

# The Role of ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific towards China's Coercive Policies in South China Sea Dispute

## บทบาทของมุมมองอาเซียนต่อภูมิภาคอินโด-แปซิฟิกต่อแนวโน้มนโยบายบีบบังคับของจีนในข้อพิพาททะเลจีนใต้

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Received 27-10-2024

Revised 17-04-2025

Accepted 20-04-2025

Doi: 10.69598/artssu.2025.4132.

### How to Cite:

Sigit, Bachtiar, J. W., & Christina, N. (2025). The Role of ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific towards China's Coercive Policies in South China Sea Dispute. *Journal of Arts and Thai Studies*, 47(2), E4132 (1-17).

**Keywords:** AOIP, China, ASEAN, coercive policies, South China Sea dispute, strategic hedging

**คำสำคัญ:** AOIP, จีน, อาเซียน, นโยบายการกดดัน, ข้อพิพาททะเลจีนใต้, การป้องกันเชิงกลยุทธ์

### Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** The South China Sea is a vital geopolitical and economic region, serving as a major international trade route, a rich source of marine and energy resources, and a focal point of territorial disputes. The overlapping sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, particularly between China and ASEAN Member States (AMS), have intensified regional tensions, with China's coercive policies shaping the strategic environment. In response, ASEAN introduced the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 to promote regional stability, inclusivity, and adherence to international law. While AOIP emphasizes ASEAN's centrality in shaping the Indo-Pacific order, its effectiveness in countering China's assertive actions remains a critical issue. This study examines the role of AOIP in responding to China's coercive policies in the South China Sea dispute, utilizing the framework of strategic hedging. The research aims to analyze how ASEAN countries leverage AOIP as a diplomatic and strategic framework to balance relations with China while maintaining regional autonomy and stability.

**Methods:** This study uses a qualitative research approach through a comprehensive analysis of secondary sources, including books, journal articles, government documents, and international news reports. By utilizing the strategic hedging framework, the research investigates ASEAN's strategic responses to China's maritime assertiveness, assessing AOIP's role in mitigating tensions and maintaining regional order. Data collection involves filtering relevant literature and policy documents to understand ASEAN's diplomatic positioning and engagement with major powers. The research also explores ASEAN's historical interactions with China and evaluates how AOIP provides a platform for member states through the geopolitical complexities of the Indo-Pacific.

**Results:** The results revealed that ASEAN's AOIP plays a limited but on the other hand, a strategic role in response to China's coercive policies in the South China Sea. Despite ASEAN's internal divisions and lack of a supranational authority, the AOIP serves as a diplomatic platform for negotiation and regional stability. However, it lacks a concrete mechanism to counter China's aggression. ASEAN member states, prioritizing national interests, have adopted a hedging strategy—balancing economic ties with China while safeguarding territorial integrity. This study shows that though AOIP cannot solve the problem or dispute directly, it remains a key tool in helping ASEAN to manage regional tensions and uphold its relevance in Indo-Pacific security.

**Application of this study:** ASEAN can use the AOIP to strengthen diplomatic ties with both China and the United States of America, creating a space for negotiation that helps reduce the risk of conflict and promotes regional security. By balancing relations with China while safeguarding their own territorial interests, ASEAN countries can manage their complex relationships with China, particularly in the South China Sea. Additionally, ASEAN can shape international rules on maritime security and territorial disputes by continuing to develop the AOIP. This action could help set global norms for resolving conflicts like those in the South China Sea. AOIP can also be used to promote mediation, trust-building, and cooperation, helping to reduce tensions and promote long-term peace in the region.

**Conclusions:** This study examined the role of ASEAN's AOIP in responding to China's coercive policies in the South China Sea. AOIP reinforces ASEAN's commitment to regional peace and security while balancing the influence of major powers like China and the United States of America. Through a hedging strategy, ASEAN nations try to maintain economic ties with China while safeguarding their territorial interests. Although AOIP does not directly resolve disputes, it serves as a diplomatic platform for negotiation and conflict mitigation. Despite challenges in achieving a unified stance, AOIP remains a crucial tool for helping ASEAN reduce regional tensions.

## บทคัดย่อ

**ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์:** ทะเลจีนใต้เป็นพื้นที่ทางภูมิรัฐศาสตร์และเศรษฐกิจที่สำคัญ ซึ่งทำหน้าที่เป็นเส้นทางการค้าหลักระหว่างประเทศ แหล่งทรัพยากรทางทะเลและพลังงานที่อุดมสมบูรณ์ และเป็นจุดศูนย์กลางของข้อพิพาทด้านอธิปไตย การอ้างสิทธิซ้อนทับในทะเลจีนใต้ โดยเฉพาะระหว่างจีนและประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียน ได้เพิ่มความตึงเครียดในภูมิภาค ซึ่งนโยบายกีดกันของจีนมีผลต่อสภาพแวดล้อมทางยุทธศาสตร์ ในการตอบสนองอาเซียนได้นำเสนอมุมมองอาเซียนต่ออินโด-แปซิฟิก (AOIP) ในปี 2019 เพื่อส่งเสริมเสถียรภาพในภูมิภาค ความครอบคลุม และการเคารพกฎหมายระหว่างประเทศ แม้ว่า AOIP จะเน้นความสำคัญของอาเซียนในการกำหนดระเบียบอินโด-แปซิฟิก แต่ประสิทธิภาพในการตอบโต้การกระทำที่ยืนยันอำนาจของจีนยังคงเป็นประเด็นที่สำคัญ การศึกษาเรื่องนี้ได้สำรวจบทบาทของ AOIP ในการตอบสนองต่อนโยบายกีดกันของจีนในข้อพิพาททะเลจีนใต้ โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดการป้องกันเชิงกลยุทธ์ งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์ว่าประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียนใช้ AOIP เป็นกรอบทางการทูตและกลยุทธ์ในการปรับสมดุลความสัมพันธ์กับจีน ขณะต้องรักษาความเป็นอิสระและเสถียรภาพของภูมิภาค

**วิธีการศึกษา:** การศึกษาในครั้งนี้ใช้วิธีการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพโดยการวิเคราะห์แหล่งข้อมูลทุติยภูมิอย่างครอบคลุม รวมถึงหนังสือ บทความวิจัย เอกสารของรัฐบาล และรายงานข่าวระหว่างประเทศ โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดการป้องกันเชิงกลยุทธ์ งานวิจัยนี้จะสำรวจการตอบสนองเชิงกลยุทธ์ของอาเซียนต่อความมุ่งมั่นของจีนในด้านการใช้ทะเล พร้อมทั้งประเมินบทบาทของ AOIP ในการลดความตึงเครียดและรักษาระเบียบในภูมิภาค การเก็บข้อมูลจะประกอบด้วยการกลั่นกรองวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องและเอกสารนโยบายเพื่อทำความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับท่าทีทางการทูตของอาเซียนและการมีส่วนร่วมกับมหาอำนาจ งานวิจัยนี้ยังสำรวจปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางประวัติศาสตร์ของอาเซียนกับจีน และประเมินว่า AOIP ได้สร้างเวทีให้สมาชิกอาเซียนสามารถผ่านความขัดแย้งทางภูมิรัฐศาสตร์ในภูมิภาคอินโด-แปซิฟิกได้อย่างไร

**ผลการศึกษา:** ผลการศึกษานี้เผยให้เห็นว่า AOIP ของอาเซียนมีบทบาทจำกัดแต่ในขณะเดียวกันก็เป็นกลยุทธ์ในการตอบสนองต่อนโยบายกีดกันของจีนในทะเลจีนใต้ แม้ว่าอาเซียนจะประสบปัญหาภายในและขาดอำนาจระดับสูง AOIP ก็ยังทำหน้าที่เป็นเวทีทางการทูตสำหรับการเจรจาและความมั่นคงในภูมิภาค อย่างไรก็ตาม AOIP ยังขาดกลไกที่ชัดเจนในการตอบโต้การกระทำที่ก้าวร้าวของจีน ประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียนให้ความสำคัญกับผลประโยชน์ของชาติ ได้ใช้กลยุทธ์การป้องกันเชิงกลยุทธ์ การรักษาความสัมพันธ์ทางเศรษฐกิจกับจีนในขณะที่ยังคงปกป้องอธิปไตย การศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าแม้ AOIP จะไม่สามารถแก้ไขข้อพิพาทหรือข้อพิพาทได้โดยตรง แต่ก็ยังคงเป็นเครื่องมือสำคัญในการช่วยให้อาเซียนบริหารจัดการความตึงเครียดในภูมิภาคและรักษาความเกี่ยวข้องในด้านความมั่นคงอินโด-แปซิฟิก

**การประยุกต์ใช้:** อาเซียนสามารถใช้ AOIP ในการเสริมสร้างความสัมพันธ์ทางการทูตกับจีนและสหรัฐอเมริกา โดยสร้างพื้นที่สำหรับการเจรจาที่จะช่วยลดความเสี่ยงของความขัดแย้งและส่งเสริมความมั่นคงในภูมิภาค โดยการรักษาความสัมพันธ์กับจีนในขณะที่ยังคงปกป้องผลประโยชน์ด้านอธิปไตย ประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียนสามารถจัดการความสัมพันธ์ที่ซับซ้อนกับจีน โดยเฉพาะในทะเลจีนใต้ นอกจากนี้ อาเซียนยังสามารถมีส่วนร่วมในการกำหนดกฎระเบียบระหว่างประเทศในด้านความมั่นคงทางทะเลและข้อพิพาทด้านอธิปไตยโดยการพัฒนา AOIP ต่อไป การทำเช่นนี้อาจช่วยกำหนดบรรทัดฐานทั่วโลกในการแก้ไขข้อพิพาท เช่นเดียวกับในทะเลจีนใต้ AOIP ยังสามารถใช้ในการส่งเสริมการไกล่เกลี่ย การสร้างความไว้วางใจ และความร่วมมือ ซึ่งจะช่วยลดความตึงเครียดและส่งเสริมสันติภาพระยะยาวในภูมิภาค

**บทสรุป:** การศึกษานี้ได้สำรวจบทบาทของ AOIP ของอาเซียนในการตอบสนองต่อนโยบายกีดกันของจีนในทะเลจีนใต้ AOIP ช่วยเสริมสร้างความมุ่งมั่นของอาเซียนในการรักษาสันติภาพและความมั่นคงในภูมิภาค พร้อมทั้งรักษาสมาคมของอิทธิพลจากมหาอำนาจอย่างจีนและสหรัฐอเมริกา โดยการใช้อยู่ระหว่างการป้องกันเชิงกลยุทธ์ ประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียนมุ่งมั่นที่จะรักษาความสัมพันธ์ทางเศรษฐกิจกับจีนในขณะที่ยังคงปกป้องผลประโยชน์ด้านอธิปไตย แม้ว่า AOIP จะไม่ได้แก้ไขข้อพิพาทโดยตรง แต่มันทำหน้าที่เป็นเวทีทางการทูตสำหรับการเจรจาและลดความขัดแย้ง แม้ว่าจะประสบปัญหาที่ยากในการบรรลุความเห็นพ้องต้องกัน AOIP ยังคงเป็นเครื่องมือสำคัญในการช่วยให้อาเซียนสามารถลดความตึงเครียดในภูมิภาคได้

## Introduction

The South China Sea, a peripheral sea that comprises part of the Pacific Ocean, stretches from the Taiwan Strait to the Karimata and Malacca Straits, encircling most of Southeast Asia. Geographically speaking, Kalimantan, the southern edge of the Gulf of Thailand, the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, Taiwan, and the Philippines border it on the northeast, east, southeast, and north, respectively. On the other hand, mainland Asia borders it on the north and west. Its total area is roughly 1,423,000 square miles (3,685,000 square kilometers) (LaFond, n.d.). This semi-closed sea is known to be

important for the surrounding countries because it has large energy reserves, abundant marine resource potential and also a very strategic international trade route due to almost one third of the world's trading ships passing through this sea (US Energy Information Administration, 2013). Because so many people in Southeast Asia rely on the South China water for fishing and the management of marine resources, the marine environment plays a significant role in the political and economic life of these nations. Nevertheless, the South China Sea is a threat and a source of conflict for both regional and non-regional nations.

Therefore, the South China Sea is an important item to discuss, including various issues such as conflicts over territorial sovereignty disputes, non-traditional threats such as illegal fishing activities, piracy and armed robbery, marine terrorism and other transnational crimes such as human trafficking. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) cooperated with countries in the Indo-Pacific region to establish the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), formed in Bangkok, Thailand in June 2019. This is one of the result of 34th ASEAN Summit. It only took about a year and a half for ASEAN members to discuss the document. This is due to the fact that the Indo-Pacific is becoming the most strategic area where the interests of the main actors intersect with each other as the center of gravity for contemporary geo-economic and geopolitics (ASEAN Briefs, 2019).

According to some, the document introduces "Indo-Pacific" into the security discourse of ASEAN, seeing the Indian Ocean and Pacific as a single strategic domain while coexisting with other geographic definitions such as East Asia and Asia-Pacific. As a result, AOIP highlights as its core values the significance of ASEAN's centrality, inclusivity, and complementarity in the Indo-Pacific region (Singh & Tsjeng, 2020). This view gives ASEAN an important role in shaping discourse and development on the Indo-Pacific issue, which will become increasingly prominent in the coming years.

Through ASEAN-led initiatives, communication and collaboration to promote peaceful cooperation, a framework based on rules, and the pursuit of an open and inclusive regional order that does not exclude any nation, the AOIP highlights the importance of ASEAN. This makes it possible for the normative frameworks of ASEAN to continue directing the Indo-Pacific, East Asian, or Asia-Pacific regional order. Furthermore, the AOIP declared that ASEAN's neutrality, particularly with regard to separating itself from the geopolitical competition between the United States and China and staying away from Chinese-regulated activities, which were implemented by other Indo-Pacific visions both officially and implicitly. For ASEAN, the AOIP is a reasonable place to start when defining its place in the evolving Indo-Pacific order. The AOIP ensures that big powers, who dominate most of the Indo-Pacific debates, do not overlook or exclude ASEAN. The paper still demonstrates ASEAN's commitment to at least confer and reach a consensus regarding the fundamentals of its understanding of the Indo-Pacific Concept (Singh & Tsjeng, 2020).

Based on various views, the Indo-Pacific region is difficult to define with certainty. For ASEAN, the regional concrete boundaries will not be a problem as long as the association maintains its centrality in the regional architecture in the future. However, China is a key holder in the Indo-Pacific region, no matter how geographic boundaries are defined. In addition, the Indo-Pacific is important for the United States and China. The United States considers that the Indo-Pacific is an important region for America's future. It demonstrates how the rivalry between Beijing and Washington will change the region's international order and strategic dynamics. If the strategic competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region became extremely tense, all other countries—particularly Australia, the Republic of Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand—although they are allies militarily with the United States—can make choices to minimize economic damage from China (He & Miangjiang, 2020).

The susceptibility of infrastructure located on shore or at sea to security attacks has drawn worldwide attention to the issue of maritime security. Maritime security, however, can also include safeguarding the blue economy, the marine

environment, and the human security of coastal populations. The Indo-Pacific area is receiving attention due to various connectivity policies being implemented by countries including the US, China, Russia, Japan, Australia, India, and ASEAN (Tuan, n.d.). Beijing views its security environment in the Indo-Pacific as generally peaceful; however, China considers the United States rebalancing and Japanese security policies as a potential disruption to regional stability (Xinhua, 2015).

While the region generally enjoys peace and security, there maritime disputes between nations and areas in the Indo-Pacific, including those involving sovereign rights over marine territories as well as territorial sovereignty at sea. The area has seen an increase in violent robberies, piracy, and maritime terrorism. The lives of coastal people are also being impacted by a number of new maritime risks that the Indo-Pacific is experiencing, such as rising sea levels, an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural catastrophes, an increase in the volume of marine waste, and a decline in biodiversity (Tuan, n.d.). Furthermore, China is a country that has the most political interests in the South China Sea. To support its interests, Beijing also needs to pay special attention, although many Chinese policies and activities are in conflict with maritime disputes in the South China Sea. **Based on the background, this paper will analyse the Role of ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) towards China's coercive policies in the South China Sea dispute.**

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the conceptual framework of hedging will be discussed to enrich the findings of the research and strengthen its argument. Second, the Historical Review of ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) section provides the historical background shaping the AOIP. Thereafter, ASEAN and China relations depict the dynamics between those countries to understand their relations better and how the AOIP will act towards the issue. China's Maritime Dispute with the Neighbors in South China Sea section further describes Beijing's claim and the conflict. The ASEAN' Policy in South China Sea Dispute section explains how ASEAN responds to such issue. This leads to China's coercive policies in South China Sea Dispute describes the changing approach of Beijing when it comes to South China Sea dispute. Following that, The United States' Involvement in the South China Sea Dispute section depicts the involvement of Washington in the geopolitical struggle. Then, in the Role of AOIP towards China's coercive policies in South China Sea Dispute section examines the role of AOIP facing Beijing's policies when it comes to the dispute. The final section proposes the conclusion.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In order to understand the AOIP's role towards China's coercive policies in the South China Sea dispute, this paper will use the concept of hedging. When used in this context, hedging typically refers to a national security or alignment policy that one state employs toward another and that combines parts of cooperation and confrontation (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). In contrast, Stiles (2018) distinguished hedging as an effort to both reduce one's commitment to something (i.e., the level of trust) and to mitigate risk by diversifying one's commitment. He continued by saying that it is ideal to view hedging as a strategy for improving commitment flexibility in terms of the level of commitment, the issues addressed, and the potential partners involved (Stiles, 2018).

Hedging is commonly compared to balancing or bandwagoning, terms coined during the Cold War to describe alternate tactics for opposing or succumbing to a strong or dangerous major power. When scholars looked at the new dynamics of world politics in the post-Cold War era, they discovered that pre-existing theoretical frameworks were insufficient (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). This led to the development of the concept of hedging. The idea of hedging, according to the majority of scholars, aims to address a number of important issues in contemporary theory and practice of international relations. How do nations typically react to emerging powers that can jeopardize their security interests?

How do they prevent the possibility of being abandoned when they establish protective links with a friendly major power? Most importantly, how do those who make decisions on foreign policy attempt to address security challenges in an incredibly unpredictable international environment? Because balancing and bandwagoning tended to concentrate on how governments react to recognized threats, it can be said that theories on balancing and bandwagoning failed to provide persuasive answers to these questions. These theories tended to concentrate on how states react to recognized dangers (e.g., Walt, 1987; David, 1991), which made them better able to address these problems. As a result, their theories implied a duality that was at odds with post-Cold War state policy. The actions of numerous states indicated attempts to reduce risk in ambiguous strategic circumstances, as opposed to taking definite positions to counter known threats or follow a resurgent great power.

Thus, hedging is a tactic used by nations and other players who may be eager to enter into significant accords concerning such fundamental problems as security and human rights but who also wish to safeguard themselves against an overly flexible or long-term commitment (Stiles, 2018). A crucial component is almost likely a concern that your partners may betray you, albeit this may result from ambiguity about the state of the world in the future or from the difficulty of enforcing the agreement itself. As a result, Stiles (2018) viewed the desire to hedge as the ideal middle ground between trust and mistrust. As already indicated, Stiles added that while mistrust can frequently prohibit collaboration from ever being considered, trust itself is not a prerequisite as long as players are able to include in the agreements some degree of flexibility along with a variety of monitoring and enforcement measures.

In particular to the context, AOIP aims to maintain stability and peace in the region. Meanwhile, ASEAN countries utilize hedging as their strategy to maintain the existing balance of power as to lower the chances of choosing a side incorrectly. Most of ASEAN countries which have conflicts with China are in a stalemate, as the escalation to the use of hard power could be detrimental to their national goals, even though such escalation is highly unlikely. The economic importance outweighs the cons of utilizing extreme measure. Yet, AOIP seems like a good medium for ASEAN countries to voice their concerns regarding the assertiveness of Beijing in South China Sea while protecting their territorial integrity. The development of a long-lasting resolution has been impeded by the complexity of the competing claims in the South China Sea and the high economic stakes involved (Li, 2017). However, this gives states a certain amount of flexibility in terms of negotiation and diplomacy.

The present qualitative research was completed by analyzing a series of secondary resources. The resources comprised books, journals, international newspapers, and government documents. After the collection of data, the process of filtering and choosing the right data was done in order to answer the research questions. The South China Sea is an important matter both for ASEAN countries and its neighbors such as China and the United States. Its strategic location provides the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) with the existing freedom of navigation according to the International Law of UNCLOS' 1982 and is rich in natural resources, such as oil and gas. However, the rise of China and its coercive policies in the South China Sea dispute has urged ASEAN to create a new platform of AOIP, even though there are diverse approaches from the members of ASEAN.

## **Historical Review of ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific**

Founded in June 2019, AOIP is a statement of ASEAN's commitment to preserving peace, security, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific area. The primary tenet of AOIP is the significance of ASEAN's centrality, inclusivity, and complementarity in the Indo-Pacific area (Singh & Tjseeng, 2020). This approach affords ASEAN considerable leeway in

implementing its interaction strategies, which include inclusive cooperation and consultation, with the goal of promoting Southeast Asia's welfare in key areas including maritime security, the economy, the culture, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition, this view also gives ASEAN an important role in shaping discourse and development related to the Indo-Pacific problem. AOIP promotes synergy amid various Indo-Pacific concept differences and aims to strengthen existing mechanisms to meet regional and global challenges. There are four important elements delivered in the AOIP about how ASEAN is close to the Indo-Pacific region, such as integrating the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean, prioritizing dialogue and cooperation, and promoting development and prosperity for all and the importance of maritime for regional architecture (Heiduk & Wacker 2020). Competition and conflict in the Indo-Pacific region are feared to affect regional stability.

AOIP forms marine cooperation since one of the security topics it frequently discusses is maritime security. According to AOIP, unsolved maritime disputes that could spark open conflict are among the marine-related geopolitical concerns that the region's governments are either currently or potentially confronting. Furthermore, maritime pollution and the unsustainable exploitation of marine resources are growing to be major issues. Preventing, managing, and finally resolving those problems calls for a more concentrated, tranquil, and thorough approach. The field of maritime cooperation established by AOIP is adapted to internationally recognized principles of international law including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982). The following is a form of maritime cooperation carried out or formed by AOIP as follows (ASEAN, 2019).

First, there should be cooperation for the peaceful settlement of conflicts, the advancement of maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and excessive flight, and the combating of transnational crimes such as piracy, armed robberies, and robberies against ships at sea. Second, there should be cooperation for the sustainable management of marine resources, which should continue to support maritime connectivity, small-scale fishing communities' livelihoods, the development of the blue economy, and the promotion of maritime trade. The third aspect involves collaboration aimed at safeguarding the environment, including addressing issues related to sea pollution, rising sea levels, marine debris, biodiversity preservation, and green shipping. The fourth aspect involves technical cooperation in marine science research and development, sharing best practices and experiences, building capacity, managing marine hazards, and raising awareness of sea-related issues.

With numerous conflicts of interest pertaining to maritime security in the South China Sea, ASEAN and AOIP work to focus and peacefully resolve the ongoing conflict in a comprehensive manner. This is particularly important when it comes to the struggle for territorial sovereignty over the islands and coral reefs. Additionally, ASEAN must contend with two powerful nations, China and the United States, both of whom are reportedly attempting to increase their influence and authority in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea's freedom of navigation and overall regional stability, which includes the resolution of peaceful conflicts, are directly important to the United States (Cronin et al., 2012). Washington, however, needs to reaffirm its interests in the region in order to confront the distinct difficulties presented by maritime disputes and territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea, even if China is still encroaching on neighbouring countries with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects and maintaining aggressive practices in the South China Sea (Cox, 2018). Because picking a side between these two powerful nations and their blocs would be detrimental to Southeast Asia's security architecture, ASEAN is forced to act neutrally and impartially towards each other as these nations carry out their policies in the Indo-Pacific.

The Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are seen by ASEAN as an integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role, rather than as two separate territorial spaces. This perspective is one of the

main components of ASEAN's predicted Indo-Pacific Outlook: a region of cooperation and conversation in the Indo-Pacific, not rivalry; a region of development and prosperity for all; and addressing the importance of maritime perspectives and domains in developing regional architecture (ASEAN, 2019). ASEAN hopes that with maritime security cooperation within AOIP, countries in the region can increase their awareness of the importance of maritime cooperation and defuse their respective egos, especially in the conflict-prone South China Sea. Even so, to realize this maritime cooperation requires quite a long time and most importantly a sense of mutual ownership and trust between countries in the region.

## **ASEAN and China Relations**

China is closely tied by geography with its neighbours, sharing land borders with up to 14 countries and having 8 sea neighbours. As a result, it's important to observe how China interacts with these nations, some of which being in ASEAN. Beijing's relationship with ASEAN is built on two tracks: bilateral relations with each member and collective relations with ASEAN as a whole. This is because ASEAN is a community that unifies many countries. Beijing prioritised building ties with ASEAN while managing intricate bilateral relations with each nation. China's relations with ASEAN have suffered as a result of the South China Sea dispute getting worse (Wang, 2021). There are worries that China's ascent could strain ties with its neighbours, particularly those in ASEAN. Relations between Beijing and certain ASEAN members have deteriorated as a result of territorial and maritime conflicts in the South China Sea, and there are many worries that hostilities there could become violent. Since the pivot or rebalancing to Asia policy was announced and put into action, the issue has gotten much more problematic. These territorial disputes, for China, could not be resolved by war, so Beijing presented a "culture of harmony". China's leader, Xi Jinping, recently called for the building of a 'community of common interests and goals' with the principles of 'friendship, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusion' with neighboring countries (Zhang & Wang, 2013).

1991 marked the start of the ASEAN-China dialogue process. In 1996, China became ASEAN's full dialogue partner. Until 1997, ASEAN-China held its first meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The leaders of the two sides announced their decision to build a 21st century-oriented partnership that benefits both neighbors and creates mutual trust between ASEAN and China. A peaceful resolution of conflicts over the South China Sea was pledged by China and ASEAN in 2002 when they signed the Declaration on Conduct (DOC). In order to strengthen ties between ASEAN and China and create a strategic alliance for prosperity and peace, China also ratified the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2003. Beijing established its Permanent Mission and appointed an ambassador to ASEAN until September 2012 (ASEAN-China Center, 2020).

China and ASEAN continue to work closely together to coordinate and cooperate on global and regional concerns. China is fully in favour of ASEAN's leadership in regional cooperation as well as its increased involvement in the creation of an inclusive and open regional architecture. The two parties have conquered the current obstacles and opportunities in the region and are committed to fostering the sensible growth of regional cooperation in East Asia. Good communication and collaboration are also established between the two parties in cooperation mechanisms such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, and ASEAN Plus China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ASEAN Plus Three) (ASEAN-China Center, 2020).

The two sides' collaboration in trade and the economy has flourished. ASEAN and China trade volume reached a new high of \$587.8 billion USD, a rise of 14.1 percent year on year, as global economic development slowed. For the

first time, ASEAN surpassed the United States to become China's second-largest trading partner in 2019. China and the ASEAN nations have also made proactive measures to boost mutual confidence and control discourse in the South China Sea. Both are actively encouraging discussions on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea, and moving forward, cooperation on sustainable maritime development will also be a priority (Xilian, 2019).

ASEAN has emerged as a significant player in the concurrent development of Southeast Asian and Chinese relations. Building a China and ASEAN community with a shared destiny, signing an agreement on good neighbourly relations and cooperation between China and ASEAN, and creating a 21st-century Maritime Silk Road are just a few of the new ideas and proposals that China's new leader, Xi Jinping, put forth in 2013 to deepen China's relations with ASEAN. Beijing thinks that ASEAN nations are the best at comprehending and assisting China's ascent. The two sides frequently engage in high-level discussions and exchange visits at all levels in the political arena. This increases friendship and understanding between people. (Zhang & Wang, 2013). Through ASEAN, Southeast Asian countries have sought to maintain both the United States strategic commitment in the region and ensnare China in norms of peaceful dispute resolution and regional multilateral forum networks (Keller, 2020).

### **China's Maritime Dispute with the Neighbors in the South China Sea**

Several ASEAN member states along with China have overlapping claims to the South China Sea. As Beijing expanded its maritime presence and established military outposts on man-made islands, it was met with increasing assertiveness from other regional claimants, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. The increasing frequency of deadlocks has also brought this problem to the United States. Washington has increased its military activity and naval presence at sea, signaling Washington's increasing role in the dispute, which, if not managed wisely, could turn parts of maritime Asia from an expanding trade channel to an arena of conflict. The struggle over overlapping exclusive economic zones in the South China Sea has a complex chronology of events such that each of the countries concerned has facilitated the growth of military capacity and assertiveness in waters and has shown a greater willingness to stake territorial claims (Council on Foreign Relation, n.d.).

In East Asia, China is now a key strategic actor. All East Asian countries are making a strategic crucial calculation about how to counter Beijing's increasing military might, even though they cannot match the American military might. China's maritime neighbours are concerned about the rise in the quantity and calibre of Chinese ships patrolling the East and South China Seas (Yahuda, 2012). There have been alarming opinions in recent years that China's great power potential, along with its expansionist goals and more assertive foreign policy approach, could threaten regional and international security by causing a significant realignment of power in East Asia and beyond. Amidst Beijing's military upgrading in response to Washington's "pivot" or "rebalancing" to Asia, maritime and territorial conflicts over the contested South China Sea have emerged as one of the major potential hotspots among the many urgent security challenges facing Asia. The South China Sea dispute is more than just a personal grievance for China's authorities in Beijing, given the country's continuous territorial disputes with its neighbours, particularly Japan. Conversely, it plays a significant role in China's overall ascent, serving as a means of showcasing its potential as a major global force. China's threat, meantime, has prompted the majority of ASEAN members to back Washington's latest attempt to "return" to Asia and revive the United States security ties with regional allies. This approach is complicating things by making the South China Sea the



centre of great-power competition. This suggests that "the future of peace and stability in the region is directly impacted by Beijing's disputed behaviour" (Kim, 2015).

China's claim to the South China Sea has caused direct conflict with the Philippines and Vietnam. Brunei, Malaysia, and Taiwan also share claims with China, particularly regarding the right to utilise the region's potentially vast submerged oil and gas resources. The situation becomes much more difficult and extra-regional when one considers the traditional liberties enjoyed on the high seas. Washington, for instance, has a stake in preserving the freedom to travel through, overfly, and engage in military exercises in waters that Beijing claims as its own. Beyond territorial disputes among a small number of claimants, ASEAN as a whole and other nations directly or indirectly involved share a significant stake in pursuing a peaceful regional order (Kim, 2015).

Beijing initially declared the defense of its sovereignty in the South China Sea to be an unwavering "core interest" in 2010. The comments were made in the wake of Vietnam's historic naval firing drills in the South China Sea during the first half of 2011. Hanoi had accused Beijing of "carefully planned and calculated" attacks on Vietnamese oil research ships. Additionally, Manila has accused the Chinese of killing Filipino fisherman and unloading building materials in Amy D, which the Philippines claims. This has caused significant concern about China's territorial ambitions not only in the Philippines but also among most of its neighbours (Kim, 2015).

Some of the coastal states of the South China Sea have long allowed their citizens and companies to fish and source oil. Not only that, they are also allowed to carry out law enforcement operations (such as fighting illegal fishing, capturing and trading endangered species) in disputed areas under the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, under the new geopolitical environment marked by the rise of China's increasingly assertive military, it is considered an act of deliberate provocation (Baviera, 2014).

UNCLOS provides some guidance on the rights of coastal states and suggests formulas for resolving maritime overlaps, but the issue is not yet resolved. A major step towards creating new forums for the peaceful resolution of legal disputes is the filing of the Philippines' case against China's nine dotted lines before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) arbitration panel. However, given China's refusal to engage in the process, it is unclear how the outcome may impact the actual situation. There have been instances of intentional use of force for the first time since the deadly Sino-Vietnamese conflicts in the Spratly Islands in 1988. Specifically, China used water cannons against fishermen, which led to the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel. In the wake of anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam that resulted in numerous civilian deaths and widespread evacuations, as well as fresh proof of Chinese military installations being built in the Spratly Islands (Baviera, 2014).

It directly undermines Beijing's agenda to project its image as a regime committed to peaceful development. Similarly, rising South China Sea conflicts may jeopardise China's national interest in preserving regional stability, which is essential for achieving political objectives. Moreover, growing hostilities over territorial disputes may result in China losing influence over its formidable adversaries, particularly the United States. Based on the assessment, Beijing made the decision to adopt a more friendly and practical diplomatic stance towards ASEAN in accordance with its "good neighbour" policy. For instance, China's leaders promised to hold consultations with Southeast Asian nations on The Code of Conduct (COC) in order to prevent tensions from rising and to prevent the majority of the ASEAN and China cooperative relationship from becoming a potential conflict, even though they still firmly believe in the idea of resolving disputes through negotiations with the parties directly involved and persistent efforts to prevent problems from becoming internationalised. Those who are directly or indirectly involved in the disagreement are more anxious about China's maritime dispute with many Southeast Asian countries because of the potential for armed war or the possible harm to

sea shipping lines. A 2014 Pew Research poll found that most people in 8 of the 11 Asian countries polled—including some members of ASEAN—are worried that territorial disputes between China and its neighbours could spark a military conflict. The public in the Philippines (93%) and Vietnam (84%) expressed the greatest concern about this (Kim, 2015).

A lack of a joint communique was the result of Cambodia, the ASEAN chair that year and a strong supporter of China, leaving the South China Sea dispute off the table, demonstrating the divisions within the organization. Phnom Penh's "dependence on Chinese aid and investors—also Cambodia's position as a party not directly involved in territorial disputes—have led Phnom Penh to support Beijing's claims, inadvertently strengthening Beijing's position on territorial issues by dividing ASEAN openly," according to Prime Minister Hun Sen, despite Cambodia's close ties to Vietnam (Hunt, 2014).

### **ASEAN's Policies in the South China Sea Dispute**

Due to its dynamic location, Southeast Asia and the wider Asia, Pacific, and Indian Ocean region—also known as the Indo-Pacific—have interests in peace, security, stability, and prosperity. As such ASEAN has an interest in taking the lead in establishing the region's economic and security architecture (ASEAN, 2019).

The general process of peacebuilding between China and ASEAN during the past twenty years is linked to the South China Sea dispute. In order to achieve peace in Southeast Asia, efforts must be made to foster mutually beneficial trust and ongoing communication. Despite the absence of a formal organization for security and military cooperation in the Southeast Asian region, ASEAN has been praised for its ability to uphold international peace. ASEAN applies diplomacy both formally and informally and uses soft diplomacy as an opponent of war and the threat of conflict. Despite this, ASEAN responds to the issues in the South China Sea differently than the United States and the European Union due to Russia's continuous aggression in Eastern Europe. In order to minimize physical confrontation, ASEAN has been instrumental in promoting communication, the growth of shared regional interests, and the development of trust and cooperation between the parties. According to influential foreign policy formation sectors, war is deemed unlikely because the South China Sea conflict is inextricably linked to the larger Sino and ASEAN relationship (Weissmann, 2010).

ASEAN has its own challenges, namely how to avoid acts of violence between armed forces of various claimant countries which can lead to further escalation. It is in this respect that military codes of conduct and swift efforts to reduce tensions are most valuable. In addition, ASEAN member countries must also guarantee and anticipate tensions that could threaten the safety of fishermen and sustainable access to their livelihoods, as well as freedom to carry out economic, scientific and navigation activities in a peaceful manner. It is hoped that the countries concerned can revisit the basic principles and norms of international law which call for peaceful settlement of disputes. The obligation is not only limited to guarantees of freedom of navigation, but will also require bilateral and collective commitments to clarify overlaps in maritime and jurisdictional boundaries, identify zones for functional cooperation, and develop cooperative regimes primarily to address common non-traditional security challenges in the ocean together (Baviera, 2014).

ASEAN, which is politically stable, economically secure, and engaged in diplomacy, has the potential to grow into a coalition of moderate middle powers, assisting in maintaining the peace, inclusivity, and cooperation that are essential to the resilience of the region. Given its robust dialogue links with China, the United States, and other actors, this is crucial to bolster ASEAN's position in aiding in the peaceful settlement of the South China Sea conflict (Baviera, 2014).

## **China's Coercive Policies in the South China Sea Dispute**

The nation with the greatest political stake in the South China Sea is China. The building of seven artificial islands in the Spratly Islands—Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, South Johnston Reef, Gaven Reef, Hughes Reef, and Cuarteron Reef—contradicts and is inconsistent with maritime security in the South China Sea. A South China Sea airfield was also constructed by Beijing, with a runway that is roughly 3,000 metres long. When all Chinese airfields are built, their combined length will be 9,000 metres (BBC, 2015), and will more than double the length of four airfields managed by Malaysia, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. All the runways in the South China Sea, barring Vietnam, will handle fighter jets; only China will be able to accommodate the larger bombers. Beijing was the first to employ island-building technologies to turn disputed maritime features into military bases that increase the range of offensive military capabilities, even if it was not the first nation to establish an airstrip in the South China Sea (Chase & Purser, 2015). This triggered conflict and strife, especially the United States spokesman, repeatedly asking all plaintiffs to stop land reclamation and new construction and refrain from militarizing the features occupied by China (BBC, 2015). China rejects this call by stating that it is only pursuing and doing what other claimant countries have done. Beijing says that land reclamation has been stopped and China does not intend to pursue militarization in the disputed Spratly Islands. Even so, the reality is that Beijing has completed land reclamation and has built a number of civilian facilities, including two lighthouses (Dolven et al., 2015). China will also build the necessary defense facilities on several islands and reefs. Beijing said that this development had nothing to do with militarization, did not target any country, and did not preclude the enjoyment of freedom of navigation or excessive flight in various countries in the South China Sea, in accordance with international law (Stashwick, 2016).

Beijing is a major force in the Indo-Pacific area, as seen by its militarization of the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the infamous "string of pearls" in the Indian Ocean. China has created Anti-Access / Area-Denial (A2/AD) in response to the militarization of the South China Sea as part of a national defense strategy to thwart foreign invasion (Ou, n.d.), according to Island Chain Theory. China continues to violate UNCLOS, and as a result, the worldwide call for multilateralism discourse has been delayed. Beijing's approach to the South China Sea issue is currently based on a bilateralist strategy. It appears that China is not as assertive in this conflict as many observers claim when it comes to the struggle over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Beijing's statements have not changed in substance or scope, although there is still uncertainty about the significance of the nine dashed lines (Ikeshima, 2013). China has opted to use its civil maritime law enforcement agencies instead than its military troops to address perceived challenges to its long-held claims, with the exception of occasional cable cutting events.

Even so, China is not the only country with major political influence and interests in the South China Sea, Beijing has to deal with Washington which is often out of line and at odds. Both continue to compete and seek support from countries around the South China Sea. In fact, both of them indirectly asked these countries to choose China or the United States (Xie, 2016), with the lure of mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields of maritime security or trade. The competition between the two presents a big dilemma for countries in the Asia-Pacific, especially Southeast Asia Countries. Regarding maritime security in the South China Sea, China is helping to protect these waters but only for its own sake. Beijing is also still confronted with various feuds and disputes over territories in these waters with various countries, mainly Southeast Asian countries, such as Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Beijing has also recently claimed the entire South China Sea with its historical claims and maintains hostile policies in the South China Sea (Mastro, 2021).

## **The United States' Involvement in the South China Sea Dispute**

The South China Sea dispute is a protracted battle that involves China and a number of Southeast Asian nations that share a contentious island. The Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands are the two island groups under question. While Brunei, Malaysia, China, the Philippines, and Vietnam compete for the Spratly Islands, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam fight for the Paracel Islands. Beijing asserts that, given the history of the area, the two islands are wholly Chinese. In addition to having abundant natural resources, the islands were military zones that offered ruling nations access to regional commerce routes. Even though Asian nations are involved in the issues, the United States has been crucial to the story as a whole. They have openly declared their belief that the South China Sea is an international body of water and that the region's sovereignty should be determined by UNCLOS. Washington also thinks that Beijing intends to use the islands for military objectives because of the sizable runway and the transformation of coral reefs into military installations, which were viewed by the United States (US) satellite photos of the islands. The US's involvement in the South China Sea conflict solely for the sake of international cooperation, promoting peace and stability, or defending US national interests is called into serious doubt by Washington's presence in the region (Institute for Global Dialogue, n.d.).

It is also possible to argue that, as the two most powerful nations in the world, the United States and China are engaged in a power struggle in which neither country wants to be a few steps ahead of the other. For instance, Washington opposes Beijing's ownership of the islands in this context because it fears Beijing would increase its influence and authority in the area and take control of the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). For security concerns, the United States disapproves of the manmade islands that China is creating. Beijing replied by saying that Washington and Canberra were applying double standards and should not be taking sides, particularly when it comes to promoting peace and stability. According to Washington, the South China Sea is international water and can be used for flying, sailing, and other activities if allowed by international law. Such claims could cause China and the United States' dispute over the South China Sea to worsen in the future (Institute for Global Dialogue, n.d.).

The United States also has a number of policies pertaining to the South China Sea. Washington's approach revolves around the Central Ocean of international law when addressing disputes in the South China Sea. Over the last four to five years, official statements from the United States have emphasized the need for competing claimants to abide by rules set forth by international law. For example, none of the plaintiffs may use force or coercion to settle disputes over sovereignty or alter the status quo of disputed South China Sea features; there should be freedom of navigation, which includes seamless legal navigation for military, commercial, and private ships and aircraft; Coastal states have to abide by the UNCLOS, which states that "freedom of the high seas," including peaceful military operations, shall apply within their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); international law governs all maritime rights to any South China Sea waters, and those rights must originate from South China Sea land features. This requirement is not met by China's nine dotted lines. In summary, land—that is, islands and rocks—is what creates a marine zone; Washington does not weigh in on the relative merits of conflicting claims to sovereignty. It does not choose sides, nor does it support the claims of one country over another; an effective Code of Conduct (COC) that will promote a rules-based framework for managing and regulating the behavior of the countries concerned in the South China Sea is essential; Washington supports internationally recognized dispute resolution mechanisms, including those provided for in the UNCLOS agreement; Washington will respond positively to the small South China Sea littoral states that are the United States allies, officially designated "strategic partners", or "comprehensive partners", looking to enhance their ability to patrol and monitor their own territorial

waters and EEZ; and the United States Government wants to increase access for its military in areas adjacent to the South China Sea (McDevitt, 2014).

A defense treaty between the United States and the Philippines states that if China attacks a Philippine coast guard or naval vessel, downs a Philippine military aircraft, or murders or seriously wounds a member of the Philippine armed forces, the terms of the treaty will take precedence. Last but not least, Beijing is crucial to Washington's efforts to resolve other crucial problems, such as putting a stop to North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programs, combating climate change, preserving calm in the Taiwan Strait and East China Sea, and fostering trade, investment, and economic expansion. This confluence of significant challenges clarifies that the South China Sea should not be a major strategic component of the United States and China relationship overall and gives the relationship a wider context. Additionally, Washington has certain unique interests, such as the US military's presence in China's EEZ and freedom of navigation: The right to engage in non-adversarial military operations and trade, even unobstructed legal trade, are two entirely distinct components of freedom of navigation that are combined when US government representatives refer to "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Speaking at the East West Centre in Honolulu, Secretary Kerry discussed the cornerstones of the Obama administration's vision for East Asia, including convincing the region that "rebalancing" remains the US government's primary objective and the Philippines' defense treaty obligations (McDevitt, 2014).

### **The Role of AOIP Towards China's Coercive Policies in the South China Sea Dispute**

The effectiveness of ASEAN as a regional security organization has been questioned but when it comes to traditional security concerns, ASEAN is bound to be seen as nothing more than empty rhetoric (Aziz & Basir, 2022) and inefficient at resolving interstate conflicts. Given the shift in regional dominance brought about by China's rise to the position of dominating power and its aggression in the region, which unnerves governments, the South China Sea issue has assumed increasing importance. As the ASEAN Outlook on the AOIP was approved in 2019, it will serve as a forum for the group's voice in the expanding Indo-Pacific debate.

The AOIP aims to take a position on the escalating Indo-Pacific issues and provide a consistent explanation of ASEAN's strategy (Aziz & Basir, 2022). In actuality, the Indo-Pacific has not been fully integrated by ASEAN's response to these issues. The Indo-Pacific has not actually been fully internalized by ASEAN Members States (AMS), and the majority of them still have mixed feelings about the idea (Hoang, 2021). When the AOIP was first adopted, Singapore's foreign minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, was honest about its limited impact: "The Outlook will not stop strategic forces from pulling individual ASEAN member states in different directions. ASEAN unity—the pre-requisite for ASEAN centrality—will be tested. Our inherent diversity will make internal coherence difficult, but ultimately more necessary too" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, 2019). ASEAN's preference for the AOIP viewpoint over a specific strategy demonstrates both how cautious, if not weak, it has been in adapting to developments in regional security and, more importantly, how differently its member countries view the Indo-Pacific region. The problem with AOIP is that it is unable to address the region's ongoing geopolitical impact from the conflict between the United States and China. Unfortunately, the AOIP does not oversee or handle their broad national viewpoints and strategies (Aziz & Basir, 2022).

Although ASEAN regional security issues are frequently challenged, ASEAN has been able to create ASEAN-led security institutions based on the idea of "cooperative security", an inclusive institutional arrangement intended to facilitate security dialogues, confidence building, and norm creation among members with the goal of politically subduing regional

great powers and influencing their behavior. By leveraging the ASEAN Way and the region's ability to withstand the pressures caused by the geopolitical and geostrategic shift resulting from the relentless Sino-American competition, Outlook appears to be a clever way to project the ASEAN vision in the larger Indo-Pacific context. The current Outlook text needs to be fundamentally revised in order to give clearer, smarter, and deeper indications as to how ASEAN intends to reform and strengthen its process of community building and to give new momentum to existing ASEAN-led mechanisms (Sothirak et al., 2023).

There is unlikely to be a loyalty shift from the national to the supranational level, notwithstanding the economic integration that ASEAN has seen. Simões (2022) identifies three causes as to why this occurred. First, there is no supranational organization in the true sense of the word inside ASEAN. Second, any such identification would be thwarted by long-standing but dormant rivalries among ASEAN countries. The unwillingness of member states to submit even a little portion of their sovereignty to the supranational level is the third justification. ASEAN behavior and actions are weak in the South China Sea disputes that ASEAN countries have with China. This is due to a number of factors, including the ASEAN Way as well as the association's members' individualist stances and their reluctance to cede any of their sovereignty to the kind of potent regional organizations that ASEAN leads and may represent their interests in such negotiations. This led to a situation where ASEAN member states who are in conflict with China regarding the South China Sea decided to adopt the hedging strategy as their instrument to maneuver through the complexities in such issues while benefitting from the situation and protecting their territorial integrity.

## **Conclusion**

AOIP is an affirmation of ASEAN's position in its role to maintain peace, security, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. One of the security issues that is often discussed by AOIP is maritime security, therefore AOIP improves maritime cooperation. Regarding maritime security in the South China Sea, ASEAN together with AOIP seeks to reduce the ongoing conflict, especially related to the struggle for territorial sovereignty over the islands and coral reefs. ASEAN is also faced with two major powers, the United States (US) and China. Therefore, ASEAN should be neutral and impartial.

China is the country with the most political interests in the South China Sea. Many policies carried out by Beijing contradict and are not in line with maritime security in the South China Sea. Regarding maritime security in the South China Sea, China helps to protect these waters but only for its own sake and is also still faced with various disputes over the territories in these waters with various countries, such as Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Recently Beijing also claimed the entire South China Sea with its historical justification.

The US's current policies are acceptable, comparatively extensive, and appropriate given the interests engaged in Washington. Though not strictly true, this is mostly a diplomatic statement. It clearly outlines Washington's desired course of action for resolving the issue and calls for all sides to abide by international law in order to establish stability. This includes taking hard power measures to address some of the power disparities that exist between China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. In conclusion, it incorporates a deterrent component while honouring Washington's security partnership with Manila and granting US naval and aviation access around both Singapore and the Philippines.

To be more predictable in their behaviour and lessen the likelihood of military conflict, the US, ASEAN, China, and other user states must work together and intensify their efforts in creating rules-based methods to ocean management. The onus of pulling back from the edge rests primarily on China. As part of hedging measures, regional governments will

continue to fortify their current alliances and form new security partnerships; however, they must make sure that the goals of creating more inclusive, cooperative, multilateral, and effective security arrangements never waver.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is crucial in determining how ASEAN would react to China's aggressive approach in the South China Sea issue. This circumstance is complicated, influenced by a number of variables that take into account both the diversity and the unity of ASEAN. The 2019 launch of the AOIP gives ASEAN a forum to share its viewpoint in the ongoing Indo-Pacific debate, particularly in light of China's increasing influence and aggression in the region. However, there is disagreement over how well the AOIP works in managing the issues brought on by China's aggression. Although the AOIP seeks to represent a unified ASEAN position on the Indo-Pacific, problems to its implementation arise from the diversity of perceptions and interests among ASEAN member states. The unwillingness of some member states to completely adopt the AOIP's strategy highlights the difficulties in striking a balance between national interests and regional security.

In the AOIP, ASEAN nations are using hedging to navigate an uncertain equilibrium between cooperating with China and safeguarding their own interests. This approach recognizes the economic importance of maintaining connections with Beijing while also promoting regional security and stability. The significance of the AOIP resides in its potential to be used diplomatically by ASEAN nations to voice their concerns with China's aggression in the South China Sea. Although the AOIP may not totally diminish China's forceful actions or directly address the intricate territorial issues, it does give member states a forum to converse and promote peaceful conflict resolution. The AOIP also adheres to the greater ASEAN tradition of diplomatic engagement and consensus-building, which are crucial elements of hedging tactics. In addition, the AOIP continues to be a crucial tool for ASEAN to maneuver through the complicated dynamics of the South China Sea dispute and regional security concerns, in spite of the hurdles.

## **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the three ARTS' anonymous reviewers and their constructive feedback in improving the quality of the manuscript. We are also immensely grateful to Prof. Yung Yung Chang and Prof. Hurng Jyuhn Wang, the faculty members of the Asia-Pacific Regional Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Dong Hwa University for their comments on earlier versions of the draft. No potential conflict of interest was reported. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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