



***CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE: THE  
MEASURED VOICE OF BRUNEI'S  
FOREIGN POLICY AMIDST THE SOUTH  
CHINA SEA DISPUTES***

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*Chinese President Xi Jinping shows the way to the meeting room to Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah. Source: Andrea Verdelli/Pool via REUTERS*

With 161 kilometres of coastline on the South China Sea, Brunei's 200 nautical mile (nm) exclusive economic zone (EEZ) overlaps with China's historical "nine-dash line"; its claim on Louisa Reef of the Spratly Islands makes it a South China Sea (SCS) claimant alongside Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, China and Taiwan. Today, tensions related to overlapping maritime claims have continued evolving for primarily two reasons: (1) the SCS' hydrocarbon reserves are estimated to contain 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, (2) it is one of the world's busiest shipping routes and home to fishing grounds that fuel conflicting island and maritime claims in the region. Hence, this piece aims to examine why Brunei has earned its moniker as the "silent claimant" amidst the vocal polarity at the South China Sea.

**Brunei's Balancing Act: ASEAN Claimant States, USA and China**

To date, Brunei maintains friendly relations with other Southeast Asian claimants vis-à-vis ASEAN, whilst balancing bilateral relationships with both the United States and China. On one hand, Brunei and China have collaborated on large-scale projects like the petrochemical joint venture Hengyi Industries Sdn Bhd and the Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin Bridge. On the other hand, it also engages in military cooperation and educational exchanges with the United States, who have shown elaborate interest in the South China Sea over the years.

While the Chinese persistence in the South China Sea derives from its historical claims, the American presence can be multifaceted; the latter would argue that it is supporting allies like the Philippines to "uphold international order and freedom of navigation." However, their presence arguably persists for other reasons: (1) the SCS is a major transit route for maritime commercial traffic, as well as the United States Navy, to and from East Asia, (2) disputes in the busy area will then result in conflict and instability, which leads to (3) an increase in Chinese influence that then becomes a detriment to the interests of the United States. The heightened involvement of both countries in the region has resulted in the increased complexity of the disputes as it becomes a significant component to the overarching U.S.-China rivalry. Today, as the possibility of a militarised South China Sea increases, it is no longer just a territorial dispute between the ASEAN claimant states and China; ASEAN claimant states - including Brunei - find themselves simultaneously caught in the middle of the US-China disputes.

**Brunei's Claims to the South China Sea: Vanishing or Calculated?**

Since their 1980s claims up until their 2020 Statement, Brunei has remained relatively silent regarding the disputes in the South China Sea. This has led experts to equate Brunei's non-confrontational nature and its small claims as "vanishing" in the heat of the South China Sea crisis. Some would even go as far as to say that Brunei has "no regard whatsoever as to what

happens in the South China Sea.” Contestably, Brunei’s elites have been focused on achieving domestic-oriented policies like its national vision, Wawasan Brunei 2035. Subsequently, Brunei’s subtlety can also be attributed to the high-level integration of ASEAN and their non-interference policy into its political identity.

In contrast to the assertive language seen in the adversarial US-China relations in recent years, Brunei’s foreign policy is built on an unfailing adherence to universally recognised principles and international law like the United Nations Charter and the ASEAN Charter. While these laws are also followed by most countries, Brunei takes extensive measures into curating the laws into its individual opinions; the sultanate arguably executes extra efforts in avoiding any disruption of international order; the skeleton of the sultanate’s foreign policy and, in extension, the country’s overall political identity. In their 2020 Statement on the South China Sea, the sultanate mentions, “negotiations... should be resolved in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the rules and principles of international law.” In contrast to its counterparts, Brunei’s foreign policy often echoes the unanimous conclusions of regional blocs and international organisations. To date, the sultanate still remains the only claimant that does not exert sovereignty over its claims and has no military presence in the disputed waters.

However, is Brunei’s current actions – or in the critics’ opinion, a lack thereof – really neglect? Arguably, the answer is not as straightforward. Although Brunei’s foreign policy language can be seen as “vague”, it can also be regarded as calculated. As the second wealthiest in ASEAN, Brunei’s identity as an absolute monarchy contributes to the fact that everything – including the maintenance of the economic status quo amongst its counterparts, and determination of threats and defence strategies – is perceived and determined by the Sultan.

As such, in May 2022, Brunei announced a net-centric coastal surveillance system and acquired a new squadron of U.S.-made drones for: humanitarian and disaster relief, search operations, border control and

law enforcement operations, as well as for surveillance and intelligence gathering. Despite a lack of information found on the relative ability of the Royal Brunei Navy on current maritime issues, this is a significant move that signifies not only an upward shift in their priorities when it comes to protecting their territorial waters in comparison to what was mentioned in the 2011 Defence White Paper, but also a calculated action taken regarding the heightened concerns voiced in the 2021 Defence White Paper. Soon after, in July 2022, the first Brunei-China Trade and Economy Forum was launched. Whilst current tensions have challenged the balancing of bilateral relationships between both rivals, the sultanate has fared considerably well so far.

Although caught in the middle, Brunei has strategically created specific relationships with these major powers; so long as its territorial waters remain undisturbed, it continues its relationship with America in predominantly defence cooperation and China in economics and trade. Given that it has not landed itself in any political tensions with either, it is safe to consider that Brunei’s calculations have worked well for its own priorities and national vision so far.

### **On Changing the Language of Brunei’s Foreign Policy**

There is a need to tread carefully when exploring the idea of refreshing the sultanate’s language when it comes to foreign policy. A key factor to consider in Brunei’s current foreign policy is its adolescence. At the young age of thirty-eight, Brunei remains one of the most novice nations amongst the claimant states, especially in terms of longevity and scale of experience. In addition to its all-around distinctly smaller calibre, from its land area and population to the size of its military arsenal, Brunei cannot afford to be on the offensive in issues of sovereignty, independence, and integrity. The friendly stance of the sultanate towards all counterparts is what it can afford in order to maintain its own national interests, while navigating its bilateral and multilateral relationships amidst its maritime concerns.

While Brunei’s priorities have not yet been directly affected by the disputes, it is crucial for the sultanate

to continue monitoring and preparing itself against an unwanted, but highly possible, conflict in the foreseeable future. If there ever comes a time where it is absolutely necessary for Brunei to increase its individual volume and assert its presence internationally for the sake of its sovereignty, independence, and integrity without the help of ASEAN (which is unlikely, but not impossible), it is important to first clarify the fine boundaries that come with presenting stronger language in the face of conflict. On top of maintaining its adherence to universal charters, documents, and international law, Brunei must not pick sides. Instead, it must clarify, strengthen, and reinforce what it welcomes, expects, and will tolerate.

In sum, remaining friendly with all its allies is what young, but realistic, Brunei can afford to ensure its national interests are well protected from risk. In other words, if Brunei hypothetically chooses to heighten its assertiveness, it would at the very least put its profitable economic ties with China at a significant risk, let alone bear the other costs of choosing sides amidst heightened disputes in territorial waters like its overall national security. In hindsight, Brunei's gentle but measured approach does not equate to the perception of "vanishing" claims; unconventionally, it is strategically more pragmatic than increasing volume and assertiveness at this time of increasing polarity in the South China Sea.

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