purpose of ASEAN's multilateral venture[s]'. For Ba (2009, pp. 176-177), ASEAN rejected traditional alliances and security arrangements when confronted by China's challenge to ASEAN on the South

China Sea dispute. Success has accompanied ASEAN's focus on socializing China through an enhanced security dialogue based on existing ASEAN frameworks, notably the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Ba, 2009; Johnston, 1999; Johnston, 2008). Indeed, Acharya (2009a, p. 211) states that since the mid-1990s, China began 'to take a more supportive role in multilateralism and the ARF'. Specifically, 'ASEAN was able to secure an agreement from Beijing to conduct Sino-ASEAN multilateral consultations on security issues' (Acharya, 2009a, p. 158). In this view, 'China has come to acknowledge the usefulness of the ARF as the only multilateral venue available to it where it can discuss and share its security concerns and approach with Asia-Pacific countries' (Acharya, 2009a, p. 211). Accordingly, ASEAN can 'claim some success in dealing with China on the Spratlys issue' (Acharya, 2009a, p. 158).

The foregoing claims are difficult to reconcile with actual record of Sino-ASEAN interaction on the South China Sea issue (Taylor, 2011). ASEAN's multilateral diplomacy at the ARF and related ASEAN fora has consistently failed to make substantive headway on the dispute. Instead of ASEAN's norms socialising China, or enhancing regional unity, China has succeeded in dividing the ASEAN states and advancing its position in the South China Sea. Significantly, in 2012, the ASEAN states were unable to reach an agreement on the South China Sea, and failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in its history (Zhang, 2015, p. 74). More importantly, ASEAN's maritime sovereignty continues to be violated by China (International Crisis Group, 2012b). To counter this, regional states have increasingly sought external power security guarantees, most notably from the United States (Tan, 2011, p. 149). This leads us to examine other perspectives to explain ASEAN's record on regional autonomy.

The Realist Argument

Realist scholars take a very different view of ASEAN regional autonomy. According to Leifer (2000, p. 108), the ASEAN aphorism of 'regional solutions for regional problems' is more 'a slogan serving a particular interest than an operational policy accepted and applied on a regional basis in any common interest'. In this view, the underlying behaviour of ASEAN actually conforms to the realist power-politics model (Jones and Smith, 2002, p.102). According to Jones, Khoo and Smith (2013, p. 111), 'actual resolution of the South China Sea dispute remained stalemated in the ARF's preferred strategy of managing problems rather than solving them'. This stalemate 'serves China's rather than ASEAN's long term strategic interest' (Jones, Khoo & Smith, 2013, p. 111). Rather than pursuing cooperative security through the ARF, there has been a 'classic recourse to hedging by weaker ASEAN states in an area of growing great power rivalry' (Jones, Khoo & Smith, 2013, p. 112). The dispute therefore demonstrates 'how more powerful actors can manipulate ASEAN's pliable norms to advance grand strategic interests' (Jones, Khoo & Smith, 2013, p. 113).

For Leifer (1999, p. 7, p. 8), a major problem is that in addition to a 'lack of political will' to resolve the dispute, there is an 'absence of any regional machinery for addressing the complex contention' in the South China Sea. Leifer (1999, p. 8) argues that the South China Sea issue 'is symptomatic of the problem of regional order in a strategically-fused East and South East Asia, which lacks a security architecture'. Ultimately, Leifer doubts ASEAN's capability to effectively deal with the South China Sea dispute. Instead, 'the role of the United States remains critical' (Leifer, 1991, p. 135). In this view, 'regional security would seem to require that such countervailing power, if it cannot be generated locally

on a cooperative basis, should be available from an acceptable external source for which there is only one candidate' (Leifer, 1991, p. 135).

Realist scholars offer a strong counter argument to the constructivist view. ASEAN regional institutions have demonstrably been incapable of resolving the South China Sea dispute. Instead, China has succeeded in dividing the ASEAN states, and utilized the existing institutional incoherence for its strategic advantage. These analysts' emphasis on the role of an external actor, the U.S., is indeed a necessary one. China's gains in the South China Sea have been predicated on an insufficiently robust U.S. response (Jones and Smith, 2007b, p. 179). However, while the role of external powers remains a critical factor in the story, the fact is that regional states possess a greater capacity to secure their own interests than has been acknowledged by the realists cited above. In theoretical terms, ASEAN states have greater autonomy, and hence state power, than they currently allow for. As our analysis will show, particularly in the post-2013 period, the Philippines and Vietnam have actively sought, and partially secured, security commitments from the U.S., and a variety of external powers including Japan and India. This aspect of regional dynamics requires further theorising, which we will offer in our alternative explanatory model.

The Critical Theory Argument

Adopting a critical theoretical approach, Jones (2012) attempts to advance a perspective where regional autonomy is highly circumscribed, but in ways that depart from the realist understanding. For Jones (2012, p. 2), external 'intervention and the non-interference principle can be explained as the outcome of struggles between and within ASEAN's most powerful social forces'. For Jones (2012, p. 8), sovereignty and non-interference can be analyzed as a 'technology of power' mechanism, which is used by domestic groups within ASEAN to determine the scope of political conflict in a way that best suits their needs. Because of this 'intimate relationship between sovereignty and social order', sovereignty is always subject to contestation by socio-political forces (Jones, 2012, p. 11). In the context of domestic conflict, the state and its institutions are subject to capture by the owners of capital. Once capture is effected, the state, by invoking the non-interference norm, is able to contain socio-political conflict and exclude outside influences that may wish to aid alternative social groups. Thus, at the international level, non-interference can be invoked or discarded to suit particular state interests or strategies (Jones, 2012, p. 8). This explains the mixed record in Southeast Asia, of sovereignty violation and the inconsistent adherence to the norm of non-interference.

The critical theory perspective is unable to adequately account for the empirical record of Sino-ASEAN South China Sea interactions. In two important respects, the South China Sea dispute represents a direct challenge to the view that sovereignty is contingent upon the role of ASEAN domestic forces. First, the dispute involves key external powers, most notably China and the United States. The interaction of these states with regional powers is integral to any analysis of the conflict. Second, it is not clear what impact, if any, ASEAN

domestic groups have had on the conflict. This raises serious questions about the relevance of the critical theory approach to an analysis of this central issue in ASEAN's post-Cold War international relations.

Vanguard State Theory[1]

Our analysis seeks to advance a fourth perspective, where state autonomy, and an intense concern with avoiding sovereignty violation, reflects a deeper concern with state survival (Krasner, 1999, Mann, 1984; Waltz, 1979). In this very important sense, autonomy, sovereignty, and state survival are reflected in the pursuit of interest convergence between ASEAN states and external great powers. The emphasis in this article on interests reflects the authors' self-identification as realists. Consistent with a realist theoretical approach, we draw on a realist understanding of how interests are defined, in its capacity as a theory of foreign policy (Elman, 1996). Following the work of Krasner (1978, p. 12), for analytical purposes, states are analysed in this article as unitary rational actors, pursuing aims understood in terms of the national interest.

Interests enjoy a venerable tradition within the realist literature, where there exists a consistent view of the basic state interest, which is state survival.[2] When a state must act to ensure its survival, this constrains a state's consideration of broader interests (Zakaria, 1998, p. 186). This corresponds to Wolfers' (1962, pp. 13-14) analogy of state action under conditions of high threat. For example, classical realist Hans Morgenthau (1967, p. 10) argues that 'the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival'. Similarly, neorealist Kenneth Waltz (1979, p. 134) believes that

'states strive to secure their survival' and 'that by comparing nations and corporations, the elusive notion of national interest is made clear'. John Mearsheimer (2001, p. 31) reaffirms this view, stating that 'survival is the primary goal of great powers'. This statement can be generalized to non-great powers. As Elman (1996, p. 31) notes, 'because of their diminished capabilities relative to others, small states lack a margin for time and error---they must be closely attuned to the external environment because their survival is at stake and the costs of being exploited are high'. Indeed, it is a fairly solid consensus among neorealist scholars that the foreign policy of non-great powers, including small states, will reflect system-level constraints (Elman, 1996, p.31). Of course, survival is not always at stake. During periods of relative peace, states 'have the "luxury" of choosing their interests and goals' (Zakaria, 1998, p. 186). During such times, a range of other values will be sought, including 'rank, respect, material possessions and material privileges' (Wolfers, 1952, p. 489).

Clearly, varying degrees of interest convergence are possible, and interests can change over time. Partial interest convergence between an ASEAN state and external actor is unlikely to elicit the high levels of sustained cooperation required to cause ASEAN state resistance to sovereignty violation. Typically, a high level of interest convergence is required to elicit the level of cooperation required to resist violations to state sovereignty. Also, interest convergence is a dynamic process, where small states actively seek 'maximum great-power commitment to their security interests while trying to minimise the price of obtaining that support' (Ciorciari, 2010, p. 2). Small states act in this manner because they 'generally lack formidable independent power capabilities', and as such, 'cannot affect the international security landscape on their own' (Ciorciari, 2010, p. 1). However, because some small states 'occupy strategic positions', they can 'affect the

overall global distribution of power by adding to the resources of some great powers and constraining others' (Ciorciari, 2010, p. 1).

Engaging with this literature, our analysis begins with the underlying premise that the study of interest convergence can yield utility to the field of Southeast Asian international relations. The ASEAN vanguard states under consideration, the Philippines and Vietnam, are at once highly vulnerable and lodged in a strategic location. They have a clear interest in establishing interest convergence with the U.S., to resist China's advances. Indeed, as this study will seek to show, without external actor interest convergence, these states have had great difficulty resisting sovereignty violations from China. During periods of decreased interest convergence, this study shares the same expectations as Leifer and Jones and Smith, and is consistent with existing realist literature. However, when a clear interest convergence occurs between an ASEAN state and an external power, a substantial compact is constructed. At this time, an ASEAN vanguard state has an active and substantial role in resisting sovereignty violations from other external powers. In short, contra the existing realist view, an ASEAN vanguard state has substantial agency, and plays the important and necessary function of actively seeking and supporting a great power commitment to regional policies, or phrased differently, intervention in regional affairs. At the same time, contrary to the constructivist view, this agency is highly qualified.

To understand and explain ASEAN's record on the South China Sea, our analysis advances a perspective, which we call vanguard state theory. A 'vanguard state' is conceptualized as an ASEAN state, which comes to the fore of the Association when it has vital interests at stake that it wishes to defend (Crawford, 2003, pp. 30-31; Press, 2005, pp. 25-28).

Crawford (2003, p. 31) defines vital interests as involving 'self-preservation, political independence, and, by extension, defence of strategically vital areas'. Similarly, Press (2005, p. 26) defines vital interests as preservation of 'sovereignty'. Secondary interests can vary greatly, and may range 'from very important interests, such as maintaining trade routes, the safety of your allies, and even national "prestige", to much more ephemeral ones' (Crawford, 2003, p. 31). Interests pertaining to national self-preservation logically must take precedence. This is because weak states have, 'less room for choice in the decision-making process. Their smaller margin of error and hence greater preoccupation with survival makes the essential interests of weak states less ambiguous' (Handel, 1981, p. 3).

Vanguard state behaviour is logically understood as a staged process involving first the maximization of security (Waltz, 1979, p. 134), and only then the maximization of power (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 33). An ASEAN state only begins to assume the role of vanguard state when vital interests are at stake, when state security is threatened. The theory does not preclude more than one ASEAN state from assuming the role of vanguard state. However, states must have compelling interests at stake in a given issue, and there must be some degree of coordination between them. Once a vanguard state has come to prominence, it will perform two major functions, which reflect an external balancing logic (Waltz, 1979, p. 168). First, because it lacks 'formidable independent power capabilities' (Ciorciari, 2010, p. 1), the vanguard state will actively seek out an external power whose interests align with its own. Second, the vanguard state will seek to portray a united ASEAN front in support of its interests, by engaging and mobilizing states within the institution. At this time, an ASEAN vanguard state has an active and substantial role in resisting sovereignty violations from external powers.

Critically, there must be an external power that is sufficiently interested in regional affairs. Here, the external power must have identifiable interests and be willing to act on those interests. There are a number of different strategies at a vanguard state's disposal to engage an external power, establishing an alignment of interests. These include the development of bilateral diplomatic interactions, various types of military co-operation, and the development of economic ties. A vanguard state may subsequently move to further solidify interest convergence with other regional states. The upshot is that without a substantial interest convergence, ASEAN is unable to resist violations to it sovereignty, and its autonomy will be increasingly compromised. In the subsequent sections, we will seek to show an increasing partial alignment of interests between the two vanguard states, the Philippines and Vietnam, and the external actor, the United States. In fact, it is the partial nature of interest alignment that explains the ineffective response by ASEAN to Chinese policy on the South China Sea issue.

Vanguard State Theory: The Philippines, Vietnam and the United States

From 1992 to 2012, ASEAN's policy on the South China Sea is explained by its inability to establish a robust convergence of interest with the U.S., the only state that has the wherewithal to seriously counter China. In this sense, this part of the narrative is an examination of policy failure. Accordingly, this is also the period when China has made sustained advances in its position in the South China Sea. A clear turning-point occurred in the period beginning in 2013, with the emergence of a more robust U.S. interest in dealing with the South China Sea issue. The subsequent convergence of interest between

the Philippines, Vietnam, and the United States has served as the basis for pushback against China in the South China Sea.

ASEAN's Failure, 1992-2012

The South China Sea issue was not an inactive one during the Cold War (Valencia, 1995). However, in the post-Cold War era, the issue has taken on a new impetus, particularly in Chinese foreign policy. Two reasons explain this. First, like all great powers, China seeks to control its immediate regional space to the extent that circumstances allow. China has done this by projecting its power into the East China and South China Sea (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 376). Second, China has become a net importer of petroleum in 1993, emerging as the second largest importer in 2009 (behind the U.S.). The possibility of untapped oil in the seabed of the South China Sea has raised the stakes. This would easily explain a law passed by China's National People's Congress in 1992, in which Beijing asserted its claims to the South China Sea, with the implicit threat to use force to enforce these claims (Tan, 2011, p. 147).

In any case, the period from late 1994 to 1995 saw China occupying the contested Mischief Reef area, building structures in an area claimed by the Philippines. A variety of actors ranging from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam have maintained counter-claims to China's, adding to the intractability of the issue. In 1996, China ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but opted out of its dispute settlement mechanism. After a period of relative calm following the signing of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea, these maritime disputes have emerged as an even more serious regional security issue. In 2008, an

agreement signed by China, the Philippines and Vietnam to conduct a joint seismic survey of disputed areas in the South China Sea lapsed (International Crisis Group, 2012b, pp. 6-7).

Against the backdrop of the failure to achieve noticeable progress on the South China Sea disputes, in May 2009, Malaysia and Vietnam made a joint submission to UNCLOS on their territorial claims in the South China Sea. In response, China submitted a map to UNCLOS that appeared to assert Chinese sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, including not only land features, but also the waters inside the line.[3] These conflicting claims focused regional attention on the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi. At the meeting, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared freedom of navigation in the South China Sea to be a U.S. 'national interest', and called for the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes based on UNCLOS (Lander, 2010). In response, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi responded with what one U.S. official described as 'a twenty-five-minute stem-winder that shook the meeting' (Bader, 2012, p. 105). Yang countered that Secretary Clinton's comments, 'were, in effect, an attack on China' (Bader, p. 105). Yang, who reportedly was 'staring directly at Secretary Clinton for much of the time', declared 'China is a big country. Bigger than any other countries here' (Bader, p, 105). Since this incident, there has been a marked deterioration in Sino-ASEAN relations over the South China Sea.

In the absence of a direct and forceful response by the U.S., China has made significant advances in extending its control over the South China Sea from 2010-12. In September 2010, the Chinese government seized a Vietnamese shipping vessel in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands. At the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM) Plus Eight Meeting in

Hanoi in mid-October 2010, Vietnam placed the issue of the South China Sea territorial disputes on the agenda for discussion. While no actual progress was achieved at the meeting, this act itself was a direct challenge to China. Beijing has consistently refused a multilateral approach to the dispute, insisting instead on settling claims bilaterally. China's subsequent disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam intensified. In March 2011, a standoff occurred when a Filipino vessel was conducting a seismic survey in the natural gas-rich Reed Bank in the Spratly Islands. Manila claimed that four similar skirmishes occurred between April and May. The Aquino government subsequently began referring to the South China Sea as the 'West Philippine Sea' (International Crisis Group, 2012b, p. 7).

In July 2011, ASEAN and China agreed to a set of guidelines for implementing the 2002 Sino-ASEAN DOC on the South China Sea. In January 2012, a meeting led to the establishment of four working groups to explore marine environmental co-operation, marine scientific research, search and rescue operations, and ways to combat transnational crime. However, at the same time that Beijing appeared to embrace a more accommodating stance, it was also prepared to respond robustly to defend its interests. Another standoff occurred between Chinese and Filipino naval vessels over the Scarborough shoal in the Spratly Island chain in April-May 2012, with China out-manoeuvring the Philippines. With a typhoon approaching, both sides agreed to withdraw from the area. The Chinese quickly returned to occupy the shoal in June, claiming ownership without firing a shot. Meanwhile, China protested Vietnam's passage of a June 2012 maritime law declaring sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. In that same month, China unilaterally established a municipality called Sansha (three sandbanks in Chinese) in the South China Sea, with Yongxing (or Woody) island serving

as the administrative hub. According to the official Chinese Xinhua news agency, Sansha's jurisdiction extends over 13 square kilometres of land *and* 2 million square kilometres of surrounding water, effectively establishing Chinese control over much of the South China Sea (Associated Press, 2012). In a direct challenge to Vietnam, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) invited bids for a new batch of oil exploration blocks, some of which were within the 200 nautical mile limit that Vietnam claims as its exclusive economic zone.

Events came to a head in July 2012, when ASEAN failed to release a Joint Communiqué following the forty-fifth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. This was the first time in the Association's forty-five year history that this had occurred. Both the Philippines and Vietnam requested that the joint statement include references to their maritime disputes with China. The Philippines wanted to include an objection to the deployment of Chinese paramilitary vessels in Scarborough Shoal (Thayer, 2013, p. 78). Vietnam wanted to include an objection to China's announcement that it would lease oil blocks that fell within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (Thayer, 2013, p. 78). However, Cambodia's foreign minister Hor Nam Hong, as ASEAN chair, blocked any mention of the dispute, claiming that these were bilateral issues and should therefore not be included (Thayer, 2013, p. 78). At the November East Asian Summit, also held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and China again tried to neutralize debate over the South China Sea dispute. Chairing the Summit once more, Cambodia unilaterally announced that ASEAN had agreed with China that 'they would not internationalize the South China Sea', and focus instead on 'the existing ASEAN-China mechanisms' (Bland, 2012). If anything, the ability of ASEAN and China to reach an accommodation on the South China Sea dispute has declined after the

ascension of a new Chinese leader, Xi Jinping in late 2012 (International Crisis Group, 2015).

Turning Point: Enter the U.S.

To the extent that the narrative in the pre-2013 period is a case study of policy failure, developments since then represent an attempt to reverse this situation. Interestingly, ASEAN's recent relative success in the South China Sea is explained by the U.S.'s increasing intervention, which has been actively sought by the Philippines and Vietnam, in their capacity as ASEAN vanguard states. Let us review the evidence.

In the face of a perceived threat from China to their territorial interests in the South China Sea, Hanoi and Manila have increased co-operation with a more engaged U.S. In July 2013, during President Truong Tan Sang's visit to the White House, the U.S. and Vietnam signed a comprehensive strategic partnership. In their joint statement, both leaders, 'reaffirmed their support for the settlement of disputes by peaceful means in accordance with international law', and 'the principle of the non-use of force of threat-of-force in resolving territorial and maritime disputes' (White House Press Secretary, 2013). For its part, the Aquino government has reinvigorated the Philippines' once estranged military relationship with the U.S. In July 2013, Manila and Washington started negotiations on the establishment of a rotational air and naval agreement that allows for an increased U.S. military presence (Bradsher, 2013).

In August 2013, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel held talks with President Aquino on this topic (Zhou, 2013). In December 2013, Secretary of State Kerry made high-profile

stopovers in Hanoi and Manila, announcing increases in U.S. military aid to both. While in Hanoi, Secretary Kerry commented on China's 23 November declaration of an Aerial Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea, advising Beijing that 'the zone should not be implemented, and China should refrain from taking similar unilateral actions elsewhere, particularly in the South China Sea' (Associated Press, 2013). The more robust U.S. response was backed up by action. On 28 April 2014, the Philippines' Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and U.S. Ambassador Philip Goldberg signed a ten-year Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) at Camp Aquinaldo, Quezon City. When approved by the Filipino Supreme Court, the agreement will allow for U.S. use of the Philippines' Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Bay (Eilperin, 2014).

Subsequent developments involving Vietnam were to heighten Hanoi's sense of a need to align itself more strongly with the U.S. Just ahead of the 24th ASEAN Summit in 10-11 May 2014, regional stability took a turn for the worse. Tensions in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship escalated. Just prior to the summit, in what must have been a long-planned operation, the Chinese state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) towed in a giant 40 storey tall drilling rig to a potential drilling site in the Paracel Islands. These islands are claimed by China and Vietnam, but occupied by China since 1974. A Chinese convoy accompanied the rig. It is unclear as to which side started the ramming, but in the ensuing scuffle, both sides' ships were subject to assault. Vietnamese anger spilled over into physical attacks on Chinese workers in Vietnam. More than 3000 Chinese workers had to be evacuated by the Chinese embassy in Hanoi and its consulate in Ho Chi Minh City (Perlez, 2014). Unconfirmed reports suggest that four persons (at least one of whom was Chinese) were killed, and one hundred and thirty-five wounded. U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki characterized the Chinese action as a

'unilateral action that appears to be part of a broader pattern of Chinese behaviour to advance claims over disputed territory in a manner that undermines peace and stability in the region' (Dyer and Sevastopulo, 2014). The Vietnamese response was to come later, seen in a direct challenge to the Chinese claims in the South China Sea, both on the basis of international law, and in enhanced relations with the U.S., India and Japan.[4]

At the May 2014 ASEAN Summit, and unlike the meeting in Phnom Penh 2012, the ASEAN foreign ministers issued a statement expressing their 'serious concerns over the ongoing developments in the South China Sea, which have increased tensions in the area' (ASEAN, 2014). The issue came to a head with a more targeted U.S. intervention. At the annual IISS Shangri-la meeting on 31 May, U.S. Secretary of Defense Hagel gave voice to regional concerns by directly critiquing Chinese policy (Hagel, 2014). Hagel noted that 'the U.S. will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged' (Hagel, 2014). The Chinese response was unequivocal. In his presentation, the Chinese representative, Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong, deputy chief of general staff of the People's Liberation Army, strongly contested Hagel's views (Wang, 2014).

Evidence of diplomatic U.S.-Filipino-Vietnamese co-ordination on the South China Sea issue became increasingly apparent. And, China has responded. In what must surely have been previously discussed between the Philippines and the U.S., Manila has followed up on its initial 22 January 2013 submission to the United Nation's Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague that protested China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. On 30 March 2014, a 4000-page dossier was formally submitted. The aforementioned PCA set a 15 December 2014 cut off date for the consideration of

competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. A flurry of well-timed activity was in evidence prior to that date. On 5 December, even as Manila announced a spike in Chinese building activity in the Scarborough Shoal, the U.S. State Department released a paper challenging Chinese claims in the South China Sea (U.S. State Department, 2014). This was followed on 7 December by China's release of a position paper contesting the Philippines' claims. Beijing's claims were backed up by a declaration of intent by their State Oceanic Administration to bolster China's surveillance capacity in the South China Sea by 2020 (Straits Times, 2014). On 11 December, Vietnam stated that it had submitted its own position paper to the PCA. Hanoi expressed support for Manila's position, questioned China's claims, and asked the tribunal to consider Vietnam's interests in the matter under consideration (Heydarian, 2014).

Chinese strategy has evolved, even as the U.S. has displayed an increasing resolve to support its ASEAN partners. U.S. satellite imagery of the South China Sea has established that from May 2014 to April 2015, the Chinese have been actively 'constructing' land at the following reefs: Cuarteron, Fiery Cross, Gaven, Hughes, Subi, and the Union reefs (Johnson South and Johnson North reefs) (Thayer, 2015a). As a consequence, the U.S. estimates that China has expanded its territory somewhere in the region of between 1500 and 2000 acres (Dou and Hookway, 2015). For example, dredging activity at Hughes Reef, a shoal in the Spratly Islands, has led to the construction of a 90,000 square yard island, complete with a helicopter pad, and radar facility. Significantly, a satellite photo taken of the same location in March 2014 revealed only a small concrete platform at high tide. The U.S. response has been robust. Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Harry Harris was quoted as saying that 'China is creating a great wall of sand with dredges and bulldozers' (Gladstone and Sanger, 2015).

In testimony before a Senate Committee in April 2015, then Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Locklear characterized China's pace of construction in the South China Sea as 'astonishing' (Tweed, 2015). He further posited that 'if this activity continues at pace, it will give them (China) defacto control of the maritime territory they claim' (Tweed, 2015). Locklear also speculated that this 'might be a platform if they (China) ever wanted, to establish an air defence zone' in the South China Sea (Tweed, 2015). U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel also objected to Chinese policy. He noted that Chinese 'reclamation isn't necessarily a violation of international law, but it's certainly violating the harmony, the *fengshui* of Southeast Asia, and, its certainly violating China's claim to be a good neighbour and a benign and non-threatening power' (Denyer, 2015).

The strong U.S. stand has served as an impetus for ASEAN, and particularly the ASEAN vanguard states, to adopt a more steely posture. On 15 April 2015, the Philippines' Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario confirmed that Manila was 'seeking additional support from the United States in terms of being able to take a stronger position in defending our position' (Minh, 2015). At ASEAN's 26-28 April 2015 Summit in Kuala Lumpur, ASEAN's Vietnamese Secretary General Le Luong Minh strongly contested China's claims in the South China Sea (Otto and Ng, 2015). This was then reinforced by the newly-appointed Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, who proceeded to make a series of explicit critiques of China's activities in the South China Sea. On 27 May, Carter met the Filipino Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin in Hawaii, where he stressed that the U.S. commitment to defend the Philippines was 'ironclad' (Department of Defense, 2015). At the annual IISS conference in Singapore from 29-31 May, Carter made clear the U.S.'s

'fundamental interest' in freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. He reiterated the U.S.'s 'deep concern at the pace and scope of land reclamation in the South China Sea' (Carter, 2015). Significantly, these are the strongest statements made by any official serving in the Obama administration since 2009 (Rosenberg, 2015). Carter then travelled to Hanoi in June 2015 to sign a joint mission statement, pledging to expand defence trade and to collaborate on maritime security (Lynch, 2015). In late June, the Philippines held naval exercises separately with the U.S. and Japan in Filipino-controlled areas of the South China Sea (Mogato, 2015). In August 2015, after a meeting with head of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris Jr., the Philippines' Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin vouched for the utility of the U.S. military role in the region. Gazmin stated that 'if there are Americans flying around there, we won't be troubled. We need to be helped in our resupply missions. The best way they could assist is through their presence' (Gady, 2015).

Vietnam has made similar efforts to seek out U.S. security commitments, and to bolster ties with the United States. These have been reciprocated by the U.S., suggesting a compelling convergence of interests. Between 6 July and 10 July 2015, the Secretary-General of the Vietnam Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, made an unprecedented visit to the United States. This was the first visit by a serving chief of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Obama confirmed that the two had 'discussed the importance of resolving maritime disputes in the South China Sea and throughout the Asia-Pacific in accordance with international law' (White House Press Secretary, 2015a). Similarly, Trong confirmed that the two had 'shared our concern about the recent activities [in the South China Sea] that are not in accordance with international law that may complicate the situation' (White House Press Secretary, 2015a).

While the following might be interpreted as a pro forma statement, the preface to those remarks included a joint statement expressing their unequivocal concern at recent developments in the South China Sea (White House Press Secretary, 2015a). Other Vietnamese officials have driven home the point. Speaking at the Asia Society in New York on 28 September 2015, Vietnam's President Truong Tan Sang commented on China's land reclamation in the South China Sea, which had just been reaffirmed by Chinese President Xi in an interview with the Wall Street Journal. Sang claimed that 'acts by China seriously affect the maritime safety and security in the East Sea' and 'violate international law' (Daniszewski and Pennington, 2015). Moreover, Sang had warm words for the United States, stating that there is no mistrust between the two nations, and that 'the moment the United States fully lifts the ban on lethal weapons sales to Vietnam, [it] will send a signal to the whole world that the Vietnam-U.S. relations have been fully normalized' (Daniszewski and Pennington, 2015).

While China has not directly challenged the U.S. since its articulation of a much clearer position on the South China Sea disputes, it has continued to alter the status quo in subtle ways. The next Chinese move was to construct a pair of lighthouses on its existing territories on Cuareton Reef and Johnson South Reef (Torde, 2015). But, again, unlike the pre-2013 period, the U.S. has responded quickly. On 26 October, in a move that was justified under the principle of freedom of navigation, the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, went inside the twelve nautical mile exclusive economic zone of the Spratly islands occupied by China (Lubold, 2015). As the U.S. staked out this more robust posture, on 29 October, the U.N. Arbitral tribunal in The Hague unanimously ruled that it had jurisdiction to hear the Philippines' 2013 submission challenging China's claims in the South China Sea (Deutsch, 2015). This move was welcomed by the U.S. and rejected by

China. On 3 November, during a visit to Beijing, Admiral Harris presented U.S. activities in the South China Sea as an instance of supporting the principle of freedom of navigation, and critically, as unexceptional (Perlez, 2015). In a highly symbolic move that backed up Harris' words, on 5 November, Carter visited the U.S. aircraft carrier the USS Theodore Roosevelt, as it traversed the South China Sea. During his visit, Carter was quoted to the effect that 'there is a lot of concern about Chinese behaviour out here. Many countries are coming to the United States and asking us to do more with them, so that we can keep the peace out here' (Ferdinando, 2015).

To underline the point, on 8 November, two B-52's flew near the disputed Spratly Islands. And, on his return to the U.S., Secretary Carter expressed in no uncertain terms that the U.S. 'joins virtually everyone else in the region in being deeply concerned about the pace and scope of land reclamation in the South China Sea' (Agence France Presse, 2015). In the face of this sustained opposition, the Chinese clarified their stance on the South China Sea, even if the fundamental position remained the same. On 7 November, Chinese President Xi stated in a speech in Singapore that China was committed to freedom of navigation, even as he asserted that the islands in the South China Sea were 'China's since ancient times' (Wong, 2015). According to Xi 'there has been no problem with maritime navigation or overland flights, nor will there ever be in the future' (Wong 2015). While some might see in that statement a more co-operative stance on maritime security, others would just as easily read in it a Chinese commitment to guarantee freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which is not the same thing.

In any case, the Philippines is clearly pleased that its efforts to engage the U.S. on the South China Sea issue have been successful. Following the USS Lassen episode in the

Spratly Islands, Philippines President Aquino told a forum hosted by the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines on 27 October that he had 'no issue' with the U.S. move, and that he believed 'everybody would welcome a balance of power' in the South China Sea (Sabillo, 2015a). Interest convergence between the U.S. and the Philippines was further solidified when President Obama met with President Aquino on 18 November 2015. Obama stated his desire to 'reaffirm our [the U.S.'s] unwavering commitment to the security and defence of the Philippines' (Philstar, 2015). He confirmed that the U.S. is 'especially committed to ensuring maritime security in the region', and that it will be increasing 'maritime security assistance to the Philippines to record levels, including two new vessels' (Philstar, 2015). Obama stated that he and Aquino had agreed on the need for 'bold steps to lower tensions, including pledging to halt further reclamation, new construction, and militarisation of disputed areas in the South China Sea' (Philstar, 2015). At the same time, Aquino confirmed that the Philippines-U.S. security alliance 'remains a cornerstone of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific', and reiterated the importance of U.S. contributions to Filipino security, that 'help us ensure that we can ably respond to current security challenges, particularly in the area of maritime security and maritime awareness' (White House Press Secretary, 2015b). Aquino took the opportunity to 'reiterate the Philippines' view that the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea must be continuously upheld consistent with international law' (White House Press Secretary, 2015b).

Interestingly, there has also been increasing evidence of high-level dialogue between the Philippines and Vietnam, which further supports their classification as vanguard states. On September 2015, Vietnamese Ambassador to the Philippines Truong Trieu Duong stated that the two would 'deepen…cooperation in order to solve all the issues concerning

the South China Sea in a most peaceful way in accordance with international law' (Straits Times, 2015). A strategic partnership was signed on 17 November, when the two leaders met at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, held in Manila. President Truong stated that 'President [Aquino] and I shared our concerns over the recent developments in the East Sea or the South China Sea, affecting trust, peace, security and stability in the region. We also reaffirmed the importance of ensuring the stability, maritime security, safety and freedom of navigation and of flight in the South China Sea' (Sabillo, 2015b). For his part, Aquino stated that 'in terms of defence relations, we [the Philippines] welcome the active engagement and cooperation between our respective defense and military establishments' (Sabillo, 2015). He continued, that 'as seafaring peoples, we look to initiatives that will enhance our capacities to better respond to challenges and situations in our common seas' (Orendain, 2015). As one regional analyst noted, 'the message is very clear, that China's neighbours are beginning to form an informal alliance' (Heydarian, cited in Orendain, 2015).

Objections

There are a number of possible queries, which may be raised to the argument proposed.

First, can ASEAN be understood as a unified entity? Drawing on the pioneering work of Frederick Frey (1985), we contend that ASEAN can be conceptualised as a unitary actor during those periods when ASEAN displays a sufficiently united front in support of vanguard state interests. As Frey (1985, p. 144) points out, 'absolutely unitary action is a naively impractical criterion for a group actor'. However, he argues that if group actors 'display sufficient behavioural cohesion among members so as to produce unitary group

actor behaviour', then evidence of minor deviations from cohesion should not result in denial of group actor designation (Frey, 1985, p.142).

Relating this discussion to ASEAN, our view is that ASEAN unity is not something to be assumed. ASEAN unity waxes and wanes. It develops in specific circumstances. Thus, ASEAN can be understood as a unified entity during those periods when ASEAN displays a united front in support of a/the vanguard state(s). This occurred during the Cold War, when Thailand acted as ASEAN's vanguard state and established significant interest convergence with an external actor, the People's Republic of China from 1979-91. Despite divisions within ASEAN, the organization was sufficiently unified to act as a unitary actor in Frey's terms, and projected an admittedly far from perfect, but still cohesive united front. This allowed ASEAN, in cooperation with China, to successfully counter Vietnamese policy, a state that had defeated the French, and the U.S. At other times, as in the case of the South China Sea dispute investigated here, interest convergence, and hence, unity between the vanguard states, the Philippines and Vietnam, and the external actor, the U.S., is very much a work in progress. That said, interest convergence is strengthening as events in the South China Sea take a turn for the worse, with China's deployment of two missile batteries in the Paracel Islands in February 2016 (Brunnstrom and Blanchard, 2016).

A second, and related, query is whether Vietnam and the Philippines are merely pursuing their own self-interest on the South China Sea. This view, if correct, significantly undermines the utility of the vanguard concept, which focuses on the interaction between the vanguard state(s) and ASEAN members to explain ASEAN policy. Here, it is important to highlight the functions performed by a 'vanguard state'. An ASEAN vanguard state has

a number of interrelated functions: It seeks to set the ASEAN agenda, and develop cohesion in support of its interests in the international context, whether that be in multilateral forums, or with respect to key external actors. How successful, or otherwise, a vanguard state is at performing these functions will directly impact its ability to resist sovereignty violation from external actors. To date, in the case of the South China Sea issue, there has been some success on the part of Hanoi and Manila in working with ASEAN to establish interest convergence with the U.S., an external power. Our argument is that Vietnam and the Philippines need to increasingly act in their capacity as vanguard states and focus on developing ASEAN unity, even as they seek interest convergence with the U.S. In the event of a failure to do these things, they will continue to have their sovereignty undermined by China.

A third query concerns the vanguard states discussed in this article. Do Vietnam and the Philippines have a greater propensity for being vanguard states on the South China Sea issue? How might the theory be applied to other ASEAN states? According to vanguard state theory, a vanguard state is *any* ASEAN state that has the most compelling interests at stake in a given issue. In the case of the South China Sea dispute, this is Vietnam and the Philippines. Therefore, these are the vanguard states. Why Vietnam and the Philippines and not another ASEAN state? First, there are only four ASEAN states with competing claims in the South China Sea: Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. We would not expect an ASEAN state that did not have a competing sovereignty claim with China to have a compelling interest at stake in the dispute. This effectively rules out the other ASEAN members. Second, history matters. Malaysia and Brunei historically have had more co-operative ties with China than the remaining claimants. This will undoubtedly have had an impact on their response to the issue. Thus, these states have

preferred a non-confrontational approach, largely accommodating China (Parameswaran, 2015). Vietnam, on the other hand, has a mixed history of being an alliance partner (1950-78) of China's, as well as having extremely strained relations with China. This is reflected in the actual use of military force over the Spratly islands in 1988, and other lower level, but still real frictions since then. Similarly, the Philippines have traditionally been a U.S. alliance partner since 1951, rather than China. And, as documented here, this relationship has deteriorated in recent years (Heydarian, 2015).

A fourth query concerns the external actor with which ASEAN establishes interest convergence. It might be queried why we have identified the United States as ASEAN's actor of choice. Why not Japan? It is true that Japan is increasing its interest in Southeast Asia, and in particular, regional maritime regional disputes. On 12 May 2015, joint naval drills were conducted between Japan and the Philippines in the South China Sea (Hayashi, 2015). On 4 June, in direct opposition to Chinese calls, Japan signed an agreement to provide naval patrol vessels to the Philippines (Rajagopalan, Takenaka, and Wee, 2015). The Japanese–Vietnamese relationship is also strengthening. From 15-18 September, the Secretary-General of the Vietnam Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong, visited Japan. A Memorandum on Cooperation between Coast Guard Agencies was signed. In a joint vision statement, it was declared that both sides 'share many fundamental interests' (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). While Japan has clear converging interests with Manila and Hanoi, not least freedom of navigation and limiting Chinese power projection ability, the U.S. has even more compelling interests at stake, and significantly greater capabilities to effect change on the part of Chinese policy. While Japan can assist ASEAN at the margins, it cannot balance Chinese power and policy in East Asia. It takes a great power to balance a great power. On this point, it is clear that for ASEAN, the U.S. is the preferred

partner to counter Chinese policy in the South China Sea. As we argue, this is increasingly occurring.

Finally, has this example of interest convergence improved ASEAN's security? This is ultimately a counterfactual question. We attempt to make a plausible case that ASEAN's security has improved by the actions of the vanguard states. Since we are dealing with a counterfactual, we have to compare our present situation to one where China was allowed to proceed unopposed with its South China Sea policy. Our argument is that to the extent that the Chinese now face an increasingly active U.S. naval maritime presence, and thus acts as a counterbalance in the South China Sea, the answer that ASEAN vanguard state actions have improved ASEAN security is yes.

Conclusion

A variety of explanations have been offered in the literature to explain ASEAN's policy on the South China Sea. None is totally satisfactory. This article offers an alternative explanation rooted in the logic of neo-realist theory, in its capacity as a theory of foreign policy. In this interpretation, the Philippines and Vietnam have taken on the dual role of vanguard states in ASEAN's response to China's policy in the South China Sea. In the pre-2013 period, these states unsuccessfully sought to resist sovereignty violations from China. This is because U.S. interests on this issue had not converged sufficiently with that of the Philippines and Vietnam. Washington was simply too distracted by developments in the Middle East and Northeast Asia, and put Southeast Asia on the back-burner. In the post-2013 period, an increasing convergence of interests between the U.S. on one hand,

and the Philippines and Vietnam on the other, has led to a stronger regional pushback against Chinese policy in the South China Sea. The theoretical implications of this case study should be noted. Our study strongly suggests that ASEAN's autonomy is not as unqualified as claimed by constructivist theorists. Neither is it as restricted as realist and critical theorists contend. Rather, it is a contingent type of autonomy, reflecting an interest convergence between a specific ASEAN vanguard state (or states) and an external actor. Agency rests in these parties. To highlight one without the other misses an important aspect of what is occurring. Power also matters in this process, since only an external great power can balance a regional great power.

Looking to the future, absent the continuation of a robust but measured U.S. intervention policy, China's control over the South China Sea is a geographical and technological inevitability. Thus, the Obama administration's recent policy under Ashton Carter is a move in the right direction. That said, the message of vanguard state theory is that for this push-back to be sustained, co-ordination and commitment will be required on the part of the Philippines, Vietnam, and the U.S. It is also vital that the Philippines and Vietnam engage and mobilize the remaining ASEAN members, to portray a united ASEAN front. Should this effort falter, vanguard state theory predicts that ASEAN sovereignty will continue to be compromised, and ASEAN's diplomats will labour in vain.

Notes

1. This section contains and expands upon the theoretical argument first outlined in Southgate, L. (2015). ASEAN and the Dynamics of Resistance to Sovereignty

Violation: The Case of the Third Indochina War (1978-91). *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs,* 2(2), 200-221.

2. For a constructivist conception of state interests, see Finnemore, M. (1996). *National Interests in International Society.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press. For Finnemore (1996, p. 2), 'interests are constructed through social interaction…[and] are defined in the context of internationally held norms and understandings about what is good and appropriate'. For the pluralist conception of state interests, see the summary of that view in Krasner, S. (1984). Review: Approaches to the State: Alternative Conceptions and Historical Dynamics. *Comparative Politics*, 16(2), 223-246. In this view, civil society is made up of a 'plethora of diverse, fluctuating, competing groups of individuals with shared interests' (Krasner, 1984, p. 226). These groups 'struggle to maximize their own, autonomously defined self-interests' (Krasner, 1984, p. 226).
3. The People's Republic of China has a long-standing claim to the territories in the South China Sea, dating back to August 1951. Force has been used by China on a number of occasions, most notably against South Vietnam in 1974, and against a unified Vietnam in 1988.
4. During a state visit by Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang from 16-19 March 2014, Tokyo and Hanoi turned their eight-year old 'Strategic Partnership' into an 'Extensive Strategic Partnership'. In late October 2014, during Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to New Delhi, Vietnam encouraged India to support the peaceful resolution of the disputes in the South China. Hanoi also encouraged India to deepen its oil exploration activities in the South China Sea. It has also established a comprehensive partnership with Australia in 2015 (Thayer, 2015b).

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