

Economic Relations Between China and ASEAN: The Shadow of the South China Sea Issue

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Abstract

China-ASEAN relations have experienced remarkable growth and transformation over the past few decades, driven by China's emergence as a global economic powerhouse and ASEAN's dynamic regional integration efforts. However, the South China Sea issue has cast a persistent shadow over their economic partnership. This paper examines the economic relations between China and ASEAN and the impact of the issue on these relations. Employing a multi-faceted approach, the paper finds that the South China issue had a negative impact on China-ASEAN economic relations, leading to tensions and disputes, a potential economic loss, a hindered economic integration, and a more cautious approach from ASEAN countries in their economic relations with China.

Keywords: China-ASEAN, South China Sea, economic relations

JEL codes: F15, F51

Introduction

Economic relations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been growing rapidly in recent years, with China now being ASEAN's largest trading partner and ASEAN China's second-largest trading partner. This deep economic integration benefited both sides, helping to drive economic growth and development in both regions. China and ASEAN have developed strong economic ties over time, with trade relations between the two regions growing rapidly. The establishment of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area has played a significant role in promoting export growth for East Asia as a whole. The economic and trade cooperation between China and ASEAN is advancing

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steadily, reflecting the increasingly close relationship between them (Bhowmik et al., 2021). Furthermore, the strengthening economic ties between ASEAN and China have positioned ASEAN as a hub of free trade agreement activity (Safuan, 2018; Selvarajan, 2015). This highlights the importance of ASEAN as a key player in the global economy.

In this sense, the relations have experienced remarkable growth and transformation over the past few decades. China's emergence as a global economic powerhouse and ASEAN's dynamic regional integration efforts have drawn both parties closer together in trade, investment, and various forms of economic cooperation. However, the remarkable achievements in their economic partnership have been accompanied by a persistent shadow—the South China Sea (SCS) issue.

The SCS issue casts a shadow over this otherwise positive relationship. China claims almost the entire SCS, which is disputed by several ASEAN members, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. This dispute led to tensions and mistrust between China and some ASEAN members. The dispute over the SCS has the potential for conflict, especially in the ASEAN region (Setyawati & Amandha, 2022). China has emerged as a regional power and has carried out maritime expansion into the SCS (De Castro, 2021).

China claims the majority of the SCS, based on a nine-dash line that was first published in 1947. The nine-dash line encompasses most of the islands and reefs in the SCS, as well as vast areas of maritime territory. The other claimant countries reject China's nine-dash line claim and have their own competing claims to islands and reefs in the SCS. The SCS dispute is a major geopolitical issue in Southeast Asia and it has the potential to destabilize the region.

This paper will examine the economic relations between China and ASEAN and the impact that the SCS issue had on these relations. Hence, the purpose is to contribute to an understanding of the interplay between geopolitics and economics in this critical region. It might provide insights for policymakers and scholars interested in the evolving landscape of international relations in Southeast Asia. In doing so, I employ a multi-faceted approach to comprehensively analyze the economic relations between China and ASEAN. Data collection primarily relies on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Data is gained from secondary sources and is analyzed through document reviews and academic literature published within the last 10 years. The ASEAN Secretariat webpage serves as a primary source for accessing relevant documents and information. Additionally, media monitoring was conducted to gather relevant news articles, opinion pieces and analyses from mainstream media outlets. Hence, the approach is mostly qualitative by nature. Some statistical information can be found as complementary.

The paper follows a structured approach, beginning with an introduction outlining its purpose and scope. The subsequent sections delve into economic relations between China and ASEAN, the SCS issue, and its impact on economic relations. The paper concludes with insights into future prospects and policy recommendations.

1. Geopolitics and economic relations

Since this paper addresses economic relations between countries that are in the shadows of territorial disputes, it is crucial to examine the complex interplay between economics and geopolitics. Economic relations at the international level refer to the interactions and exchanges of goods, services, capital and knowledge between nations (Malakhova et al., 2020; Taras & Ponomarenko, 2022). Meanwhile, geopolitics is concerned with how geography affects politics. In this sense, political power is influenced by geographic factors, especially territorial boundaries in connection with diplomatic relations (Devetak et al., 2017). Geopolitics and economics are inextricably intertwined, influencing each other in a complex and dynamic manner. This is particularly evident in the context of countries engaged in territorial disputes, where political tensions can severely impact economic ties. Various International Relations (IR) theories shed light on this intricate relationship, providing valuable insights into the ways geopolitical factors shape economic interactions and vice versa. This part aims to explore them.

Realism, a dominant paradigm in IR theory, emphasizes the importance of power and national interest in shaping international relations. According to realists, states are inherently self-interested actors, constantly seeking to maximize their power and security (Waltz, 1979). In the context of territorial disputes, realists argue that geopolitical tensions can disrupt economic relations between the disputing parties. The threat of conflict and the possibility of economic sanctions can deter trade, investment and other forms of economic cooperation (Rosecrance, 1986).

Neoliberal institutionalism, an opponent of realism, presents an alternative perspective, emphasizing the role of international institutions and cooperation in shaping economic relations. Proponents of this theory argue that international institutions can help mitigate the negative effects of geopolitical tensions by providing a framework for dialogue and cooperation (Keohane, 1984). For instance, regional trade agreements can facilitate economic ties between countries with territorial disputes, reducing the risk of economic disruptions caused by political conflicts.

Dependency theory, on the other hand, highlights the unequal power dynamics between developed and developing countries, arguing that the global economic system perpetuates the exploitation of weaker nations by richer ones (Frank, 1969). In connection with territorial disputes, dependency theory suggests that weaker states may be more vulnerable to economic coercion by stronger states, further exacerbating tensions and hindering economic cooperation (Mumme & Grundy-Warr, 1998). This can be particularly evident in cases where the disputed territory holds significant economic resources or strategic importance.

Marxist theory emphasizes the role of class struggle and economic exploitation in shaping international relations. Marxists argue that the capitalist system is inherently conflict-ridden, leading to competition among states for resources and markets (Teschke & Wyn-Jones, 2017). Concerning territorial disputes, Marxist theory suggests that economic interests can play a significant role in fueling conflicts, as states may seek to control disputed territories for their economic value (Colás & Pozo, 2011).

Constructivism takes a more ideational approach, arguing that concepts and norms play a crucial role in shaping international relations (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1992). Constructivists emphasize the role of shared identities and beliefs in fostering cooperation, suggesting that reducing geopolitical tensions can create a more conducive environment for economic relations. Regarding territorial disputes, constructivists argue that fostering dialogue and understanding between the disputing parties can help overcome the negative perceptions that often contribute to economic disruptions (Fierke, 2015).

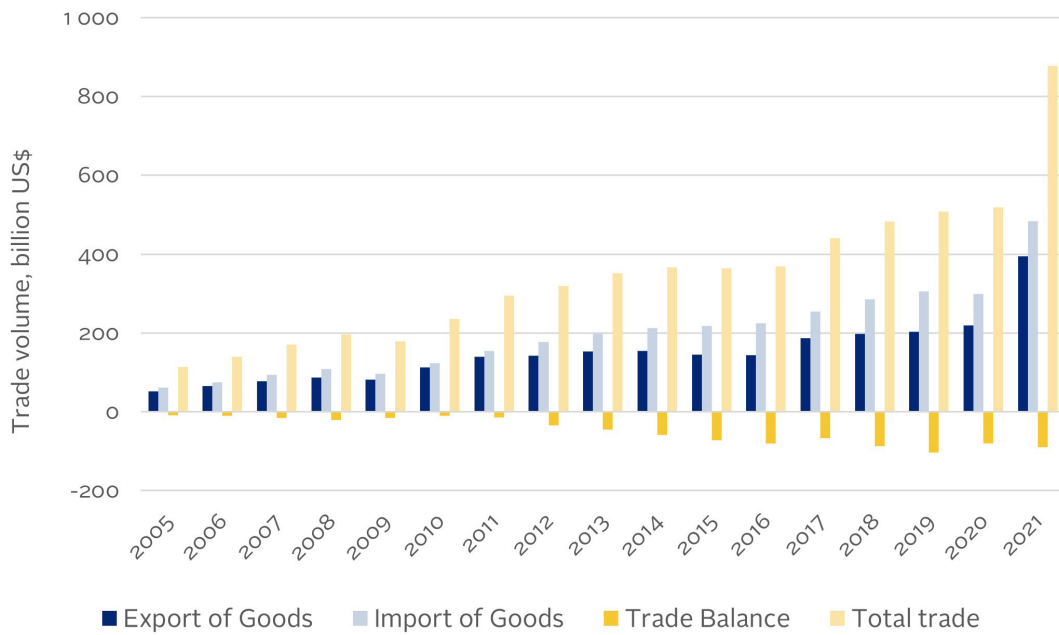
Geopolitics and economics are inextricably linked, influencing each other in a complex and dynamic manner. In the context of territorial disputes, geopolitical tensions can severely disrupt economic relations, while economic interdependence can provide incentives for cooperation and conflict resolution. By reviewing the different perspectives offered by each theory, we can get a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between these two factors. To further our understanding of the relationship between geopolitics and economics, we will now examine the case of China and ASEAN in the SCS to see how it aligns with the theories discussed.

2. China-ASEAN economic relations

As a regional bloc, ASEAN comprises of ten countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. Established on August 8 1967, ASEAN's primary goals were to promote regional peace, stability and economic growth (Putra et al., 2019). In its early years, ASEAN focused on fostering regional cooperation through various initiatives, including economic cooperation, cultural exchange and infrastructure development. Today, ASEAN is a major regional power and a key player in global affairs. The bloc's combined population of over 600 million and its growing economies make it an attractive market for foreign investment. ASEAN is also a major producer of natural resources and goods (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). With this potential, ASEAN engages increasingly with external partners, including China, India, and the United States (Rattanasevee, 2023)

In economic relations with China, ASEAN has experienced substantial growth and transformation over the years. This dynamic partnership has been marked by a significant increase in trade volumes, investments, and multifaceted economic cooperation. Trade relations have been a cornerstone of this relationship, with China and ASEAN consistently expanding their trade volumes. In 2020, the two parties reached a remarkable trade volume of over \$600 billion, making China the largest trading partner for ASEAN, and vice versa (Bi, 2021). An example of this can be seen in Figure 1. From 2005 to 2021, the trend is always growing.

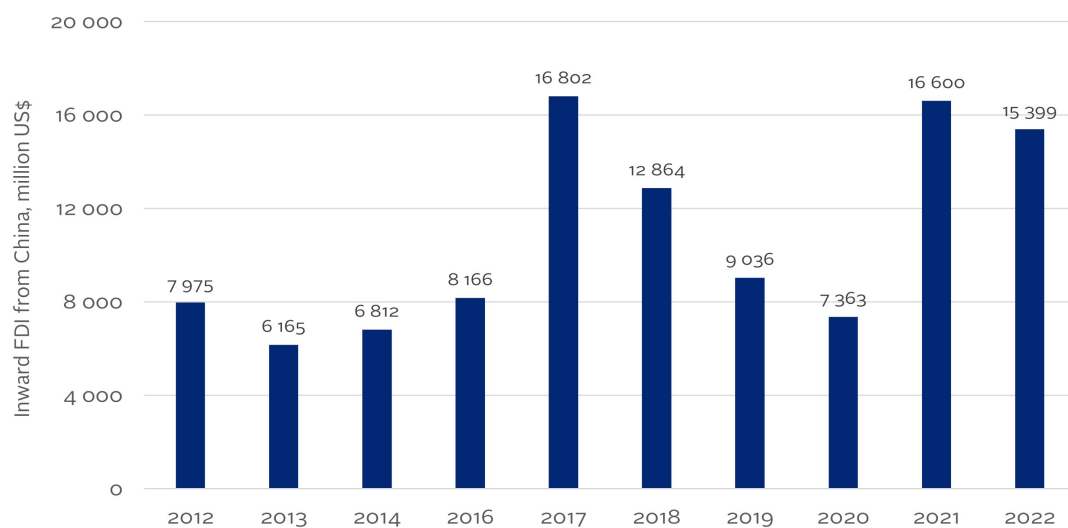
Figure 1: ASEAN trade with China



Source: Edited by the author based on ASEAN Secretariat (2023)

Investment flows played a vital role in strengthening this economic bond. China's investments in ASEAN countries, particularly in the infrastructure, manufacturing and technology sectors, have been substantial. In return, ASEAN nations found opportunities in China's vast consumer market and established manufacturing bases. These investments have contributed to the development of both sides (Bhowmik et al., 2021). Chinese FDI to ASEAN is mainly on manufacturing and real estate. As plotted in Figure 2, the tendency has fluctuated over the past decade, with a peak of US\$16.8 billion in 2017 and a low of US\$7.3 billion in 2020. In 2022, FDI inflow from China to ASEAN was US\$15.4 billion, slightly lower than the previous year.

Figure 2: FDI from China to ASEAN



Source: Edited by the author based on ASEAN Secretariat (2023)

Moreover, economic cooperation between China and ASEAN extends beyond trade and investment. Initiatives such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) have played a pivotal role in reducing or eliminating tariffs on various goods, thereby fostering trade. Signed in 2002 and coming into effect in 2010, ACFTA serves as a comprehensive free trade agreement between both parties. Its key features are tariff reduction, investment liberalization and customs cooperation. In this development, the cooperation also extends to areas like agriculture, tourism and technology transfer, enhancing the depth of their economic engagement.

Regional organizations have been instrumental in facilitating this relationship. ASEAN serves as a crucial platform for China's engagement with Southeast Asia. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contributed to China's investments in infrastructure projects within ASEAN countries, enhancing connectivity and trade within the region (Wang, 2022).

The economic relationship between China and ASEAN is characterized by its evolution into a robust and multifaceted partnership. The growth in trade volumes, substantial investment flows, and diversified economic cooperation underscore the importance of this relationship in fostering economic growth and development in the region.

Trade between China and the ASEAN has blossomed into a robust economic partnership. Remarkably, in 2022, the trade volume between the two entities surged to an unprecedented USD 722 billion, solidifying China's position as ASEAN's largest trading partner for an impressive 14 consecutive years. This remarkable growth is underpinned by various factors, including mutual market access agreements and the substantial reduction of trade barriers, notably through initiatives like the ACFTA (PRC State Council, 2021).

In addition to robust trade, investment flows play a pivotal role in strengthening economic ties. Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) into ASEAN has been substantial. In 2022, it reached USD 15.4 billion, surging from just USD 9 billion in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. This underscores the attractiveness of ASEAN countries as investment destinations for Chinese investors, particularly in sectors such as infrastructure, manufacturing and technology. Concurrently, ASEAN nations have seized investment opportunities in China, further fortifying economic relations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

3. The South China Sea issue

The historical context of the SCS dispute is complex and spans over several centuries. The dispute involves competing territorial claims over the SCS and its islands by multiple countries, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan (Roy et al., 2017). The origins of the dispute can be traced back to ancient times, with accounts of tributes made to the Imperial Court of various Chinese dynasties by "barbarians" from the southern seas (Gao & Jia, 2013).

Throughout history, different empires and states exerted control over parts of the SCS, leading to overlapping claims and disputes. The modern dispute can be traced back to the early 20th century when China began asserting its claims over

the SCS based on historical and geographical factors, particularly the nine-dash line (Rossiana, 2022). The nine-dash line, which was first officially published by China in 1947, encompasses a vast area of the SCS and overlaps with the exclusive economic zones of other countries (Gao & Jia, 2013). See Table 1 below.

Table 1: South China Sea dispute timeline

Year	Event
1947	China Marks South China Sea Claims
1974	China Claims Parcel Islands
1976	Philippines Discovers Oil Field
1979	Sino-Vietnamese War
1982	UNCLOS Is Established
1988	China Sinks Three Vietnamese Ships
1992	China Passes Law on the Territorial Sea
1996	Mischief Reef Incident
2002	ASEAN and China Code of Conduct
2009	Malaysia, Vietnam Submit UN Claims
2010	United States Affirms Interest in the South China Sea
2011	Philippines Summons Chinese Envoy
2012	Scarborough Shoal Incident
2012	Vietnam Passes Maritime Law
2012	ASEAN Fails to Issue Communique
2013	Philippines Files UN Arbitration Over China's Sovereignty Claims
2014	U.S., Philippines Sign New Defense Pact
2014	Vietnamese, and Chinese Ships Collide After China Moves Oil Rig
2015	U.S. Warship Patrols Near Chinese-Built Islands
2016	China Deploys Missiles to Paracels
2016	Tribunal Rules Against China's South China Sea Claims
2016	Duterte Bans Fishing in Shoal Waters
2019	Philippine President Alarmed by Chinese Ships
2019	Chinese Ship Spends Months in Vietnam's EEZ
2020	Tensions Rise in South China Sea Amid Pandemic
2021	Chinese and Philippine Navies Face Off
2022	Indonesia and Vietnam Finalize EEZ
2023	Philippines Welcomes Expanded U.S. Military Presence

Source: Council on Foreign Relations (2024)

The SCS dispute gained international attention in the post-World War II era, as countries in the region sought to assert their sovereignty over the islands and maritime resources in the area. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) established a legal framework for resolving maritime disputes in 1982, including those in the SCS (Wardhana, 2021). However, the competing claims and overlapping maritime boundaries led to tensions and occasional conflicts in the region.

The dispute has been further complicated by the strategic and economic importance of the SCS. The region is rich in natural resources, including oil and gas reserves, and is a major shipping route for global trade. The control and access to these resources heightened the stakes for the countries involved in the dispute (Anand & Forbes, 2021). Additionally, the SCS has become a geopolitical flashpoint, with major powers, such as the United States and China, asserting their influence in the region (Simon, 2012).

Efforts to resolve the SCS dispute have been ongoing, with various diplomatic initiatives and negotiations taking place. The ASEAN has played a central role in facilitating dialogue and promoting a peaceful resolution to the dispute (Setyawati & Amandha, 2022). However, progress has been slow, and tensions continue to simmer in the region.

The SCS issue holds significant importance in regional geopolitics. The region witnessed a shift in geopolitical dynamics, with the potential for open conflict (Sarjito et al., 2022). The SCS is a strategic location that serves as a sea communication route, connecting different regions (Matondang et al., 2022). The disputes in the SCS have ramifications for Asian regional stability (Mukherjee, 2022). The region has been a site of conflict for decades due to competing territorial claims and the abundance of resources (Anand & Forbes, 2021). China's emergence as a regional power and its maritime expansion into the SCS tested the capacity and limits of ASEAN in resolving security issues (De Castro, 2021). The SCS issue has the potential for conflict, especially in the ASEAN region (Setyawati & Amandha, 2022). The disputes in the SCS involve not only claiming countries but also other countries with interests in the region (Benyamin & AlmuBaroq, 2022).

The SCS issue is also intertwined with power dynamics and leadership in East Asia (Weissmann, 2019). China's actions in the SCS are seen as an opportunistic projection of power, challenging the influence of the current hegemon (Ataka, 2016). The United States and China are engaged in a narrative battle about leadership in the region (Weissmann, 2019). Japan, viewing the SCS as its maritime lifeline, aims to expand its influence in Southeast Asian security affairs through the issue (Wu, 2020). The SCS issue reflects China's effort to dislodge the US as the hegemonic power in the region and establish its sphere of influence (Fong & Gek Koon, 2019).

The SCS issue has implications for regional institutions and conflict management (Emmers, 2014). The prospect of ASEAN becoming more divided over the issue is a real possibility, due to divergent views and China's influence within the association (De Castro, 2020). The region witnessed a paradigm shift in research

towards finding a realistic and peaceful resolution to the disputes (Teixeira, 2019). The complexity of the SCS issues poses challenges to regionalism in Southeast Asia. The SCS dispute is a matter of seizure or claim of territory, making it a complicated problem (Priangani & Hattu, 2020).

4. Impact of the SCS issue on economic relations

The SCS issue had a mixed impact on China-ASEAN economic relations. On the one hand, trade and investment between China and ASEAN countries continued to grow in recent years. China is now ASEAN's largest trading partner. On the other hand, the SCS issue created uncertainty and tension that has hindered further economic cooperation. The dispute raised concerns about China's intentions in the region and led to increased militarization of the SCS. This created uncertainty among businesses and investors, making them more hesitant to invest in the region.

The fear of a conflict in the SCS also had an impact on China-ASEAN economic relations. A simulation by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that a war in the SCS could have a devastating impact on the region's economy. The study found that the closure of key maritime waterways could increase the cost of shipping. It could also lead to a welfare loss of around 11% of GDP for Southeast Asia on average (Coşar & Thomas, 2020).

Table 2: Forecasted welfare losses for countries in the region

Country	% reductions in real GDP
Singapore	22.17
Vietnam	13.23
Thailand	13.19
Philippines	10.78
Malaysia	10.72
Cambodia	9.71
Indonesia	5.64
Myanmar	3.39

Source: Coşar & Thomas (2020)¹

Furthermore, the SCS conflict had implications for regional security and stability, which are crucial for economic relations between China and ASEAN. The escalation of regional conflicts around the SCS has increased due to China's claims to most of the waters in the region (Budiana & Djuyandi, 2023). This raised concerns among ASEAN countries about China's intentions and led to a more cautious approach to their economic relations with China.

¹ This table has been slightly modified for Southeast Asian countries accordingly. Not all the countries covered.

China's actions created an atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust. This led to a decrease in Philippine-China trade. In the first seven months of 2023, China's trade with the Philippines declined by 14%, driven by falling commodity prices and weak global demand for electronic products. This decline also led to a decrease in the share of Philippines-China trade in overall China-ASEAN trade, from 15.85% in 2022 to 13.96% in 2023 (Siqi & Jennings, 2023).

China has been using its economic clout to pressure ASEAN countries to support its position on the SCS issue, which further undermined trust and unity within the bloc (Sumadinata, 2023). However, both sides have a strong interest in maintaining stable and prosperous economic relations. It is important to find ways to manage the SCS conflict and build trust in order to maximize the economic benefits for both parties.

The SCS issue is not only a matter of territorial disputes but also has broader implications for regional stability and security. The conflict raised concerns about China's aggression and assertiveness in the Asia Pacific area (Hongbin & Ullah, 2022). It also led to geopolitical turbulence in the region and added complexity to security threats (Sukmawijaya et al., 2022) from economic and military aspects. In some parts of the waters there is an overlap of jurisdictions between claimant states (Brunei Darussalam, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and China). The South China Sea is a vital sea communication route that connects different regions, resolving the conflict crucial for maintaining political stability.

Efforts to resolve the SCS conflict have been made through various means. The ASEAN offered a Code of Conduct (CoC) as a potential dispute settlement mechanism (Rossiana, 2022). CoC is a set of non-binding rules and guidelines aimed at managing disputes and promoting cooperation in the SCS. It was first proposed by China and ASEAN in 2002, but negotiations have been slow and progress has been limited. ASEAN member states are still not united in their approach to the dispute (Setyawati & Amandha, 2022). Dialogue and diplomacy remain important tools for resolving the conflict and preventing further escalation.

Conclusion

The SCS issue is a complex and challenging one. But still, there are some opportunities to promote economic relations between China and ASEAN. One opportunity is to focus on areas of cooperation that are less likely to be affected by the conflict, such as trade in goods and services that are not directly related to the SCS. We see that the potential economic growth for both sides is there. Another opportunity is to strengthen regional institutions, such as ASEAN, that can play a role in managing conflict and promoting cooperation. By working together, China and ASEAN should minimize the negative impact of the SCS issue on their economic relations and build a more prosperous and stable region.

The SCS issue is indeed complex and challenging, but it is important to find ways to manage it and promote economic cooperation between China and ASEAN. The economic relations between these parties are beneficial to both of them, and they should not be allowed to be derailed by the SCS issue. By working together, China and ASEAN could develop a framework acceptable to all parties involved. In this regard, a Code of Conduct in the SCS is still in negotiation. If it is satisfactory to all parties, it would help to reduce tensions and create a more conducive environment for economic cooperation.

Pertaining to the theories mentioned, we could understand how realism might help to explain how the threat of conflict and the possibility of economic sanctions leads to distrust and political uncertainty. Neoliberal institutionalism would highlight the role of international institutions in mitigating the negative effects of geopolitical tensions. The establishment of the ACFTA provided a platform for leveraging cooperation among ASEAN member states and China, which has helped to reduce tensions and promote economic cooperation. Dependency theory draws attention to the unequal power dynamics between China and ASEAN. China's economic dominance created a situation where ASEAN countries could be more vulnerable to economic coercion by China, which can further exacerbate tensions and hinder economic cooperation. Marxist theory emphasizes the role of economic interests in driving conflicts. The SCS dispute is, in part, rooted in the competition between China and ASEAN for control of the region's vast natural resources and strategic importance. Finally, constructivism would suggest that the decision to reduce geopolitical tensions is deeply intertwined with the shared norms and ideas held by the involved parties. Similarly, addressing the root causes of territorial conflicts necessitates a thorough examination of how these norms and ideas became entrenched in the foreign policies of the respective countries.

Future research should focus on the intricate interplay between geopolitics and economics in the South China Sea (SCS) region, particularly examining the roles of domestic politics, investment flows and regional and global institutions. A deeper understanding of domestic political dynamics within China and ASEAN can help predict how political shifts and policy changes affect economic interactions. Quantifying the impact of the SCS dispute on investment flows can assess the extent to which geopolitical tensions influence economic decision-making. Evaluating the effectiveness of regional and global institutions in managing the SCS dispute and fostering economic cooperation is crucial for de-escalating tensions and creating a conducive environment for economic growth. By understanding these dynamics, policymakers can better anticipate and mitigate the effects of geopolitical tensions on economic relations between China and ASEAN, promoting sustainable economic cooperation and regional stability.

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