

The silent claimant state: Brunei Darussalam in the South China Sea Region

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea Areas of the sea have proven reserves of oil and gas and are a hot spot with high potential. However, it is the South China Sea's weight as a geopolitical strain that sets it apart as a potential theater of conflict. It is a dispute between China, Indonesia, Taiwan, the Philippines (which had brought the case), Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Vietnam due to overlapping territorial claims as well as China's unilaterally drawing of the Nine-Dash Line. Brunei Darussalam is seen as a claimant state which does not make an overt claim to the Spratly Islands. Brunei Darussalam is also among the countries that have agreed on some of China's projected cooperation schemes. China is a partner that can support Brunei, and it indirectly influences its political position by doing so, thus challenging ASEAN's unified action on the South China Sea dispute.

Keywords: South China Sea; Brunei Darussalam; Nine-Dash Line; ASEAN

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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the sea has played many roles; it can be of amusement and food for humans, a way for economy spreading, and sometimes a force that both divides and unites nations. The sea as the common heritage of mankind is a legacy shared by all humanity, and every nation has the right to exploit marine resources for its use. However, it also provides the seeds for conflicts to arise if such countries can make broad sweep maritime claims with no agreed edges or rules as to what is rights and obligation of each country in respect of its maritime borders. These issues are closely tied to national security and sovereignty. Third, maritime limitation conflicts are mainly generated from adjacent or overlapping boundaries, where each belligerent party applies different principles to demarcate its maritime baselines (Tandunga 2020).

The South China Sea dispute is one of the conflicts that has gained attention from the international community. The region is coveted because of its enormous natural resources, and that is why countries are willing to fight for it. Territorial claims All South China Sea claimants have some kind of territorial claim or interest in the waters of the sea. With more than 30,000 islands and coral reefs in this region of the world, there is not only a wealth of natural resources, but also a great strategic location that many countries would use for defense. Therefore, it seems as though an increase in the state of tension is a serious danger in the South China Sea. Several countries have staked an official claim to parts of the South China Sea.

Another cause for the South China Sea row is the political and security impediments that ASEAN encounters, especially concerning the South China Sea. This contest for resource-rich, strategically significant waters predates ASEAN and even the independence of some member states. In 1947, China issued a map showing almost all of the South China Sea belonging to it on the basis of what it said were “historical rights” and “economic rights.” In 1949, the Communist Party seized power to establish the People’s Republic of China (PRC). By 1953, the PRC depicted what is now commonly referred to as the “Nine-Dash Line” in its own map capturing disputed territories against other countries and setting multilateral disputes alight, such as Scarborough Reef (China and the Philippines), Spratly Islands (China, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam), and Paracel Island (China, Taiwan, and Vietnam) (Bangun, 2021).

This fact is also echoed in the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), which has estimated that the South China Sea holds approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. The Philippines Oil Corporation Philex Petroleum Corp has also made similar allegations (Dwiguna & Syahroni, 2019). These immense stores are important not only economically but also geopolitically. These resources can provide those in control with increased energy security and economic power. The South China Sea is an important world shipping route, a Shipping Lane of Transportation and Shipping Lane of Communication, supplying 40,000 ships with essential goods in the Middle East to Asia to the Americas every day. This reality made the claimant states (China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam) and other interested countries like the US, Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, and Russia utilize the sea for transportation of goods, trade, energy supply, international navigation, aviation, and global security strategies (Muner, 2020).

However, China’s South China Sea claim is a red herring. Under UNCLOS, a state’s maritime border is 22 kilometers from the shoreline, and within that distance, it has exclusive rights overall economic activities out to 370 kilometers from the shore. In addition, China’s “Nine-Dash Line” crosses waters that are geographically very close to the Vietnam coastline, and thus drew objections from Vietnam and other ASEAN member nations (Wijaya, 2019). China’s claims stretch more than a thousand miles from the Chinese coast and defy standard interpretations of international maritime law, creating enormous diplomatic friction. Legal Indefinability and Single Party Claims by China However, the lack of clarity in law and unilateral claims from China have received criticism from around the world, adding complexities to the diplomatic aspect as well as the stakes within the region. Such dynamics have made regional diplomacy more complex as affected states try to harmonize the interests of their respective home countries with peace and stability in the region.

Given the high degree of uncertainty, the South China Sea problem is a potential time bomb that could explode at any time. Nevertheless, to prevent further escalation and aggravatory tensions, this is a time when all the contending countries need to exercise restraint: that means no reliance on military power and an accent on diplomacy. We continue to advocate negotiations and bilateral and multilateral consultations as peaceful ways to solve problems in the South China Sea. ASEAN and China have attempted to make the 2004 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea the basis for measures. Later, in June 2019, the parties discussed the process of formulating a Code of Conduct (COC) at the ASEAN–China Summit, though without reaching an agreement.

No agreement on COC Recent months have also seen a lack of consensus regarding the COC, largely due to different national interests and suspicions from some members, coupled with China's continued assertive behavior in the area. Uncertainty regarding what the law considers acceptable behavior on the high seas and differences of opinion over international maritime laws only make this debate more confusing. This dilemma reflects a dangerous state of regional insecurity and one that contains the risk of both miscalculation and conflict. In the future, it is imperative for ASEAN and China to deepen the diplomatic process, enhance confidence, and work together cooperatively to reach a win-win outcome. Thus, each state still carries out its own activities and agendas to claim the South China Sea (Muryanto Fajri, 2020).

Brunei Darussalam is a claimant and has never publicly declared sovereignty over the Spratly Islands. In the Spratly: Its claim in the Spratly's is centered on Louisa Reef, which Brunei asserts based on its location within the continental shelf of the country (Roach 2014). This is the same rationale given by Malaysia, China, and Vietnam for their respective territorial claims over some of the features in Spratlys. Despite this shared basis for justifying claims, Brunei is relatively less active than other countries such as China, which frequently shows off its assertiveness through military presence throughout the region, or Vietnam and the Philippines, which have both taken diplomatic and legal measures to solidify their positions. The comparison underscores Brunei's inclination toward a diplomatic and low-key posture in addressing the South China Sea dispute.

China has proposed cooperation initiatives to Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei. However, some countries involved in the conflict did not accept such offers. Brunei Darussalam was one of those who did, and detailed cooperation agreements have been set up since 2013. Their relationship is of special interest, especially as it continues to develop through the lingering South China Sea territorial dispute. For Brunei, this deal has both positive and negative aspects. Applying leverage on one level, it gave credit to the assertion that a stronger economic and diplomatic relationship with China could help defuse immediate tensions. Conversely, dependence on China may constrain Brunei's diplomatic maneuverability and establish an apparent association with China's regional sway for other claimant states, potentially undermining Brunei's ties to ASEAN members. In conclusion, Brunei's approach of co-operation is most appealing considering practical and economic interests, although it demands a pathway that will allow Brunei to maintain balance amidst regional conflicts.

2. METHOD

Methodology is a domain of knowledge devoted to the mechanisms by which information is gathered and accessed within a research project for purposes that satisfy scientific requirements. In this research, the researcher uses a qualitative method of research, which is an inquiry strategy that focuses on the process of getting information in understanding meaning and experiences, concepts, as well as descriptions, presented narratively. The research method is literature study (library research), by collecting secondary data related to the topic of the study and then analyzing findings carefully. As the secondary source of data, an online date which taken from Google Scholar and Scopus is used by researcher. To facilitate the research, he conducted a profound literature review with descriptive writing. The acquired data are interpreted by reading, understanding, revising and comparing multiple sources to reach conclusions of the research problem.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper particularly analyses maritime security in the South China Sea, which is considered a main stage of competition between its ASEAN member states as well as between their neighboring countries. To decode the complications of this conflict, maritime theory is used as an analytical bulwark. It is part of the broader theory of maritime, which encompasses strategic sea lanes, an understanding of the economic aspects, and specifically, the strategic role of a powerful navy. By relating these components, we can better understand why and how countries with stakes in the South China Sea act.

3.1.1 Defining Maritime Security

Maritime security is becoming one of the most important foci of international relations. In the last 10 years, important stakeholders in maritime policy, ocean governance, and international security have started to include maritime security in their mandates or reframe their work as relevant for maritime security. In 2014, the UK, EU, and African Union AU forged grand maritime strategies. NATO also established maritime security as one of its goals under the Alliance Maritime Strategy adopted in 2011. The U.S. championed this evolution when it released its National Maritime Security Policy in 2004. Maritime security was also integrated into the framework of the responsibilities of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO)'s Maritime Safety Committee (MSC), a UN agency (Bueger, 2015). Nevertheless, some skeptics claim that the implementation is not consistent across all areas. It is questionable whether traditional strategies are capable of long-term protection of non-traditional threats, including piracy and the environment has been questioned. "Beyond that, how much military presence and [diplomatic] outreach should be kept in the loop is a point of contention among some stakeholders.

Historical perspective: Maritime security is a fairly new concept, but it has distinguished itself as a key word over the last 10 years, especially with regard to the maritime community. Interpretation of maritime security Maritime security may be interpreted as a term used to describe safety at sea or as a range of policies, codes, measures, and provisions designed to secure areas within the maritime domain. In academic discussions, the phrase "maritime security" did not feature significantly in debates about the security of maritime spaces until roughly 2000. In 2002, there was a steady increase in academic citations to maritime security (Figure 1).

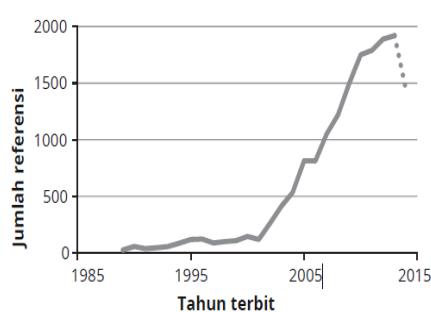


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of academic references to “maritime security” between 1989 and 2014 recorded by Google Scholar.

As can be seen in the table, references to maritime security figures have steadily risen over the years (Germond 2015). The information in Figure 1 shows a continuous age growth in academic interest, with some remarkable peaks in certain periods. This rise signifies an increased global focus on maritime security, perhaps underpinning new dynamics in the geopolitical domain or triggered by evolving maritime threats.

The reorientation of security, one that also accounts for national and international factors on the maritime dimension, will have to be nested with doctrinal revisions aimed at forming a maritime governance belief structure and framework. This is also congruent with the concept of Comprehensive Maritime Security, which takes into account all dimensions, including military, economic, and environmental aspects, while addressing problems at sea. Pursuing a maritime axis (*poros maritim*) seems reasonable as our response to the necessity of reinforcing national capacity to maintain sovereignty, primarily now that we know that sovereignty has taken on a different meaning in the context of globalization. Strategic Maritime Leadership also supports this approach, insisting on a distributed balance of power by coalitions and partners. The establishment of a maritime axis requires reorienting the defense doctrine that combines elements of the three services with other government departments and non-state actors to shape a form of maritime governance that is respected on a global level (Hidayat, 2015).

The security of the seas faces many perils and points of vulnerability in the maritime environment, transportation system, and beach landing areas. Notwithstanding all these threats and vulnerabilities, cooperation between flag states and coastal states is a powerful instrument for improving common security while fully respecting the principle of sovereignty. A prominent example of such collaboration is the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which brings several Asian countries under one umbrella to improve maritime safety in the region. Likewise, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) is a worldwide endeavor with 105 countries committed to curbing the trafficking of WMD through the world's oceans. These cases illustrate the success of international cooperation in responding to maritime threats. Cooperation is grounded in international law and observes the principle of equality of sovereign countries and freedom of navigation. Such cooperation is not restricted, but rather may be employed for interventions relating to any threat to the peace and security of the seas and territorial waters of states.

According to the different understandings of maritime security theory, it can be seen that maritime security has always been an important part of the international situation. States establish maritime security systems to protect their territorial waters and boundaries, preserve national stability, and deter foreign interference. As illustrated by China's unilaterally drawn Nine-Dash Line and the behavior of other claimant countries, tensions in the South China Sea are increasing. Brunei Darussalam, a claimant state that does not overtly raise claims against the Spratly Islands has also attracted other ASEAN members' attention. Brunei is also interested in the economic sector of China, as well as the continuation of a more neutral policy, which helps it maintain good ties with neighboring countries, hence preventing them from an outright confrontation with the US. This careful balancing act permits Brunei to cash in on Chinese investment and trade. However, this tactic makes it difficult for ASEAN to formulate a united policy on the South China Sea dispute, weakens its influence, and obstructs effective control of regional conflicts.

3.2 Causes of the South China Sea Conflict

Maritimes are also essential for the execution of all kinds of economic activities. The South China Sea is an important area for the countries around it, especially Southeast Asia. The principal countries that border the South China Sea are China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, along with Taiwan, for some readers, in a more academic context. It is the portion of the Pacific Ocean from Singapore and the Strait of Malacca to the Taiwan Strait, which spans an area of more than 3.5 million km². The South China Sea is the economic lifeline of Japan, Europe, Western Asia and India: 90 % of all oil imports to Japan, 30% of Europe's oil imports traverse it, 40% for India pass through the area. Bordered by numerous nations, the South China Sea has emerged as one of the world's busiest sea lanes (Jaya, 2015).

Its oil and gas reserves, which are presumed to be second only to those of Saudi Arabia, also put the sea among the most disputed waters because of its strategic and lucrative position in Asia-Pacific. A report by the U.S. The Energy Information Administration (2013) found that the South China Sea may hold approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, suggesting that it could be worth a lot in the decades to come. Even the United States cannot take this for granted: it

maintains its naval power to ensure that China follows international law. In addition, the US role is informed from economic and security perspectives. From an economic perspective, the United States is interested in ensuring free access to international trade routes that are heavily trafficked by global economies, and from a strategic perspective, it is interested in countering China as it extends its influence further abroad. Its navy's presence encourages freedom of navigation, which is key for global trade routes, as well as respect for international maritime rules. In the US-China trade war, America wants to decelerate Asia's swift economic meltdown of the last two decades, and the under-sea has been further forced to influence atop as a global concern (Wijaya, 2019).

Through its boundary line, the Nine-Dash Line, China unilaterally declares sovereignty over much of the South China Sea. China's claim is based on historical rights, which state that the areas within its Nine-Dash Line have always been part of China. China cites ancient maps and scripts, including those from the Ming and Qing dynasties, to back its claims that it has long maintained interaction with and governance over these waters. Yet, such a historical claim contradicts the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regime, which does not accept historical rights as grounds for territorial control (Putro, 2020).

Thus, China's assertion in the South China Sea is now a major conflict. Under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, a country's territorial sea covers 12 nautical miles (22 kilometers) from its coastlines, but it also has exclusive economic rights in areas up to 370 nautical miles (around 690 kilometers). In 1953, China publicly promulgated the officially defined Nine-Dashed Line as its national border. However, these claims impose on the territorial Waters of Vietnam, the Philippines and the Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, which is a source of dispute and conflict in the South China Sea (Sanjiwani, 2020). These disputes have been the focus of several legal and diplomatic moves in recent years. Significantly, in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague decided that China's claims were unlawful and rejected any basis for China's historic rights within the Nine-Dash Line, a finding challenged by a case brought by the Philippines. However, China refuses to accept the ruling, and diplomacy among the parties is ongoing in an effort to find a peaceful solution. See Figure 2.

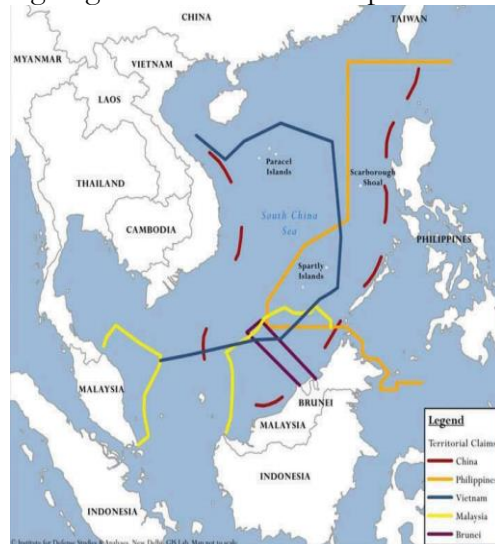


Figure 2. Map showing territorial claims and the Nine-Dash Line

Source: GIS Lab, IDSA

In total agreement of UN sanctions on China, many eastern and western countries, including Japan and the U.S.A. is calling for boycotts of such misbehavior by China. The Philippines, for example, has faced incursions into its exclusive economic zone, and Vietnam claims that its fishermen have been clashing with Chinese ones. China's aggression in the South China Sea dispute has seen other countries lose territory and economic rights, which they then want to put forward their own claims over those waters. These tensions are compounded by the region's abundant oil and gas resources and important

shipping lanes (Smith 2020). Hence, despite increasing international pressure, China has shrugged off critics as it cements its role as an emerging world superpower. China believes that these laws are only tactical tools to hold back its growing presence as a superpower in the 21st century (Wijaya, 2019).

3.3 Brunei Darussalam – China

Brunei Darussalam, which gained independence from Britain in 1984, has adopted an open economy and it did not join any political or economic blocs either in Cold War period or afterwards. This is partly due to Brunei's abundance of oil and gas. Most of the revenue in the country is generated by industry, such as oil and gas exploitation and processing. This has resulted in Brunei's economy being very heavily dependent on oil and gas (approximately 95 percent of export revenue is from crude oil and natural gas products). These resources also account for some 90 percent of the government's revenue, as well as far more than any income produced by services, construction, agriculture, or anything else. Therefore, its heavy reliance on the economy makes Brunei's foreign policy more pragmatic while striving for neutrality to create a tranquil environment for exporting oil and natural gas. Brunei is reliant on just a few commodities to support its economy, which implies that external geopolitical developments in key importing countries, including China, can adversely impact economic output. This aspect effectively creates a double-edged sword for Brunei, constraining its diplomacy to preserve economic benefits while managing regional exigencies.

However, even if the economic development of Brunei has been decelerated, based on Trading Economics (2018), it is 9th in the Asia Power Index and 33rd in the world GDP per capita, higher than Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Significantly, Brunei has nevertheless significant relative power and more than these countries in economic power and thus the same potential as Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia to resist China's claims (Putro, 2020).

Tour by country Brunei Darussalam is a silent claimant state and has not made any official claims on the Spratly Islands. Brunei's particular claim in the Spratlys is on Louisa Reef. The domestic economic recession Brunei faces is why it often takes a defensive position despite China's. The country's reaction to the South China Sea is somewhat ambivalent, particularly since China also seeks bilateral negotiations with the Brunei Sultanate to abandon its contested claims. One of China's approaches to influencing Brunei's foreign policy over the South China Sea is by presenting economic inducements for reviving the Brunei domestic economy on one hand, and at a time making the country dependent upon Chinese economic activities (Suharman, 2019).

Brunei's strategic calculus represents an intricate balancing act between economic development and territorial integrity. First, China provides strong economic incentives that will alleviate Brunei's urgent economic woes, including the necessity to find new sources of revenue in non-oil and gas sectors. On the negative side, these incentives are pursued at the expense of its strategic claims in the South China Sea. This trade-off underscores the difficult balancing act Brunei must perform to maintain economic growth while managing political and sovereign risks. This kind of delicate calculus informs Brunei's overall approach to keeping its economy humming while trying not to fan regional flames.

China-Brunei relations also entered a new stage in 2013, when both countries began visiting each other regularly, reflecting the growing ties between them. On one such visit, China suggested joint exploration and exploitation of the resources in the South China Sea, which was agreed upon by both nations. This collaboration has strengthened China-Brunei relations, which were mainly energized in terms of energy cooperation in the oil and gas industry (Sanjiwani, 2020).

The Sultanate of Brunei feels that its command to accommodate Chinese interests in the South China Sea can serve to buoy economic recovery and diversification, drive growth, and therefore enhance domestic political legitimacy. Brunei, as a small claimant state, prefers using soft power to remind (not assert) its territorial claim; it emphasizes economic cooperation based on friendship, trust, and goodwill. Indeed, Brunei has consented to the Chinese economy and development under a so-called strategic partnership, including setting aside mutual territorial concerns with other ASEAN claimants that are often put aside (Suharman, 2019).

Unlike Brunei, other ASEAN claimants, including Vietnam and the Philippines, are more assertive against China's claims over their territory. Vietnam has escalated its military power and international diplomacy to keep China's influence in check. The Philippines, which has historically depended on the United States for its defense support, has also pursued legal means to challenge China's claims, including an arbitration case it brought before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013. These different approaches by ASEAN members exemplify the variation of initiatives in the region according to their geopolitical and economic interests.

Brunei's support for China was evident in 2013 when it held the chair of ASEAN. Brunei leveraged its chairmanship to back China in the South China Sea dispute. This backing remained in place when the Philippines hosted an informal encounter among ASEAN claimants to discuss the matter, but Brunei declined to attend. This decision was a sign of Brunei's attempt to avoid taking an adversarial position against China. The Brunei stand had repeated China's indirect machinations to elicit softness in the Bruneian position even as it was waxing strong within ASEAN. Brunei has frequently held different views from its fellow ASEAN member states, and the latter have done China's bidding by instructing a number of ASEAN countries—Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia—to take more positive views on Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

This combination has limited ASEAN's capacity to forge common positions on the dispute and, in turn, played into China's hands. China is the biggest winner, but Brunei also benefits. Brunei has also allowed exploration and extraction of oil and gas in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), including waters that overlap with China's South China Sea claims, with capital investment from China and human resource contribution by the country (Sanjiwani, 2020). For example, China has launched the Brunei-Guangxi Economic Corridor project, which has greatly stimulated regional economic development. Meanwhile, Brunei is also working with Chinese investors in the development of the Pulau Muara Besar project, a petrochemical complex as part of Hengyi Industries from China, demonstrating real results from its investments in Brunei. These projects did not just increase Brunei's industrial capabilities; they also forged numerous job opportunities that have greatly contributed to its efforts at economic diversification.

4. CONCLUSION

The significance of the South China Sea as a major sea lane and its rich energy reserves have resulted in the continuation of tensions in the area. This is compounded by China's unilateral claims to territorial waters based on what it calls a "nine-dash-line" justified on historical grounds. China has insisted that the regions it claims within the nine-dash line are its inherent territory from ancient times. However, these claims are disputed by international law, notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which most disputing countries adhere. Under UNCLOS, coastal states enjoy rights over water up to 200 nautical miles (378 kilometers) off their shores in an Exclusive Economical Zone (EEZ). Many of the claims within China's nine-dash line overlap with other countries' EEZs, making these countries (China which itself lays claim to almost the entire South China Sea), Indonesia, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Vietnam) compete for disputed territories.

Indonesia, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Malaysia have all shown a stronger cause than before to respond to Beijing's rising muscle, which is reflected in Brunei's tendency to take a defensive stance against China as it falls into domestic economic recession. For example, in 2016, Indonesia ramped up its naval presence near the Natuna Islands, while the Philippines, led by then President Benigno Aquino III, took the row to The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration, which ruled against China's claims. Meanwhile, Malaysia has conducted overt military drills with the United States to assert its claims. Brunei, however, is more concerned with economic diplomacy and in 2018 hosted China's Foreign Minister who talked about greater investment and trade rather than addressing territorial claims.

As a small claimant country, Brunei Darussalam is dependent largely on soft power in putting forth its claims to territory. Soft power is a concept formulated by political scientist Joseph Nye, explaining the capability of persuasion using attraction (cultural, political, and policy), to substitute for force or

monetary powerhouse clout. Brunei, for instance, places an emphasis on enhancing economic collaboration with China based on friendship, mutual confidence and goodwill of the two countries. It is this approach that has enabled Brunei to sustain friendly diplomatic ties and exploit economic partnerships beneficial to its national interests.

The gains made by Brunei in its partnership with China are mostly reciprocal. By cooperating with Brunei, both China and Brunei have collaborated against other members of ASEAN. In return, Brunei takes advantage of Chinese cooperation to jointly petro-explore and exploit oil and gas reserves in Brunei's territorial waters that happen to overlap with its South China Sea claims. This cooperation is reflected in concrete projects such as the Brunei-Guangxi Economic Corridor, aimed at promoting trade and economic co-operation as well as the joint venture between Brunei National Petroleum Company and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) in exploration of oil and gas. Brunei also benefits from vast investments and support from China, deepening the Sino-Bruneian partnership.

But this tie has made it difficult to push Brunei Darussalam's foreign policy position on the matter in a certain direction, making it more difficult for ASEAN to forge a common agreement on how to deal with the South China Sea issue. Brunei has complicated ASEAN's unity in offering a joint response by emphasizing the importance of preserving economic links with China. Widespread variations in how assertively member states want to see China's actions in the region countered are providing challenges for producing a coherent approach. These internal rifts is one of the factors that weaken ASEAN's Diplomatic Clout, and make China take advantage of these divisions. Therefore, Brunei's position highlights the larger difficulty of balancing national interests and regional unity in ASEAN's SCS endeavor.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

EK contributed to conceptualization, research design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. She also served as the corresponding author and coordinated the revisions and communication during the review process. DPWL assisted in developing the theoretical framework, interpreting the findings, and refining the discussion section. JDA provided guidance on methodological design, supervised the overall research process, and reviewed the manuscript for academic consistency and clarity.

Disclosure statement

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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