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Entering Uncharted Waters?
ASEAN and the South China Sea

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PREFACE

The workshop on “Entering Uncharted Waters? ASEAN and the South China Sea Dispute” was organized by the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), on 18 February 2011. It was the initiative of then ISEAS Director, Ambassador K. Kesavapany, who first asked this question: What does the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have to do with the South China Sea?

In an attempt to answer this question, one may find that ASEAN — not just the ASEAN members that have claims to little pieces of land and vast waters of the South China Sea, not just individual ASEAN members, but ASEAN as a whole — has an abiding interest in peace and stability in this region and in freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea. Much of ASEAN’s commerce, including its members’ traded food and energy resources, passes through or over the South China Sea. The stakes of ASEAN and its members in the South China Sea are very high. It is very important for our security and our economies.

Indeed, the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint is quite specific. It calls on ASEAN to continue its “current practice of close consultation among Member States to achieve full implementation of the DOC” — The DOC is the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which China and the ten ASEAN states signed in Phnom Penh in November 2002. The DOC commits ASEAN members and China to the peaceful settlement of their disputes, freedom of navigation and overflight, self-restraint, no new occupations, confidence-building measures, and cooperative activities in the South China Sea. As we all know, the multiple claims to land features and their waters in the South China Sea are one of the critical flashpoints for potential conflict in our part of the world. It is, therefore, valuable for us at least to understand the nature and extent of each party’s claims.
ISEAS was, therefore, fortunate to have so many scholars participating in this conference who are experts in South China Sea issues. Even if they did not speak for their respective governments, they at least well understood the positions of those governments. Their discussions offered us hope that this knowledge would lead all claimants to bring their claims as close as possible to the provisions of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which all of them are parties. After all, ASEAN has also sought to promote the rule of law in the region. It is with these objectives in mind — peace, stability, freedom of navigation and overflight, confidence building, cooperation, and the rule of law — that truly inspired this conference.

I would like to express my thanks, first, to Ambassador Kesavapany for his inspiration. My thanks also go to Ambassador Rodolfo C. Severino, Head of the ASC, for his support for this conference and for sharing his view with other participants. I am indebted to all paper presenters for their active participation and their excellent papers; this book will undoubtedly be useful not only for policymakers but also for observers and students who are interested in the issue of the South China Sea. I would like to thank Triena Ong for making this publication a success, all members of the ASC, ISEAS’ administrative members, and two trainees at the ASC who helped me in the preparation of this manuscript: Nicholas Zulkoski and Hong Wee Keat.

None of those thanked here are by any means responsible for the content of the book. Any errors that might remain are all mine.

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