

ASEAN's Norm Subsidiarity Strategy in Shaping Regional Order in the South China Sea[°]

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Abstract

In order to avoid further erosion of its own autonomy and marginalization in the shaping of the order in the South China Sea, ASEAN has actively taken the initiative to strengthen the shaping of the order in the South China Sea by resorting to the principle of norm subsidiarity. On the one hand, it has resisted negatively the U.S.-advocated norm of “freedom of navigation” through the strategy of norm indifference. On the other hand, it has resisted positively the Chinese-advocated norm of “bilateralism” through the strategy of local norm practice. ASEAN's actions have achieved certain results in resisting the influence of great power norms, but have achieved limited results in promoting the dominant position of ASEAN norms. In the future, ASEAN needs to speed up the conclusion of a more substantive “Code of Conduct in the South China Sea” with China, strengthen internal unity and solidarity, enhance the influence of ASEAN norms, and revive ASEAN's reputation.

Keywords: *Norm Subsidiarity, ASEAN, South China Sea, Regional Order*

[°] This work was supported by the National Social Science Foundation Project under Grant No. 21&ZD244 and the Guangdong Provincial Social Science Fund Project under Grant No. GD24YZZ02.

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1. Introduction

This paper will take the South China Sea issue as an example to study the application of ASEAN's norm subsidiarity strategy and its effectiveness. At present, the order in the South China Sea region is in a state of intense change, which is manifested not only in the power struggle between various actors, but also in the norm struggle between various actors. On the South China Sea issue, China advocates bilateral negotiations with other South China Sea claimants based on historical rights. However, this move was opposed by some ASEAN countries and the United States. The United States is not a party to the South China Sea dispute, but it is worried that China's leading the resolution of the South China Sea issue will threaten or weaken its own hegemony, so it intervenes in the South China Sea issue in the name of "freedom of navigation" norms to achieve the goal of containing China and maintaining its own hegemony. However, this move was strongly opposed by China and did not receive full support from ASEAN. Faced with increasingly fierce competition among major powers, ASEAN hopes to negotiate the South China Sea issue based on "ASEAN norms" under the framework of ASEAN leadership, manage major power competition, maintain its own autonomy, and strengthen the shaping of order in the South China Sea region.¹ So how does ASEAN, which lacks power and material resources, take specific actions? What are the results? What challenges will it face in the future?

On the one hand, the study of these issues helps to clarify ASEAN's behavioral logic on the South China Sea issue from a normative perspective, that is, how ASEAN, as a weak actor, can exercise autonomy in terms of norms and participate in the shaping of the order in the South China Sea region. On the other hand, it also helps to enrich the connotation of the theory of norm subsidiarity. This article will draw on the concept of "norm subsidiarity" proposed by Amitav Acharya (2011) for analysis. Since he did not propose how weak actors can implement norm subsidiarity, this study proposes specific strategies for ASEAN to implement norm subsidiarity based on ASEAN's behavior on the South China Sea issue. Therefore, this study helps to enrich the theoretical connotation of norm subsidiarity. In a broader sense, this study also helps to better understand the agency of weak actors and challenge the Western-centric perspective in international norm research.

The paper is divided into the following sections. The first section briefly reviews and evaluates the established academic literature and presents the analytical framework of the paper. In the second part, it analyses how ASEAN has resorted to the principle of norm subsidiarity while resisting the influence of norms dominated by China and the United States to strengthen its own shaping of the regional order in the South China Sea. Finally, based on the above analyses, a brief conclusion is presented, along with relevant policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review and Research Framework

A representative example in this regard is the research of Amitav Acharya (2011, 2018). In 2011, he took the lead in developing and verifying the conceptual tool of “norm subsidiarity” to describe the constructive role of the Third World in the normative field of the global order. In his 2018 book *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*, Acharya redefined “agency” and constructed a norm “localization-subsidiarity-circulation” framework, further exploring the role of Third World countries or regions in the global order from a normative perspective.

Acharya's study mainly discussed the definition, motivation and effects of normative subsidiarity. Norm subsidiarity refers to “*the process whereby local actors create rules with a view to preserve their autonomy from dominance, neglect, violation, or abuse by more powerful central actors*” (Acharya, 2011: 97). The local actors here mainly refer to the normative behavior of weak countries, especially those in the Third World. Acharya argues that the motivations for local actors to resort to norm subsidiarity include the following. First, when local actors are excluded in the process of global norm shaping and institutional construction, the principle of subsidiarity can become a way for them to deal with the potential “dictatorship” of higher-level institutions and more powerful countries. The rationality of local norms lies in the fact that local institutions are more familiar with local problems than global institutions and can therefore propose better solutions. Second, when the “meta-norms” cherished by local actors are violated by powerful actors and the global institutions that embody these norms are unable to prevent such violations, local actors will resort to norm subsidiarity. Third, local actors hope to make the “abstractly defined” “meta-norms” consistent with local concepts, identities and habits. This motivation comes from the desire for legitimacy, the recognition of

the uniqueness of their own values and identities, and the general cultural characteristics of localization.

Acharya also pointed out two major consequences of norm subsidiarity. The first is the “challenge/resistance” effect. Local actors provide normative resistance to central actors (including major powers and institutions controlled by them) by creating norms. At the same time, local actors claim the right to make rules and deal with their own problems without interference from any higher authorities. The latter has the right to “perform only those tasks that cannot be performed at a more direct or local level”. Therefore, norms are used here as “weapons of the weak” to compensate for those actors who “lack structural and material power” to resist foreign interference. The second is the “support/reinforcement” effect. This is related to the way local actors create norms by “citing and supporting global norms to ensure their autonomy and resist powerful actors”. Acharya pointed out that in the contemporary international system, some global norms are implemented and supported by weak countries, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, independent self-determination, national equality, non-intervention, etc. Local actors support these existing global norms, thereby delegitimizing any attempt by external actors to circumvent this principle, and ultimately prevent the latter, thereby ensuring their own autonomy and resisting powerful actors. In this sense, the support/reinforcement effect is achieved.

Since then, some scholars have used this concept for applied analysis, such as Lee and McGahan’s (2015) study on ASEAN countries’ cooperation in anti-piracy systems, which mainly focused on analyzing the motivation of ASEAN countries to resort to norm subsidiarity in anti-piracy cooperation. Cloramidine and Wibisono’s (2024) study on how ASEAN implements global cybersecurity norms, which mainly focused on analyzing how ASEAN resorts to norm subsidiarity to strengthen global cybersecurity norms. Liu’s (2024) study on ASEAN’s resistance to the “responsibility to protect” norm in the process of responding to the “Nargis” disaster mainly focused on analyzing how ASEAN resorted to norm subsidiarity to challenge the norms advocated by major powers.

Overall, the concept proposed by Acharya has rich development potential in describing the role of third world countries or regions in shaping regional order. Weak actors lacking power and material resources can also exercise autonomy in norms to shape regional order. Unfortunately,

Acharya did not propose specific strategies for local actors to resort to norm subsidiarity. In addition, applied research on norm subsidiarity has rarely paid attention to this issue, and has not yet applied this concept to the South China Sea issue. Based on previous research, this article will try to go a step further and propose two strategies for resorting norm subsidiarity—norm indifference and norm practice, and apply ASEAN's two strategies to the analysis of the South China Sea issue.

Norm indifference mainly refers to the indifference of local actors to powerful foreign norms. Specifically, it expresses dissatisfaction or protest by ignoring or disregarding foreign norms. Norm practice refers to the local actors responding to problems by practicing their own dominant norms, which can also be called “local norm practice”. Wei pointed out that local practice is a socially meaningful and patterned performance action carried out by a practice community composed of local actors based on common local background knowledge. She also pointed out that it defines the basic norms, rules and agendas of the interaction between local actors, constructs the basic social connotation of the relationship between actors, and plays an important role in shaping the regional order (Wei, 2020: 3-4). Therefore, local norm practice is an action that focuses more on results, rather than just normative advocacy.

Fundamentally, both strategies involve resistance to foreign norms. The former achieves resistance through indifference or neglect, which can be called “passive resistance”; the latter achieves resistance through the practice of its own dominant norms to promote the effectiveness of its own norms, which can be called “active resistance”. For ASEAN, the latter also has the effect of support/consolidation, because ASEAN norms include some universal norms in the international community, such as sovereignty, non-interference and other norms. When ASEAN practices these norms, it naturally supports or consolidates international norms. If ASEAN practices its own unique social-cultural norms and can demonstrate the effectiveness of these norms, it will undoubtedly promote the universality of ASEAN norms.

It should be pointed out that when facing powerful actors, ASEAN will adopt these two different strategies at the same time, but the emphasis will be different. For external actors with strong power, ASEAN may not be able to persuade them directly through local norm practices, but will adopt a passive resistance, that is, focusing on the strategy of norm indifference. For

external actors with secondary power, ASEAN may have a greater chance of persuasion, so it will adopt a more active resistance, that is, focusing on local norm practices and directly persuading powerful actors. In the South China Sea region, China and the United States are obviously stronger than ASEAN, but the United States is obviously stronger than China. Therefore, ASEAN has a stronger motivation to adopt the local norm practice strategy to actively resist China, and has a stronger motivation to adopt the norm indifference strategy to passively resist the United States.

3. ASEAN's Norm Subsidiarity Strategy on the South China Sea Issue

3.1 *Local Norm Practice: ASEAN's Resistance to China's Advocacy of "Bilateralism"*

After the end of the Cold War, although China's strength has increased rapidly, there is still a big gap compared with the United States. At that time, China focused most of its energy on economic development, and a peaceful and stable surrounding environment was conducive to China's economic development. In other words, China needed ASEAN's help more at that time. Therefore, on the South China Sea issue, ASEAN has a stronger motivation to actively resist China's advocacy of "bilateralism", that is, to strengthen normative persuasion of China through local norm practice strategies.

3.1.1 *Disagreements Between China and ASEAN on "Bilateralism" or "Multilateralism"*

China and ASEAN have differences in the way of dealing with the South China Sea issue, namely, "bilaterally" or "multilaterally". For a long time, China has advocated a peaceful settlement through negotiation and consultation with the directly concerned countries on the basis of respecting historical facts and in accordance with international law, that is, the "bilateral" approach. This approach denies ASEAN's relevant role in the South China Sea issue, and is also intended to exclude interference from major powers outside the region. However, ASEAN countries advocate negotiating the South China Sea issue with China through the power of the whole, which is usually called the "multilateral approach".

For China, the "bilateral" approach is mainly based on the following three considerations. First, China is concerned about third parties, especially the United States, intervening in the resolution of the South China Sea issue.

The United States has been a prominent player in the South China Sea issue. Although the United States has repeatedly stated its neutral position that it does not stand on the side of any claimant country and supports the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, and in the first decade of the post-Cold War era, the United States has been committed to reducing its excessive power and influence in the region. However, since the United States has signed military alliance treaties with the Philippines and Thailand, and has carried out fairly close military cooperation with Singapore, Vietnam and other countries, China has reason to be skeptical about the intentions of the United States. China believes that the United States is a troublemaker that undermines peace and stability in the region (PRC, 2020). Second, China is worried that ASEAN countries will greatly enhance their bargaining power when negotiating with China as a whole. As individual countries, the strength of ASEAN member states is far behind that of China. Therefore, through bilateral negotiations, China can better use its power and leverage to exert influence. However, when negotiating with ASEAN as a whole, China's comparative advantage will be greatly reduced, the restrictions it faces will increase, and it is more likely to be at a disadvantage in the negotiations. In addition, multilateral negotiations may also make China face an "alliance" including the United States, which is the situation that China least wants to see (Ramadhani, 2016: 4-5). Third, China has a hard line on territorial sovereignty, arguing that it should not be included in multilateral negotiations. For China, territorial sovereignty is an issue that cannot be questioned. China has repeatedly reiterated that it has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and their surrounding waters, which concerns China's core interests. Michael D. Swaine (2010) points out: "China's use of the term 'core interests' on an issue is intended to convey a very high level of commitment to manage or resolve the issue on China's terms without much discussion or negotiation."

For ASEAN, there are also considerations for taking a "multilateral" approach. First, taking a "multilateral" approach is in line with its philosophy or norms. ASEAN has formed the philosophy or norms of multilateralism in its many years of historical practice, and has a strong desire and action to promote this norm to a wider region. During the Cold War, ASEAN had already shown its preference for multilateralism. In the political field, in the process of resolving the Cambodian issue, ASEAN actively promoted the United Nations to propose resolutions and principles for resolving the

Cambodian issue, and promoted the “Democratic Kampuchea Coalition Government” to become the legitimate government of the United Nations, etc., which played an important role in promoting the final resolution of the Cambodian issue. In the economic field, in the face of the damage to the interests of ASEAN countries, especially Singapore, caused by the International Civil Aviation Policy (ICAP) issued by the Australian government, ASEAN countries united as a whole to actively negotiate with Australia on the aviation market, and finally forced Australia to compromise. After the end of the Cold War, ASEAN paid more attention to openness and inclusiveness in the external dimension. For example, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia was revised to encourage non-regional countries to join; the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established to include major powers in the multilateral security dialogue system; the “ASEAN+” regional cooperation mechanism was created to create a regional cooperation model of “small horses pulling big carts”. At the 38th ASEAN Summit held on October 26, 2021, ASEAN adopted the “ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Preserving Multilateralism” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021), emphasizing the importance of ASEAN’s adherence to multilateralism in all fields. The declaration stated:

“REAFFIRMING our belief that regionalism and multilateralism are important principles and frameworks of cooperation, and that their strength and value lie in their rules based on nature, inclusivity, transparency and openness, mutual benefit and Respect;

REITERATE the need for ASEAN to remain united, cohesive, and resilient in promoting its purposes and principles as enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and the commitment to support multilateralism founded on the principles stipulated in the Charter of the United Nations and on the basis of international law, which is the indispensable foundation of a more peaceful, prosperous and just world, as well as emphasizing a committed multilateral approach in responding to emerging opportunities and challenges and actively shaping a rules-based regional architecture that is capable of tackling pressing common regional and global issues.”

Second, from a utilitarian perspective, adopting a multilateral approach will help ASEAN countries gain greater benefits. Chinese scholar Song W. (2015: 7) pointed out that “generally speaking, when small and medium-sized countries build an interdependent economic relationship with a powerful country, they will definitely have political concerns, that is, their unequal status in the interdependence may become a handle for interference and influence by the powerful country. If a form of multilateralism, especially institutionalized multilateralism, is adopted, small and medium-sized countries can unite to defend their independence and rights in this multilateral cooperation, while not giving up the huge benefits of establishing an interdependent relationship with regional powers”. Vietnamese scholars Truong-Minh Vu and Nghiem Anh Thao (2014: 372-373) believe that the multilateral system can become a “weapon of the weak”. First, it creates a communication platform for all parties (especially the weak) to express their opinions. In bilateral relations with powerful countries, decisions are likely to be unilateral, completely controlled by power or resolved through the balance of power, which is obviously disadvantageous to weak countries; second, the multilateral system helps to limit the unilateral actions that powerful countries may take. If powerful countries defy or violate the rules, the legitimacy of the actions of powerful countries will be reduced, while the legitimacy of the actions of weak countries will be enhanced. Finally, the multilateral system is the lowest-cost way to ensure that disputes are resolved through laws and regulations, rather than simply through the balance of power or force. Singaporean scholar Byron Chong (2024) also emphasized: “ASEAN focuses on open and inclusive multilateralism, aiming to create a favorable environment where smaller countries can not only shape the overall outline of the regional order, but also exert a certain degree of influence on the preferences of larger and more powerful countries.”

3.1.2 ASEAN's Persuasion to China in the Multilateralization of the South China Sea Issue

Based on the above differences, in order to avoid further damage to their own interests and to enhance ASEAN's normative influence, ASEAN countries actively promoted the multilateralization of the South China Sea issue through the strategy of “local norm practice” and resisted the “bilateralism” norms advocated by China. Specifically, the measures taken

by ASEAN include the following.

First, ASEAN discussed the South China Sea issue through the multilateral platform, creating a *fait accompli* of the multilateralization of the South China Sea issue. During the Cold War, ASEAN did not speak out on the South China Sea issue as a whole. Even when China and Vietnam had a serious armed conflict over “Chigua Jiao” (Vietnam calls it *Đá Gạc Ma*) in 1988, ASEAN still did not respond. However, after the end of the Cold War, facing the shrinking power of the United States and the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia and China’s increasingly confident behavior, ASEAN countries gradually began to seek to speak out collectively through the ASEAN platform. In 1990, Indonesia held an informal seminar sponsored by Canada to seek the collective position of ASEAN countries on the South China Sea issue. In 1992, ASEAN issued its first joint statement on the South China Sea issue. Since then, the South China Sea issue has become a frequently discussed topic at the ASEAN summit and related ministerial meetings (such as the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting). With the establishment of multilateral cooperation mechanisms centered on ASEAN, the South China Sea issue has also become a frequently discussed topic at the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the summits between ASEAN and its dialogue partners (such as the United States and Japan). Through this multilateral approach, ASEAN has utilized its collective strength and the ASEAN-centered multilateral mechanism, and by controlling the right to set the agenda and issue joint statements after the talks, it has promoted the process of multilateralization of the South China Sea issue, creating a *fait accompli* of the multilateralization of the South China Sea issue. In this way, China’s opposition to multilateralism and advocacy of bilateral negotiations has become, in a certain sense, a self-policy declaration, which is divorced from the practice of the region and ultimately forced China to accept multilateral negotiations.

Second, ASEAN does not directly criticize China by name in its joint statements, but exerts influence in the form of “hopes” and “suggestions”. For example, in July 1992, although ASEAN issued the “1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea” (Centre for International Law, 2017), the statement did not mention China’s name, nor did it condemn China (in February of that year, China passed the “Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Area”). In 1992, when the Philippines proposed to hold an international conference to discuss the South China Sea issue, it was rejected

by ASEAN. Even when the serious “Meiji Jiao Incident” (The Philippines calls it Panganiban Reef) occurred in 1995, ASEAN remained restrained in the joint statement it issued. In the statement, ASEAN only expressed serious concern about the recent incidents that affected peace and stability, but did not directly mention China. At the same time, ASEAN also called on all parties to exercise restraint, avoid taking actions that endanger regional stability and undermine peace and security in the South China Sea, and called for the problems caused by the “Meiji Reef Incident” to be resolved as soon as possible (Zhang, 2010: 70-71). ASEAN’s practice of “saving face” in public has taken into account the comfort of all parties, especially China, and eased China’s concerns about participating in multilateralism.

Third, ASEAN gradually guided China to participate in the multilateral framework in a step-by-step manner. For example, in 1993, Singaporean Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng invited Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen to attend an informal dinner of ASEAN dialogue partners and to participate in the consultation forum between ASEAN and dialogue partners during the 27th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting/Subsequent Ministerial Meeting in 1994. Finally, China participated in the first working meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994 as a founding member. Although China did not participate in this meeting in an official capacity, but as a consulting partner, it was still the first regional multilateral security cooperation organization that China participated in after the end of the Cold War. Before that, China only participated in multilateral organizations centered on the United Nations. Some scholars pointed out: “In a sense, ASEAN is the guide of China’s multilateral diplomacy” (Zhang, 2010: 65). Under the guidance of ASEAN, China gradually entered the multilateral stage, and once it entered this stage, the South China Sea issue became one of the topics that both sides could not avoid. In April 1995, at the China-ASEAN Senior Officials Consultation Meeting held in Hangzhou, ASEAN countries expressed serious concerns about China’s behavior in the “Meiji Reef Incident” and China’s future South China Sea policy. In response, China’s chief representative Tang Jiaxuan made an unexpected move at the time – arranging the delegates to a separate room after the dinner to discuss the South China Sea issue. Although this was only an informal discussion with ASEAN countries, it still marked the first time that China was willing to discuss the South China Sea issue with ASEAN as a whole, breaking China’s previous position of only holding bilateral negotiations with relevant countries.

Since then, China and ASEAN have conducted more substantive coordination on the South China Sea issue. In 2002, the two sides signed the “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” (DOC) and moved towards reaching a “Code of Conduct in the South China Sea” (COC). During the 2014 East Asia Summit, Premier Li Keqiang further clarified the “dual-track approach” to handling the South China Sea issue: “the relevant specific disputes shall be peacefully resolved through negotiations and consultations by the directly concerned parties on the basis of respecting historical facts and international law, and the peace and stability of the South China Sea shall be jointly maintained by China and ASEAN countries” (CGP, 2014). This is the first time that China has clearly stated that it accepts ASEAN’s participation and promotion in the construction of security order in the South China Sea (He, 2021: 128). The proposal of the “dual-track approach” means that China has made a slight adjustment in its approach to handling the South China Sea dispute, from refusing to resolve the South China Sea issue through any multilateral channels to recognizing that it can seek solutions to some issues involving multilateral interests in limited multilateral occasions.

3.2 Normative Indifference: ASEAN’s Resistance to the “Freedom of Navigation” Norm Advocated by the United States

3.2.1 Securitization: The United States Promotes the Spread of the “Freedom of Navigation” Norm

Although “freedom of navigation” as a legal norm has been recognized by the vast majority of countries in the world, the “freedom of navigation” stipulated in the “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea” is very vague, and there are also great differences in international judicial and arbitration practices regarding “freedom of navigation”, which has led to great differences in the understanding of this norm among countries. From the perspective of norm construction, the “freedom of navigation” norm is still in the process of construction. Therefore, this gives the United States, which has strong power and influence, more initiative to construct norms that are beneficial to itself according to its own wishes and promote their diffusion. The reason why we attach importance to norm construction is that, as a mechanism of power, norms are more easily accepted by others than coercive power (Michael and Duvall, 2005). If hegemony supplements

and maintains its material dominance by constructing a social framework that legitimizes its power and leadership, the cost of hegemony can also be reduced.

Securitization operations are of great significance to the generation of norms. Pan Yaling (2019: 57-58) pointed out: "By identifying 'existential threats', securitization operations can provide a persuasive moral logic and effectively establish the urgency of norm generation." Therefore, in order to promote the spread of "freedom of navigation" norms that are beneficial to itself, the United States has gradually securitized the "freedom of navigation" issue in the South China Sea. Barry Buzan (1998: 159) pointed out that the United States often uses securitization methods to legitimize its unilateral actions to interfere in the sovereignty of other countries by constructing threats to the international community, international order, and international law.

First, the United States refers to China as a normative object. Through diagnostic framing, it refers to China as a threat and destroyer of "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, which makes the public reach a common understanding that there is a threat to "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. For example, Peter Dutton (2011: 47) pointed out that China's nine-dash line in the South China Sea is overconfident and aggressive, and is the "culprit" of regional instability. In 2015, Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, pointed out in a speech that "freedom of navigation" has a global standard, not a double standard, that is, China can fly, sail and operate anywhere permitted by international law, while other countries cannot" (US Pacific Command, 2015). On July 11, 2021, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken issued a statement on the fifth anniversary of the Arbitral Tribunal Ruling on the South China Sea, stating that: "Nowhere is the rules-based maritime order under greater threat than in the South China Sea. The People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to coerce and intimidate Southeast Asian coastal states, threatening freedom of navigation in this important global waterway, and called on China to abide by its obligations under international law, cease provocative behavior, and respect the rights of all countries, big and small" (US Mission to ASEAN, 2021).

Second, through prognostic framing, specific strategies and means are proposed to solve the so-called "freedom of navigation" issue in the South China Sea. The United States believes that the "freedom of navigation" issue in the South China Sea should be solved through international law or

international rules. The United States' unilateral accusations against China will not easily gain the recognition of other countries. It also needs to use the discourse of rules to make it credible and legitimate, and then influence the common cognition of the securitization audience (Zhang and Zhang, 2020: 47). Therefore, on the one hand, the United States highlights China's violation of international law and undermining the rules-based international order in its discourse and rhetoric. On the other hand, it points out that the international customary law reflected in the "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea" provides guidelines for the reasonable use and access rights of the ocean. The United States, "along with ASEAN member states and other maritime countries and the wider international community, regards freedom of navigation, public domain access and international legal order in the South China Sea as national interests. The United States not only consistently exercises its right to "freedom of navigation", but also supports other countries in exercising their right to navigate and operate in international waters (US Department of State, 2010). In addition to international legal means, the United States also believes that the issue of "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea should be resolved through multilateral consultations. In June 2011, US Democratic Senator James Webb submitted a "motion calling for a peaceful and multilateral solution to Southeast Asian maritime territorial disputes" to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Webb used the "Impeccable" and "McCain" incidents to accuse China of obstructing the "freedom of navigation" of US warships and merchant ships in the South China Sea, claiming that the United States supports a peaceful and multilateral solution to the South China Sea disputes in order to facilitate the US military's South China Sea patrols (Liu and Xing, 2018: 35).

Third, through motivational framing, the United States encourages allies and partners to participate in collective "freedom of navigation" operations in the South China Sea and maintains their enthusiasm for participation. (1) The United States has vigorously increased its military presence in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, setting an example for allies and partners to participate in collective "freedom of navigation" operations in the South China Sea. To this end, the United States has taken measures including: increasing military budget allocations in the South China Sea, strengthening military presence and force deployment, frequently holding military exercises and large-scale joint military exercises in the South China Sea, and

increasing the frequency of “freedom of navigation” operations by US ships in the South China Sea, directly challenging the normative claims of China and other coastal countries. (2) The United States has strengthened defense and security cooperation with allies such as Japan, the Philippines, and Australia to obtain their support for its “freedom of navigation operations” and also provide support for their participation in “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea. (3) The United States has urged the inclusion of the issue of “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea on multilateral political agendas such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, the ASEAN Summit, and the ASEAN Regional Forum, promoting ASEAN’s attention and urging ASEAN to support the “freedom of navigation” it advocates. For example, on November 23, 2019, Admiral Philip S. Davidson, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, delivered a speech at the International Security Forum. Regarding the COC being negotiated between China and ASEAN, he urged ASEAN countries to ensure that the agreement reached would not restrict their freedom of navigation or their ability to conduct commerce and exercises there (Vergun, 2019).

In short, the United States has been raising the issue of “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea on various occasions and platforms, portraying China as a threat and destroyer of “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea, while the United States is a defender of “freedom of navigation” and international rules, and gradually pressuring relevant countries in the South China Sea to accept the United States’ position, principles and norms. In fact, the “freedom of navigation” norms and related practices advocated by the United States on the South China Sea issue are intended to use its own power to promote the spread of the norms it advocates, and then establish a so-called rule-based order in the South China Sea region dominated by itself. ASEAN countries have a clear understanding of this. As Aileen Baviera (2017), a professor at the Center for Asian Studies at the University of the Philippines, warned: “If ASEAN does not play a leading role in this issue (South China Sea dispute), then the great powers may try to unilaterally impose their own rules, and whether the great powers succeed in calming or exacerbating the conflict in the end, the management of the dispute and the ocean itself will be defined by non-ASEAN actors, thereby infringing on ASEAN’s autonomy and marginalizing the ASEAN regional multilateralism brand within its own geographical scope.” Therefore, in order to prevent the United States from dominating

the construction of order in the South China Sea, ASEAN has resisted the “freedom of navigation” norms advocated by the United States.

3.2.2 Norm Indifference: ASEAN's Resistance to the United States' Promotion of “Freedom of Navigation” Norms

In view of the greater normative pressure on ASEAN in the light of the systematic efforts of the United States to promote the proliferation of “freedom of navigation” norms, ASEAN has mainly adopted a passive resistance strategy, namely norm indifference. First, while the United States frames China as the object of the “freedom of navigation” norm, ASEAN does not target “freedom of navigation” at specific countries. Zhou (2005: 92-94) mentions that if the object of the norm disappears, then the norm will lose its function and the reason for its existence. At the 3rd ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Kuala Lumpur on 4 November 2015, faced with the prospect that there would be no reference to the South China Sea in the joint statement, the US delegation expressed its displeasure and refused to support the draft declaration. Ultimately, due to differences among member states, ASEAN decided not to issue a joint statement and replaced it with a chairman's statement. In the Chairman's Statement, Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein stressed that the joint statement would not actually help resolve the South China Sea disputes and that dwelling on the joint statement would not solve the real problem. Instead, Hishammuddin stressed the importance of concluding a code of conduct in the South China Sea to build mutual trust and confidence and maintain regional peace and stability (Parameswaran, 2015). This approach not only successfully resisted the US attempt to tie the issue of “freedom of navigation” to China's claims in the South China Sea, but also fully reflected ASEAN's emphasis on maintaining overall friendly relations and the practice of “balanced relations” (Wei, 2017: 62-63).

Second, in response to the United States perception of China as a threat to freedom of navigation, ASEAN views China as a collaborator in safeguarding freedom of navigation. In joint statements issued on various occasions, including the ASEAN-China Leaders' Summit and the China-ASEAN Commemorative Summit on the Establishment of Dialogue Relationship, both sides emphasized their commitment to safeguarding the safety and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea in accordance with international law including the 1982 United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In response to the US urging ASEAN to ensure the US and its partners' right to "freedom of navigation" and unrestricted commercial and military exercises in the South China Sea, ASEAN has "appeased" China through various dialogue channels and repeatedly reiterated that it has no intention of taking sides between China and the US. For example, on February 17, 2016, when Obama hosted the US-ASEAN Special Summit, he said: "At this summit, we can advance our shared vision for a regional order that upholds international rules and norms, including freedom of navigation, and resolves disputes through peaceful and lawful means" (Wai, 2016). This is an indirect but clear reference to China's aggressive reclamation and construction of military facilities in the disputed South China Sea. In response, ASEAN countries have responded cautiously. At the dinner that followed, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said regarding the South China Sea dispute: "This issue needs to be resolved peacefully on the basis of international law, but at the same time, we must remember that this is in the context of a cooperative relationship, not an adversarial one." Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak pointed out: "We all agree that the principle of freedom of navigation should be respected, and we all believe that relevant countries should not increase tensions in the region, and when we talk about demilitarization, this also applies to China and the United States" (Wai, 2016).

Third, in terms of the means of resolving the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN has adjusted to the United States's claim of resolving it through international law and multilateralism, emphasizing that it should be resolved under a forum led by ASEAN, rather than just the legal means and multilateral methods advocated by the United States. In July 2016, after the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) announced the award made by the arbitral tribunal, the United States called on China to respect the award made by the arbitral tribunal and suggested that the arbitration case be mentioned in the joint statement of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, while criticizing China for building artificial islands and facilities at sea and sending warships close to the disputed territory to safeguard its "freedom of navigation" rights (Mogato et al., 2016). In response, ASEAN rejected the US suggestion and, based on its own principle of "consensus", did not mention the arbitration case in the joint statement of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, but expressed ASEAN's "serious concern" about the situation in the South China Sea.

It reiterated the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, reiterated the need to enhance mutual trust and confidence, exercise restraint in carrying out activities, avoid actions that may further complicate the situation, and seek peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Emphasizing the importance of non-militarization and self-restraint in all activities, including land reclamation, it is considered urgent to step up efforts to make further substantive progress in the full implementation of the Declaration and to conduct substantive negotiations for the early conclusion of the COC, including the outline and timetable of the COC (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Mari Pangestu, former Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of Indonesia, pointed out that from the perspective of ASEAN, it is beneficial to balance the United States and China, but to do so, there needs to be a common position that benefits all ASEAN member states. One of the difficulties facing ASEAN is that China has various territorial disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia in the South China Sea. The United States said that these disputes should be peacefully resolved through legal means rather than bilaterally, and freedom of navigation should be guaranteed while resolving the disputes. ASEAN takes a similar position, but believes that freedom of navigation should be achieved under a code of conduct negotiated in an ASEAN-led regional forum. ASEAN must maintain this position. The leadership and neutrality of Indonesia, ASEAN's largest country (not a claimant), can help achieve this goal (Pangestu, 2016).

Finally, ASEAN is wary of the involvement of the United States and its partners in the South China Sea issue. ASEAN believes that increasing military-related activities, sending aircraft carriers, increasing naval fleets, submarines, conducting oil exploration, or establishing encirclement alliances cannot build trust. It also points out that mobilizing all ASEAN member states, including non-claimants, to unite against China or tarnish China's image internationally is a departure from ASEAN's way of doing things, which prioritizes consultation, dialogue, non-conflict and non-confrontation. At the same time, these actions cannot encourage China to participate meaningfully in negotiations (Vireak, 2019). In other words, ASEAN is worried that inviting the United States to play a more active role may further arouse China's dissatisfaction and confrontation, thereby

complicating the resolution of disputes. In 2015, Indonesian Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu said: "If regional countries can manage the South China Sea themselves, there is no need to involve other countries" (Parameswaran, 2015). In fact, the United States' incentives to ASEAN are intended to use ASEAN as a tool to constrain China, but ASEAN has a deep understanding of this. Therefore, on the one hand, ASEAN welcomes the United States to play a constructive role, and on the other hand, it focuses on ASEAN's autonomy and hopes to resolve the South China Sea issue within the ASEAN framework. Nguyen Hung Son (2021), vice president of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, noted that in order to manage the South China Sea, the region's top priority is to work towards an open, inclusive, transparent and rules-based regional security architecture in which major decisions are made based on rules and norms rather than power, while properly respecting the interests of all countries.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The South China Sea is becoming a focal area for competition between China and the United States. From the perspective of normative order, China and the United States have put forward their own normative propositions to strengthen the shaping of order in the South China Sea. As a relatively weak actor, ASEAN also hopes to strengthen the shaping of order in the South China Sea to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.

The research in this article shows that ASEAN is not a passive recipient of international norms. It can also exercise autonomy and resist the norms advocated by major powers to a certain extent. On the South China Sea issue, ASEAN faces pressure from the "bilateralism" norm advocated by the powerful actor China and the "freedom of navigation" norm advocated by the United States. In response, ASEAN resorted to the principle of norm subsidiarity, adopted a norm indifference strategy to passively resist the powerful United States, and adopted a local norm practice strategy to actively resist the second-strongest China to maintain its own autonomy.

The actions taken by ASEAN have produced certain effects. First, it gradually made China accept ASEAN's relevant role in the South China Sea issue and made China agree to negotiate with ASEAN on a binding code of conduct, thus avoiding ASEAN's irrelevant role in the South China Sea issue and strengthening ASEAN's shaping of the order in the South China Sea region. Second, it gradually made the United States give up on ASEAN

as the main actor in promoting the “freedom of navigation” norm. This move helped avoid provoking a more intense reaction from China and avoided intensifying the Sino-US conflict. In this sense, ASEAN has achieved certain results in regulating Sino-US conflicts and playing the role of a “buffer” in Sino-US competition.

At the same time, ASEAN’s actions have achieved limited results in strengthening the dominance of ASEAN norms. First, it has not been able to fully constrain China, nor has it reached a more binding COC with China. (1) China has not fully accepted the “multilateralism” norms advocated by ASEAN. Although China recognizes ASEAN’s relevant role in maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea, it still insists that issues involving sovereignty in the South China Sea should be negotiated directly by the relevant parties. This is actually a limited acceptance of “multilateralism”. (2) The protracted negotiations on the COC have seriously constrained ASEAN’s management of great power competition. Although China and ASEAN have reached a consensus to reach a more effective and substantive agreement as soon as possible, so far, the code has been negotiated for more than 20 years, far behind the pace of escalating Sino-US competition. In other words, in order to make the “Code” more meaningful, the progress of diplomatic negotiations cannot continue to lag far behind the changes in the balance of power at sea. (3) The long duration of the negotiations also shows that there is still a lack of trust between the parties.

Second, ASEAN has also failed to effectively prevent the United States from pointing its “freedom of navigation” spearhead at China in the South China Sea. Given that ASEAN does not fully support the “freedom of navigation” norms advocated by the United States, and that different countries have different strategies and interests in the South China Sea issue, the United States has made a second choice and has established a number of small multilateral mechanisms or non-institutional normalized arrangements to replace it according to different agendas and preferences. This includes: the “Quadilateral Security Dialogue” mechanism (QUAD) between the United States, Japan, India and Australia, the trilateral cooperation between the United States, Philippine and Vietnam, the trilateral dialogue between the United States, Japan and Australia, the trilateral security partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS) and other regional multilateral mechanisms, as well as bilateral partners between the United States and Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries. The

United States has instead promoted the spread of its “freedom of navigation” norms in these formal or informal combinations. Although the United States’ “freedom of navigation operations” have only attracted the formal participation of the United Kingdom, Japan and Australia, it has successfully won the support of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries (Oladipo and Brunnstrom, 2021). ASEAN’s disregard for the “freedom of navigation” norms advocated by the United States is essentially a desire to resolve the South China Sea issue in accordance with ASEAN norms under a framework dominated by itself. However, the actions taken by the United States have disrupted ASEAN’s attempt and further divided ASEAN.

Overall, ASEAN as a weaker actor faces greater challenges in shaping an ASEAN-centric regional order in the South China Sea through recourse to the principle of normative subsidiarity. In the future, the key for ASEAN is, first, to accelerate the conclusion of a more substantive COC with China. Although the COC may not be able to resolve the South China Sea disputes once and for all, it has important practical significance in stabilizing China-ASEAN relations. The fact that the South China Sea remained calm for many years after the signing of the DOC is an example. In addition, against the backdrop of escalating competition between China and the United States, a COC with certain binding force has become more practical in stabilizing the situation in the South China Sea.

Second, strengthening the unity and solidarity within ASEAN. At present, as the competition between China and the United States intensifies, the pressure and inducements exerted by China and the United States on ASEAN countries have further increased, which has led to a more obvious trend of internal division within ASEAN. To this end, ASEAN must do its utmost to encourage open and frank dialogue among member states, reduce mutual suspicion among internal member states, and strengthen internal unity and solidarity.

Third, strengthening the influence of ASEAN norms and reviving ASEAN’s reputation. At present, the effectiveness of ASEAN norms is generally questioned. Not only is it ineffective in solving internal regional problems, but also major powers do not trust ASEAN norms to play a role in easing geopolitical competition, which reduces the influence of ASEAN norms. In the future, ASEAN can strengthen cooperation in areas where member states have greater interest and least resistance. For example, in areas such as humanitarian disasters, epidemics, cybersecurity, and cross-

border crimes, it can focus on achieving achievable results in these areas to improve its reputation. At the same time, ASEAN also needs to strengthen its detailed assessment of the dynamics of Sino-US competition, enhance its flexible response capabilities, and better play the role of a buffer in Sino-US competition.

Notes

- ¹ ASEAN norms, according to Acharya's classification, they can be divided into legal-rational norms and socio-cultural norms. Legal-rational norms are formal rational legal principles, which are derived from the universal principles of the Westphalian system, including sovereignty, non-interference, non-use of force in dealing with inter-state relations, and peaceful settlement of disputes. Socio-cultural norms reflect the historical and cultural environment of the actors. For ASEAN, its uniqueness is specifically manifested in the long-advocated ASEAN working method - the "ASEAN Way", which generally includes: consultation, consensus, informality, gradualism, non-confrontation, face-saving, organizational minimization, and non-binding (Acharya, 2001: 47-72; Haacke, 1999: 581-611). Since the end of the Cold War, along with ASEAN's practice of open regionalism, multilateralism has become an extension of the connotation of the "ASEAN Way" (Zhai and Yin, 2023).

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