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ASEAN AND THE RESOLUTION OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ISSUE: ASSESSING DIGITAL LIMITATIONS

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Abstract: The author focuses on a strengthening digital component in the evolution of the South China Sea issue in the context of ASEAN's evolving approach to the deepening contradictions and its policy in the digital field. On outlining ASEAN's policy on the South China Sea issue, the author proceeds to exploring the digital agenda of ASEAN's multilateral dialogue formats to finally turn to the emerging digital component of the issue and major attendant difficulties the association in encountering. The author argues that deepening global digital transformation has made the issue increasingly difficult to handle. The reason accounts for an overlap of its non-digital and digital aspects (the latter are presented by numerous undersea cables running through the South China Sea, AI tools that may generate social discontent, deposits of rare earth metals in that maritime area, and underwater data centers that raise the water temperature) with a negative multiplier effect. It complicates the issue and undermines ASEAN's policy as the coordinator of Asia-Pacific multilateral dialogue venues while discussing possibilities to make it less serious. The article offers a new perspective on the challenges that the association has to take into account regarding the South China Sea issue. As its digital dimension has emerged very recently, while its influence is growing, the research has obvious relevance, academic novelty and practical significance.

Keywords: *South China Sea, ASEAN, China, digital transformation, under-sea cables, artificial intelligence, rare earth metals, undersea data centers, implications*

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АСЕАН И УРЕГУЛИРОВАНИЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ ЮЖНО-КИТАЙСКОГО МОРЯ: ОЦЕНКА ЦИФРОВЫХ СДЕРЖИВАЮЩИХ ФАКТОРОВ

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Аннотация: В фокусе внимания автора статьи находится усиливающаяся цифровая составляющая в эволюции проблемы Южно-Китайского моря в контексте изменения подхода АСЕАН к углубляющимся противоречиям и ее политики в цифровом пространстве. Проведя обзор политики АСЕАН в отношении проблемы Южно-Китайского моря, автор переходит к рассмотрению цифровой повестки многосторонних диалоговых форматов АСЕАН и далее – к зарождающемуся цифровому компоненту проблемы и основным сопутствующим ему сложностям, с которыми сталкивается Ассоциация. Согласно позиции автора, углубляющаяся цифровая трансформация обусловила нарастающую сложность рассматриваемой проблемы. Причина состоит в наложении друг на друга ее нецифровых и цифровых аспектов (последние представляют собой подводные кабели, проходящие через Южно-Китайское море, ИИ-инструменты, способные привести к общественным беспорядкам, месторождения редкоземельных металлов в этой акватории и подводные центры хранения и обработки данных, повышающие температуру воды) с негативным эффектом мультипликатора. Это усложняет содержание рассматриваемой проблемы и затрудняет политику АСЕАН как координатора азиатско-тихоокеанских многосторонних диалоговых площадок при обсуждении возможностей снижения ее остроты. Статья предлагает новый взгляд на вызовы, которые Ассоциации приходится принимать во внимание применительно к проблеме Южно-Китайского моря. Поскольку ее цифровое измерение возникло совсем недавно, однако его влияние усиливается, исследование имеет несомненную актуальность, научную новизну и практическую значимость.

Ключевые слова: Южно-Китайское море, АСЕАН, Китай, цифровая трансформация, подводные кабели, искусственный интеллект, редкоземельные металлы, подводные центры хранения и обработки данных, последствия

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The South China Sea issue continues to generate considerable interest around the world. This multidimensional issue has become increasingly complex due to the impact of the ever-increasing digital transformation, which makes the controversies progressively complicated.

This assessment is especially relevant to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In fact, the association has invested much time and effort in resolving the issue, but without impressive progress. At present, contradictions are much more difficult to manage, as their non-digital and digital aspects overlap, while the resources at ASEAN's disposal are diminishing.

Since the non-digital and digital aspects of the issue are interdependent and reinforcing, its negotiated settlement becomes problematic. In light of this, to explore the issue through the prism of ASEAN's possibilities in the digital field is a timely and relevant exercise.

Revisiting ASEAN's Approach to the South China Sea Issue

The association has repeatedly tried to address and resolve the South China Sea contradictions, or at least to keep them manageable. Among ASEAN's early attempts to develop a unified position on the issue, ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea (1992) and Statement by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers on the Recent Development in the South China Sea (1995) are cases in point. Although the wordings of both documents were abstract rather than practically focused, they, nevertheless, demonstrated ASEAN's readiness to handle the issue collectively rather than individually. To ASEAN's disadvantage, however, the Asian financial and economic crisis made ASEAN countries focus on their internal problems and simultaneously decreased ASEAN's bargaining positions vis-à-vis China.

Predictably, the ASEAN states were unable to negotiate collectively the provisions of ASEAN's version of the Code on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea between 1999 and the early 2002. As things were, the ASEAN countries that participated in negotiations with China could not unify their positions on the key provisions on the Code on Conduct (CoC), which brought negotiations to a stalemate. The suggestion made by Malaysia that ASEAN should sign the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties as an interim document instead of the negotiated CoC allowed the association to shelve its internal contradictions, at least for some time. Notwithstanding this, the provisions of the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (2002) demonstrated ASEAN's substantial concessions to China on nearly all the crucial aspects of how the issue was to be handled.

The South China Sea issue was behind ASEAN's intention to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). In the former case, China's assertive policy in that maritime area spurred ASEAN into action, and the association hoped that the ARF would engage China in dialogue and make its policy more predictable. In the latter cases, China's policy in South-east Asia after the Asian financial and economic crisis, aggravated by pro-Chinese provisions of the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea 2002, generated ASEAN's growing concern. Additionally, the association took the view that the the ARF and the EAS would better realize their potential in case they were supplemented by a dialogue platform focusing completely upon military cooperation. Although these expectations were fulfilled only partially (the EAS expansion has brought Sino-American contradictions to its agenda and, by extension, deteriorated relations between the EAS participants, while the ADMM Plus has not contributed to making the South China Sea issue less complex), nevertheless, they played a crucial role in ASEAN's institution-building policy.

The South China Sea issue has evolved through several stages. Initially, it included only sovereignty-related differences between China, Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries. Then it shifted to the ASEAN-China dialogue, and those discussions resulted in the signing the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002. In the late 2000s, the issue embraced contradictions between China and the US, and finally, to a geopolitical competition between the PRC-led Belt and Road Initiative and the US-led Indo-Pacific Region. As a result, the burden that the association has to bear has become extremely heavy. Initially, the association had to cope with the negative implications of Vietnam's accession, as only the SRV makes claims to the Paracel islands. Later on, ASEAN had to make serious concessions to China, as the latter had been able to play on intra-ASEAN contradictions while negotiating the provisions of the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea before the Declaration 2002 was adopted. Subsequently, ASEAN had to react on the US-China controversies, mostly, over the freedom of navigation narrative and the US response to China's reclamations¹. Notably, China's construction of artificial land features was motivated by its intention to strengthen its bargaining positions in dialogue with the association on the Code on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. As the Belt and Road Initiative and the Indo-Pacific Region gained traction, ASEAN responded by issuing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific², which might progressively weaken ASEAN's position vis-à-vis its extra-regional partners.

An event of special importance for ASEAN's policy in the South China Sea took place in 2016, when the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) published its verdict³. Although its ant-Chinese stance was clear, intra-ASEAN contradictions did not take much time to appear⁴. Nevertheless, the association did not demonstrate its readiness to "think outside the box" in elaborating on a new approach to the issue, because of which problems are accumulated rather than resolved. One thing was clear, however. Not only bilateral and regional, but also global tools of influencing upon the South China Sea issue were not strong enough to keep it within manageable bounds. The issue had outgrown its previous dimension, and it was impossible to put it in the regional framework. In its turn, the association had been unable to develop effective policy tools to shape the evolution of the progressively globalizing South China Sea issue.

Realistically, the South China Sea issue has been one of the most evident failure stories of ASEAN's policy. The association made a decision to move from the post-ministerial conferences (PMC) to the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum influenced by prospects for rising instability in the South China Sea, as well as ASEAN's intention to keep the issue manageable. The second ARF session in 1995 convincingly demonstrated that these expectations were far from reality. A similar assessment is relevant to ASEAN's policy on the establishment of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, as China's policy in the South China Sea became increasingly assertive after the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties had been signed. The first session of the expanded East Asia Summit in 2011 witnessed an escalation of the US-China rivalry generated by the South China Sea issue. Both individually and collectively, these developments should have incentivized the association to amend its approach to the issue (or at least elaborate on safety mechanisms that would have allowed the issue to evolve more or less peacefully). Discouragingly, it has been and remains far from reality. To substantiate, ASEAN and China have been unable to achieve real process in moving from the Declaration 2002 to a Code on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, neither in 2017, when the association celebrated its 50th anniversary, nor in 2015 and 2025, when the ASEAN Community was established.

At this stage, the following conclusion is evident. Arguably, ASEAN's attempts to handle the issue have reached a deadlock. At present, the association is encountering new difficulties generated by ever-increasing digital transformation with profound implications for all the aspects of its policy.

Global Digital Headwinds and ASEAN's Response

Before discussing in detail major digitalization-related developments that the association has to deal with, several points are noteworthy. The digital agenda is part of ASEAN's prospective plans, which is best exemplified by its intention to establish "a leading and connected Digital and Technological Community with open and interoperable, secure and trusted digital ecosystem" by 2045⁵. Against this background, however, a gap between these plans and tools to translate them into reality is conspicuous. Additionally, the association has to take into consideration the factor of artificial intelligence (AI). The latter is an indispensable tool for promoting and supporting any trans-boundary activity, and the more so – integration projects and initiatives.

Theoretically, the digital transformation offers the association tangible economic and security benefits. According to available assessments, the value of ASEAN's digital economy can reach up to 2 trillion dollars by 2030⁶. More importantly, this growth may be inclusive, as socially vulnerable segments of Southeast Asian societies can integrate into economic and commercial activity, as well as obtain advantages of lifelong education and skill-training, healthcare, etc. Micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises of ASEAN member states can empower their activity with digital tools (mostly, by improving payments and logistics, as well as by expanding fund-raising opportunities), to the best advantage of their commercial performance. Lastly, as Southeast Asia is a seismic-prone area, digital tools can improve the prediction of natural disasters, as well as facilitate search and rescue operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities, etc.

Although it is easy to lapse into clichés about the virtues of digital transformation, practically, however, the association has serious reasons for concern. To start, intra-ASEAN digital infrastructure gaps are a big problem. For instance, the percentage of internet users per 100 persons in ASEAN countries ranged from 99.0 (Brunei) to 63.6 (Laos) in 2024⁷. No less discouragingly, ASEAN's dependence upon its extra-regional partners is increasing. Mainly, it relates to China and the United States, whose controversy over technological issues is gaining traction. While some time ago, Washington banned the purchases of China's critical technologies and the usage of China's software in the US, now it aims to control East Asian global value chains (GVC) and even reorganize them to the US best advantage⁸. Undoubtedly, even the partial realization of these plans will change the East Asian economic, business, political and security landscape radically. Lastly, rampant crimes in the digital space across the region matter strongly. Southeast

Asia has long been an area of intense criminal activity. Presently, the convergence of non-digital and digital crimes across the region produces a strong negative multiplier effect on individual ASEAN countries and the association as an international actor.

Complicating the matter, the digital transformation has strong chances to aggravate many of Southeast Asian socio-economic and political-security problems. For instance, it will impact on employment, as costs reduction and rise in productivity due to AI tools will threaten low-skilled repetitive jobs like, for instance, in line assembling operations. Additionally, inequality gaps across Southeast Asia will be widening due to the AI factor, leading to a two-speed AI economy effect⁹. More than that, global platform companies rather than those developed by the corporate sector of ASEAN member states are likely to become beneficiaries due to the concentration of market power factor. Although those developments are not something new and are entirely commensurable with the logic of globalization, ASEAN and its member states will strongly feel their impact.

Trying to cope with those processes and, ideally, manage and control them, the association explores three interconnected directions. First, it has launched projects and initiatives implemented exclusively in the digital field, the most recent being ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030 (2026) and Hanoi Digital Declaration (2026). Simultaneously, the association equips its non-digital projects and initiatives with digital tools, which is best exemplified by ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) as its part. In the latter regard, cases in point are ATIGA Form D that enables exporters to use ATIGA Certificate of Origin (CO) online, and ATIGA electronic phytosanitary certificate – e-Phyto. Lastly, ASEAN develops cooperation, both between its member states and with its external partners, in the science, technology and innovation (STI) field. Relevant examples include ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Science, Technology and Innovation (AMMSTI), ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation (COSTI), the ASEAN Science, Technology and Innovation Week, the ASEAN Digital Transformation Award, etc. Apart from it, action plans on science, technology and innovation are upgraded regularly and are synergized with ASEAN's integration policy. Collectively, these directions aim to contribute to raising ASEAN's digital competitiveness or, at least, meet the challenges of the ever-expanding digital transformation.

In reality, however, ASEAN's problems are in abundance. Revealingly, ASEAN cannot integrate the AI agenda into its multilateral projects and initiatives. Relevant documents adopted by the association to date – ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics (2024), Expanded ASEAN

Guide on AI Governance and Ethics – Generative AI (2025) and ASEAN Responsible AI Roadmap (2025-2030) (2025) – are based on the principle of consensus. No less discouragingly, the corporate sector of ASEAN countries cannot contribute substantially to its digital competitiveness. For instance, the ASEAN Business Advisory Council, despite implementing selected initiatives like Wiki Entrepreneur, ASEAN QR Code and Marketplace Landing Platform, has not contributed to qualitative raise of the digital participation of the corporate sector, mostly MSME, in ASEAN countries. In its turn, the grass-root cooperation in these countries is encountering setbacks, as, for instance, startups cannot enter foreign markets and expand their trans-boundary activity in the digital field due to a patchwork of data localization practices across the region. Finally, East Timor’s accession to ASEAN presents it with an additional problem, as the country lacks basic digital assets (like infrastructure, effective regulation, competences, etc.) and cannot successfully integrate into ASEAN-led formats. Both individually and collectively, these factors undermine ASEAN’s successful policy in the digital field.

The positions of ASEAN countries in international digital rankings hardly give reasons for optimism. Take, for instance, gaps between ASEAN countries from the perspective of overall terms and future readiness, presented by IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking (published by the IMD Business School in Switzerland)¹⁰. The same assessment is substantiated by the data presented by Global Innovation Index 2025 (published by World Intellectual Property Organization) across criteria like Institutions, Human Capital and Research, Infrastructure, Knowledge and Technology Outputs, etc.¹¹ Instrumentally, these gaps are very difficult to narrow, which further decreases ASEAN’s competitiveness.

As evidenced by the afore-discussed developments, the digital transformation presents the association with serious challenges. If so, it is expedient to look at how the digital transformation affects major security threats the association has to deal with. Among the latter, the South China Sea issue is a case in point.

A Digital Impact on the South China Sea Issue: Tasks ahead for ASEAN

Currently, the South China Sea issue is undergoing a profound transformation, as its digital dimension is visibly increasing in significance. Based on the evidence thus far, several points warrant consideration.

First, the South China Sea is a locus of underwater cables that connect Southeast Asia with other regions, within and beyond the Asia-Pacific

territorial domain. In light of this, apart from progressing politicization of the regional milieu, several fundamental questions appear. Do ASEAN member states just provide extra-regional actors, including China and the United States, with space for their internet connectivity facilities? Is the association an international actor that can contribute to creating a digital governance regime in Southeast Asia since undersea cables need timely maintenance and repairing? What will China prioritize while negotiating with ASEAN on a Code on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and to what extent will the association be receptive to these expectations? Simultaneously, the financial side of things matters all the stronger, as AI drives increasing demand for ultra-fast undersea cables, and the global spending on new undersea digital connectivity facilities is expected to account for 13 billion US dollars between 2025 and 2027. With these factors in view, the interest displayed by top US tech companies, including Meta, Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, is not surprising¹².

In its turn, China aims to build a “Great Underwater Wall” and control over 60% of the global subsea cable market¹³. Importantly, an actor that controls data traffic can not only intercept and monitor it, but also amend it in a way both data senders and data receivers will be unaware of this interference. In this context, progressing politicization of digital issues, as Southeast Asia is between the Chinese and the American digital ecosystems, deserves mentioning again.

Second, AI tools influence upon the perception of the issue all the stronger. Deepfake videos, AI-generated audios with voices of top politicians, and other manipulative practices have become widespread. As a result, public perceptions are prone to manipulations. This is exemplified by a rising public outcry in the Philippines generated by manipulations with AI tools while describing developments relating to the South China Sea dispute¹⁴. Since many people are not critical about information they consume, and fact-checking is not common, AI tools are used for generating public discontent, mobilizing people to disobey authorities and, by extension, complicating relations between the participants of the dispute.

Third, the factor of rare earth metal (REM) deposits in the South China Sea deserves mentioning. Rare earth metals are indispensable for technologically advanced production in the civil and the military sectors (like, for instance, in producing batteries, semiconductors, sensor, radar, and laser systems, etc.) According to available assessments, China “controls 60% of the extraction of REMs and 90% of their processing”. More to the point, the PRC is “the dominant supplier of REMs to the global market”¹⁵. Since recently, China has paid increasing attention to the deposits of rare earth metals in the

South China Sea due to the proximity of their extraction. It its turn, since ASEAN positions itself as a global manufacturing hub, including in the production of electric vehicles, the corporate sector of its member states participates in the REM extraction and processing. These developments contribute to the complexity of the South China Sea issue.

Fourth, the factor of underwater data centers rises to prominence. As the digital transformation progresses, demand for data centers becomes increasingly urgent. The maintenance of data centers includes cooling, which is a problem for tropical countries. As a result, attempts to build underwater data centers are a common occurrence. China's commercial underwater data center developed by Beijing Highlander Digital Technology Co., Ltd near Hainan Island is a case in point. Chinese tech giants like Tencent, Alibaba, JD.com, and Pinduoduo express interest in using that facility¹⁶. Presumably, locating data centers in the South China Sea may become a routine practice. The implications for the environment will be disastrous, as waste heat will go into the sea, and the temperature of large masses of water will progressively rise. As a result, the thermal burden to the South China Sea and, by extension, on the world ocean will increase exponentially.

The afore-discussed factors complicate the issue significantly. At this juncture, a shift from the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea to a more obliging Code on Conduct does not seem realistic, at least, in a short-term perspective. For ASEAN, this is a disturbing scenario, since ASEAN's prospective plans, including those associated with the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2045, are questioned.

As demonstrated by the developments presented above, the South China Sea issue is influenced upon by miscellaneous digital factors that overlap with a negative multiplier effect. Since the digital transformation has become irreversible, the impact that these factors exert on the issue will constantly be increasing, which will make the contradictions extraordinarily difficult to handle.

Conclusion

The analysis of the nascent digital dimension of the South China Sea issue seen through the prism of ASEAN's instrumental possibilities in the digital field reveals several broad assessments.

Discouragingly, the association has solidified its subordinate position vis-à-vis China regarding the South China Sea issue. Consequently, prospects for resolving it on terms that would differ from those outlined in the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea 2002 do not appear realistic.

More regrettably, ASEAN cannot make ever-increasing digital transformation, which has become an irreversible process, play for its interests. Although the association makes determined efforts to catch the digital winds in its sails, in reality, it does not possess sufficient resources to make this process manageable to the best advantage of ASEAN as an international actor and its member states. In these circumstances, ASEAN will probably follow the process of resolving the issue rather than shape it.

The South China Sea issue becomes increasingly polarized and, by extension, difficult to handle. An overlap of its non-digital and digital components makes prospects for its resolution illusory.

In sum, the South China Sea issue is encountering influence from multiple directions, which adds to its complexity and unpredictability. At the same time, however, the spectrum of tools at ASEAN's disposal to shape the issue according to its preferences and prospective plans seems to be narrowing. In these circumstances, expectations about ASEAN's ability to contribute substantially to a decrease of contradictions between the parties with stakes in that maritime area must be kept low.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

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