


Chapter 15

ASEAN and the South China Sea: Traditional Security Cooperation Mechanisms and Vietnam's Strategic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines ASEAN's traditional security cooperation mechanisms in the South China Sea (SCS) from 2000 to 2025, focusing on Vietnam's role in regional maritime security governance. The SCS hosts critical shipping lanes facilitating over one-third of global maritime trade, yet faces escalating tensions from overlapping territorial claims and great power competition. ASEAN has developed multilateral frameworks including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties, Code of Conduct negotiations, and specialized forums such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum and ADMM+ to manage disputes peacefully. Despite constraints from divergent national interests and consensus-based decision-making, these mechanisms have contributed to regional stability. Vietnam has emerged as a proactive architect of cooperation frameworks, leveraging multilateral institutions to enhance national security while strengthening ASEAN's collective capacity in addressing maritime security challenges.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-4470-6.ch015

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1. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea (SCS) stands as one of the world's most strategically significant and contested maritime regions. Connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, it hosts critical international shipping lanes that facilitate over one-third of global maritime trade, valued at approximately 5.3 trillion USD annually (Kiet et al., 2025a). This vital waterway's geopolitical and geoeconomic importance extends beyond commerce, encompassing substantial energy resources, rich fishing grounds, and strategic military positions that shape regional power dynamics in the twenty-first century (Koga, 2022).

The contemporary security landscape of the SCS is characterized by overlapping territorial claims, intensifying militarization, and complex great power competition (Yoshimatsu, 2022). China's assertive pursuit of control over the SCS—manifested through its contentious “nine-dash line” claim, extensive island reclamation activities, and military infrastructure development—has fundamentally altered the regional security architecture (Kiet & Tuyen, 2023). These actions directly challenge the sovereignty claims of ASEAN member states, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, while contravening the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Simultaneously, the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy has designated Southeast Asia as a critical theater for balancing Chinese influence, thereby transforming the SCS into a focal point of Sino-American strategic rivalry (Hiep et al., 2024; Kiet et al., 2025b).

This volatile environment presents ASEAN with both unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Maritime security has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central pillar of national security for all Southeast Asian nations (Thayer, 2018b). Beyond traditional security threats stemming from territorial disputes and military posturing, the region confronts multifaceted non-traditional security challenges including piracy, terrorism, environmental degradation, illegal fishing, and transnational crime (Hiep et al., 2024). The convergence of these traditional and non-traditional threats, compounded by external power interventions, demands robust multilateral cooperation mechanisms (Zhang, 2023). Since the 1990s, ASEAN has progressively developed an intricate web of security cooperation frameworks aimed at managing SCS tensions through peaceful dialogue and multilateral engagement (Yoshimatsu, 2022). These mechanisms—including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) signed in 2002, the ongoing Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations, and specialized forums such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and East Asia Summit (EAS)—represent institutionalized efforts to establish behavioral norms, build strategic trust, and prevent conflict escalation (Zhang, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains constrained by divergent national interests among ASEAN members,

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