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## **ASEAN States and the South China Sea Disputes: Going it Alone or Together?**

*Gilang Kembara*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*As Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship comes to an end, the South China Sea disputes continue to flare up between China and the claimant states in ASEAN. **GILANG KEMBARA** notes that although numerous initiatives have been introduced under Indonesia's chairmanship to push for greater cohesiveness within ASEAN, there is a risk that some claimant states may attempt to resolve the disputes in the South China Sea on their own terms.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The South China Sea dispute continues to grab headlines across the world, showing no signs of abating despite the ongoing negotiations for the planned South China Sea Code of Conduct (CoC) between ASEAN and China. At the beginning of 2023, both the Philippines and China traded blows when Manila accused Beijing of [shining a "military grade" laser](#) that temporarily blinded crewmen from the Filipino coast guard during a resupply mission at a disputed shoal in the South China Sea. On 28 August 2023, just before the 43rd ASEAN Summit took place, Beijing published a [new South China Sea map](#), which drew coordinated rejections from all the ASEAN claimant states, as well as the 2023 ASEAN chair, Indonesia.

Although the rejection shows a rare moment of unity by these claimant states, ASEAN is still somewhat disunited in its attempt to establish a united perspective on the South China Sea dispute. This lack of unity highlights ASEAN's broader relevancy on the South China Sea and growing risk of the group's marginalisation on the issue. Aside from the continued confrontations between China and the ASEAN claimant states, the

sluggish development of the Code of Conduct may lead to individual ASEAN member states taking matters into their own hands.

## **Growing Solidarity**

Expectations were high of Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, coming on the heels of Brunei and Cambodia's turns to lead the grouping in the past two years. As the largest Southeast Asian state, Indonesia has been naturally seen as the region's leader. Its political capacity and capability are expected to shine more focus on the growing list of ASEAN's woes and challenges, such as the Myanmar crisis, the US-China rivalry, and socio-economic issues, aside from the enduring South China Sea issue.

Despite the exhaustive list of issues that ASEAN is expected to address, Jakarta has acknowledged the need to focus on more holistic maritime security cooperation between ASEAN member states going beyond activities at sea. During the 25th ASEAN Political and Security Council meeting in Phnom Penh in late 2022, just before Jakarta took up the ASEAN chairmanship, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi proposed the [adoption of an ASEAN Maritime Outlook \(AMO\)](#). The AMO, which was later adopted and published in August 2023, seeks to strengthen the synergy between ASEAN's various maritime-related sectoral bodies and promote a shared understanding of the complex and evolving maritime landscape. It is also intended to serve as the main reference for maritime cooperation between ASEAN and its [external partners](#).

On the security side, the Indonesian Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia or TNI, for short) realises the growing urgency for Indonesia to streamline practical cooperation with the other ASEAN member states amid the increasing intensity of the South China Sea dispute as well as the uncertainty arising from the US-China rivalry. Accordingly, aside from participating in the 2nd ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise (AMNEX) in May 2023, Indonesia hosted the first ASEAN joint military exercise in September 2023, code-named [ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023](#) (ASEX).

Although the exercise was non-combat in nature, it was notable for having [sea and land components](#), along with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, search and rescue, medical evacuation, and anti-piracy components. The exercise was successful in bringing all 10 ASEAN members to participate, with Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore deploying their naval assets. It was also notable that this was the first ASEAN joint exercise without the involvement of external powers.

## **Seizing the Opportunity**

Despite these positive efforts in the maritime realm, ASEAN's march towards regional unity and cohesiveness continues to be hindered by the constant pressures arising from the South China Sea disputes. ASEAN's slow progress in managing the dispute with China, especially through the CoC negotiations, could lead to each ASEAN claimant state pursuing unilateral policies to uphold its sovereignty and economic rights.



Although ASEAN has scaled new heights of solidarity under Indonesia's chairmanship with the adoption of an ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) in August 2023 and the hosting of other joint military exercises, it has yet to establish a united perspective on the South China Sea issue, which may lead to ASEAN member states attempting to address the matter on their own terms. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

One of the most recent signs that claimant states could go the unilateral path emerged when it was reported that the Philippines was considering filing [a second case](#) against China at an international court or arbitral tribunal, this time over China's alleged environmental destruction in the South China Sea. The Philippines' pushback against China first took place 10 years ago, in 2013, when it took China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) after a lengthy standoff at the Scarborough Shoal in 2012. This led to the PCA ruling in favour of the Philippines in 2016, a ruling that was largely ignored by Beijing.

Meanwhile, Vietnam, another claimant state, has been advancing its bilateral partnership with various external partners to improve its capability to safeguard its claim in the South China Sea. Notably, it has pursued a higher level of partnership with the United States, marking a historic upgrade in [US-Vietnam relations](#) to a comprehensive strategic partnership. This new level of partnership is likely to boost military-to-military cooperation, in addition to opening up cooperation in multiple strategic issues, such as climate change and technology.

Vietnam has also pursued defence ties with Canada. In 2019, Vietnam inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Canada on defence cooperation and a defence cooperation plan for 2021–2023. Subsequently, regular exchanges on defence cooperation have taken place between the two countries, including [the latest one in September 2023](#).

Vietnam's willingness to upgrade its bilateral relations with Western powers, particularly the United States, is aimed at checking Beijing's maritime activities in the disputed areas. However, it is also looking to offset its relationship with its main defence partner, Russia, which is currently in decline.

## Looking Ahead

The South China Sea will remain a daunting issue that ASEAN will have to continue to deal with in the foreseeable future. The main challenge now will be to ensure that unilateral efforts to manage the South China Sea disputes, while helpful, do not unravel the progress towards ASEAN's cohesiveness and undermine the grouping's centrality in the Asia-Pacific region. We ought to remember the old adage; "if you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together."

**Gilang KEMBARA** is Research Fellow in the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

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S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)