BALANCING MARITIME SECURITY AND SOVEREIGNTY CLAIMS: THE INTERPLAY OF LAW AND MEDIA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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Abstract

The South China Sea (SCS) is a strategic area of conflict where sovereignty, security and, strategic stories intertwine to make the region insecure. This paper aims at analyzing the roles that law, media, and security play in the SCS disputes dynamics. Thus, although the enforcement is governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it remains rather week: for instance, China rejected the 2016 arbitration which declared its nine-dash line unlawful. State-controlled and digital media are weaponized to promote legal stories and propaganda alongside disinformation in a way that shapes security perceptions. On the other hand, factors like militarization, poaching and degradation of the environment act as a source of conflict therefore escalating the conflict and showing that there is a need to engage in conflict resolution. This paper analyses the reaction of both regional and global actors, including ASEAN, the US, and China, as well as assesses the outcomes of the existing frameworks and programs. The study underscores the role of media in constructing and reinforcing sovereignty claims, shaping public opinion, and influencing policymaking in navigating the disputes of SCS. Based on the analysis, policy suggestions have been made such as building ASEAN's capability, increasing the implementation of UNCLOS, promoting security cooperation, and combating fake news. This paper demonstrates how legal, media, and security approaches can be combined to respond to the multifaceted nature of the SCS and develop a sustainable system for creating a rules-based order at sea. The results, therefore, corroborate the need for regional integration and creativity in the management of the South's conflicts.

Keywords: *South China Sea, Maritime Security, International Law, Media, Lawfare*

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Introduction

The South China sea or SCS is widely known to be the world most contentious water body and is in the centre of legal strife, power struggle and geopolitical straits. Increasing its strategic value is this region's abundance in natural resources, the international trade sea lane of more than $3 trillion every year, and geopolitical conflicts that involve historical, political power relations, and legal aspects (Bernard et al., 2024; Doan, 2024). Well beyond its geographic value, the SCS is the place in which norms of international law and modalities of communication foretell texts and images that structurally condition the regional and global security order. However, the main underlying issue of the SCS disputes involves freedom of sovereignty claims and claimant's naval security needs. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia claim the overlapping EEZ rights on account of different legal regimes collectively supported by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (2024; Additional Proofs, 2022). On the other hand, outside actors such as the United States with its notion of preserving rule of law seeks to flex muscle through the freedom of navigation operations. Such demands expose not only legal and spatial contentiousness but also Calibration of Communication and Media Tactics in International Relations (Proksch, 2024) and the manifestation of Imagining the Nation: Media Strategisation in a Decolonising World (Simões, 2022).

Disputes in the SCS are very much driven by 'lawfare' in which legal systems are used as instruments of controls and power. The ruling in favour of the Philippines in arbitration in 2016 that declared China's nine-dash line invalid is a perfect example of how international law and geopolitics work. However, because the ruling's enforcement is thin, it raises questions as to whether states can sustain a rules-based order amid great power conflict (Seo, 2024; Doan, 2024). Such incidents underperform the rising interest in the complex nature of law, media, and security issues in contested territories. Just as important is the way in which communication constructs the SCS narrative. Information and diplomatic discourses work well for states to gain authorization for their conduct and demonize opponents. For example, China uses state media to attempt to say that they are the rightful owners of the lands while America uses strategic framing to say that they are there to maintain peace in the region (Proksch, 2024; Bernard et al., 2024).

Such narratives do not solely shape the common perception of a conflict but also help in decision making as a communal procedure, which makes communication in modern maritime disputes inevitable.

The SCS is also a miniature of other global issues of security such as militarization, fishing in the international waters and environmental pollution among others. China's creation of artificial islands, and militarization of such structures arises tension in this region thus exerting pressure on small nations and regional bodies such as ASEAN to collaborate but at the same time resist (Simões, 2022; Proksch, 2024). This compounded with the fact that the region is occupied by major global powers making the search for a solution to the conflict less likely to be peaceful (Niazi, 2024).

This article aims at drawing out the interconnection between law, communication and maritime security in the South China Sea. Through analyzing the legal regulation of the area, the management of the communication activity, and the aspects of the security connected with the territorial disputes, it is planned to present one of the biggest and most important playgrounds of the modern geopolitics. This approach not only reveals the processes that face sovereignty claims management but also discusses a way to find a reasonable compromise between legal standards, strategies, and the experiences of maritime safety.

This research draws on lawfare, media framing theory, and securitization theory. Lawfare provides an explanation on how states strategically operationalize sovereignty through the use of legal instruments. Framing theory offers an explanation on the construction of narratives by different actors to justify their claims, whereas securitization theory explains how states portray maritime disputes in the context of security issues as those that threaten their very existence.

This study is qualitative and relies on primary documents such as legal decisions, policies, and media files. Secondary sources comprised scholarly publications and commentaries on issues of maritime security, international law, and the media, including its portrayal. An analysis of the content of the media from China, the United States, and Southeast Asia was done to find the differences in media framing. The study applies discourse analysis on the legal documents and security statements of ASEAN, the United States, and China as the most relevant actors.

Sovereignty Claims and Legal Frameworks

South China Sea Disputes consist of territorial sovereignty issues that threaten the international law of the sea regimes of territories over the seas. These claims are not separate from history, geopolitics, and this part refers to the use of international law with a focus on UNCLOS. This section attempts to present an understanding of sovereignty claims of power stakeholders, the legal grounds of the conflicts, and the difficulties arising from the differences in the application and applicability of international law.Ownership and control of the SCS are highly based on historical facts. China has territorial staking on large parts of SCS through a geographical line known as nine-dash line. This is informed by historical maps and official papers, which according to China lay evidence of sovereignty over the islands and sea region enclosed by this line (Seo, 2024). Nonetheless, other actors of the region, like the Philippines, Vietnam, or Malaysia, deny this historical narrative, which relies on more recent legal approaches and the historical occupation of some features (Simões, 2022).

For instance the Philippines with historical legal approach to defend its position for Spratly Islands and Scarborough shoal. Vietnam, for instance, goes to historical works of the Nguyen Dynasty and document its territorial claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands (Doan, 2024). These two competing historical account make the resolution process difficult in addition the two show that by relying on historical claims in present legal actions one face certain challenges.UNCLOS signed in 1982 is the main international convention that helps to regulate current disputes over sea issues. UNCLOS provides principles including e.g., EEZs which provides sovereignty over resources found within international waters 200 miles off a country's coastlines and gives continental shelf and territorial sea definitions (Soares de Lima & Hirst, 2024). To the SCS, UNCLOS is an important tool in identifying legality of sovereignty claims.

The 2016 arbitration case was filed by Philippines against China under Annex VII of UNCLOS and is considered as unique legal event. The awards pointed out that Chinese nine-dash line lacked legal standing under international law and dismissed its historical rights in the SCS resources. Furthermore, some of the features which China sought to assert sovereignty include rocks and low-tide elevations and the understanding was that they do not create the rights to an EEZ or territorial sea (Seo, 2024). Nevertheless, the fact that the decision is legally

enforceable, China's rejection of the ruling well explains the numerous hurdles governing the application of international law where state cooperation is not mandatory (Doan, 2024).

Limitations of International Law in Sovereignty Disputes

The SCS disputes also uphold that international law is not sufficient in providing remedy to complicated sovereignty questions. UNCLOS provides ample legal basis but lacks efficient methods and mechanisms of enforcement. This decided lack of drive by force again makes powerful nations like China to challenge legal ruling by simply choosing not to be bound to such ruling. This has resulted in a new trend where vast powers are deemed not to be tamed by international law failure in power imbalance in particular lately (Proksch, 2024).However, even for UNCLOS there is plenty of room for interpretation The treaty has its shares of vagueness too. For instance, the convention does not articulate the principles for allocating sovereignty as a means of resolving sovereignty over islands, rocks and low-tide elevation features that are the focus of the SCS dispute. This is due to the fact that such lack of precision has caused the claimants to advance arguments that they stand to benefit from in the interpretations of these provisions (Simões, 2022). Third, specific states' nonappearance in legal cases like China not attending the 2016 arbitration weakens legal solutions.

The Role of Lawfare in Sovereignty Claims

This paper pays particular attention to the effect of lawfare in SCS disputes, where the legal regime in different Global South countries is employed to attain geopolitical goals. Each of the nations has used legal justification that supports its stand on the matter between China and the United States of America. China employs domestic laws to quell its sovereignty over the disputed territories while arguing that international rulings that surface opposing assertions of the similar sovereignty filed by China are inapplicable (Seo, 2024). On the other hand, the United States claims they are exercising freedom of navigation right under the UNCLOS even they are not a party to this convention (Bernard et al., 2024). This exposes how legal instrumentations can be depended on to strengthen sovereignty propositions and sustain actions that inflame conflict. In so doing, each state aims to ensure that its actions are well perceived by the rest of the world while violating the spirit of UNCLOS awaiting Doan 2024 .

An attempt to address the contentious issues of sovereignty through diplomacy using regional diplomacy has been a challenge. As for ASEAN as a regional institution, they have try to contain the disputes in the region via the Formation of The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the current discussion on the Comprehensive Code of Conduct (COC). However, due to ASEAN's decision-making system where all important decisions are made through consensus and the. The roles of external actors, however, make the legal situation even murkier. The United States and like-minded western powers back maritime rivals such as the Philippines and Vietnam in enforcement of the rules-based norms but their actions are politically motivated (Proksch, 2024). This has lead to inconsistent approach towards sovereignty claims while the multilateralism pursued through the United Nations and other like minded international organization is often constrained by the national interests.

Sovereignty claims in the SCS are a blend of historical enmity, legal jurisdictions, and geopolitical gamesmanship. Although, UNCLOS can form the basis for handling these issues it has weak enforcement arm and has certain contentious provisions which need further strengthening. Lack of proper adjudication is another chief problem, although the aggressive application of legal tactics by major powers also poses a threat to the conflict solving process due to the interaction of legalism and geopolitics. Sovereignty disputes will persist in the SCS due to regional and international conflict dynamics, therefore, international systems have a pivotal role to play for the sovereignty issues in SCS through following the right honoring international laws and international practices (Bernard et al., 2024; Simões, 2022; Seo, 2024).

Maritime Security Challenges

The SCS is one of the most intensely contested maritime areas internationally and a vital commercial and navigational sea line of communication. Though, Southeast Asian security issues are not confined to sovereignty issues alone but also include militarization, piracy, and environmental degradation, and fishing whereas several countries of the region practice Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing. Most of these challenges have the potential of causing insecurity not only in the region but also other parts of the world.The other security issue that is very sensitive in relation to militarization in the SCS is a security issue. People have also accused China of creating artificial islands and arming them with structures like airstrips, missiles among

others. These developments enable China to assert force and claim informal occupation over sea claims or put into operational practice unofficial control over the waters which basically means that the region in question is actually being militarized (Proksch, 2024; Simões, 2022). In response, the United States has ramped up its FONOPs as its declared determination to preserve freedom of navigation at sea and counter ambitious maritime assertiveness (Seo, 2024). This competition between China and the United States has led to the creation of a relatively unstable military power equilibrium creating the likelihood of militancy.

Thus, Vietnam and the Philippines have also recently increased their defence capacities, which has all contributed to the escalations of this arms race. Militarization in the SCS destroys confidence with actors involved and lowers the prospects of non-violent resolution (Doan, 2024). The absence of adequate structures in the multilateral security architecture to deal with this problem underlines why cooperation in this direction is necessary. Another major threat to maritime security in the SCS is piracy and armed robbery – together with Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. The Region hosts very many fish stock resources that provide sustenance for millions of persons, but over fishing and other unlawful activities are jeopardizing these resources. Unpacking, then, the Chinese fishing fleets that are usually followed by the maritime militia of the People's Republic of China: Chinese fishing fleets are said to be conducting incursions into the EEZs of other claimant-nation states – encounters that are said to happen frequently (Bernard et al., 2024). This is not only negative to marine life, but also increases the hostility between neighboring countries.

Exacerbating the problem is that there is no adequate measures that have been deemed efficient to implement in order to control fishing. Although the UNCLOS deals with management and allocation of marine resources there are still some issues relating to the enforcement of the provisions stipulated in the UNCLOS because of complicated jurisdictions and reluctance of certain state actors to comply fully with the requite provisions (Doan, 2024). Combating IUU fishing has to be based on the support of regional cooperation and implementation of successful monitoring and enforcement measures. The SCS is also one of the most significant piracy and other transnational crimes such as smuggling and human trafficking grounds. The incidence of piracy though has recently reduced in the region because of the large

and open sea borders it still faces the risk of piracy attacks (Proksch, 2024). Thus it becomes more acute because the economic and political situation in some parts of Southeast Asia cannot be called stable, which means that there will be a constant demand for the services of criminals. Cooperation at the regional level, for instance, through cooperation in the Malacca Strait Patrols, appears to support cooperation in matter of maritime security. Nevertheless, similar frameworks have not been effectively applied in SCS because political vulnerability and overlapping claims over territories are obstructive (Simões, 2022). The greater cooperation in the exchange of information there is, as well as in the use of combined patrols the region's ability to combat piracy and other transnational crimes can be greatly improved.

Maritime security in the SCS is threatened by a long-term environmental impact on the region. Activities like the dredging and land reclamation for synthetic island creation affected the coral structures and a broad range of marine ecosystems (Simões, 2022 110). Mentioned above, over fishing complications the already challenging situation regarding the preservation of other species, as well as the impoverished coastal populations. The Brier declares that climate change aggravates these outcomes due to subsequent increase in the intensity of storms, sea levels and in the rate and variability of fish migration. It destabilises maritime structures, hampers trade channels and increases the odds of competition for scarce resources as predicted by Niazi in 2024. Environmental and climate changes necessitate regional actors to adopt sustainable approaches and factor environment in maritime security policies.

New Threats: Non Traditional Security Threats

Other security concerns that believe to be on a rise within the SCS include cyber security threats and the incorporation of autonomous systems in operation afloat. Piracy losses are also economic because the enhanced use of digital devices in navigation, communication, and surveillance exposes the maritime structure to cybercrimes (Bernard et al., 2024). It is possible certain such attacks could interdict important chokepoints, sabotage information systems and even increase interstate tensions.The ability of the system to employ unmanned equipments such as drones and other autonomous naval vessels also challenges the global maritime security. Even though these technologies augment surveillance as well as centralisation of control and operational effectiveness, concerns can be raised regarding the absence of legal responsibility, regulation,

and potential misuse especially in disputed territories (Seo, 2024). This is because appropriate use of these technologies requires formulation of international norms and regulations to counter arising risks.

Regional Security Mechanisms

The search for solutions to maritime security challenges in the SCS has been hindered by a relative weakness of comprehensive regional security structures. ASEAN's endeavor including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) has been the pursuit of mechanisms on building confidence and avoiding disputes. But, these efforts have been brought to naught due to the selfish interest of member states and the absence of punitive measures (Simões, 2022). The current and ongoing discussions of possibility to establish the Code of Conduct (COC) look as a positive development. However, the effectiveness of the COC is highly dependent on the outcomes achieved by rules setting and enforcement, and priorities and concerns of different players (Proksch, 2024). The capacity to act as a mediator can be built in ASEAN, as well as cooperation with other countries can be developed, such as the United States and Japan to strengthen the existing regional security institutions.

SCS maritime security issues are therefore complex and include both conventional and emerging threats that require the cooperation to address. Military development, unauthorized fishing activities, sea robbery, pollution, and new generation threats demonstrate the factors that make the stabilization of the region challenging in the contemporary world. Although, there are numerous existing models it is discernable that in resolution of these challenges there is a need for better collaboration, sound legal means as well as future oriented solutions. In analysing and viewing the future of the South China Sea, there must be symmetrical consideration of national interest and regional and international security imperatives.

Media and Sovereignty Claims: A Strategic Analysis

Media refers to part of the soft power through which states can formulate sovereignty claims in a manner that is preachable to the international audience. For instance, China has been using its state-controlled media to give prominence to historical narratives on behalf of its so called 'nine-dash line', thus portraying such actions as being right within its historical rights and

legitimate national interest (Seo, 2024). According to Simões (2022), China communicates messages through Xinhua and CGTN, which portrays China's territorial control as historical continuation; making other Southeast Asia nations' claims look illegitimate. Likewise, the Philippines made use of media to draw attention to the award of 2016 arbitral tribunal from the Permanent Court of Arbitration declaring China's enormous sea claims invalid. To that end, the Philippines has resorted to promoting its diplomatic legitimacy as consistent with the principles of international law to rally international support against China's aggressive media tactics (Doan, 2024). These two arguments exemplify how media is used in support of sovereignty projects, as well as delegitimize the opposition's viewpoints.

Media: An Instrument for Domestic Fund Raising

Locally, the media provides a platform of rallying the population behind the political leadership and its policy with respect to territory. The state owned media in China is instrumental in fanning nationalist prejudices and Or Default Public opinion on the government's SCS policies. In this manner, media narratives excuse China's actions while denying dissent and thereby consolidating domestic approval of contentious question (Proksch, 2024). In the other claimant states, media is employed to point to perceived violations and raise awareness of the economic and social implications of contested sovereignty. For instance, Vietnamese media often cover events of Chinese fishing boat or military patrols in the spirit of encroachment on Vietnam's sovereignty right of the seas. Such a strategy also strengthens homegrown counter-Chinese activities while raising global advocacy for intervention and backing.

Digital and Social Media: The Current and Future Responsibilities

Digital media and social networking play have shifted the balance of how the sovereignty and Security issues are communicated. The social media like twitter, face book, and Weibo provide an effective stage for the states as well as other non-state actors to spread their information and hence influence public opinions. Social media as one of the tools of 'digital diplomacy any country can directly communicate with domestic audience as well as the international one, (Niazi, 2024). Social media has been usefully employed by China to propagate its line about the SCS. By synchronised operations, Chinese authorities exploit accounts in WeChat and Weibo to disseminate maps, videos, and information graphics that support its

sovereignty assertion. In the same vein, there are paid social media commentators and artificial intelligence agents whose job it is to discredit anyone who opposes Beijing's stand (Seo, 2024). It is not limited to the internal audience but is aimed at influencing external platforms about China's action.

On the other hand, social media has assisted the smaller states, and other non-state actors in countering the hegemonic discourses. The Philippine activists and groups have different incidents of Chinese boats in the Philippine territory using Twitter and Facebook to such things and the result effusion impact and the economic wastage of those things (Doan, 2024). State-socialized narrative have been further checked and balance by social media advocacy for alternative narratives and cultural bonding for marginalized groups worldwide.

Media and Security Narratives

Other than sovereignty claims, media is an essential component in the construction of security discourse in SCS. Media is the tool the states employ this military actions i.e naval patrols and exercise as measures intended to protect regional stability. For example, the United States has repeatedly employed its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) as a form of maintaining the 'rogue' narrative, as a defender of the rules-based order (Proksch, 2024).China on the other side uses media in an attempt to justify militarization of artificial islands for its own protection and for the stability of the region. All the state-controlled outlets underline the need for the respective installations to address identified dangers emanating from the outside world led by the United States. This makes this narrative an attempt to explain the Chinese behavior even as it seeks to shift blame for assertive behavior (Simões, 2022).

Media also has a very important function of raising or reducing security threats within a certain environment. Brazen coverage and racist incitement do contribute to people's anxieties and promote escalation of tension. On the other hand, achieving a fairness in reporting and sharing of information can enhance confidence between parties and resort to diplomatic solutions (Doan, 2024).

Propaganda, Disinformation and Misinformation

Self-generated rumours including propaganda, misinformation and disinformation are rife when it comes to the media strategies of SCS dispute. There is symbiosis between states using

information operations to blind the public and jam their opponents. The line of propaganda where China appeals to historical entitlement and benevolently paints its actions is paradoxical to the characterization of the U.S as an alarming actor in the region (Seo, 2024). Likewise, disinformation campaigns intended for competitor claimants ideologically operate to discredit them and create divisions among their respective people. Another category of the population also shares wrong information either deliberately or by default. It is found that social media is extremely vulnerable to Bart spreading of rumours or half-baked news through its networks, which often exacerbates the ongoing conflicts making the process of conflict solu. Solving these issues needs more work on increasing the media literacy level and creating strategies to combat fake news (Niazi, 2024).

ASEAN and Media as regional Instrument

It also has functions of medias in the process of sovereignty and security disputations in regions. ASEAN has tapped the media talking for its initiatives for as early as the DOC and the on-going COC talks. These efforts are showcased to give the impression of a bloc of collectively working nations and to portray ASEAN's capacity and readiness to adopt the peaceful conflict solving strategy (Simões, 2022). But even in these media strategies, ASEAN advocacy efforts are compromised due to the conflicting goals of its member states that lead to a lack of concertation and thus erode the regions' cohesiveness (Bernard et al., 2024).The information warfare employed in sovereignty and security claims also has significant impact for the SCS. On the one hand, media also provides whistle blowing, accountability and an opportunity to give accurate information . On the flipside, it can be used as a tool of propaganda, provocation, and to undermine the gains that organizations, business entities, investors, customers and other members of the public seek to achieve. Thus, except for the specific diplomatic and security goals, the value of media strategies primarily depends (Seo, 2024).

Media is an essential factor in the fluid processes of sovereignty and security issues in the SCS. In strengthening the concepts and positions in the media space and molding collective memories or perceptions, media has a crucial importance in the regional geo-political processes. Still, it has its drawbacks that appear most dangerous when the platform is utilized for propagandistic and, in particular, fake news purposes. Thus, it will be safe to state that media

will retain the role of an influential factor in the management of conflicts and the prospective of peace and stability as long as the SCS remains the area of interest for global actors.

Interplay Between Law, Media, and Security

The SCS remains one of the world's most liberal and contested geographical areas where law, media and security are entrenched and in constant evolution. All these dimensions – of law as a structure, media as the tool of the story, and security as the principle of the strategy – are critically important in forming the disputes of the region. In this case, it raises the question of how these three elements interrelate; impact the behaviours of other stakeholders; and shape the trajectory of the SCS conflicts.

Legal Frameworks as the Bases for Sovereignty and Security

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the principal legal instrument providing for the management of the SCS. It hasn't only given a provision for demarcation of maritime zones but also control in relation to the exploration of resources and is provided with an urged way to solve the conflicts with the help of arbitration. However, its application in the SCS has been characterised by some problems. The early 2016 SCAR arbitration award that annulled China's nine-dash line exemplified that there is room for legal regimes to offer legal contours to sovereignty titles (Seo, 2024). However, its dismissal of the ruling showed the law's imperatives in addressing power relations (Doan, 2024).

Another instance that can be described as security is observed in the way that states use law as a vehicle justifying military actions. For instance, the United States champions FONOPs on the basis of protector of UNCLOS though it has not ratified the convention. Such operations are presented as legal actions against improper maritime assertiveness, thus maintaining/ strengthening the US as a guardian of the rules-based international order in response to China 's strategic play (Proksch, 2024). On the other hand, China has relied on domestic laws to assert control over disputed features and thereby shows how states seek to weaponize legal provisions in order to consolidate the disputed areas and withstand international pressures (Simões, 2020).

Media as instigator for Legal and Security Stories

Media mediates the relations between law and security by defining their communication field and framing actions of States. The tactical approach to media escalates legal claims,

including China's historical internationally backed rights based on the nine-dash line. by using state media such as CGTN China presents its legal position as a defense of sovereignty, invoking history at the same time roll legal argumentation with nationalism (Seo, 2024).Likewise, through media, the Philippines has tagged the winner of the arbitration case under international law in relation to China's unlawful jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea as the rightful sovereign. Pros So, by appealing to the tribunal and by presenting the decision of the tribunal as a victory of international law the Philippines aims at creating international support and counterbalance China in the narrative struggle (Doan, 2024). These media strategies explain how law is not just an entity, but a powerful instrument which interpretation and enforcement relates to the public opinion.

Hence, while looking at security, media is both, a magnifier and a demagnifier of conflict. Every military exercise, or any confrontation between for example the U.S naval forces and the Chinese naval forces, sadly amplifies the fears of an impending conflict and comes with the pressure for the next level escalation. On the other hand, media coverage about diplomatic engagements like ASEAN's attempt towards coming up with the COC will encourage positive attitude and other measures tending to create confidence (Simões, 2022).

Lawfare and the Weaponization of Legal Stories

Legal strategy applied by a country as an instrument of power refers to the concept of lawfare, which combines the use of laws in the context of the SCS and media security. The tactics it uses for may be summed up as active advocacy of its selective interpretation of international law and passive prevention of the application of international judgements it considers unfavourable. For instance, when it passes domestic legislation that shades its own territorial sovereignty on the disputed territories, then it has a legal ground to act yet undermining the authority of international laws (Seo, 2024).The United States and its allies on the other hand engage in these efforts through their legal stories in an effort to promote the rule of law based world. The actions FONOPs taken by the US are portrayed as being necessary to sustainable and counter political and social decline and norms are eroded by certain states in certain literatures and commentaries to news over reactions. This use of lawfare shows that legal arguments are not separate from media strategies but as are part of the process of seeking to influence the world's perceptions.

Security Dilemmas and the Function of the media

Thus, security dilemmas of actors involved in the SCS are further complicated by the legal and media interplays. For instance, military operations on man-made islands in the South China sea are portrayed by China media as a strategy of self defence of territory from external aggression. Still, regional actors and the international community consider these actions as provocative and militarisation, which results in mistrust, and arms race (Doan, 2024; Bernard et al., 2024).The reports of some security events, like conflicts between fishing boats or between coast guard vessels, enrage the situation. What is more, such events are not presented merely as random occurrences, but as projections of certain tendencies that belong to geopolitics. For example, Vietnamese media insists on chinese fishing inside VN EEZ and describes their actions as infringement on Vietnamese sovereignty and security threat (Simões, 2022). These policies act as locally rallying and mobilizing accounts to spur domestic support as well as force international actors into action.

ASEAN's Balancing Act: Media, Law, and Security

Given that ASEAN is a regional organisation, it will be pivotal in mediating the interaction between law, media and security. The efforts of ASEAN include the DOC focusing to provide the rules of the proper behavior to minimize the possibility of conflicts. However, these often fail due to non-implementation and non-compliance and the interests of member states are quite often not aligned with the interests of the community. Negative information related to ASEAN's negotiations of a COC can be seen also as both capabilities and weakness of the regional cooperation. As mobilising support for ASEAN's advocacy for peace and respect for international law, media can at the same time play a role in revealing cracks within ASEAN and the power dynamics with powerhouse countries like China and the US (Bernard et al., 2024). It is a dynamic that depicts how efficacy of ASEAN in addressing security threats is presented by media.

Falsehood and Fake News: The Impact and Influence

The SCS disputes are also characterized by mis- and disinformation. National television and social networks are employed as tools for disseminating untruthful information and manipulations, including overestimated military capacities, or fakes. China's employment of

digital campaigns to advocate for its sovereignty claims and to delegitimize competing voices represents the extent by which misinformation alters the legal and security dynamics to an extent that has been seen by Seo (2024). It important to note that counteracting misinformation cannot be done by one player alone, but instead has to involve playing to the promotion of correct reporting and increasing media literacy. The international organizations and regional actors need to create ways through which the authenticity of the information that is being spread across is confirmed or otherwise bust (Niazi, 2024). This is especially significant in the SCS where the wrong information can easily fan tensions and affect the trust that is required in managing disputes.

The Areas of Integration and Synergy

This paper also identified ways through which law media, and security in the region can enhance integration and cooperation through ways such as: For instance, relations between regional actors and global organizations can be improved to increase comprehension and efficiency of implementing legal reforms and increasing transparency. In this way, media can help build a positive story of common interests, together with successes of cooperation – joint patrols, joint actions in environmental matters, etc. (Simões, 2022). As well the enhancement of digital technologies to monitor and report the situation in real-time can also enhance an understanding of accountability. These technologies can increase the confidence of legal and security systems to deal with norms compliance or violation incidences (Bernard et al., 2024). The inclusion of these tools into regional strategies can help fill existing gaps between legal enshrinement and actual implementation.

The South China Sea can be used as an example to the complexity of the interactions between law, media and security in the construction of the system of relations both in the international and in the regional level. Treaties such as UNCLOS give legal basis for the solutions of the issues but their utility is in practice and implementation. Media works with a great force that can be used in framing the narratives, changing the trends of opinions, and fostering the legal provisions with security requirements. However, there are related difficulties which arise while using the media in the form of strategic actions, such as misrepresentation of information and provoking the conflict. This indicates that to successfully manage the

developing activities in the SCS, a multi pronged legal, media and security approach is paramount. To achieve this, it is necessary not only to develop international law but also to call for accountable coverage and regional integration. However, coordinated among the interests involved in them, the interplay of these dimensions might be helpful to influence change processes in order to eventually move toward a more predictable and rule-abiding maritime order.

Regional and International responses.

To assert, the dispute in SCS has garnered much of regional and international attention owing to its overtones of sovereignty, sea power and trade. Different players such as regional players, international players, superpowers, and global organizations have interacted with the problem as a diplomatic, legal and military phenomenon. Moving on to the second part, this section looks at how regional Organization like ASEAN and others International actors, including Super powers like US, China, and many more responded to SCS Disputes. The ASEAN has been a key regional player in managing the SCS disputes andora ASEAN has been the most influential regional participant in managing the SCS disputes. The organisation has through multilateralism implemented measures like the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in relation to the South China Sea (SCS). The DOC, which was signed in 2002, is an assurance between the members of the ASEAN, and China not to engage in activities, that may complicate the situation. However, it never offered legally binding recommendation, systematic enforcement tool, and is not very effective.

The South China Sea is also in the process of formulating a COC to enhance the framework for handling the disputes, by ASEAN. However, the process of bilateral as well as multilateral negotiations has been a slow process due to the internalization of the ASEAN member states and their relations with China. For instance, Cambodia and Laos, who are the members of ASEAN and denote significant economic relations with China, take political stances that are favorable to Beijing; this undercuts ASEAN's capacity to articulate a coherent policy stance (Simões, 2022; Doan, 2024). This fragmentation clearly points to the challenge ASEAN has faced in the process of coordinating its member state's policies in their relations with powerful regional and global actors.

America has been quite involved in the SCS disputes as it has deemed involvement in the region as its defense of the international order. FONOPs are operations of the US challenging unlawful claims of sovereignty over maritime areas by sailing naval forces into the areas. Such operations' primary purpose is to assert the unimpeded passage principle under UNCLOS, despite the fact that the United States has not ratified the convention. Besides, the armed forces the U.S. has also participated in diplomatic actions aimed at developing cooperation with the countries of the region. Is it in an attempt to moderate China's expansionist tendency that the U.S., through offering military support, and holding joint military maneuvers with Philippines and Vietnam and others. But it conducts its activity that Beijing tends to consider as provocative and which only increases tensions (Proksch, 2024). This dynamic is described as having a guardian function on the one hand, and a risk of being a source of increased tension on the other. The Chinese approach to the SCS disputes can most be described as aggressive and unilateral actions. State activities including land reclamation, militarization of artificial islands, activity of the maritime militia, China seeks to achieve effective control over the areas it claims (Simões, 2022). Through these actions, Beijing justified these actions by invoking historical lineaments pointed to the nine-dash line as its historical entitlements to the region, (Seo, 2024).China has also used bilateral diplomacy to solve conflict relations with distinct ASEAN nations ignoring the existence of ASEAN. This manner helps China to utilise bureaucratic and political impact, more often splitting the ASEAN collective unity (Doan, 2024). Further, Beijing's utilization of state-controlled media and propaganda enhances the development of Beijing's rhetoric, portraying its activities as protective and purposefully focused on the stabilisation of the region (Bernard et al., 2024).

Japan, Australia and the EU have also joined the list of other global players in expressing concern on the SCS disputes. Japan and Australia have backed the US stance, training together with American forces and supporting the rule of law at sea. These countries recognise the SCS as vital for international commerce and for balance of power in the region thus aligning their politics with the other Indo-Pacific polices (Proksch, 2024). Although the EU has not directly been a party in the SCs, it has broadly supported a rulesbased system as well as endorsed

UNCLOS. According to Niazi (2024), the EU aims at stability in ASEAN through diplomatic measures and economic cooperation and regional institutions building. However, its impact could not be compared to the involvement of regional stakeholders as well as great powers.

For the current SCS disputes, it is possible to highlight that international organisations and UN associated structures actively participate in the legal aspect of the conflict. The September 2016 award of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in which it annulled China's nine-dash line assertions can be viewed as a pioneering discouragement under UNCLOS. Even though this ruling is legally enforceable its effectiveness is constrained by states' compliance meaning that the decision was rejected by China (Seo, 2024).

Other international bodies like THE International Maritime Organisation (IMO) plays the role of promoting and maintaining order in the regions due to its role of ensuring the safety of maritime and the marine environment. But that is all limited to these issues, that is why there is a need to establish a strong and enforceable multilateral regime to address more serious security threats in SCS (Simões, 2022).

Challenges and Opportunities

This is evident from the measures taken by the different countries of the region coping with SCS disputes to capture the spirit of regional and international cooperation and the problems inherent in it. On one hand, national selfishness and rivalry of the great powers prevent coming up with a consistent approach. At the same time, aspects like military cooperation, including mutual exercises and training, talking in multiple voices, and environmental partnership reveal that the collaboration is possible (Bernard et al., 2024). Thus, building up of ASEAN and other regional organizations is essential to further its dialogue and to lessen tensions. The effectiveness of regional responses can be improved by measures such as; improving enforcement of agreements, encouraging CBMs and the adoption of recent relevant technologies in monitoring and surveillance. Likewise, more attention to UNCLOS and corresponding legal regulation from the international community can strengthen the legal argumentation of the multilateral approach (Proksch, 2024). The management of sovereignty and security within the South China Sea is a model that presents some of the difficulties experiencing this geopolitically important area. International and regional responses as noted above differ but

clearly signal the necessity for collective effort. Boosting ASEAN's capability, enhancing the effectiveness of the international legal system, and promoting cooperation with major powers are the policies for making progress toward stability and a rule of law in the South China Sea.

Conclusion

This paper observes that the SCS disputes represent an excellent paradigm of inherent challenges in sharing sovereignty, security, and perceptions. Thus, tensions defined by law & media and security & law & media on the base of the UNCLOS & Media on Law & UNCLOS media popularizing or distorting & Security & law & media and by providing a base for a new power balance in the region. Nevertheless, the region continues to suffer from current conflicts brought about by power relations, legimate authority issues, and obedience of legal demands and national interests. The SCS is not merely a regional phenomenon, it has become a concern that has captured global importance, and serves to highlight the difficulties of maintaining a rules based international system. Due to non-compliance and weak enforcement mechanisms of legal instruments like the 2016 arbitration ruling, expansive historical claim like the nine-dash line have been declared unlawful but this has not been effective due to non-compliance. The task of solving the conflicts in the SCS has been made even more challenging by the use of media by all the stakeholders and has turned the SCS into media warfare. Some of Security threats such as militarization, piracy, fishing in the high seas and represents threat to the sovereign rights, are skills which complicate tensions that surround the region and make it extremely sensitive. ASEAN has been trying to improve its standing through the DOC and the current negotiation for the COC but its effectiveness is bogged down by internal discord and great power intervention. These problems require a multisectoral and multilevel solution that requires the specific attention to the legal and security aspects as well as diplomatic efforts.

To reach stability and solve all the conflicts in SCS, it is highly important to have compliance with the rule of law, security cooperation and security communication. Despite the stated challenges the room for cooperation remains open as long as regional institutions are strengthened, legal mechanisms developed, and diplomatic efforts multilateralized. All these indicate that with a coherent framework marking all round intervention, the various stakeholders in the South China Sea can manage the current intricate order and work towards a more stable and orderly sea.

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