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Over the last year, China's "political" annexation of the South China Sea has increasingly dominated global and regional news headlines.

While much media and academic attention has been given to the changing US-China relationship and the two powers' symbolic military positioning in the South China Sea, China's bold and daring cartographic annexation – through its nine-dash territorial demarcation – has profound implications for the South-east Asian region and the coherence of Asean.

CHINA'S REGIONAL FOOTPRINT

The marine territory that China is claiming with its nine-dash line is so huge – amounting to 90 per cent of the South China Sea – that it raises the question of whether China can also claim membership of the region of South-east Asia.

China's marine claims have three spatial implications for the region:

- It says South China Sea claims are its "core" national interest, which underscores national primordial attachments in South-east Asia;
- It sees the marine claims as a product of a "regional order", not an international order based on the "freedom of the seas"; and
- It sees its Mekong and South China Sea involvement as an extension of its national and geo-political relations with states in the region. It unilaterally invites itself into the region with economic carrots for individual states.

China's bid at territorial annexation of the South China Sea has left

members of Asean – a 10-nation regional grouping – in disarray. If it succeeds, China will control much of the region's marine highways and the trade that passes through the South China Sea, estimated to be worth US\$5 trillion (S\$7.1 trillion) a year. It could no more be seen as an outsider of the South-east Asian region.

In Asean meetings, China's territorial positioning in South-east Asia will give it legitimate rights to assert its regional and national interests. Already some Asean members are jostling to embrace the rising dragon – and this is causing anxiety to other members, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. Malaysia and Thailand seem to walk a fine line between the United States and China.

China's political rhetoric and public debates with the US over the South China Sea demonstrate that Beijing sees its claims as part of a "regional order" subject to a regional dialogue with Asean states, as opposed to the US position of an international order and freedom of the seas.

Its "regional order" claim translates as a public assertion that South-east Asia has become its geopolitical turf, almost as the US Monroe Doctrine did for Latin America. The shift in global politics is the move from the Washington to a Beijing consensus, for the rising dragon needs a geopolitical region of its own design.

China's cartographic claim of territory underscores the very nature of how Western powers in the 19th century claimed large territories in South-east Asia by mapping territorial areas as their crown lands. Will the South-east Asian states be effective in developing counterclaims in the South China Sea by mapping their marine territories?

As Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul demonstrates, Thailand to some extent successfully protected itself by keeping its national "geobody" intact with cartographic delimitations that countered those of the British and French in the 19th

century.

Will South-east Asian countries accept the Finlandisation of their region by Chinese hegemony, the way Finland acquiesced to Soviet influence over its policies during the Cold War?

Despite its current equity crash and trading woes, China's economy seems like a rising global behemoth. Yet the country's Achilles' heel lies in its growing national debt, its fragile domestic political system and the imponderable question of whether a capitalist economy can jell with a communist political system in a sustainable manner.

With its economic prowess, China seems for the moment to have the upper hand.

The rising dragon is using economic bribery to win over South-east Asian states and its task is made easier by weak national governments, disparities of wealth and corrupt politicians.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA'S RESPONSE

Academics in various disciplines have, for decades, debated the identity and character of South-east Asia. Even though there are sceptics who question the region's "cultural and social" homogeneity, archaeologists, anthropologists, geographers and revisionist historians accept the region's salient cultural identity. Others accept by de facto means the region's identity because it can neither fall under the East Asian nor South Asian cultural realms. This was put to the test when Sri Lanka, under President J. R. Jayewardene, requested admission into Asean and was politely told that it could not be accepted because the country was not of the same socio-cultural fabric of regional members.

Will China's unilateral incursion in the region give it regional legitimacy?

The regional engagement is also taking on rather "primordial attachments" which will affect the Chinese populations in the region. China's declared national "core" interests deal with "primordial

attachments" and can be extended to overseas Chinese in the region. This can upset the apple cart of Chinese minorities seeking assimilation, accommodation or integration within national populations. The Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia's bold walk through Petaling Street in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown late last year, shortly after a racially charged political rally, signalled China's "defensive" stance towards overseas Chinese populations.

While both the US and China are locked in psychological warfare due to "perceptions" of each other's threats, the South-east Asian region has become a marine theatre of Huntington's "clash" of civilisations. South-east Asians have been used to centuries of civilisational changes, from Chinese to Indian to Middle Eastern and Western.

Unlike the West which colonised the region, China has had a long history of "functional" political and economic relations with kingdoms in the region.

With history and geography on China's side, regional leaders might in the long term acquiesce to their rising neighbour.

After all, South-east Asians reflect a plastic culture which operates adaptably and pragmatically, with a focus on the present rather than the past. Hence China's historical arguments for its marine claims carry less impact with citizens in the region than its current economic, strategic and political presence.

On the other hand, China's nationalistic and by extension "primordial relations" in its territorial expansion might trigger emotional and passionate responses from the region's peoples, which might be difficult to appease in the short run.

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• S.E.A. View is a weekly column on South-east Asian affairs.

S.E.A. View

Is Chinese influence redefining S-E Asia?