

ASEAN'S PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM AND THE EVOLVING NORMATIVE SECURITY STRATEGY ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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Abstract

The South China Sea dispute has been considered as one of the crucial tests for ASEAN due to factors such as member-states' weak national resilience, China's hegemonic expansion and non-traditional security issues involving economic activities and environment, making it a significant political-security agenda for the regional institution at the age of fifty. The overall purpose of this article is to explore the core assumptions regarding ASEAN principled-pragmatism and the evolving role of ASEAN normative security strategy underlying the concepts of ASEAN Way, neutrality, multilateralism and centrality relating to the South China Sea dispute. Based on the conceptual frameworks, we show that ASEAN's principled-pragmatism is imperative in determining the ten member states foreign policies underlying the expectation of 'low cost-high benefit', 'low cost-low benefit' or 'high cost-low benefit'. We further argue that the aspects of threat perception, economic dependency and national resilience are necessary not only to explain the extent of how ASEAN could reach the condition of 'win-win' in its framework, but to also help elucidate the Association's viability as a regional organisation in managing the multifaceted interests in its political-security paradigm.

Keywords: ASEAN, South China Sea, principled-pragmatism, normative security strategy, political-security

Introduction

As a regional institution, the initial role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) half a century ago could be simply understood as a platform to encourage "meaningful communications between neighbours who have minimal knowledge about each other in the thick of ultra-nationalistic security ambitions" (Makaruddin and Mohamad 2004:15). This attempt was considered a remarkable success, as evidenced through the myriad of multilateral engagements and extensive member-states cooperation underlying the crucial aspects of political-security, economy and socio-cultural archetypes. However, as the Association cemented its standing as a regional grouping in these key areas, its strategic role was once again brought into focus following the fallout of fundamental global challenges of the twenty-first century in climate change, food security, unemployment, refugees and occurrences of pandemics and epidemic diseases. At the most critical juncture, ASEAN, in particular, is currently facing perilous tests in relation to its centrality on the South China Sea dispute, which immensely determines the adjournment of the 'long-promise' towards the creation of ASEAN Political-Security Community. In this sense, the article argues that it is significant to understand the mechanisms that ASEAN utilise to strategically manage the South China Sea dispute.

On the whole, the South China Sea dispute is characterised as complex and difficult due to the zero-sum nature of the competing legal claims and its association with nationalist sentiment with the varied cast of claimants (Ba 2011:271). Specifically for ASEAN countries, the South China Sea is profoundly associated with issues regarding the rule of law, the establishment of the Code of Conduct and confronting Beijing's hegemonic ambition in the region. For this reason, the measures undertaken by ASEAN countries signify the pre-determined expectations in regards to the regional desire to achieve an effective and lasting form of win-win agreement that could satisfy all the parties' interests. However, when it comes to the conflict in South China Sea, the current regional approach is rather manifestly positional due to China's status quo as the Great Power, the low degree of regional resilience among ASEAN member states as well as the involvement of other major powers. Given the concern, the article seeks to analyse how ASEAN and its member-state deal with the conflict in South China Sea underlying the concept of principled-pragmatism.

Principled-pragmatism, hypothetically suggests that the solution underlies the principality of moral conscience and at the same time is realistic by taking account the full economic, social and political dimension in the conflict (Juncos 2017:6). In terms of foreign policy, principled-pragmatism by no means is entirely new or unique. Principled-pragmatism is one of the key features in the 2016 European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), which aspires to bridge the reality gap between the EU's conventional role underlying the democratic principles that seems to be less relevant and ineffective outside its neighbourhood. That is why the EU's principled-pragmatism suggests that it needs to develop a more flexible and low-key that are based on technical engagement, joint interests and shared ownership in some sectoral areas for a constructive policy.

For ASEAN, the term "principled-pragmatism" has never been formally addressed in its official statements, by the regional diplomats or any of the ten countries' leaders. The nearest examples that might show how ASEAN is often described as pragmatic in its approach underlying the political-security, economic and socio-cultural interests. In the context of South China Sea, the countries' responses to China's increasing assertiveness in the contested water depend on the individual state's priority. Vietnam is seen as more vocal due to its status as claimant and the myriad of physical confrontation in its claimed seas, while on the opposite end, Cambodia is considered as 'neutral' and 'under the Chinese control'. The indictment is mainly due to its frequent disagreement to the strongly worded joint-statement against Chinese militarization activities in SCS during the non-issuance of 45th AAM joint-communique and in many other regional meetings.

Here we examine what principled-pragmatism means for ASEAN by looking at the approaches of the Association and its member states in regards to the dispute in SCS. In this sense, the article proposes that the combination of "low cost-high benefit" expectation can be conserved in the dispute. For example, "low-cost" method means diplomatic engagement to manage the multidimensional interests in SCS, but at the same time, the measures are realistic to the fact that the Association is unable to fully contain the foreign powers' "high-benefit" in SCS. Our presumption is that there is a genuine expectation in the region that ASEAN by no possible means would adopt high-cost methods like military alliance or collective arbitration ruling, nor it can effectively use low-cost methods like multilateralism, to reach a win-win agreement with all claimants in SCS. It also relates to the article's deeper interest relating to the concept of ASEAN principled-pragmatism, in which it seeks to analyse the extent of member countries'

responses to the SCS dispute that are depending on the weight of its economic, social and political-security benediction.

Research Background

The approach proposes that principled-pragmatism underpin two basic commitments which are principled; "the rule of law or legal orientation towards the shared local experience that is basic and necessary to the societal knowledge and action" (Snyder and Vinjamuri 2012:434). The growing shift towards this approach can be seen through ASEAN procedural operation that is becoming a more rule-based institution through the enforcement of ASEAN Charter in 2008 as well as the establishment of the current Blueprint for the three ASEAN core pillars.

While pragmatism, as understood from the political studies accentuates the credit system of which "thoughts and actions should be readjusted accordingly just as our interaction with the environment is impending and unavoidable" (James in Kloppenberg 1996:102). It is called as being pragmatic when the "belief can be secured or even protected, in response to the interference of the world" (Went 1994:384). For ASEAN to be more pragmatic it needs to be using the means of multilateral networks to improve the bargaining chip when dealing with one another and more critically, the Great Power.

In this context, by ASEAN being principled-pragmatic, the Association is challenging the tacit presupposition of much of the critics by showing "the accurate representation of reality, rather than "what is better for us to believe" which has been the automatic and empty excuses made by the member-states when it comes to consolidating their interests (Tavits 2007:154). It is important for ASEAN to make a sharp distinction between being principled-what is contributed by ASEAN for regional security and being pragmatic- what is "decided and given" internally and externally.

These insights lead us to further reflect on ASEAN's founding commitment on national resilience in its economic and social factors to maintain the regional sovereignty, given the fact that ASEAN itself is no stranger to confrontation and wars. Therefore, as understood in ASEAN context, ASEAN Way tries to balance its normative and rule-based approaches underlying the primary objective of developing the state resilience (Ba 2012:125, Acharya 2013:69).

Regarding its relation to the principles of ASEAN Way, principled-pragmatism is a method for implementing policy and highly familiar within the realist or liberal strategists to find is a middle way for addressing foreign policy and security. In this sense, principled-pragmatism cannot be called a theory as it focuses on the process, the dynamics of internal change, rather than ultimate objective. It is also worth mentioning that principled-pragmatism is by no means the ultimate way for ASEAN to pursue its objective but rather using its limited material resources to reconcile on a more justified, meaningful interactions.

In a much practical sense, principled-pragmatism may help ASEAN to decide its foreign policy whether to balance, bandwagon or hedging in response to China and other major powers in the South China Sea, taking into account the degree of threat perception and economic prospect in each relationship. For this reason, the way ASEAN member state is being principled-pragmatic in choosing their strategies in SCS relies on its expectation in regards to the extent of 'cost' for ASEAN and the extent of 'benefit' for the great powers.

Principled-pragmatism is also realistic in the sense that it is not trying to apply a free security concept- that ASEAN could be devoid of external enemies in such a critical case like SCS. It

matches the 'common sense' of the world politics to feel insecure, because even big powers like the US still feel threatened with outside interference. Thus, this maintains that ASEAN can be principally pragmatic by nurturing a distinct way of conducting its internal and external relations underpinning an informed identity construction (Acharya 2004).

Core assumptions relating to ASEAN principled-pragmatism

In the region of Southeast Asia, there is a local understanding that state sovereignty can only be maintained by giving a particular emphasis on multilateral institution at the regional levels. In this sense, the structure of ASEAN is designed to increase the salience of norms, in order to respond to such conflict" (Alagappa 2003:77). The personification of this statement can be seen in the form of the Association's conventional practice underlying its normative security strategy which are the concepts of ASEAN Way, neutrality, multilateralism and centrality. The reason is that throughout its fifty years of operation, these are the locally accepted normative behaviours that guide the ten member states' expectation on how ASEAN can reach certain condition of 'win-win' in its political-security, economic and sociocultural framework (Acharya 1998:67).

The consequence of having such normative principles embedded in its structure creates a sense of pre-determined expectation within the countries, concerning to what extent one can signify the regional desire that is to achieve an effective and lasting form of agreement. In this context, it should be noted that by being principled pragmatic it does not mean ASEAN member-state is being wholly ignorant of what is critical to regional stability. The idea is that principled-pragmatism put forward a condition where the response to a particular problem is based on the regional moral behaviour and realistic thinking regarding each party's multidimensional interests.

There are several key determinants relating to the extent of ASEAN principled-pragmatism which are threat perception, regional resilience-ruled based focus and 'we-feeling' identity. First, in Southeast Asia, the threat perception varies depending on three broad scopes of intra-ASEAN, inter-ASEAN and the rulings elites. For some scholars, the threat perception in the region can be associated to all three scopes, depending on "whose security is threatened and the nature and gravity of the threat" (Emmerson 2009:5). For instance, there were incidents at SCS where states seek to assert or defend its resource interests as seen in the case of Phú Khánh basin between Vietnam and China and there was also the obscurity over maritime entitlement of features in SCS hinders the states' security interests such as in the case of China's objection over the Freedom of Navigation Program led by the United States.

In this particular point, it is important to identify ASEAN's unique ability to response to external threat through the systems of conflict management as pointed out by Mikio Oishi, which are the mediation regime system (MRS) and the alliance system (AS). Oishi explains mediation regime system functions to absorb tensions and shocks using the regional norms and practices of multilateral diplomatic engagement in order to ensure nonaggressive actions taken by the opposing parties, while through the alliance system, ASEAN seeks to control Beijing's involvement using balancing and deterrence against China and United States (Oishi 2017: 11), Both systems can be considered as principled pragmatic in a way that ASEAN manages not only to consolidate "the reciprocally conflicting positions of the parties but also to allow dissipation of tension underlying the constitutive functions that open the possibility of better management of the dispute" (Oishi 2016: 13-14). It is also should be noted that the ASEAN's ability to absorb and cope with shocks relating to Great Powers' involvement in SCS can be

considered as effective, considering that there are series of shocks that ASEAN had faced over the last three decades namely the 1988 Spratly Skirmish, the US's controversial exercise of Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) and the failure to issue a joint communique during the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting.

The second factor that might determine ASEAN principled-pragmatism is regional resilience and ruled-based focus. Resilience, in the straightforward term, refers to "the ability to resist sudden shocks and recover from them" (Fjader 2014:119). In the setting of regional grouping, there are three forms of society resilience that can be applied; first, "adaptation towards the maintenance of status quo, second, keeping the shock as marginal to safeguard the existing structures or policies and third, ability to renew and transform by diversifying multiple structures" (Fjader 2014: 121).

For ASEAN, it is relatively presumable that the Association is currently at first level and the second level by looking at the stable security nature of regional status quo with its members actively committing to the grouping and how ASEAN has been managing series of threats while engaging with great powers. The regional efforts towards building a more resilient community can be seen in ASEAN Political-Security Blueprint by 2025 which focuses on rules-based community.

In another perspective, ASEAN's current rapid economic transformation is not just necessary to improve the ten countries' infrastructure development but also to fuel the growing appetite of external powers' strategic political and economic interests. The history has also shown that during the Second World War, the Southeast Asia region became the theatrical concourse for the world's superpowers to fight for the golden land for natural resources like rubber and to assert political ideology and military superiority. In this context, the construction of regional resilience should accentuate states' vulnerabilities and insecurities due to the visceral issues of socio-cultural, economic and geopolitical security that will always be the factors in the intra-states inter-state political environment (Christopherson et al. 2010:5).

The third determinant factor to ASEAN's principled-pragmatism is the 'we-feelings' identity. The 'we-feelings' identity is essentially the manifestation of ASEAN's sense of belonging to one region, or notion of having shared destiny to produce a form of ownership and togetherness that lubricates the relationship between both people and the governments of ASEAN (Baba 2016:95-97). Applying Constructivism to understand the idea of 'we feelings' in ASEAN, it can be interpreted through the idea of 'mutual consciousness of identity'. Wendt explains that 'mutual consciousness of identity emphasises on the "share destiny of others, define interests with regards to other states, and possibly will develop a sense of community" (Wendt 1994: 386).

Central to this analysis is that the 'we-feelings' identity also favours the ASEAN Way of handling conflicts through the consensus-making process and underscores the regional communitarian aspects where "ideational construction to create a new state identity that enabled member-state to pursue its interest in ASEAN" on fundamental shared interests for maintenance of sovereignty and a similar vision of regionalism and regionalisation" (Acharya 2014:25). This can be seen during the post-Cold War era where some of the Southeast Asia countries shared attachment in political and social beliefs in the form of status quo, cultural commonalities and historical experience despite the odds they faced.

When looking at the concept of principled-pragmatism in ASEAN and the European Union, it gives several compelling indications in terms of how the both organisations are getting similar in their approach relating to their political-security framework. First, the EU was previously known of its conventional approach of ‘naming-and-shaming’, ‘sanctioning’ and demanding convergence on its terms in order to implement the European-wide rules over the opposing parties. There were internal severance over issues of Euro, refugees, migrants, terrorism, environment and other transnational challenges. Even worse, the EU’s approach in perpetuating the liberal international order has also unintentionally contributed to the reinforcement of the regime relating to the case of Syria, Turkey and Russia as well as had resulted in the deteriorating peace in the nearby neighbourhood, as seen in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen.

In this context, the concept of principled pragmatism that is applied in the EU’s political-security vision can be seen through its emphasis of ‘pragmatism philosophy’, of which the Union realistically uses a broader lens to connect and understand the world, and not as how it would like to see it. As explained by Tocci in ‘A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World’, the notion of principal pragmatism helps the EU to distinguish what is acceptable to the Union’s core values and principles by weighing the practical consequences of acts and a focus on local practices and dynamics. The current example is how the EU is being principled pragmatic to develop traction according to its values and interest with the other countries. For instance, in the case of South China Sea legal dispute, the European Union had been careful to comment on Beijing’s weak adherence in upholding international law despite the active Chinese militarization of South China Sea islands.

According to the statement of all 28 EU governments after the arbitration, the bloc recognised the court ruling in The Hague and the support on “committed to maintaining a legal order of the seas and oceans. Rather than using affirmative languages such as support or welcome in regards the tribunal’s decision, the EU decided to only recognise the Court’s ruling. The logical reasons for the Union’s broad, general statement on the dispute are namely due to the extensive Chinese investment in its own land, the intensified Beijing’s lobbying activity towards individual governments of EU to neutralize the bloc’s involvement in the SCS dispute as well as to maintain its neutral position and political interests with the United States and ASEAN member states. In this context, the EU is being principled by identifying the significance of international law in parallel to its longstanding values, yet is pragmatic in terms of consolidating the 28 governments’ interests and the Union’s diplomatic advantage in relation to China.

It relates to how ASEAN was criticized by the EU and the international community for being politically blind when it officially accepted Myanmar into the regional grouping in 1997 despite its human rights record. But, the role of ASEAN and its constructive engagement policy can be seen imperative in democratising the regime’s commitment to reform in its political and economic sectors, by contributing experiences and resources, and working with the people and government of Myanmar (Renshaw 2013:37).

Second, ASEAN recognition of democratic principles and rules-based community in its political-security agenda reflects the member-states’ commitment to undertake greater institutionalisation efforts so that ASEAN can retain its role as a driving force in regional dialogue and cooperation. It is because the establishment of ASEAN Charter in 2007 and its current morality-based approach underlying the legal principles such as the UNCLOS in SCS has transformed itself from a loose grouping of sovereign nation states to an intergovernmental

organisation with a legal identity. Indeed, without preparing to incorporate rules and identity in its formal framework, ASEAN will be merely based on geographic proximity.

But it also should be noted that although the Western idea of legality and institutionalism are well-acknowledged in the region, it might not be to the extent of the EU's practise of supranational authority which requires the shifting of decision-making from the national capital to a regional bureaucracy. The reason is because the particular move is highly relevant to better understand the extent of ASEAN principled-pragmatism as it strikes a balance between preserving member-states' fundamentals due to "the high sensitivity and states and private non-state actors reluctance to make hard obligations" (Deinla 2017:38). In this sense, although the operationalisation of principled-pragmatism in both groupings might be different due to core factors like institutional frameworks and capacity, the regional objectives and guiding norms, it would be safe to assume that the notion of principled-pragmatism is likely to be desirable and imperative as an instrument to guide their decision-making.

ASEAN principled-pragmatism in the South China Sea

The article would suggest that the current level of ASEAN principled-pragmatism approach in South China Sea conflict could be seen in the form of ASEAN member-state considering solutions to be in the areas that are 'low cost to them and high benefit to China'. It also focuses on the practical *modus vivendi* between ASEAN countries such as through the joint development area to reconcile the different maritime interests and prevent an overly contentious situation.

One of the most fitting examples to illustrate the general implication of ASEAN's principled-pragmatism in South China Sea dispute would be the failure to issue a joint communiqué on SCS during the 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh. A week after the incident, ASEAN member states came out with "ASEAN's Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea" as a result of the unceasing efforts of member states like Indonesia to repair the damage (Thayer 2013:78).

There are two reasons to explain this observation. First, the response reflects the real setting of ASEAN's acceptance of the regional vulnerability given its 'low cost' approach, due to the large gap of political, economic and socio-cultural integration in the Southeast Asia region (Ba 2016:50). Second, the particular disagreement gave institutional experience of 'high benefit to China', when it allowed the greed of individual states to be placed over the regional interests. It results in the marginalization of the "perceived role of ASEAN as a neutral entity to neither serve the interests of Beijing or other dominant powers (Storey 2016:135).

In this sense, what was primed as ASEAN's clashes or disunity by the Western media, should be seen as the Association's ability to be realistic in its low-cost approach because ASEAN did not force or throw out a superficial joint-statement just to satisfy the public checklist and allowing itself to stay in its long-term illusion of 'security community' (Chang 2016:341). Rather, ASEAN principled-pragmatism shines as it chose to face the short-term crisis to seek options whereby those differences can be made compatible and is based on the freedom of the will of the countries involved.

The Code of Conduct

The article would consider the Association's effort to produce the Code of Conduct of Parties (COC) in the South China Sea as a form of principled-pragmatism in a bid to defuse the tensions between ASEAN claimants and China. It is because, through this effort, ASEAN managed to assert its interest in maintaining centrality in regional security affairs and hold all the parties' commitment to negotiate realistically to provide guidelines for the future code (Thayer 2013:81). Under this logic, ASEAN cautiously holds onto its 'high benefit and low cost' approach by investing on the expected gain and not just a quick fix for short-term political settlement.

By keeping this expectation in mind, the current standard of ASEAN's principled-pragmatism is less on 'who owns what', due to the bottleneck exhaustion of using legal solution, but rather 'who does what' which is relating to the islands militarization in SCS. Under this concern, ASEAN believes this issue can be addressed only by doing what the Association does the best for fifty years, which is keeping the opponent close. In this aspect, the painstaking process of creating the Code of Conduct is not solely because ASEAN wanted it to be legally binding given the China's problematic culture of compliance, but the prime agenda of COC is to 'meaningfully' interacting and communicating with China.

The term 'meaningfully' here means to gain further information pertaining to its activity in SCS and as a collective way to remind China that ASEAN is aware of its behaviour. But the Association often choose to 'save Beijing's face' in respect to its competing status quo in the international system (Swee-Hock et al. 2005:194). Besides, ASEAN is also trying to position the member countries' source of comfort in the conflict, by focusing on territorial sovereignty, peaceful dispute settlement and a time-off in SCS militarization, or else outside interference might be more attractive for ASEAN than staying on Beijing's course. This also includes ASEAN's principled pragmatism way of managing conflict that is by taking advantage of the politics of ambiguity, which encourages parties to maneuverer around the flashpoints and subsequently allow shock deflection and tensions to be dissipated (Oishi 2017:10).

In this sense, the effort to create a Code of Conduct should be seen as realistic for ASEAN because it allows the SCS dispute to be discussed underneath an ASEAN-centric umbrella. It pulls diversity of political interests into a regional bargaining power, taking into account its small states status quo and the limit of legal primer in SCS dispute (Thayer 2013: 82). Should there be no code of conduct as proposed by ASEAN, there might be no other localised instrument, or perhaps Beijing might put forward its own version Code of Conduct in SCS, as evident in its economic approach, which might put ASEAN in a zero-sum geopolitical disadvantage (Simon 2008:278).

The discussion also explains the scholars' presumption of the possibility of ASEAN members being socialised by China, rather than the other way around. To which this article would put forth the concept of ASEAN's principled-pragmatism where member-states using the regional weight to pursue their national interests as an extension of states' vulnerabilities (Jones and Smith 2007: 61). It suggests that ASEAN's principled-pragmatism approach relating to the legal ruling in SCS might be different if ASEAN possesses a solid form of regional resilience. The constant regional belief is that the ultimate logical solution to this conflict should follow the guidelines given by UNCLOS or the tribunal ruling. Yet, it could only be done effectively if there are joint efforts by the international community to diversify the legal methods as well as to enforce the ruling outcome of UNCLOS.

ASEAN individual member-states' principled-pragmatism approach to SCS.

In studying the role of ASEAN and its principled-pragmatism approach in SCS conflict, it is highly imperative for scholars to first analyse the foreign policy for each member-state. It is because although ASEAN has gained international attention as a single regional group, the nature and durability of ASEAN security framework reveals that the Association remains essentially a product of state-centric decision making. It means that the state-centric approach embedded in ASEAN normative security appears to address the multifaceted interests of the ten individual governments, underlying factors like geopolitical position and domestic priority. All these factors should be considered to explain why ASEAN principled-pragmatism approach in the troubled water might pose a distinct or new interpretation of the South China Sea realities.

The first level of ASEAN's principled-pragmatism would expect a 'Low cost-High benefit' from the SCS conflict, of which the particular ASEAN countries pose similarities in terms of with not having any claims in the territorial dispute and enjoy a good security and economic relationship with China. The countries that might fit in this description are Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar primarily due to their high political, economic and military engagement and the close geographical location with China where these countries undertook massive projects like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. In this case, the growth of China's relative capabilities and its culture of weak law enforcement is favourable to the countries, which is why their foreign policy are often 'neutral' pertaining to SCS to mitigate all forms of risks that might arise and negatively impact their bilateral relations (Kuik 2016:505). Therefore, these countries focus on return-maximising regarding positive economic expectation and with little preparation for risk contingency in relation to China's assertiveness in SCS.

Taking Cambodia as the example, the country disagrees with Vietnam over the usage of strongly worded joint-statement pertaining the South China Sea dispute. Looking at the issue from the Cambodian shoes, it is both principled and pragmatic because first, it is a neutral entity with no expected gain from the territorial conflict. Thus, it is highly important for Cambodia to prevent any actions that can make the situation even tenser or to the extent of war. As what Prime Minister Hun Sen indicated before, "the South China Sea is not an issue between ASEAN and China" (Parameswaran, 2015). The idea here is that the SCS dispute should not complicate ASEAN-China relations as there are bounty areas of cooperation that both sides can fundamentally benefit from such as in trade, investment, education, tourism and joint efforts in fighting against non-traditional security issues.

Second, Cambodia is also using its right to have a different political view under the consensus based setting. During the recent AMM meeting for instance, Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn equates the joint-statement regarding the SCS dispute as "making a palatable ASEAN-based soup with each country would like to add their own 'ingredients' (Dara, 2017). In this context, rather than letting the broth spoil by listening to all, it is also principled pragmatic for all parties to take the middle road and take a step back. It should be noted that ASEAN member-state, including the five founding countries, has never signed up to the ASEAN's membership thinking that it would act as a dispute-settlement mechanism. All the past territorial disputes in the region were resolved through bilateral mechanisms and subsequently the International Court of Justice. In this sense, the best role that ASEAN could fulfil is to be a dispute-avoidance mechanism in the SCS dispute.

Next, the second level of being principled and pragmatism in the South China Sea conflict is the 'Low cost-Low benefit' in which these countries do not take any confrontation that requires military offence but rather cautious in addressing the dispute via public statements. Contrary to the first example, the second group usually partakes a hedging strategy in response to the China's assertiveness in the SCS by focusing on getting return-maximising in terms economic pragmatism and preparing for risk-contingency through indirect-balancing or forging defence cooperation with other countries (Kuik 2016: 507). The countries might cajole Beijing for economic assistance, but prepare the military for the worst. With this expectation, the member states are trying to minimise or lower China's hegemonic benefit in SCS dispute.

The countries that might fit in this description are either claimant or non-claimant states like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Brunei. These countries also hold strategic geopolitical interests in the South China Sea such as its freedom of navigation and natural energy, which is why the maintenance of maritime stability is more important. The article will specifically look at the example of Malaysia's principled-pragmatism approach in SCS dispute underlying the 'Low cost-Low benefit' expectation. Predominantly, there have been two dominant narratives in Putrajaya in its response to SCS dispute. The first discourse is that Malaysia has been seen as "playing it safe" through its neutral and independent posture and strategic diversification foreign policy to ensure its claim in SCS (Parameswaran 2015:6). Specifically in this view, the conflict in South China Sea is seen as an ASEAN's problem that requires diplomacy and restraint as it is not simply a matter of Malaysia's sovereignty.

The second overture involves a stronger mode of opposition through its public statement and even directly to the Chinese ambassador in response to foreign ships incursion in Malaysia's lawful water in SCS, to which the country would take legal action if its sovereignty is being threatened (Hellendorff 2016: 292). It is because there were increasing intrusions by the Chinese PLAN vessels since 2013 around James Shoal and other areas within Malaysia's EEZ. The article views the grand narratives of Malaysian foreign policy in SCS dispute as principled pragmatic in two ways. First, Malaysia makes certain that it will always favour positive economic relationship but at the same, places its national sovereignty at the top of its foreign policy. The underlying message is that Malaysia is aware that China presents more of an opportunity than a threat to its interests and it would be counter-productive to strain the deep bilateral ties simply due to the SCS dispute. Second, Malaysia took a cautious step to balance the rhetoric in SCS dispute as it is wary over internationalising the issue in other platforms than are not ASEAN as it might draw greater major power rivalry in the region (Hellendorff 2016: 293, Kuik 2013:456). It is because even without it having to move aggressively, it has a 'loud' neighbours like the Philippines and Vietnam that have been a useful buffer to project the regional dissatisfaction to Beijing.

The last example of the member-state principled-pragmatism in SCS underscores the 'High cost-Low benefit' expectation. The countries that expect high cost-low benefit from the SCS conflict would pursue a combination of direct-indirect engagement and balance towards China. The countries would position themselves as the weaker states in the power disparity setting, in the interest of defending their national interests and preserving regional stability. The operationalisation of high cost-low benefit also means that these countries might spend on soft balancing such as bringing up SCS issue in multilateral forums and hard balancing for a deterrent purpose by increasing defence spending and strengthening law enforcement to deter China's hegemonic control.

The countries that might fit in this description is Vietnam and the Philippines. What makes this group different from the previous two groups is that they have several direct encounters with China's naval force in the disputed area, they have the large overlapping claims with Beijing and the strong anti-China sentiments in their countries. They also signed a trilateral Joint Maritime Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) agreement in 2005 but failed due to the issue of sovereignty. These personal experiences hence shaped their current strategic foreign policy approach towards SCS. It should be noted that the article considers the Philippines fit in this group because of its long history of being assertive in SCS through ASEAN–multilateral platforms, the tribunal ruling and active engagement with the United States. Currently, it might temporarily halt its posture following the 'low cost-high benefit' expectation due to the ASEAN chairmanship and Duterte's hectic domestic priority.

Firstly, the Socialist country is known for its direct and indirect engagement with China and fellow ASEAN members to seek for best political settlement to solve the dispute. In this context, Vietnam established direct engagement with China through high-level visits and cooperative measures relating to maritime issues such as hot line, fishery and preventative mechanism in the sea. But at the same time, Vietnam pushes indirect engagement with other ASEAN countries to engage China in an ASEAN-based multilateral framework.

What is principled-pragmatic about this approach is that Vietnam uses both engagements on a complimentary basis to consolidate the opinions of various interest groups within China as well as the perspectives of the claimant and non-claimant ASEAN member-state relating to the contested water, for Vietnam to comprehensively assess the situation in SCS. Vietnam also practices soft balancing by engaging with the great powers through active military procurements from Russia, the United States and India (Amer 2014:33). It adopts hard balancing by expanding its defence capacity and improving law enforcement capability. While these approaches might induce the tendency to execute direct military confrontation under a tense situation, Vietnam has been cautious by justifying that the established relationship with external power as just formal diplomatic relations and the modernization of armed force to protect its long coast and large maritime zone. The idea of principled-pragmatism here is that Hanoi being logical to protect its sovereignty, considering its experiences of being threatened by China and how it often got ignored by other ASEAN member states for political support.

The extent of principled-pragmatism in ASEAN-China relations

There are some core assumptions discerning China's primary objectives in SCS. It is firstly important to acknowledge that China positions the South China Sea as a 'core interest' on its national agenda, meaning that it is considered as "non-negotiable" and on par with Taiwan and Tibet. Some scholars also assert that Beijing wishes to gain control of the SCS is due to the strategic shipping lanes and energy security (Andrews-Speed 2014:24-28). The reason is that accessible trading and fossil fuels are considered as the lifeblood of China's gigantic economy. There is an insatiable thirst for these non-renewable resources grows even more in the current years, by looking at how Beijing's economic policies mostly consist of Renminbi being thrown over the lands, the skies and the oceans across many nations where it is possible to reach.

The core examples are the "One Road One Belt" (OBOR) initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The implication is particularly significant in the SEA region, where the countries are highly in need of high-level infrastructures and foreign capital. It is one of the hefty ways that Beijing has kept all 10-member countries from merging against it despite the explicit danger of China's maritime assertiveness in SCS. In a much deeper

sense, China is also interested to setup military and commercial facilities along its sea lines of communication from West Asia to China passes through several choke points such as Malaccan Strait and Lombok Strait, known as the "String of Pearls" (Lam 2015:118). The string of Pearls is an act of containment against any military attempt by the United States and its alliance in the region. It is in parallel to the recent development that includes China's modernisation of military forces, the formation of artificial islands and increase of ports and airfields access.

Next, scholars also relate the Beijing's fundamental interests in the SCS with historical power projection. China's power projection come from the notion of 'Son of Heaven' mandate and the sense of self that sees itself as a victim of the international system due to the deep historical injury of One Hundred Years of National Humiliation as a result of foreign powers occupation. In this context, the Chinese leadership perceives South China Sea as a significant place where it can expansively project the idea of a Great, modern China, making the SCS a matter of national identity and regime security. It is also why part of China's goal in SCS is to project People's Liberation Army Navy as true blue water navy to keep the United States out of the Asia Pacific by dominating the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean (Koda 2017:4).

The extent of principled-pragmatism towards ASEAN –China relations can be seen in the way ASEAN has been dealing with China in South China Sea by using the Code of Conduct and the fact that China is taking the outcome of the framework seriously as its behaviour might be affected. In this sense, ASEAN is also using the advantage of the member-states' bilateral ties with other external powers in the political-security, economic or sociocultural aspects, which make it "hard for one great power to manipulate the Association unilaterally, given the gridlock of power" in the region (Emmers 2014:61). The idea is that despite the great power competition in SCS, the players are all linked through mutually beneficial relationships. Therefore it is principled pragmatic for ASEAN to address the issue regionally as it can minimise the pressure of Great Power and making conflict seems undesirable.

Another way ASEAN is being principled pragmatic when dealing with China is by utilising the international law to manage the maritime resource rights. Although UNCLOS cannot forcefully impose its legal verdict to the ratified countries, it is highly necessary for the claimant states in the region to justify its claim using its jurisdiction. It is because UNCLOS provides transparency regarding the conflicting claims between the claimants, which is vital to prevent a self-determined position by any of the claimants to "might makes right". In this sense, UNCLOS helps to legitimise the actions of ASEAN claimants like Vietnam and the Philippines to criticise China's brutal development in SCS via range of platforms.

Conclusion

This article has examined the central assumptions concerning ASEAN principled-pragmatism and the evolving role of ASEAN normative security strategy underlying the concepts of ASEAN Way, neutrality, multilateralism and centrality in response to the South China Sea dispute. It has discovered that the concept of principled-pragmatism helped to explain the country's foreign policies following their variegated expectations of 'low cost-high benefit', 'low cost-low benefit' or 'high cost-low benefit' relating to the international law, threat perception, economic dependency and the level of regional resilience.

The article helps to explain that despite the common criticism that ASEAN countries only put emphasis on the individual interests over regional unity in the South China Sea dispute, it is veritably an act of principled-pragmatism that calculates the weight of both normative and

material factors in determining the approach. In this sense, ASEAN principled-pragmatism sought to illuminate specific meanings of state sovereignty and regional shared norms like non-use of force and how it might be incorporated to form the strategies of balancing, hedging or bandwagon against China and other major powers. Not only did these elements are paramount to yield distinctive meanings for each member-state in the pursuance of regional stability, but also realistic to the level of power disparity in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, it is inexplicable to presume that the concept of principled-pragmatism has a direct stabilising effect to the SCS dispute. It is because as the majority of ASEAN countries turn to China for investment and consequently give 'high benefit' through the enhanced positional negotiation power, China is also capitalising the hegemonic freedom to be more assertive by militarizing the seas and threatening other claimants sovereignty in SCS. In this context, ASEAN principled-pragmatism might have worsening impact on SCS although none of the countries would want to see military conflicts in the troubled water.

At the same time, there are also positive developments relating to the operationalisation of principled-pragmatism in the South China Sea. First, despite the recurrent maritime incidents in SCS, ASEAN countries do not view each other as a threat and often focus on the bigger picture by focusing of *modus vivendi* to solve maritime issues. Second, ASEAN countries look at alternative ways based on moral rationalism through legal actions and realistically through low-cost measures to avoid provocation in SCS. One of the examples is by renaming their EEZs according to the local reference such as Indonesia's "North Natuna Sea". Correspondingly, this article suggests that by adhering the idea of principled-pragmatism, it might encourage ASEAN countries to come forth with efficient approaches in SCS. It also includes the fact ASEAN has never take sides on the merits of a certain claim, nor it is attempting to resolve the disputes. Thus, it gives flexibility for the countries to 'pick' any measures.

To this end, the article would offer several suggestions in the aspects of political, economic and sociocultural underlying the concept of ASEAN principled-pragmatism in South China Sea dispute. The concern here is to make certain that the Association will remain viable not just when dealing with external powers but most importantly, to be more significant for the ten member-countries prospective relations. First, concerning the political framework, the core problems with ASEAN current security approach are the lack of institutional leadership and limited material domain, making many nations increasingly leaning towards bigger power for economic sustenance. In this context, ASEAN can consider an 'ASEAN minus X' decision-making relating to the critical matters in SCS in cases like illegal territory trespassing. The upside point is that it would give flexible rooms for claimants to take charge of the matter while non-claimants able to opt-out, which can solve problems like victim-blaming and sweeping issues under the rug just because one particular country decides to disagree. A more concrete way for ASEAN to deal with SCS dispute would include using its diplomatic strength to open up discussion and enhance cooperation with other major regions over the issues of maritime security, territorial management and international law, which has been the centre of commitment for most countries especially when it comes to safeguarding one's sovereignty against the huge influence of major powers like China. This way, ASEAN might be able to stabilise its position in the region and to uncover new relationship that is based on rules-based security order. It is also vital to do as to lessen Beijing's control over ASEAN's relationship with external parties like the European Union, which might be cautious to cooperate with ASEAN in SCS matters due to China's dominating political and economic statecraft in the region.

Regarding the economic factor, the article put forward the core assumption that ASEAN principled-pragmatism in SCS is largely determined by the threat perception and regional resilience due to the ASEAN countries' dependencies on the major powers. In this context, it is suggested for ASEAN to form regional stratagem by establishing a specific framework to face Beijing's hegemonic economic arrangements such as through the special networking plan to lessen the financial dependency when dealing with the One Belt One Road initiative. While the framework might not diminish the substantial worth of China's economic assistance, it should be done for the ten countries to form regional mechanisms to improve the Association centrality and to prevent China's 'high benefit' from using its influence to destabilise the region. Concerning the socio-cultural aspect, ASEAN needs to push forward the sense of 'we-feelings' identity relating to the South China Sea dispute, following the focal point of the rules-based community and people-centred aspiration. It can be done by pushing through the idea of regional ownership for critical issues in cases of clashes in SCS, where all parties should be encouraged to submit to the courts of international arbitration. It is because for ASEAN to be more principled-pragmatic in addressing the contemporary security threats in SCS, the countries' participation in ASEAN should not be like what it used to be known for, such a membership in an exclusive regional elite club. The setting now should involve a greater public connection by taking approaches that give higher publicity.

These suggestions capitalise on the long-lasting narrative that the member states of ASEAN would find each other for a 'sense of comfort', only when they realise that there are critical issues in the Southeast Asia neighbourhood that might affect their national sovereignty. It should be noted that the article does not attempt to solve the maritime dispute in SCS but focusing on the significant ways to develop stronger regional resilience in the face of threatening security threats in the contested water.

Looking forward, the article believes that it is indispensable to take into account the principled-pragmatism expectation or *raison d'être* of ASEAN countries regarding the way they view and conduct their regional and international affairs pertaining the South China Sea dispute. The view should encircle the significance of ASEAN normative security strategy underlying the notions of ASEAN Way, neutrality, multilateralism and centrality and how these approaches can be enriched to advance the Association's role in managing South China Sea dispute. Further hitherto, the article underlines that the lasting prospect of "safe and peaceful times" in the South China Sea should calibrate a more tangible enforcement based on the international law and realistic measures that can scrutinise the present and speculate about the future of both traditional and non-traditional security matters in the contested waters.

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