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Entering Uncharted Waters?

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Entering Uncharted Waters?

ASEAN and the
South China Sea

EDITED BY

PAVIN CHACHAVALPONGPUN



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Singapore

First published in Singapore in 2014 by
ISEAS Publishing
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg

Website: <<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Entering uncharted waters? : ASEAN and the South China Sea / edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun.

1. South China Sea—Claims.
2. South China Sea—Claims vs. China.
3. Dispute resolution (Law)—Southeast Asia.
4. Conflict management—Southeast Asia.
5. ASEAN.
 - I. Pavin Chachavalpongpun.

KZA1692 E61

2014

ISBN 978-981-4380-26-3 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4380-27-0 (e-book, PDF)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

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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.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun
Editor
Singapore, August 2013

CONTRIBUTORS

Aileen San Pablo-Baviera is a Professor and former Dean of the Asian Centre, University of the Philippines. She is editor-in-chief of the international journal *Asian Politics and Policy*. Her research focus is on international relations of the Asia-Pacific. She has published extensively on Philippines-China relations, China-ASEAN relations, East Asian regionalism, and the South China Sea disputes.

Robert C. Beckman is the Director of the Centre for International Law (CIL) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Head of its programme in Ocean Law and Policy. He heads the CIL Research Projects on Submarine Cables and Law of the Sea and on International Marine Crimes. He is also an Associate Professor in the NUS Faculty of Law where he currently teaches Public International Law, Ocean Law and Policy in Asia, and International Regulation of Shipping.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University, Japan. Receiving his PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies, Pavin has written extensively on ASEAN issues, including his edited volumes of *ASEAN-US Relations: What are the Talking Points?* (2012) and *The Road to Ratification and Implication of the ASEAN Charter* (2009). He was the Lead Researcher for Political and Strategic Affairs at the ASEAN Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, from January 2008 to March 2012.

Hasjim Djalal is a member of the National Indonesian Maritime Council and former Vice Chairman of the Indonesian delegation to the Third United Nations Law of the Sea Conference. Receiving his Masters of Law from the University of Virginia where he was the University's first Indonesian

student, Djalal is also former Chairman and President of the International Seabed Authority.

Wang Hanling is Professor and Director of the Centre for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, Institute of International Law, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Receiving the degree of Doctor of Law from CASS, he has published widely and submitted numerous consultancy reports to the Chinese central government. He is an expert of special arbitration under Annex VIII of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and served as a UN consultant. He won the highest research award of CASS for his outstanding policy advice to the Chinese central government in 2007 and 2008.

Fu-Kuo Liu is Research Fellow at the Institute of International Relations (IIR), National Chengchi University, Taiwan and Adjunct Professor at the International Doctorate Program in Asia Pacific Studies (IDAS), College of Social Science, National Chengchi University. He received his PhD from the University of Hull. He has written extensively on Taiwan security and South China Sea policy, U.S.-Taiwan relations and cross-strait cooperation.

Dzirhan Mahadzir is a freelance defence journalist based in Kuala Lumpur. He holds an MA in Defence and Security Analysis from the University of Lancaster, United Kingdom, and has written for various international defence publications including *Janes Defence Weekly*, *Janes Navy International*, *International Defence Review*, *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, *Defence Review Asia* and *Asian Military Review*.

Li Mingjiang is an Assistant Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also the coordinator of the China Program and the Coordinator of the MSc in Asian Studies Program at RSIS. He received his PhD in Political Science from Boston University. His main research interests include China's diplomatic history, Sino-U.S. relations, Asia-Pacific security, and domestic sources of China's foreign policy. He is the author (including editor and co-editor) of nine books. His recent books are *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split* (2012) and *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* (2009). He has published papers in various peer-reviewed journals

including *Global Governance*, *Cold War History*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *China: An International Journal*, *China Security*, *Security Challenges*, and *The International Spectator*.

Nguyen Thi Lan Anh is Deputy Director of the Centre for South China Sea Studies and Vice Dean of the International Law Faculty of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. Dr Nguyen received her PhD in International Law from the University of Bristol, United Kingdom and has research interests in ocean law and policy, maritime security, and the South China Sea issues.

Rodolfo C. Severino is the Head of the ASEAN Studies Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and a frequent speaker at international conferences in Asia and Europe. Having been Secretary-General of ASEAN from 1998 to 2002, he has completed a book, entitled *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community* and published by ISEAS, on issues facing ASEAN. He has produced a book on ASEAN in ISEAS' Southeast Asia Background Series, one on the ASEAN Regional Forum, and another on the Philippine national territory. Severino was Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, the culmination of thirty-two years in the Philippine Foreign Service.

Barry Wain, a career journalist, was the Writer-in-Residence at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. A former editor of the Asian edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, he also served as the paper's diplomatic correspondent and as a columnist, specialising in the South China Sea and other regional issues.

Mikael Weissmann is a Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) in Stockholm, Sweden. He is also an Affiliated Researcher at the East Asian Peace Program at Uppsala University. He received his PhD in Peace and Development Research from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden in 2009. Weissmann's research focuses on peace and security in East Asia, soft power in Sino-ASEAN relations and EU-Asia relations. He is also leading a project on "Collaboration at Sea", focussing on the role and impact of collaboration for maritime security. Among others, he has written the monograph *The East Asia Peace: Conflict Prevention and Informal Peacebuilding* (2012).

