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The Delicate Equilibrium: How ASEAN Countries Frame the South China Sea Issue and China's Regional Expansion ^[1]

My previous blog examined narrative patterns on Twitter surrounding the South China Sea, as disseminated by China's foreign ministry over the 18-month period preceding its favorable reception of ASEAN's proposed Code of Conduct (COC) for addressing disputes in the region in August 2023. My analysis unveiled a deliberate effort by Beijing to downplay contentious issues in favor of promoting a vision of regional cooperation under its leadership. Now, the question arises: How did ASEAN countries articulate their narrative strategies on Twitter regarding the South China Sea during this critical period?

To answer this question, I concentrated my research on the activities of three specific Twitter accounts: the official handles of the foreign ministries of the Philippines (@DFAPHL) and Malaysia (@MalaysiaMFA), and the official account of ASEAN (@ASEAN). Within the realm of geopolitical dynamics, these three entities exhibit varied stances toward China. First, ASEAN operates as a regional organization encompassing a diverse array of nations, necessitating its public diplomacy efforts to navigate through multifaceted interests and perspectives. Second, Malaysia, owing to its extensive economic ties and longstanding relationship with the Chinese diaspora, holds the distinction of being labeled a "comprehensive strategic partner," of China, a status surpassing China's "strategic partnership" with both ASEAN and the Philippines. Conversely, the Philippines has maintained a historically close geopolitical alignment with the United States. In recent years, tensions have been witnessed between the Philippines and China over the South China Sea, reflected in the more assertive tones observed within Philippine digital diplomacy towards China within the ASEAN framework.

Common Strategies for Leveraging Social Media Affordances

Although adopting a similarly cautious approach as their Chinese counterparts, diplomats from ASEAN nations, particularly those from the Philippines and Malaysia, employed the mention function in their initiatives and narratives concerning the South China Sea issue to a limited extent. However, interactions were predominantly confined to engagements with their respective diplomats and political figures. Similarly, the use of mentions by the ASEAN institutional account was restricted to interactions involving ASEAN officials (e.g., @hourn_kao) and China's mission to ASEAN (@China2ASEAN).

Furthermore, a notable distinction emerged between ASEAN and China regarding the use of hashtags. ASEAN's utilization of hashtags tended to be more structured and targeted. When discussing the South China Sea, relevant actors employed specific hashtags such as #DFASStatement and #DFAForgingAhead (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Philippines), #WismaPutra (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia), and #ASEAN (ASEAN's institutional account) to establish intertextuality with their posted content. Additionally, Malaysia's

diplomatic account employed hashtags like #MalaysiaChina, #DuaHala (meaning “two-way”), and #BilateralAffairs to reinforce their narratives and initiatives concerning China. In contrast, the ASEAN institutional account utilized #ASEANTalk to express and cultivate its relationship with China, focusing on promoting youth exchanges.

The narrative strategy of ASEAN’s official accounts

In the realm of public diplomacy, ASEAN’s official account predominantly crafted narratives that emphasize harmony and peace concerning China and the South China Sea, with occasional exceptions in news releases detailing the activities of ASEAN diplomats.

Narratives from ASEAN’s public diplomacy efforts often focused on events linked to China relations, displaying a discernible bias in this regard. Communication from ASEAN articulates issues with rationality, interpreting figurative policies and diplomatic strategies with precision. Given its multinational regional status in the Asia-Pacific, ASEAN’s public diplomacy primarily aimed to set an institutional tone in the communication process to construct a favorable image for the organization.

Malaysia’s narrative strategy

While ASEAN’s official account strived for a neutral and impartial narrative tone regarding the South China Sea issue, aiming to avoid exacerbating tensions and promote a multilateral, peaceful resolution, Malaysia’s Foreign Ministry adopted a relatively polarized approach. Malaysian foreign service discourse tended to emphasize mutually beneficial cooperation and negotiation when preparing content with the keywords “The South China Sea” and “China,” reflecting the nation’s significant economic, trade, and cultural ties with China. However, when addressing the South China Sea dispute directly, Malaysian diplomats employed a different narrative strategy, advocating for and facilitating cooperation among ASEAN member states to foster collective public opinion and geopolitical pressure, thereby enhancing negotiation leverage with China on a more equitable basis.

The Philippines’ narrative strategy

In contrast to Malaysia’s relatively cordial diplomatic relations with China, the Philippines’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs has historically experienced strained diplomatic and military ties with China, primarily due to disputes over the South China Sea. Recent developments indicated a shift in the Philippines’ narrative strategy towards China and the South China Sea, transitioning from strategic ambiguity to a more assertive stance. Similar to Malaysia, the Philippines’ diplomats prioritized diplomatic initiatives within the ASEAN framework, advocating for intra-ASEAN cooperation to facilitate negotiations with China regarding the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

However, the Philippines MFA also seeks international support and applied pressure on China by highlighting collaboration with European and American partners and quoting their statements. Additionally, the Philippine foreign service utilized Twitter narratives to directly criticize China’s geopolitical actions, emphasizing its commitment to defending its claims in the disputed ocean area.

Consequently, on the plan of digital public diplomacy, ASEAN countries appeared to be navigating a delicate equilibrium between their economic imperatives and

regional solidarity as they engage with China on the South China Sea issue, strategically positioning themselves for future negotiations on the Code of Conduct.

A delicate equilibrium

This exploratory analysis offers insights into the narrative strategies of ASEAN as a collective entity, shedding light on its approach to relations with China and the South China Sea issue. While ASEAN's institutional account adopts a diplomatic and neutral tone to bolster its credibility and authority, Malaysia's MFA underscores ASEAN's pivotal role in regional geopolitics and advocates for a cooperative regional approach to resolving South China Sea disputes. Conversely, the Philippines has transitioned from ambiguity to clarity in addressing the South China Sea issue in the public diplomacy arena, influenced by its geopolitical dynamics with both China and Western nations.

However, ASEAN countries have opted for a cautious approach in responding to China's activities in the South China Sea and framing the related issues, displaying limited public diplomacy assertiveness. This circumspection can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the substantial presence of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, the significant power disparity between ASEAN and China, and economic considerations. The economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have accentuated the reliance of ASEAN member states on China's market for their economic revival and growth, particularly in vital sectors such as tourism and agriculture, which form the backbone of most ASEAN economies. Additionally, the ambiguous stance on the South China Sea issue may enable continued economic and trade engagements with China while also furnishing leverage for collective bargaining within the ASEAN framework. Consequently, on the plan of digital public diplomacy, ASEAN countries appeared to be navigating a delicate equilibrium between their economic imperatives and regional solidarity as they engage with China on the South China Sea issue, strategically positioning themselves for future negotiations on the Code of Conduct.
