

## China's Maritime Strategy and Its Impact on the Security Perceptions of Southeast Asian States

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### Abstract

The study explores China's maritime strategy and its impact on the security perceptions of Southeast Asian states, drawing upon secondary data from government reports, policy papers, journal articles, and regional security analyses. Over the past two decades, China's assertive actions in the South China Sea—such as island reclamation, increased naval patrols, and the construction of military installations—have significantly altered the strategic landscape of Southeast Asia. While Beijing frames these actions as part of its sovereign rights and maritime defense, neighboring countries perceive them as coercive, destabilizing, and indicative of expansionist ambitions. The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how states like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia have responded to these developments through policy adjustments, defense cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. Findings reveal a deepening security dilemma in the region, with affected states strengthening bilateral ties with external powers such as the United States and Japan, while also expressing cautious commitment to multilateral conflict-resolution mechanisms through ASEAN. The research underscores how strategic narratives, historical grievances, and power asymmetries contribute to divergent threat perceptions and policy responses. It concludes that unless mitigated by genuine dialogue and confidence-building measures, China's maritime posture will continue to generate mistrust and fuel regional insecurity.

**Keywords:** China, maritime strategy, Southeast Asia, South China Sea, ASEAN.

### Introduction

China's growing assertiveness in maritime affairs has become one of the most consequential developments in contemporary strategic studies, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia. At the heart of this issue lies the South China Sea, a region not only rich in natural resources and vital sea lanes but also deeply contested in terms of territorial claims and maritime entitlements. China's maritime strategy, which includes the assertion of the so-called "Nine-Dash Line," island-building activities, and increased naval presence, has raised significant alarm among Southeast Asian nations (Storey, 2016; Thayer, 2020). These developments have not only challenged the legal and geopolitical status quo in the region but have also reshaped the security perceptions of smaller littoral states whose strategic autonomy and territorial integrity are at stake.

China's approach to the South China Sea can be characterized as a combination of "gray zone" tactics, military modernization, and strategic infrastructure development, all designed to assert de facto control without triggering direct military conflict (Mastro, 2019). These actions are justified by Beijing as defensive measures aimed at protecting historical rights and ensuring regional stability. However, for many Southeast Asian countries, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, such behavior is perceived as aggressive, revisionist, and indicative of China's

broader hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific (Nguyen, 2018). The divergent perceptions between China and its neighbors have contributed to a growing security dilemma, wherein defensive actions by one party are interpreted as threats by others, leading to escalating military postures and strategic realignments.

Southeast Asian states do not form a monolithic bloc in their responses to China's maritime strategy. Their reactions vary depending on geographical proximity, economic dependence on China, historical ties, and domestic political considerations. Vietnam, with a history of maritime skirmishes with China, has adopted a more confrontational stance, enhancing its naval capabilities and deepening defense cooperation with the United States and Japan (Le Thu, 2020). In contrast, countries like Cambodia and Laos, heavily reliant on Chinese investments, have largely aligned with Beijing's narratives, often diluting ASEAN's collective responses. The Philippines has fluctuated between confrontation and accommodation depending on the administration in power, most notably during the Duterte presidency, which downplayed legal victories in favor of economic concessions from China (Heydarian, 2017).

The strategic calculus of these states is further complicated by the role of external actors such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. The U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), joint military exercises, and vocal support for international law (especially the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling) have emboldened some Southeast Asian countries to resist Chinese pressure. However, this has also heightened concerns about being caught in a great-power rivalry, leading some nations to hedge by maintaining strategic ambiguity or pursuing "omni-directional" foreign policies (Acharya, 2014). ASEAN, while attempting to mediate through multilateral dialogue and the Code of Conduct negotiations with China, has struggled to maintain unity and coherence in the face of national interests and Chinese influence (Emmers, 2019).

In sum, China's maritime strategy has had a profound and uneven impact on the security perceptions of Southeast Asian states. This qualitative study, grounded in secondary data and strategic discourse analysis, seeks to unpack these perceptions, understand their origins, and evaluate their implications for regional stability and strategic alignment. By focusing on key states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, the study aims to shed light on the complex interplay of national narratives, regional diplomacy, and great-power politics in shaping Southeast Asia's maritime security environment.

## **Literature Review**

The strategic dynamics of China's maritime behavior in the South China Sea and its implications for Southeast Asia have generated a rich body of literature. Scholars have approached the subject from diverse perspectives, focusing on China's military and political objectives, Southeast Asian responses, the role of international law, and the influence of external actors. This review synthesizes the key themes in existing research and identifies gaps relevant to understanding how China's maritime strategy has influenced the security perceptions of Southeast Asian states.

Many scholars agree that China's maritime strategy in the South China Sea represents a deliberate shift from a reactive to a proactive posture. According to Mastro (2019), China employs a blend of hard and soft coercion—including military buildup, island construction, and coast guard activities—to incrementally shift facts on the ground without provoking open conflict. This "gray zone" strategy allows China to expand influence while avoiding direct

confrontation. Similarly, Holmes and Yoshihara (2011) argue that China's embrace of Mahanian principles signals a desire to project sea power and control vital sea lanes, which Beijing considers essential to its long-term strategic interests.

The literature highlights that Southeast Asian states vary in how they perceive and respond to China's maritime activities. Thayer (2020) notes that Vietnam views China's assertiveness as a direct threat to its sovereignty, prompting military modernization and diplomatic hedging. In contrast, Cambodia and Laos often downplay maritime disputes due to their economic alignment with China (Storey, 2016). The Philippines' security perception has been inconsistent, shaped by political leadership. While President Aquino III challenged China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016, President Duterte adopted a more conciliatory tone, reflecting a preference for economic gains over maritime sovereignty (Heydarian, 2017).

Several authors examine the collective ASEAN response to China's maritime strategy. Emmers (2019) points out that ASEAN's principle of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making often results in diluted statements and ineffective action. Despite attempts to negotiate a Code of Conduct with China, progress remains slow and largely symbolic. ASEAN's structural limitations prevent it from acting decisively, even as some member states face direct maritime threats. This institutional weakness has reinforced the perception that regional security must be pursued through bilateral or extra-regional partnerships.

Legal scholars emphasize the significance of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, which invalidated China's "Nine-Dash Line" claim. Beckman (2017) argues that while the ruling was a diplomatic victory for the Philippines, China's refusal to accept it has undermined the authority of international law. As a result, some Southeast Asian states have grown skeptical about the efficacy of legal instruments in constraining China's actions. This contributes to heightened insecurity and strategic uncertainty, as lawfare is seen as insufficient without parallel military or diplomatic deterrence.

Much of the literature explores the role of external actors in shaping Southeast Asian security perceptions. The U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, Japan's capacity-building assistance, and Australia's military cooperation are viewed as crucial counterbalances to Chinese influence (Snyder, 2018). However, Acharya (2014) cautions that over-reliance on external powers may create dependency or provoke escalation, further complicating regional alignments. As a result, many Southeast Asian states adopt a hedging strategy—engaging with both China and the West to maximize autonomy and avoid choosing sides.

While existing studies provide comprehensive insights into China's maritime strategy and ASEAN-state responses, there is a relative paucity of qualitative, perception-based research that focuses on how specific national elites, military planners, or coastal communities in Southeast Asia interpret Chinese actions. Most studies prioritize state-level policy over lived security experiences or internal political debates. Additionally, few works explore how historical memory and strategic culture shape these perceptions over time. The literature establishes that China's maritime strategy has profoundly influenced the strategic calculations of Southeast Asian states, though responses vary widely. Existing research has examined legal, diplomatic, and geopolitical dimensions, but more qualitative inquiry is needed to understand the subjective perceptions and

decision-making processes within Southeast Asian countries. This study seeks to contribute to this emerging area by analyzing national narratives and strategic discourse as shaped by China's maritime behavior.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand how Southeast Asian states perceive and respond to China's maritime strategy, this study considers three key international relations theories: Realism, Constructivism, and the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Each offers a unique lens for analyzing state behavior, strategic decision-making, and regional interactions in the context of maritime disputes and strategic rivalry.

#### **Realism**

Realism posits that the international system is anarchic, and states are the primary actors driven by the pursuit of power and survival. National interest, defined in terms of military and strategic capabilities, governs state behavior (Morgenthau, 1948). Realists view China's maritime strategy as a natural outgrowth of its rising power and strategic imperative to secure sea lanes, deter rivals, and dominate its periphery. Similarly, Southeast Asian states are seen as rational actors who respond to China's assertiveness by forming alliances (e.g., with the U.S.), enhancing naval capacities, or balancing power within regional arrangements. Vietnam's arms purchases and military drills with the U.S. and Japan can be interpreted as realist strategies of external balancing. While realism explains strategic rivalry and security dilemmas, it often neglects the role of identity, norms, and non-material factors such as diplomatic discourse or historical memory in shaping state perceptions.

#### **Constructivism**

Constructivism emphasizes the social construction of international relations. State behavior and interests are shaped not just by material power but also by ideas, identities, historical experiences, and intersubjective meanings (Wendt, 1992). From a constructivist perspective, Southeast Asian states' security perceptions of China are rooted in historical narratives (e.g., colonial legacies, past conflicts with China), national identity, and shared ASEAN norms such as non-interference and peaceful dispute resolution. For example, the Philippines' fluctuating policies toward China reflect changing domestic narratives and elite beliefs about sovereignty, economic necessity, and nationalism. Constructivism also explains why ASEAN states respond differently to similar threats—because their perceptions are constructed through internal discourse, not fixed material facts. Constructivism may lack predictive power and underplay the role of hard power and strategic calculations, especially in military crises or power competition.

#### **Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) was developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003). RSCT argues that security interdependence is most intense among neighboring states, creating a "regional security complex." Regional dynamics are shaped by the proximity of states, shared threats, and overlapping interests. External powers may influence but do not dominate the regional pattern. RSCT is highly applicable to Southeast Asia, where China's maritime actions affect the entire subregion. The South China Sea dispute is not an isolated bilateral issue but part of a regional security web involving multiple ASEAN states, each affected by geography, history, and regional institutions. RSCT helps explain why regional states are both bound

together and divided in their responses to China—creating a security complex that is internally driven but externally influenced (e.g., by U.S. and Japanese involvement). While RSCT captures regional dynamics well, it may be less effective in explaining intra-state variation or individual perceptions within a state (e.g., public opinion or elite divisions).

This study adopts Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its guiding theoretical framework. RSCT offers the most suitable lens for understanding the regionalized nature of security perceptions in Southeast Asia. Unlike realism, which focuses on great-power competition, or constructivism, which emphasizes ideational factors, RSCT combines structural and intersubjective elements. It captures how China's maritime strategy simultaneously provokes state-level insecurity, prompts regional diplomatic responses, and is influenced by the actions of both neighboring states and external powers. RSCT is especially relevant for a study aiming to analyze how security perceptions are shaped by regional interactions, shared vulnerabilities, and strategic interdependence.

### **China's Maritime Strategy and Its Impact on the Security Perceptions of Southeast Asian States**

Over the past two decades, China has increasingly asserted itself in maritime domains, especially in the South China Sea—one of the world's most strategic waterways. This assertiveness forms a key component of China's maritime strategy, encompassing military expansion, economic influence, legal claims, and infrastructure development. For Southeast Asian states—many of which have overlapping territorial claims or rely heavily on maritime trade routes—China's activities have become a source of both strategic concern and diplomatic calculation.

#### **China's Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea**

China's maritime strategy is multidimensional, involving both military and non-military instruments. Officially termed a “defensive” strategy, its actual posture—especially in the South China Sea—is increasingly assertive. This includes the militarization of artificial islands, frequent patrols by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), and the use of coast guard and maritime militia forces to enforce its expansive “Nine-Dash Line” claims (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2011).

#### **Southeast Asian Responses: A Spectrum of Security Perceptions**

Security perceptions among Southeast Asian states vary significantly depending on historical relations with China, economic dependency, military capability, and geographic proximity to contested waters. Vietnam views China's maritime expansion as a direct threat to its sovereignty and regional stability. Historical animosities, including past maritime clashes and border wars, intensify this perception. Vietnam has responded by modernizing its navy, expanding defense ties with the U.S., Japan, and India, and pursuing legal diplomacy to challenge China's claims (Thayer, 2020). Vietnam's assertiveness is rooted in both nationalist sentiment and its realist strategic culture. The Philippines' security perception of China has evolved with political leadership. Under President Aquino III, Manila challenged Beijing's maritime claims at the Permanent Court of Arbitration and won a landmark ruling in 2016, which China refused to accept. However, under President Duterte, Manila shifted toward a more conciliatory stance,

seeking Chinese investment while de-emphasizing the ruling (Heydarian, 2017). This dual-track approach reflects the Philippines' internal political divisions and economic considerations.

Cambodia and Laos, both non-claimant states, view China less as a threat and more as an economic partner. Their security perceptions are shaped by strong political and economic ties with Beijing, leading them to block stronger ASEAN statements against China. This has further exposed divisions within ASEAN and highlighted the limitations of a collective regional response (Storey, 2016). Although Indonesia is not a claimant in the Spratly Islands, China's Nine-Dash Line overlaps with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) near the Natuna Islands, prompting periodic tensions. Yet Indonesia has historically avoided direct confrontation, preferring diplomatic and legal routes. Malaysia, similarly, has adopted a quiet diplomacy approach, balancing economic relations with discreet military modernization.

### **ASEAN and the Limits of Regionalism**

ASEAN, despite being the central regional institution, has struggled to present a unified front in response to China's maritime actions. The requirement for consensus in ASEAN decision-making has often resulted in weak or watered-down statements. For example, joint communiqués have repeatedly avoided directly criticizing China, reflecting internal divisions driven by varying national interests (Emmers, 2019). This institutional weakness undermines ASEAN's credibility as a security community and reinforces the perception among its members that bilateral or external alignments are more reliable avenues for maritime security. The slow progress on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea exemplifies ASEAN's limited effectiveness in addressing core security concerns.

### **The Role of External Powers and Hedging Behavior**

In response to China's maritime strategy, many Southeast Asian states have intensified security cooperation with external powers—primarily the United States, Japan, and Australia. These partnerships offer capacity-building, military training, intelligence sharing, and naval presence that help smaller states deter Chinese coercion. This has led to widespread hedging behavior, wherein states seek to balance against China's power without overtly confronting it. They maintain economic engagement with China while simultaneously enhancing strategic ties with external actors. This nuanced strategy reflects the desire for autonomy and stability in an increasingly polarized environment (Kuik, 2008).

### **Theoretical Insight: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**

RSCT, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), explains how regional security interdependence shapes the actions and perceptions of neighboring states. In the case of Southeast Asia, China's maritime assertiveness has intensified the sense of shared vulnerability and strategic interconnectedness. Southeast Asia constitutes a regional security complex where the maritime behavior of one actor—China—has direct implications for the security of all. The interactions among ASEAN states, and between ASEAN and external powers, form a security web shaped by geographic proximity, interdependence, and overlapping maritime claims.

RSCT effectively captures both the diversity and interconnectivity of security perceptions in Southeast Asia. It also accommodates the role of external actors as security influencers without portraying them as dominant forces. This makes it the most suitable theoretical framework for this study.

## Conclusion

China's maritime strategy has significantly impacted how Southeast Asian states perceive their security and formulate strategic responses. While some states confront China diplomatically or militarily, others accommodate or hedge, reflecting a spectrum of perceptions shaped by geography, history, economy, and domestic politics. The lack of a unified ASEAN response and the rise of extra-regional partnerships underscore a fragmented but interdependent regional security environment. Using Regional Security Complex Theory, this study illustrates how China's actions are not interpreted in isolation but as part of a broader web of strategic calculations across Southeast Asia. Understanding these perceptions is essential to crafting sustainable regional security mechanisms and avoiding escalation in one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime zones.

## Recommendations

- i. ASEAN must move beyond consensus paralysis by developing flexible mechanisms such as "ASEAN-minus-X" or "coalitions of the willing" that allow like-minded states to act collectively on maritime security. Establishing a permanent ASEAN Maritime Crisis Response Unit with shared intelligence and rapid consultation protocols can improve its ability to respond to future maritime tensions.
- ii. Southeast Asian coastal states should invest in integrated Maritime Domain Awareness technologies—such as radar, satellite tracking, and AI-based surveillance—to monitor maritime activity and deter encroachment. Multilateral initiatives like joint patrols and information-sharing agreements (e.g., between Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines) should be expanded to cover the South China Sea.
- iii. To reduce overdependence on any single power, Southeast Asian states should deepen security ties with middle powers such as Japan, India, South Korea, and Australia. These partnerships should focus on capacity building, defense diplomacy, and infrastructure security to maintain strategic autonomy while enhancing deterrence.
- iv. ASEAN and China must finalize a legally binding and enforceable Code of Conduct that includes dispute resolution mechanisms, a ban on militarization of occupied features, and respect for the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling. Civil society and regional think tanks should also be involved to build pressure for compliance and transparency.
- v. Governments should invest in public diplomacy campaigns to build domestic awareness of maritime rights and counter disinformation. Narratives that promote regional unity, international law, and peaceful coexistence can help create a stronger internal mandate for defending maritime sovereignty without escalating conflict.

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