Renewing the Multilateral Response: Building an ASEAN Coalition

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Key Questions

1. Why does the multilateral response to the South China Sea need to be renewed?
2. What are the possibilities, viability and limitations of building an 'ASEAN Coalition' on the South China Sea?
3. What are its implications for regional security?

Main Arguments

- ASEAN has **failed to adequately respond** to the South China Sea indicating age-old problems at the very heart of ASEAN decision-making. Such failures have led to **ASEAN member-states to seek unilateral/bilateral approaches** that call into question ASEAN's relevance and have wider implications for the law-based regional order that its member-states rely upon.
- An 'ASEAN Coalition' is a **problematic concept** that raises a number of contentious questions. The **limitations that exist** within ASEAN suggest an ASEAN Coalition is **neither possible nor viable** in the foreseeable future.
- Whether we try to renew a multilateral approach or build an 'ASEAN Coalition', it is important that any efforts regarding the South China Sea is takes **a comprehensive and inclusive approach** that seeks a **win-win solution rather than a zero-sum game.**

ASEAN's Multilateral Response Failures

- To demonstrate the failure of ASEAN's multilateral response, we only need to look at the lack of a joint statement following the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration.
- A joint statement was seen as critical
  - The PCA ruling was not enforceable on its own and required the good-will of nation-states
  - The rules-based regional order that the PCA's ruling upheld is critical for member-states existence.
- It should be noted that for some time ASEAN member-states had been discussing the possibility of issuing a joint statement, with experts expecting at worst a watered-down and generic output.

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- *"I don't think the real question is about whether ASEAN will be able to issue a joint statement…Rather, it is more about what it has to say"* – Prof. Huang Jing, NUS
- *"ASEAN should certainly be able to issue a joint statement...but ASEAN consensus building is likely to dilute any sharp wording or reference to China*" – Carlyle Thayer, Australian Defence Force Academy
- *"ASEAN would lose even more credibility…if it didn't make a statement, so I think it is likely"* – Alexander Neill, IISS

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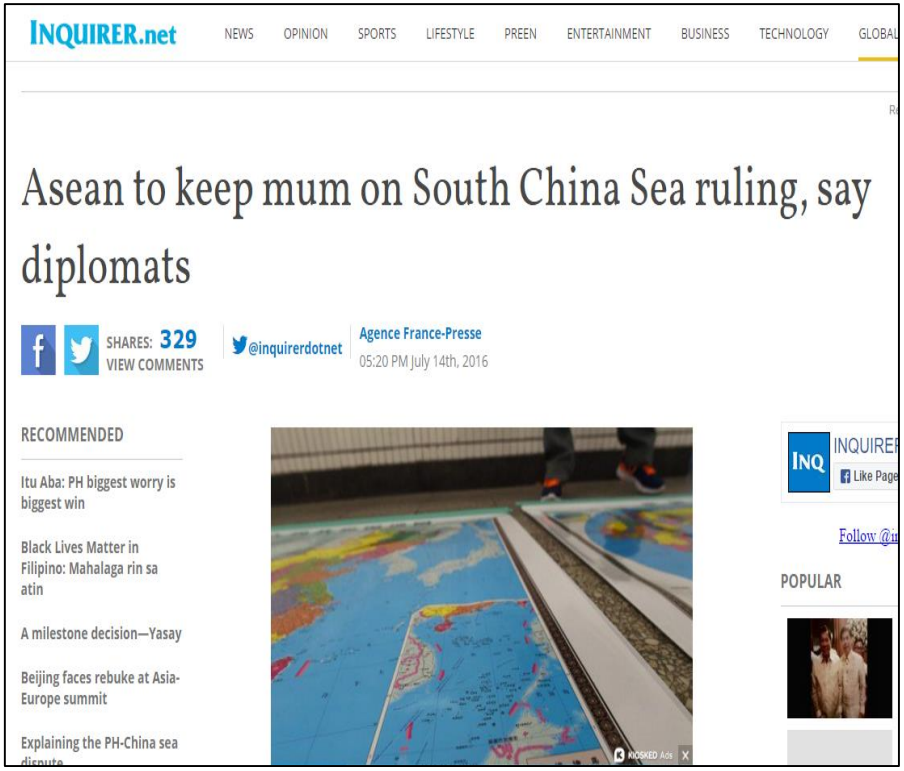
- Unfortunately, in reality the 10 member-states were unable to reach consensus to issue the joint statement.



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- Curiously, it was claimed that a draft statement had been agreed upon beforehand.
  - *"Accounts from diplomats suggest that though a draft text was prepared, no consensus was reached on whether to issue it as China had once again succeeded in splitting ASEAN"*
  - *"ASEAN officials had prepared a draft text but there was no agreement to release a joint statement"* – Southeast Asian diplomat
- Interestingly, with the draft statement itself it should be noted that it included watered-down lines such as:
  - *"The Arbitral Tribunal'sAward provides clarification on maritime entitlements under UNCLOS, which could be useful for parties to peacefully settle disputes in the South China Sea."*

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- ASEAN's failure to issue a joint statement following the PCA's ruling marks the FOURTH time since 2012 that ASEAN has been divided over the South China Sea issue.

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- The failure calls into question the relevance of ASEAN and its self-proclaimed 'centrality' in the regional security architecture.
- The failure also makes a mockery of the ASEAN Bali Concord III of 2011 which called for:
  - increasingly speak in a common voice on international matters of mutual concern at related international forums;
  - to enhance ASEAN's capacity to respond and contribute solutions to those global matters

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- As such it is unsurprising that ASEAN member-states have sought unilateral approaches to the South China Sea issue

- Cambodia: "will not join in expressing any common position on the verdict"
- Singapore: "The Philippine arbitration proceedings against China were a national decision undertaken by the Philippines without consultation with the rest of us."

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Problematic 'ASEAN Coalition'

- The term 'Coalition' implies certain points.
- Recent usage of 'coalition' in international relations cover:
  - the Coalition of the Gulf War, assembled by President George H.W. Bush during the 1st Gulf War,
  - the "Coalition of the Willing" for the war in Iraq led by the United States and its allies.
  - the United Nations coalition that intervened in the 2011 Libyan civil war against Muammar Gaddafi.

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- According to one expert, a coalition has following the four characteristics
  - Members must frame the issue that brings them together with a common interest.
  - Members' trust in each other and believe that their peers have a credible commitment to the common issue(s) and/or goal(s).
  - The coalition must have a mechanism(s) to manage differences in language, orientation, tactics, culture, ideology, etc. between and among the collective's members (especially in transnational coalitions).
  - The shared incentive to participate and, consequently, benefit.
- It is questionable whether an 'ASEAN Coalition' could fulfil these characteristics

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- Other questions raised by an 'ASEAN Coalition' include:
  - Who are the members of the coalition? Only ASEAN member-states or is it open to non-members? The US?
  - What would be the goal of an 'ASEAN Coalition'?
  - How to prevent an 'ASEAN Coalition' from being seen as an anti-China coalition?
  - What are the assets of the 'ASEAN Coalition' that can be utilized to achieve its goal?
  - How to ensure that the 'ASEAN Coalition' remains united? Changing governments? Changing national interests? Changing foreign policy priorities?

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- The limitations of an 'ASEAN Coalition' would be no different to the limitations of ASEAN as a whole.
  - Decision making process dependent on consensus-reaching
  - Lack of resources – militarily, economic, diplomatic
  - Different interests of ASEAN member-states
  - Different level of relationship with China

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- Importance of economic potential of SCS differs vastly among the different parties involved.
- Similarly, when we talk about how the economic potential will affect the member-states of ASEAN, we should remember that not all ASEAN member-states are claimants to the SCS

South China Sea estimated proved and probable reserves

Country name	Crude oil and liquids reserves (billion barrels)	Natural gas reserves (trillion cubic feet)
Brunei	1.5	15
China	1.3	15
Indonesia	0.3	55
Malaysia	5.0	80
Philippines	0.2	4
Taiwan	-	-
Thailand	-	1
Vietnam	3.0	20
Total	**11.2**	**190**

Note: Reserve totals do not include Gulf of Thailand or onshore reserves.
Reserve estimates are based on field ownership status.
Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Oil & Gas Journal, IHS, CNOOC, PFC Energy.

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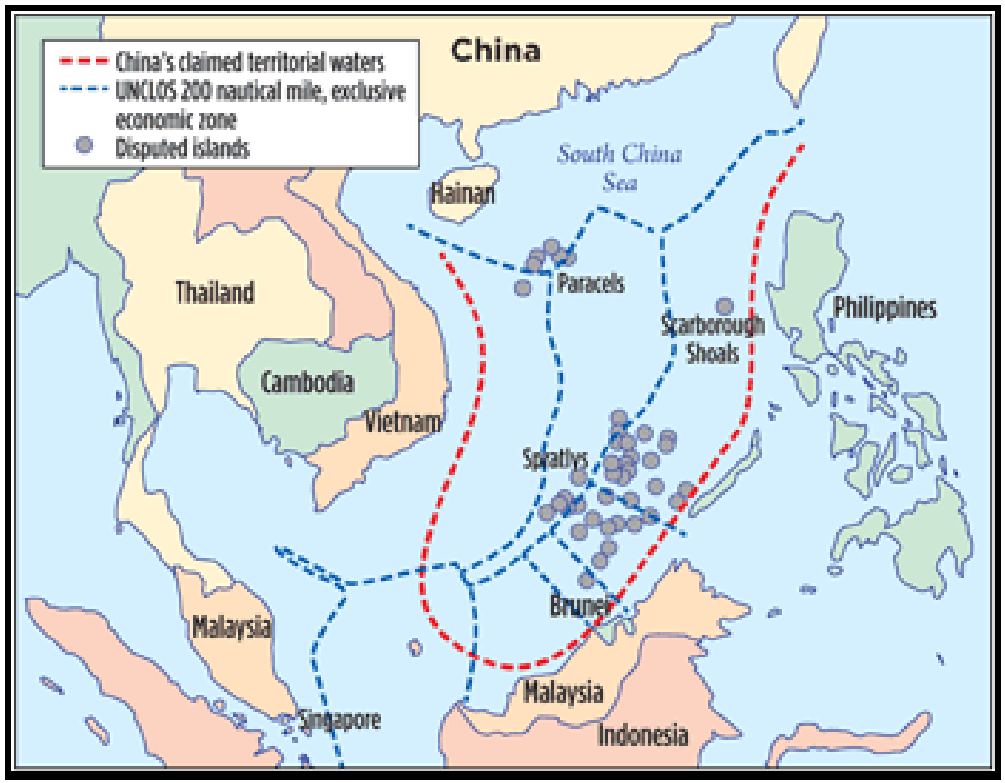
- Different parties will define the South China Sea in different ways;



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- Foreign policy priority =
  - Freedom of Navigation?
  - Rights to Exploration?
  - Rights to Fishing/Exploit the Waters?
  - Rights to Exploit Land Features/Land Reclamation?

- Definition of SCS=
  - All waters and features within Nine-Dashed Line?
  - All the islands vs certain islands within the South China Sea?
  - Natuna Island vs Natuna EEZ?

Implications for regional security

- In renewing a multilateral approach or building an 'ASEAN Coalition', it is important that any efforts regarding the South China Sea takes **a comprehensive and inclusive approach** that seeks a **win-win solution rather than a zero-sum game.**
- The PCA ruling cannot be implemented without the cooperation of all parties, including China.
- Isolating China will only serve to provoke Beijing to take a more assertive stance. Having whipped up nationalist sentiments, it will be too much of an embarrassing climbdown for China. 'Saving face'.

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Final Thoughts/Conclusion

- It is clear that there is much homework for ASEAN to do to raise its relevance in response to the South China Sea
- It must go beyond simple rhetoric and towards action. Yet, even agreeing on simple rhetoric has proven difficult for ASEAN.
- For that ASEAN must address the serious issues that exist within, not least its lack of unity, its limited capabilities, and limited resources/assets
- Only then can ASEAN seek to comprehensively and inclusively resolve the issue of the South China Sea.

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