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Securitization in East Asia

How did the securitization discourse of the South China Sea disputes in high-level state communication of the Philippines and Vietnam evolve from 2009 to 2024?

Topic and Research Question

The territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) are widely portrayed as a major geopolitical security hotspot of our time. Although the SCS is a vast area where the different interests of various actors compete, research tends to predominantly focus on the material military-strategic aspects of the disputes and their implications for the Sino-US rivalry.

To contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the disputes' nature, this thesis answers the research question: "How did the securitization discourse of the South China Sea disputes in high-level state communication of the Philippines and Vietnam evolve from 2009 to 2024?". The choice of the Philippines and Vietnam as country cases allowed for the study of two directly involved regional middle powers, while the selected timeframe of the years from 2009 to 2024 accounts for the most recent developments of the disputes.

The conducted quantitative and qualitative content analysis of relevant security discourse generated empirically replicable results that addressed several academic research gaps. Additional relevance lies in the more complete understanding of the regional security dynamics, which allows ASEAN, China and the US to better inform their strategies of managing the disputes.

State of the Art

This thesis builds on the two main theoretical contributions of the Copenhagen School of security studies, being securitization theory (ST) and sectoral security.

Securitization studies "who securitizes, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why, with what results, and, not least, under what conditions (i.e., what explains when securitization is successful)" (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 32). In its essence, securitization is an extreme form of politicization where a regular political issue is constructed as an urgent matter of security through discourse, which allows for the mobilization of resources that would have otherwise not been possible. Successful securitization can therefore be identified by observable security practices (Floyd 2010, 53). Additionally, the proposed sectoral approach to security along five sectors – economic, environmental, military, political and societal security – simultaneously

widens and deepens the definition of security beyond the traditional military survival of states.

Existing research applying ST to the region of East Asia highlights its utility for the study of territorial disputes and notes that the SCS disputes have generally become securitized, but an empirical application to the discourses of the Philippines and Vietnam in the most recent years is absent.

Methodology and Approach

The applied approach builds on a descriptive quantitative and qualitative content analysis to track the evolution of securitization discourse within coded texts.

Data for the high-level securitization discourses was defined as the individual country contributions to the ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlooks (ARF ASO) for the years from 2009 to 2024. This ensured a reasonable level of comparability regarding the potentially diverse discourse strategies of the two cases. The texts were manually collected and coded using QualCoder. The coding process was guided by a developed codebook that accounted for the major elements of securitization: referent objects (what is threatened?), existential threats (what poses the danger?), functional actors (other influential actors) and security practices. The overarching categories of referents and threats were further classified to reflect their corresponding security sector, whereas security practices were divided into either intended or performed measures.

The coded texts were subsequently analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively for each country and year individually. The quantitative content analysis examined the general length of the ASOs and the proportion of the SCS disputes in them, as well as the numerical occurrences and volatility of each category and code. The qualitative content analysis investigated the employed thematic expressions used for each category and code for short-term trends and long-term patterns.

These individual results were then compared to uncover any differences and similarities in the securitization discourses of both countries, thereby answering the research question.

Main Facts

The ASOs of both countries have overall grown in length and were generally longer in the Philippines, but had a higher proportion dedicated to the SCS disputes in Vietnam.

The most common sectors of referents used by the Philippines, in order of frequency, are: 1. political (90), 2. military (61), 3. economic (17), 4. environmental (15), 5. other (14), and 6. societal (0); whereas for Vietnam the order is: 1. military (81), 2. political (64), 3. other (25), 4. economic (12), 5. environmental (7), and 6. societal (0). Thematically, both countries share most of their major themes, including the long-term patterns of peace and stability, as well as the recent trends of confidence, rights and trust as most common referent objects.

The most common sectors of threats used by the Philippines, in order of frequency, are: 1. military (99), 2. other (83), 3. political (8), 4. environmental and societal (1 each), and 5. economic (0); whereas for Vietnam the order is: 1. other (58), 2. military (57), 3. economic (1), and 4. environmental, political and societal (0 each). Thematically, both countries share most of their major themes, including the long-term pattern of disputes and the recent trend of tensions as most common existential threats.

Functional actors have over time become a more dominant element in both countries' high-level securitization discourse but were more present in the Philippines. Common themes were references to themselves and to China, as well as to institutions of international law, particularly the COC, DOC and UNCLOS.

Security practices have over time also become a more dominant part in both countries' high-level securitization discourse, however with a larger amount and stronger increase by the Philippines. The Philippines used more performed than intended measures, whereas for Vietnam this ratio is inverted. Common themes were the long-term patterns of a peaceful resolution rooted in international law, the finalization of a COC and the call for mindful behavior by all involved parties.

Results

The SCS disputes have generally become a larger part in both countries' high-level security discourse. There is

a clear tendency towards a numerically increasing and thematically more complex securitization.

Although the proportion of the disputes in the ASOs is comparatively higher in Vietnam, the country's use of securitization elements was simultaneously more volatile than the more consistent discourse by the Philippines. Both states prioritized traditional military and political referent objects and shared several overlapping thematic trends and patterns in these sectors. Concerning existential threats, there is an overwhelming dominance of military and other threats. The Philippines were notably more explicitly pointing out specific actors and activities as threatening, whereas Vietnam used rather vague expressions. Matching long-term patterns of the employed functional actors reflect the shared regional security context. A final distinction can be found in the Philippines stronger emphasis on performed security measures, whereas Vietnam focused more on intended future practices.

To further address ST's lack of empirical research, future research can adapt the developed analytical framework by transferring and applying it to other security hotspots, country cases, time frames and sources of discourse.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Oliver Robert Bechtiger holds a BA in International Relations from the University of Geneva. He most recently interned at the Embassy of Switzerland in the Republic of Korea and wants to pursue a career in international affairs.

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