



Master Thesis:

Changing Relations in the South China Sea: Indonesia and Singapore and their Responses to
Rising Power China

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Abstract

China is a rising power, something that has become increasingly evident in the South China Sea dispute in the past decade. In 2009, China for the first time officially and unilaterally declared sovereignty over a large part of the South China Sea (SCS). At that time, both the biggest and smallest states of the region, Indonesia and Singapore, did not belong to the so-called 'claimant states'. However, the increased tension in the SCS as a consequence of China's maritime expansion leads to both states being affected by this dispute. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine the question '*How and why have Indonesia and Singapore responded to the increased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, despite both initially not being claimant states?*' Outlining the developments in the South China Sea and looking at the dimensions of economic relations and domestic political factors, this thesis will try to explain the responses of Indonesia and Singapore to an increasingly assertive China in the South China Sea in the past decade. What could be concluded is that while Singapore and, to a greater extent, Indonesia are economically increasingly dependent on China, which could lead to turning a blind eye to China's behaviour in the SCS, the two Southeast Asian states have instead increasingly criticized China in the past decade in order to go against its growing assertive behaviour. This response comes out of dynamics in domestic politics that does not allow the two states to behave submissively.

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List of Abbreviations

ACFTA – ASEAN - China Free Trade Agreement
AIIB – Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ARF – ASEAN Regional Forum
BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
CCP – Chinese Communist Party
COC – Code of Conduct
CREC – China Railway Group Limited
CSFTA – China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement
EEZ – Exclusive Economic Zone
INSP – Indonesia National Survey Project
NAM – Non-Aligned Movement
OEC – Observatory of Economic Complexity
PAP – People’s Action Party
PCA – Permanent Court of Arbitration
SCS – South China Sea
UN – United Nations
UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US – United States

1. Introduction: Indonesia, Singapore and a Rising China

With a rapid economic growth in the past 70 years, China's influence on a global level seems to grow and with that it also becomes an increasingly important rival to the global power of the United States (US). While China's rising influence and power is often viewed with suspicion on the global level, the region of Southeast Asia is dealing with this huge state much more directly in a heated dispute concerning the South China Sea (SCS). In 2011, Robert Kaplan has stated that "The 21st century's defining battleground is going to be on water", with which he meant the SCS to be precise in which "China is engaged in an undeniable naval expansion" (Kaplan 2011). The SCS is a critically located geostrategic sea and the centre of a territorial dispute in which involved states (claimant states) have overlapping claims, with China claiming the overwhelming part of the sea. In 2009, China for the first time officially and unilaterally declared sovereignty over a large part of the SCS with the nine-dash line. At that time, both the biggest and smallest states of the region, Indonesia and Singapore, did not belong to the so called 'claimant states'. This means that China's claims seem not to interfere with their maritime territory and they were thus not directly involved in the territorial dispute. However, China's claims were never fully explained and its maritime expansion is causing increased tension in the SCS and Southeast Asia's regional organisation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which in turn influences both Indonesia and Singapore. Next to that, Indonesia and Singapore do have strategic and economic interests in the SCS (Storey 2017, 143). Before the SCS dispute became such an apparent geopolitical conflict, arguably dominating the diplomatic relations between China and the ASEAN countries, the Indonesia-China and Singapore-China relations have been through critical and prosperous times already.

Indonesia-China diplomatic relations started when Indonesia recognized the People's Republic of China with Beijing as its capital and established diplomatic ties in 1950. The warming ties with China alarmed the anti-communist forces in Indonesia since Mao Zedong supported communist groups in Southeast Asia (Anwar 2019, 147). Moreover, the economically successful ethnic Chinese Indonesians caused resentment among indigenous Indonesians, which led to them long being discriminated against in Indonesia. This anti-Chinese sentiment has been prevalent throughout Indonesian history and bilateral relations between the two states have always been difficult due to the entanglement with Indonesian domestic politics. Moreover, compared to Singapore, Indonesia was more ambivalent in engaging China in the region due to its own sense of 'regional entitlement', based on its huge

physical size, big population and natural resources (Leifer 1999, 87). As a consequence of the anti-communist and anti-Chinese sentiments, Indonesia broke off diplomatic ties with China in 1967 when Suharto became president (Wong and Fook 2016, 2). Diplomatic relations were officially restored in 1990 due to several reasons such as China's growing economic power, strategic considerations to not ignore China's looming power over the region and Indonesia's aim to become a more assertive global power (Visscher 1993, 93-94). Bilateral relations especially flourished since the democratic start-off in 1998 due to the abolition of the discriminatory laws against the ethnic Chinese minority in the post-Suharto period and China's changing policy towards Southeast Asia (Sukma 2009, 592). Already before 1990, Indonesia increased its economic relations with China in order to benefit from the enormous economic potential China had to offer and China quickly grew to be Indonesia's biggest trading partner in 2010 (Laksmana 2011, 27). Even though Indonesia-China relations have increased since 1990, Indonesia remained cautious and chose to deal with China mostly in multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Through these frameworks, Indonesia's concerns on China's influence on domestic ethnic Chinese and its already increasing assertiveness in the SCS in the 1990s were reflected (Laksmana 2011, 26).

Singapore's approach to China has always been characterized by pragmatism, separating politics from trade, and with that being one of the few countries that resumed (trade) relations with China in the 50s and 60s when strong anti-communist sentiments arose in Southeast Asian countries (Wong and Fook 2016, 2). Singapore and China have maintained trade relations until 1990 without any formal diplomatic framework. Even though Chinese leadership was handed over to Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s who agreed to cut support to communist groups, highly anti-communist Singapore stayed wary towards China and was quite late to shift diplomatic relations from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1990. Just like Indonesia, Singapore also favoured to use the wider vehicle of ASEAN in order to engage China rather than solely conduct relations bilaterally. Since Deng Xiaoping lauded Singapore's successful economic development and stable social order during his Southern Tour in 1992, Singapore received numerous visits from China that studied the small city-state (Fook 2018, 324). This caused the two countries having a 'special relationship'. However, Singapore being a small country with a Chinese majority of around 70% has been cautious to not become too close with China. Being seen as 'little China' would provoke its Muslim neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia and therefore Singapore only established official diplomatic ties with China in 1990 after these two countries had done so (Leifer 2000, 18).

Due to Singapore's pragmatism, it has always acknowledged the importance of remaining relevant for China and taking the opportunities this big state offers (Wong and Fook 2016, 4), while at the same time maintaining strong relations with the US to balance China's growing power.

For both Indonesia and Singapore, concerns on the increasing assertive policy of China in general and in the SCS in particular has increased their doubts on whether China's rise will be peaceful and what the consequences will be for their own security. Therefore, when specifically looking at the tensions in the SCS since 2009, this thesis aims to examine: *'How and why have Indonesia and Singapore responded to the increased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS), despite both initially not being claimant states?'* While focusing on the dimensions of economic relations and domestic political factors, this thesis will try to explain the responses of Indonesia and Singapore to an increasingly assertive China in the SCS conflict in the past decade. These two dimensions are chosen because China's economic power has become ever more apparent in the past decade, undoubtedly offering opportunities to economic interests of the two states, while at the same time how the domestic politics of the two Southeast Asian states perceive China's behaviour very likely affects their response as well. Firstly, an outline of the changing relations between Indonesia and Singapore with China will be given, concerning issues and tensions arising from the SCS in the timeframe from 2009 up until the start of 2020. After that, economic relations and subsequently the domestic political dimension will be discussed, detecting how these two factors have changed in their relationship with China and why they changed. Taking different events and developments into account, there could be looked at how the SCS dispute has affected their relationship with this growing power in the past ten years and why the two Southeast Asian states have responded to China the way they did. To be clear, in contrast to works (Fitriani 2018; Laksmana 2016) that are still stating that Indonesia is a non-claimant state in the conflict, this thesis claims Indonesia has become a claimant state in the conflict because it is increasingly affected by the dispute ever since the Natuna Islands incidents in 2016. What could be concluded is that while Singapore and, to a greater extent, Indonesia are economically increasingly dependent on China, which could lead to turning a blind eye to China's behaviour in the SCS, the two Southeast Asian states have instead increasingly criticized China in the past decade in order to go against its growing assertive behaviour. It becomes clear that this response comes out of dynamics in domestic politics that does not allow to behave submissively.

2. Changing Relations: Singapore and Indonesia and an Assertive China in the South China Sea conflict since 2009

The PRC, i.e. China, has shown more assertive behaviour since the beginning of the new decade, in which its foreign policy has shifted from low-key diplomacy to a more forceful national rejuvenation policy (Zhu 2019, 4-5). This increasing assertive behaviour could specifically be seen in the SCS conflict. In 2009, China unilaterally declared sovereignty over more than 80% of the SCS. Located between South, Southeast and Northeast Asia, the SCS has a critical geographical location and the claimant states are interested in retaining the rights to fishing stocks, exploration of natural gas and the control of vital shipping lanes (Roy 2013, 223). China is claiming sovereignty over hundreds of islands, atolls and reefs in the SCS and its 'historical claims' are represented by a U-shaped line (the 'nine-dash line') in official maps without further explanation (Hayton 2014, 117). Also, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan and the Philippines are claiming their separate yet overlapping parts. The resources of the SCS are significant since ten percent of the global catch is done in this sea, being a source of protein for hundreds of millions of people in Southeast Asia. However, none of the islands in the sea are meeting the criteria of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), thus not being able to generate both a territorial sea or an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Storey and Lin 2017, 3). This is confirmed by the tribunal ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in 2016, stating that none of the disputed Spratly Islands are capable of generating maritime zones or an EEZ, backing the Philippines in a case it already raised in 2013 on the disputed waters of the SCS (Bowcott, Holmes and Phillips 2016). Although this ruling is non-enforceable, it is a legal and political victory for claimant states. UNCLOS has been ratified by 166 countries, including all claimants in the SCS conflict except for Taiwan, which is not a member of the United Nations (UN). In addition to this, more than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage pass the SCS each year (Storey and Lin 2017, 4). Therefore, even though there is no state in the conflict aiming to disrupt the trade flow through the sea, if instability and conflict would take place in any form, this could threaten free navigation and free commerce.

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, being unscathed from the financial crisis of 2008-9, China's confidence on world stage has been steadily growing in the past decade. Parallel with this came a growing Chinese assertiveness in the SCS conflict and due to the rapid modernization of its navy, China has expanded its presence in the sea and applied coercive measures on other claimants (Roy 2013, 229). China has started to show increasing assertive

behaviour by establishing artificial islands which are highly disputed by regional states and the international community (Fitriani 2018, 396). The PCA in The Hague is the only international body that is able to make a judgement on the sovereignty claims of islands in the SCS. However, these judgements require agreement and since China refuses to give its consent, the PCA cannot legally enforce its rulings and settle the dispute (Hayton 2014, 247).

Indonesia: From Quiet Diplomacy to an Assertive Responsive State

In 2009, there started to be deeper gaps in how Indonesia and China handled the SCS dispute and uneasy relations set off (Fitriani 2018, 396). This mainly took place in Indonesian territorial waters around the Natuna Islands, which are located between Malaysia and Borneo. While Indonesia generates an EEZ north of the Natuna Islands based on international law, China's claimed nine-dash line overlaps with this Indonesian maritime territory (Storey 2017, 153). Due to that, there have been multiple maritime incidents in the area in which Indonesian coastguard vessels dealt with Chinese vessels protecting Chinese fishing boats operating illegally in the area (Storey 2017, 154). In early 2010, Indonesian maritime authorities started to arrest Chinese fishing boats that were fishing in Indonesia's EEZ (Chang 2020). Moreover, Indonesia submitted a letter to the UN in July 2010 questioning and contesting the legal basis on which China based their 'nine-dash line claim' (Suryadinata and Izzudin 2017, 19). Indonesia requested to circulate this letter to all UN members. Later in 2014, a high-ranking Indonesian military official, Fahru Zaini, accused China to include Indonesian waters near the Natuna Island into their self-proclaimed line, emphasizing that 'this dispute will have a large impact on the security of Natuna water' and it could take legal action against China which would put the big state into a negative international spotlight (Muhibat 2018, 57; Purwanto 2014).

Since 2016, the continuous use of 'discrete dialogue' and quiet diplomacy has changed. While Indonesia has always tried to avoid maritime row with China by emphasizing that 'there is no territorial dispute between Indonesia and China based on international law' (Suryadinata 2014), an incident in 2016 showed that there is in fact a dispute over overlapping maritime claims near the Natuna Islands when Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying openly declared that the waters north of the Natuna Islands are Chinese 'traditional fishing zones' (Suryadinata and Izzudin 2017, 20; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2016). Indonesia admitted it is affected by the dispute and president Joko Widodo expressed its intention to do anything in his power to protect Indonesia's national sovereignty and to go

against Chinese aggressive intrusions (Indrayani 2016, 481; Morton 2016, 931). In this year, tensions heightened when Chinese fishing boats refused to listen to warnings from the Indonesian navy corvette to leave the waters that are located within both China's proclaimed nine-dash line and the EEZ around the Natuna Islands belonging to Indonesia (Chang 2020). A Chinese coast guard vessel intervened and the Indonesian corvette eventually fired warning shots to the fishing boats which ended in a stand-off in the waters near Natuna between the two countries. This incident has caused a shift in Indonesia's stance towards China and it started to take a harder line in the maritime dispute in the SCS. By both publicizing this event and taking concrete military steps in order to defend Indonesian waters around the Natuna Islands, Jakarta might have hoped that this would back off China. Unfortunately for Indonesia, in December 2019 China challenged the maritime claim again when a Chinese vessel escorted a number of Chinese fishing boats into the Indonesian waters (Chang 2020). Indonesia was outraged when during a press briefing on December 20 in Beijing another Chinese spokesman of the Foreign Ministry, Geng Shuang, stated that "nothing will change the objective fact that China has rights and interests over the relevant waters" (Purba 2020). Indonesia replied with the same kind of statement, noting that: "China's claims to the Exclusive Economic Zone on the grounds that its fishermen have long been active there ... have no legal basis and have never been recognized by the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)" (Heydarian 2020).

Preservation of the UNCLOS is one of Indonesia's core interests (Storey 2017, 154). Causing dissatisfaction at the side of China, Indonesian issued a statement on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 1th of January in 2020, invoking the tribunal ruling of the PCA in The Hague of 2016 (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia 2020). This case was filed three years earlier by the Philippines and formally rejected the claims of the nine-dash line of China in the SCS. This policy of legally confronting China by adhering to international law followed the recent intrusion of Chinese coastguard vessels into the Natuna sea, and may eventually prove to be a diplomatic and legal game changer in the SCS conflict (Bagares 2020). China however, has always rejected this ruling as non-binding and illegal.

While Jakarta mostly has downplayed these maritime conflicts with China, probably due to economic reasons, it has strengthened the military presence and offshore patrol boats on and around Natuna (Chang 2020). Next to military presence, the Indonesian government installed Susi Pudjiastuti as Minister for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs soon after Joko Widodo (Jokowi) became president in 2014. In order to address illegal fishing, Jokowi

instructed her to sink foreign vessels from China and any other Southeast Asian country which were fishing in the Indonesian waters illegally (Afriansyah 2016, 287; Varagur 2017). Some of these incidents were even broadcasted and gained a lot of publicity (Thayer 2014), hoping that this would have a deterrent effect (Afriansyah 2016, 294). Pudjiastuti's approach has often been characterized as explosive, yet she became a popular and highly regarded minister. During her five years in office, she has sunk more than 500 boats and with that estimated to have deterred 10.000 ships from illegally entering Indonesian waters (Hutton 2017). Indonesia has always been very protective over its national sovereignty and Chinese fishing activities in Indonesian waters are perceived as direct violations of this sovereignty. In addition to that, the stability of regional waters is vital for Indonesia's security and economy (Fitriani 2018, 401). Therefore, Indonesia has stepped up its cooperation with the US doing joint naval exercises near the disputed areas in order to hedge against China (Heydarian 2018). Up until now, it could be viewed that through a combination of peaceful diplomacy and slowly increasing its presence around the Natuna Islands in order to protect its national sovereignty and interests, Indonesia has been able to manage the Natuna issue without much controversy and without jeopardizing its economic relations with China.

In general, a decade of stable democratization and economic growth seems to have made Indonesia a more self-conscious power, increasingly realizing its capabilities (Heydarian 2018). Despite the tensions in the SCS between the two countries, economic relations and, to a lesser extent, security cooperation remain the most developed areas of the relation between Indonesia and China. It comes as no surprise that cooperation in defence is not developing easily between the two states, since despite agreements on boosting cooperation and developing 'Action Plans', Indonesia's worries about Chinese intentions slows down security operations (Fitriani 2018, 396). One of the most important issues Indonesia is worrying about, is that China's bilateral actions are dividing ASEAN as an association. Already since the 1990s, Indonesia tried to be a modest mediator of the conflict and always emphasized the importance of finding a resolution through regional frameworks led by ASEAN (Fitriani 2018, 396). Indonesia does not wish to be dominated by a big power, nor that it is going to dominate the region.

Singapore: From Special Relationship to 'One of the Many'

Singapore's foreign policy has always followed Lee Kuan Yew's aim of 'a balance of power' through which it was economically pro-Chinese and militarily pro-US, while also

trying to retain an individual position (Huang 2017). Singapore has never been a formal claimant state in the SCS conflict, yet rather claims to be neutral and emphasizes that all claimant states should adhere to international law such as the UNCLOS (Li and Zhang 2013, 174). The prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, has emphasized continuously that ‘we (Singapore) have got our own stance; different from China’s... we have to choose our own place to stand ... we cannot succumb to pressure’ (Loong 2016). Singapore-China relations hitting the lowest points in the past decade, had almost always to do with the SCS conflict.

A turning point in the dispute for Singapore has been a remark in 2010 by the then Foreign Minister of China, Yang Jiechi, at a particularly tense China-ASEAN Ministers Conference in Hanoi. He told Singapore’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, that ‘China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact’ (Southgate 2019, 172). The reason for this remark was that during this conference some ASEAN states and the US raised the SCS dispute, causing anger at the side of China. After this incident a Chinese patrol vessel visited the city-state in 2011, which in the Chinese media was described as a sovereignty-reinforcing mission, and Singapore formally asked China to clarify its claims and abide by the UNCLOS (Storey 2017, 154). In 2016, relations between China and Singapore were at a lowest since years when the Singapore delegation to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) allegedly wanted to endorse the arbitration ruling of the PCA about the nine-dash line on the final communique (Huang 2016). Singapore’s prime minister Lee Hsien Loong once stated that the arbitration ruling is much more powerful than waiting to see ‘whose guns are more powerful’ (Wong 2016). Nevertheless, while the Chinese newspaper Global Times reported that Singapore did not succeed due to opposition from many countries, the Singaporean ambassador to China, Stanley Loh, countered that Singapore did not raise the arbitration ruling but that the proposal rather concerned an update of the NAM declaration’s South China Sea paragraph reflecting the consensus position of all ASEAN members (Huang 2016). This event demonstrated China’s growing intolerance of Singapore’s diplomatic approach, who was seemingly leading the charge against China. At a meeting between China and ASEAN around the same time, Chinese vice-foreign minister Liu Zheming said to Singapore to stay out of the conflict and ‘as Singapore is not a claimant state in the SCS, we hope that the Singapore government, on the condition of not interfering in SCS issues, will actively promote cooperation between China and ASEAN’ (Wong 2016).

Singapore has been the country coordinator for the ASEAN-China dialogue for three years until mid-2018, trying to enable progress on a new Code of Conduct (COC) to regulate

action in the SCS. This COC would involve dispute management, stability building and emphasize the freedom of navigation (Quang 2019). Eventually, China praised Singapore for its constructive role as coordinator over these three years (Dancel 2017). However, this new COC has still never been completed due to many difficulties, among which disagreement over dispute settlement mechanisms between the different involved countries. Most importantly, China refuses to join any agreement or COC that could threaten its claims on the SCS territory (Quang 2019). This only leaves the nonbinding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS from 2002 as a document on the sea.

China prefers to handle the SCS conflict outside the (international) media, only involving countries that are formal claimant states. Singapore, on the other hand, is very much concerned with and highly dependent on the rules-based international order, therefore publicly supporting the arbitration ruling of the PCA. Singapore is a firm opponent of the ‘might is right’ approach and publicly emphasized on multiple occasions that small states such as itself, need freedom of navigation and the rule of law in conducting foreign affairs and resolving disputes (Fook 2018, 334). Singapore operates one of the biggest ports in the world and instability or conflict in the SCS would disrupt free maritime trade (Storey 2017, 154; Tan 2009, 38). Thus, although it might not have overlapping territorial claims with China, it definitely has great interest in keeping stability in the SCS.

Militarily seen, Singapore cooperates most with the US out of all other Southeast Asian countries. Singapore has had a strategic ‘defence’ partnership with the US for decades, the latter supplying defence technology and facilities for military trainings in Singapore while Singapore is a useful partner for the US in terms of maritime security in Southeast Asia (Parameswaran 2019a). This military relation also has been useful to hedge against instability in the region since Singapore sees the US as the “only realistic counterweight to potential Chinese external assertiveness” (Lif and Ikenberry 2014, 78; Medeiros et al. 2008, 185). For instance, recently in 2019 Singapore has upgraded an agreement with the US that facilitates the use of defence-related facilities in Singapore by the US (Parameswaran 2019a), highlighting their strong relations in face of the changing dynamics in the region. Next to this, Singapore has maintained military ties with Taiwan, despite opposition from China (Zhen 2017).

Singapore and China for a long time have had something that was called: a special relationship, which could be evidenced alone by the high level of attention from China during

the funeral of Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, in 2015 (Huang 2016). Due to its economic success and stable social order, Singapore for some time has been the developmental model China wanted to duplicate. After Deng Xiaoping first visit to Singapore in 1978, People's Daily (the organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)) called Singapore a "garden city worth studying for its greening, public housing and tourism" (Yew 2000, 668). Singapore's experience would provide a reference for China, since it had shown that it was possible to create a certain level of socio-economic development under strong leadership. However, China has a growing intolerance of Singapore's diplomatic approach and rather not wants Singapore, with its majority ethnic Chinese population, to remain neutral between the US and China. Singapore realizes that China has hardened its language towards countries that are dependent on China for economic prosperity and dependent on the US for security (Siow 2016). China wants Singapore to use its unique position in ASEAN to promote Chinese interests and help to solve disputes it has with other member states. While Singapore always rejected this expectation since this would undermine their status as an independent state (Tan 2009, 34; Dexian 2013, 3), the city-state does sometimes refrain itself from commenting on great power politics. For instance, senior Singaporean officials did not criticize China's militarization of islands in the SCS (Panda 2018).

With China increasingly becoming a (regional) power under the leadership of Xi Jinping with economic and technological advancement, it does not find anything to learn from the city-state anymore (Sim 2019). China probably has become so self-confident in the past decade that it just wants to export their own political model abroad. China's growing military heft only drew Singapore closer to the US (Chang 2019). While Singapore remains pragmatic and committed to warming ties with China in order to position itself beneficially in the changing geopolitical environment, it has been over with the time that Singapore is regarded as a special ally and now rather is much more like any other Southeast Asian country.

Implications of a Rising China

This chapter has given an overview of the tense developments in the SCS and seemingly changing relations between the two Southeast Asian states and China. Fook (2018) claims that the stark difference between China in 2009 and China today is that it has become much stronger and more influential (335). It is evident that China's low-profile foreign policy has made place for one more in line with that of a major power, something highly visible in the SCS conflict. This has consequences for how Indonesia and Singapore have to deal with

this big state. Sukma (2009) characterizes Indonesia's stance towards China at the start of our time frame in 2009 and was already right in one prediction: "any sign indicating that Beijing plans to be a dominant power in the region would certainly revive Indonesia's sensitivity" (Sukma 2009, 608). Regarding Singapore, China remains to have specific expectations of how smaller states ought to behave in international politics (Fook 2018, 335), something that Singapore pertinently does not seem to follow up. After having looked at developments in bilateral relations as a consequence of China's increased assertive behaviour in the SCS, the next chapter will examine the impact of these tensions on Indonesia's and Singapore's dealings with China in their economic relations.

3. Underlying Constraints: Economic Relations Across the South China Sea

Within the context of the SCS conflict, it is a major consideration for both Indonesia and Singapore to respond to the provocations of China which could possibly have negative impacts on the broader range of bilateral interests they have in their relation with China. This part specifically looks at the economic interests of the two states in relation with China and discusses how the economic relations between Indonesia and China and Singapore and China have changed over the past decade, and why this happened.

Indonesia's Changing Economic Relation with China: Opportunity or Threat?

The enormous growth of the Chinese economy offers business opportunities to Indonesia's economy in the form of the enormous market and its need for raw materials and resources (Fitriani 2018, 392). Trade relations between the two states have increased drastically in the past decade. China is Indonesia's most important trading partner and foreign investor in mainly infrastructural projects (Anwar 2019, 145) and as some other ASEAN countries, Indonesia is heavily dependent on China for its imports (Salidjanova and Fi 2015, 18). When looking at the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), in 2010, Japan was a more important export destination for Indonesia than China (respectively 16% and 12%), while the top import origins were both Singapore and China with 15% (OEC 2017). As of the latest data from 2017, China is Indonesia's top export destination (14% of its exports) and also grew to be the top import origin for Indonesia with 22% (Singapore being the second with 12%) (OEC 2017). These figures show that China has become an important trading partner for Indonesia in the past decade, making Indonesia more dependent on its trade relation with China since the balance of trade is in favour of China.

The current president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, came to office in 2014 with the promise to accelerate Indonesia's economic development (Connelly 2016, 7). Indonesia is a big, but relatively poor country. It struggles with poverty, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure and unequal distribution of resources among the regions. Jokowi's plans implied that foreign policy became subordinate to an emphasis on economic development, trade and investment (Djumala 2015), with the most prominent advances in the field of bilateral trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

The main focus of Jokowi's developmentalist idea is on infrastructural projects. In order to attract private foreign investment, Jokowi has always openly invited international businessman to invest in Indonesia and has used economic diplomacy to attract foreign capital (Sriyanto 2018, 2). However, due to the country's reputation of corruption and slow processes, foreign investment proved difficult to attract. Therefore, Jakarta looked at Beijing in order to fill up the investment gap. China's funding of infrastructural projects via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are a major opportunity for Indonesia to receive funding for its infrastructural projects. The BRI is seen as an opportunity to accelerate infrastructural projects and to access China's technology and financial resources (Negara and Suryadinata 2018, 1). China-Indonesia joint projects are beneficial for Indonesia due to access to funding and technology while China values the exploitation of raw materials and the access to the middle-income market in Indonesia. Since Jokowi became president late 2014, China increased from being the tenth country in 2008 to the third in 2016 as source of FDI (Negara and Suryadinata 2018, 3-6).

Jokowi tried to balance good ties with its neighbouring ASEAN countries and the need of infrastructure and development. However, Jokowi's foreign policy in the first stage tended to neglect the central role of ASEAN, despite Indonesia being the biggest member state (Sriyanto 2018, 3). In addition, Jokowi's aim to deliver quick result during his term as president has led to taking Chinese offers which offer a faster construction timeline over Japanese bids which could offer superior technology (Connelly 2016, 8).

Thus, economic relations between the two countries increased during the Jokowi presidency. While Indonesia has been looking for economic development, China is looking for overseas market and investment opportunities (Suryadinata 2017, 2). China moreover viewed Indonesia as a strategic player in its Maritime Silk Road for supporting regional sea route connectivity, while Indonesia could emphasize the infrastructure programs as a more

maritime strategic programme for the whole nation (Wilayah 2018, 8). It seems to be the perfect match for building economic ties which lead to more cooperation.

Despite Jokowi's enthusiasm, public perceptions about Chinese investments are mixed and Indonesians are sometimes highly suspicious of China's intentions. Concerns about China's economic 'invasion' are heard every now and then in the Indonesian media (Negara and Suryadinata 2018, 24). There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, many Indonesians tend to keep negative sentiments towards the Chinese and fear that accepting Chinese investments also brings Chinese labourers to the country (Connelly 2016, 12). This comes out of past struggles with ethnic Chinese people in Indonesia. Indonesians tend to keep negative sentiments on Indonesia-China economic relations in the form of bilateral arrangements or within ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) (Chandra and Lontoh 2011, 8; Hadi 2012). Indonesia signed the ACFTA in 2010 which involved further cooperation fields such as politics and law, expanding beyond economic sectors alone. The business community and civil society pressed the Indonesian government, which fell under the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono until 2014, to renegotiate terms or pull out of the agreement (Anwar 2019, 155). This mostly came out of scepticism towards China due to the widening trade deficit, the negative sentiments of Indonesians towards Chinese products and labourers, the concerns about the loss of jobs and worries about the benefits the agreement would bring (Chandra and Lontoh 2011, 3).

Secondly, the Chinese infrastructural projects in Indonesia have developed a reputation of low quality and late completion. Indonesian government officials have learned that China is not able to deliver upon all their pledges related to economic cooperation and investments projects. One of those projects which is followed by delays and controversy is the China's BRI flagship project in Indonesia: the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway. This project started construction in early 2016 conducted by the China Railway Group Limited (CREC), which is a part of Indonesia-China high-speed rail consortium. After years of 'old-fashioned mismanagement and incompetence', according to Indonesia's investment chief Thomas Lembong, this project is finally back on track (Salleh 2019). Another infrastructural project that has received a fair amount of criticism is the Batang Toru hydropower project which is funded mainly by the Bank of China and constructed by the Chinese state-owned firm Sinohydro (Tan 2019). This hydropower dam will be constructed in the midst of the Batang Toru rainforest in Sumatra. While the Indonesian authorities are supporting this project, which will supply electricity to the province of North Sumatra, environmental groups

are heavily against this project since it will threaten the local ecosystem and an endangered orangutan specie living in the forest. Next to that, energy consultants have claimed that this expensive project is unnecessary for future energy needs since North Sumatra is one of the most electrified regions in the country with 95% of the people having access to electricity (Kahfi 2020).

There are also researchers arguing that even though the rise of China and with that the growth of its economy could have many chances for other countries, it also means a threat to export industries in Southeast Asia since they could fall in the ‘‘middle-income trap’’ (Gill and Kharas 2015, 4). This threat specifically means for labour-intensive manufacturing such as textiles and garments, in which China outcompetes other exporting countries such as Indonesia (Booth 2011, 144). On the other hand, Indonesian export of mineral products, metals and vegetable by-products such as lignite, petroleum gas and palm oil to China has stayed very stable and increased off and on through the years (OEC 2017). Many of these however, are dependent on the overall economic development in the world and thus makes Indonesia vulnerable to economic downturns.

Even though the economic relation with China was never a divisive issue during the Yudhoyono presidency until 2014, there has been a change of public attitudes towards Indonesia’s closer economic relations with China since Jokowi’s presidency (Negara and Suryadinata 2018, 24-25). After maritime incidents around the Natuna Islands it has been reassured again and again that the dispute would not affect the economic relation between China and Indonesia (Weatherbee 2016, 2016). There are concerns that an increasing dependence on Chinese investments limits the ability for Indonesia to decisively counter Chinese assertiveness in the SCS conflict while maintaining stability and security in the SCS is vital for Indonesia’s economic interest. Yet, it seems that Chinese assertive behaviour in the SCS only adds to the notion of seeing China as a threat because negative impacts of the economic relation on Indonesian workers by bringing in Chinese labour and China’s failure to deliver what it promises already reinforce negative sentiments in Indonesia.

Therefore, rather than the Natuna Islands incidents, negative perception towards Chinese economic domination and mainland Chinese workers coming to Indonesia are factors capable of shaping economic relations. The Natuna incidents will remain an important issue between the two countries, however, both China and Indonesia value the deepening of bilateral economic engagement (Izzuddin and Suryadinata 2017, 4). Overall, the increasing

relations between China and Indonesia is based on the economic sphere and for now the opportunities of a rising China for the Indonesian economy seem to overshadow the possible threats the Chinese economy could pose. The role of Chinese descendants in the Indonesian economy and the power of China-linked people could be detected in both economic relations with China and the domestic factors. Namely, the concerns raised by the general public in Indonesia towards China's involvement in the Indonesian economy is also based on the domestic political contests in the country (Anwar 2019, 155).

Singapore's Changing Economic Relation with China: Adapting to Opportunities

Based upon many factors, under which territory and economic scale, Singapore is much smaller than China. However, it has gained economic importance disproportionate to its size (Li and Zhang 2013, 172). As discussed previously, during the early years of Singapore-China relations, China has looked at Singapore as a state to learn from since it was a one-party system which had enabled successful socio-economic development in a short period of time. Several Chinese delegations came over the years to learn how Singapore had established a stable social order and at the same time achieved enormous economic growth. However, due to China's rapid economic growth, the 'Singapore experience' is less relevant for this big country now (Fook and Yongnian 2016, 17). For Singapore, China's rapid economic development is a new engine to foster its own economic growth since it serves as an important market for goods and destination for investments (Tong 2016, 50-51).

From independence on, Singapore has always had as key strategy to establish ties with advanced economic powers and markets (Tan 2009, 40). With the exception of a couple of years, Singapore has been China's biggest trading partner in ASEAN. Economically, Singapore and China are intertwined, with China being Singapore's largest trading partner since 2014 and Singapore being China's second largest source for FDI (Chong 2018). In 2010, China was Singapore's biggest export destination with 12% and biggest important origin with 12% (OEC 2017). As of 2017, China was Singapore's second export destination with 16% of its exports and China was Singapore's biggest import origin with 15% of its imports (OEC 2017). These figures show that even though China is Singapore's largest trading partner, Singapore is less dependent on China in its trade relations than Indonesia because Singapore's export and imports are much more diversified to other states. The two countries have strengthened economic resilience and financial stability through the China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (CSFTA) and three flagship projects in China established

by Singapore: Singapore-Suzhou Industrial Park, Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City and Knowledge City in Guangzhou (Chong and Wong 2014, 50). These economic projects lend substance to the bilateral ties between the two countries (Fook and Yongnian 2016, 17). Economic pragmatism, shared historical and cultural ties with a common language and geographical proximity have helped to advance strong bilateral ties (Tong 2016, 56).

While Singapore is also joining the BRI of China, it is not a major recipient of BRI projects since it already has a very developed economy with a good infrastructure network. Instead, Singapore is able to provide key services needed by other countries involved, such as financing solutions and legal and consulting services (Fook 2018, 331). Some would even argue that Singapore's role in the BRI is the one of providing less visible expertise yet which determines how well a project succeeds (Lim 2017). In two interviews in 2017, Singapore's national development minister, Lawrence Wong, said that the BRI 'is not something that can be done by China alone' and as a major 'financial centre' Singapore is able to play a 'useful role' to provide local and regional knowledge to Chinese companies that settle in Southeast Asian countries (Ministry of National Development 2017). Moreover, during a visit to Beijing in September 2017 at the invitation of China's premier, Li Keqiang, Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that the BRI could serve to 'integrate China into regional and international economic systems while greatly boosting the prosperity and development in other countries'. Next to that, he also stated that 'a prosperous and confident China, a China that coexists peacefully and benefits mutually with neighbouring countries is not only good for the well-being of China, but also the world at large' (Xinhua News 2017).

With multiple statements of this sort by Singapore officials, it may want to position itself as a favourable partner now China is shifting its economy from manufacturing to higher value-added sectors and show that Singapore with its big financial centre is a valuable partner to have in the BRI projects. There may also be deeper underlying dynamics at play than solely economic benefits, such as being pragmatic and looking at the future strategic regional outcome. Singapore has always understood that a rising China could pose benefits to the Southeast Asian region if handled well. Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew always said: blocking China's rise is simply too costly and in order to let China be a 'responsible' actor, it should be given a stake in the economic system (Khong 2004, 188). Even though economic ties have stayed well between the two countries, Singapore does recognize the growing assertiveness of China, particularly when itself feels provoked by it (Liow 2016).

Singapore's strategic location along the Malacca Strait has always been a great leverage to the city-state, and has therefore welcomed Chinese economic development since this would lead to more maritime trade and profits. Even though the BRI has posed significant opportunities for Singapore, it also involves challenges. China is aiming to remake trade flows through the BRI, and has designed a network of trade routes mainly over land across central Asia and continental Southeast Asia, excluding the Malacca Strait (Chang 2019). Next to that, China is building big ports in coastal cities which could challenge the position of Singapore's port. Also, if the framework of "Made in China 2025" comes to full fruition, aiming to turn China into the world's number one high-tech leader in manufactured products (Chang 2019), this could potentially hurt Singapore's exports because its exports to China consist for around 16 percent out of commonly used electronic products (The Atlas of Economic Complexity 2017). This could have significant long-term consequences for Singapore. Keeping trade flowing through the Malacca Strait and being able to export high value-added products is key to its national interest.

From time to time, the relation between Singapore and China has been affected by other factors and ran into difficulties. These factors involve the power competition between China and the US in the region, which affects smaller countries such as Singapore that have friendly ties with both of them. Other difficulties are China's rise and the expectation of how smaller states ought to behave, which has as a result that Singapore is often seen as negatively affecting Chinese interests by interfering in the SCS conflict (Fook 2018, 332). Beijing has been unhappy with a Singapore openly supporting international law and the decision by the PCA in the Hague to reject China's maritime claims in the SCS (Lim 2019, 133). Despite the unhappiness, Singapore has continued to emphasize its preferred position. Singapore's neutrality in the conflict has always been 'active', which means that it wants to maintain stability and continuing the economic growth of the region (Li and Zhang 2013, 175).

Overall, the economic relations between these two countries have remained resilient during the times of a hostile political climate or disagreement. Singapore is welcoming economic development in rising China and the strong foundation of economic relations between the two countries have been able to weather disagreements every now and then. Yet Singapore is highly dependent on its open and liberal economy, and therefore is highly dependent on stability and the free flow of trade and goods through the SCS. Making substantial efforts to ensure this free navigation in the SCS, is specifically the active behaviour of Singapore what bothers China.

Economic Relations: Not the Right Venue to Respond to the South China Sea Dispute?

As could be seen from the analysis above, both Indonesia and Singapore have had much to gain in their economic relation with China in the past decade. Not wanting to hamper this relation could serve as a strong incentive why they would not go as far as to antagonize China in the SCS dispute. Singapore is not as heavily dependent on trade relations with China as Indonesia since it has other big trading partners and is not necessarily in need of Chinese investment. Singapore rather adapts to the chances China and the BRI could pose. However, besides economic chances there are also tensions apparent, such as industrial competition and the perceived threat of China to the rules-based international order which underpins international trade. Economic chances offered by China being equally important as free maritime navigation explains Singapore's 'active neutrality' in the SCS conflict. Moreover, it might not be the SCS dispute that directly threatens their economic relation since this has been resilient during times of disagreement, rather China's aim to become the world's tech leader could hinder Singapore's export products in the long term.

Indonesia has the biggest stake in economic relations with China due to its increasing economic dependency and much-needed infrastructure development. It seems that the several incidents around the Natuna Islands will not hinder economic relations between the two, but rather the factors of diminishing faith in successful Chinese infrastructural projects under the umbrella of the BRI, mainland Chinese workers coming to Indonesia and the competition faced from Chinese exports have an effect on Indonesians' sentiments towards China. Yet it seems that the opportunities of a rising China for the Indonesian economy overshadow the possible threats the Chinese economy could pose. What became clear is that the (changing) economic relations do not fully reflect Indonesia's and Singapore's response to China. In order to get a complete picture, there should be looked at more dynamics at play such as domestic sentiments that could affect how the states respond: the element of domestic politics. This could help explain more in-depth the behaviour and responses of Indonesia and Singapore towards China in the SCS in the past decade.

4. Domestic Politics and the Dynamics of Ambivalence in Indonesia and Singapore

In addition to the evolvement of economic relations, domestic political behaviour is a factor that further explains the responses of Indonesia and Singapore to a rising China and its assertive behaviour in the SCS dispute. This chapter will discuss how sentiments in domestic politics affected and changed how Indonesia and Singapore viewed China and its involvement in the SCS in the past ten years, and why they did.

Indonesia's Domestic Political Behaviour: A Return to Ambivalence

Analysts argue that domestic factors, rather than geopolitical considerations, are the prime drivers for Indonesia's foreign policy, with the elite and public being divided over the rise of China seeing both opportunities and threats (Anwar 2019, 146; Laksmana 2016, 283; Fitriani 2018, 395). Some say that Indonesia's perception of China is rather a projection of its image of domestic ethnic Chinese (Laksmana 2011, 25), yet the arrival of Chinese migrant workers and the growing reliance on Chinese loans have also been widely discussed by the Indonesian public and political elite (Herlijanto 2017, 2). Moreover, tensions in the SCS such as the incidents in the Natuna waters have been taken up by the media and discussed within the Indonesian public. While Indonesians viewed China increasingly positive in the reformation era after Suharto, Chinese aggressive behaviour around the Natuna Islands has changed this view (Fitriani 2018, 393).

Some surveys suggest otherwise. According to data collected via surveys done under the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP) conducted by the Yushof Ishak Institute in 2017, around 75% percent of the Indonesians admire China, 90% thinks that Indonesia will benefit from a close relationship with China and the number of people that think the rise of China will have a positive effect on Indonesia is slightly higher than the number of people that think it will have a negative effect on the country (Herlijanto 2017, 4). This stands in stark contrast with negative sentiments discussed earlier on economic relations. This could be partly explained by the limited tolerance Indonesians have towards Chinese workers, welcoming high-skilled workers such as managers and technicians but not tolerating low-skilled Chinese workers which are seen as a threat to Indonesian workers. However, Indonesians' view towards China and Chinese influence on the Indonesian economy differ in other surveys such the ones by 'Median' and the 'Wahid Foundation', both carried out in 2017. These surveys show that the majority of Indonesian respondents dislike particular

groups such as the ethnic Chinese and do see China as a threat (Anwar 2019, 157). The INSP also found that many Indonesians think Chinese assertiveness in the SCS could grow into a big diplomatic conflict which would threaten Indonesia's interests. On the other hand, the survey 'The State of Southeast Asia' done by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute published in 2020 shows that 52% respondents from Indonesia would align with China rather than the US (Iwamoto 2020). Strikingly, according to the Global Attitudes survey by Pew's Research Centre published at the end of 2019, this goes together with a drop of 17% from 53% to 36% in how favourable Indonesians view China (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019).

Looking at the various surveys, Indonesia's trust in the US as a strategic leader in the Southeast Asian region have declined while the perceived power of China has grown. At the same time, Indonesians' worries about China's growing influence are increased as well. This could mean that while viewing China as the most influential country in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is worried about China's growing regional and political influence which consequently leads to a rise in anti-Chinese sentiments.

Public perceptions such as researched by the INSP are divided into partisan politics. The Indonesian government remains divided between those who have positive sentiments towards China and the ones that are rather suspicious of Chinese activities in the past decade (Anwar 2019, 146). Suspicion could specifically be found among the political elite groups that have taken a stance against the Jokowi administration, including leaders of Islamic organizations, former military generals and former high-ranking political officials (Herlijanto 2017a, 2). These negative perceptions of China mainly grow out of fear of Chinese interference in Indonesia's strategic locations by infrastructure investments, the reliance on Chinese loans that could lead to China actually taking over Indonesian assets, and the negative consequences that could lead from Chinese behaviour in the SCS dispute. Political elite that is more in favour of China are commonly supporters of the Jokowi administration. They say to not see China as a political threat and appreciate Chinese companies operating in Indonesia, however, they do share the same worries about the incidents near the Natuna Islands and are uncomfortable with the idea that China is seeking global hegemony through BRI and the Maritime Silk Road project (Herlijanto 2017a, 5). Thus, there clearly is a mixed view on China among government officials, military officials being more suspicious of Chinese behaviour, while others see China as a country Indonesia could learn and benefit from but should be kept an eye on at the same time.

Moreover, identity politics seem to have conflated Indonesia-China relations with domestic political competition for power. Examples are the demonstrations against Ahok, a former governor of Jakarta who is ethnically Chinese and was accused of blasphemy by Islamic groups during the 2016 electoral campaign in Jakarta. Also, in the run-up for the presidential election in April 2019, Jokowi was accused of being a 'handmaiden' for Chinese interests (Anwar 2019, 158). The Indonesian political climate shows that an increase in anti-Chinese sentiments among Indonesians could be used as a political instrument in domestic politics. The rise of China clearly has been used for a domestic political agenda with opposition parties framing Jokowi as the person that is bringing Indonesia closer to China for infrastructure investment and development, but with that threatening Indonesia's sovereignty and freedom to create its own foreign policy. As a result, incidents around Natuna coming under public scrutiny have led to the Indonesian government renaming the Natuna Exclusive Economic Zone to North Natuna Sea (Laut Natuna Utara) in July 2015. This is done in order to appease domestic opposition against Jokowi since complying to external pressure would be a very unpopular move in Indonesian domestic politics (Syailendra 2018).

More than with other countries, China has clashed with Indonesian domestic affairs due to the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia (Anwar 2019, 146). Indonesian sentiments of China are not only caused by perceptions of mainland China or Chinese assertiveness and activities, but also by the public's and elite's perceptions of ethnic Chinese in the Indonesian domestic context (Sukma 2009, 603). The cultural and political restrictions imposed on this group are gone and an increasing number of Chinese have entered Indonesian politics and non-governmental organisations (Sukma 2009, 605). Yet despite the increasing acceptance of ethnic Chinese in the Muslim country, it remains a relevant factor in Indonesia's perception of China and its relations with the rising power. There are still stereotypes associated with ethnic Chinese, especially in conducting business where resentment against ethnic Chinese business leaders remains apparent (Sukma 2009, 605). Interestingly, through the period of Yudhoyono's presidency from 2004-2014, economic relations with China have not been a divisive political issue and his policy of "one million friends and zero enemies" was not seen as favouring China (Anwar 2019, 155). Even Yudhoyono erasing the last remnants of the New Order discriminatory policies against the Indonesian-Chinese minority and opening space for them to run for public official positions was met with great acceptance of the wider public in Indonesia (Anwar 2019, 155). However, when Jokowi took office in 2014, the

criticisms about Jokowi's 'pro-China' policy and the implications of dependence on Chinese investments marked a decisive change in public attitudes.

Due to China's increasing assertive behaviour in the SCS, Indonesia's domestic politics continues to have more reservations towards China, showing its ingrained ambivalence and its aim to not be closely identified with China (Anwar 2019, 154). Also, Chinese influence on regional dynamics is something Indonesia's government is worried about. Chinese arrogance in allowing their fisherman to fish in Indonesian waters has been condemned by the navy and ministers who were responsible for this issue (Fitriani 2018, 396). The change of public and domestic political elite's attitude since 2014 has to do with a mix of the ever-increasing economic power of China and its assertive behaviour in the SCS. Namely, China's behaviour around the Natuna Islands became more aggressive while at the same time, Jokowi was still seeking China to invest in Indonesia and improve economic relations.

Moreover, while there seems to exist a general consensus between domestic political elites in Indonesia on China as a potential threat, they do not agree on how much of a threat China could be and how to handle this (Syailendra 2018). Despite the relatively good economic relations between the two, Chinese behaviour in the SCS sparks criticisms from domestic groups who are watching China more suspiciously. It is clear that Indonesia does not entirely want to fulfil the role of 'honest broker' anymore since the new range of incidents in the Natuna sea in December 2019, however, the position of the divided domestic politics remains ambiguous towards China. It remains to be seen whether sentiments in domestic politics will persist the toughened position of Indonesia in the SCS when Chinese behaviour in the SCS becomes even more aggressive. Moreover, when the ethnic question is going to trump the objective of economic development in Indonesian domestic politics, this could have consequences for Indonesia-China bilateral relations.

Singapore's Domestic Political Behaviour: Not just a Small State

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the small city-state has been governed by one and the same party: The People's Action Party (PAP). Lee Kuan Yew has been the leader of the PAP and prime minister until 1990 and under his rule Singapore managed to transform from a swamp to one of the most advanced economies in the world. The city-state political elite's preoccupation with its perceived vulnerability as a small state surrounded by big

countries has been decisive for Singapore's use of pragmatism in its foreign policy, and its focus on survival impacted both external and domestic policies (Tan 2009, 23).

Being a semi-democracy, Singapore normally is able to draft very practical foreign policy. However, the Singaporean government with its established elite is being increasingly influenced by domestic political opinion (Bower 2014). As long as the PAP has ruled Singapore, the party always managed to win between 61 and 68 percent of the seats. In 2011 however, it experienced the worst election result since it ruled the city-state with only gaining 60 percent of the seats in parliament which was ironically called the 'Singapore Spring' (Klingler-Vidra 2012, 69). This heightened domestic political contestation showed that the Singaporean population increasingly wanted their voices heard. It is no longer assumed that the PAP leadership knows everything, since the population itself is well educated and travels a lot, being able to make their opinions known. Singaporeans would like to see a beneficial relationship with China, but not being overwhelmed by Chinese culture or an influx of Chinese immigrants (Klingler-Vidra 2012, 72). At the same time, young Singaporeans positively view Singapore's foreign policy still being characterized by pragmatic relationships with both China and the US (Klingler-Vidra 2012, 73).

Especially Chinese immigration into Singapore has caused dissent among the population. For instance, government plans in 2013 expected a population growth of 30% by 2030 mainly due to foreign workers and immigrants, making the total population 6.9 million. These plans caused rare mass rallies of Singaporeans opposing to allow more immigration. While the Singaporean government claims this is needed in order to sustain the rate of economic growth, Singaporeans think this will only lead to rising living costs and property prices (BBC News 2013). Recently in December 2019, a video of an Indian man screaming at a security guard in front of his apartment building caused hundreds of demonstrators to show up at a rally to demonstrate against Indian people that are 'easily' being able to move into Singapore. This anger was a reminiscent of the government immigration plan in 2013 (Xinghui 2019). It seems as if the 'xenophobia' against 'foreigners' from, among others, mainland China is rising in Singapore and they are blamed for problems such as unemployment and overcrowding public transport. Next to that, 7 out of the 10 respondents to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies research centre state they think immigrants are not doing enough to integrate into Singapore (Xinghui 2019). These anti-immigration views are not race-based, but rather come out of nationalism.

With around 75% of the Singaporean population being ethnically Chinese, you might presume that the domestic political elite finds it doable to deal with China because of cultural and linguistic similarities. This will do for a part. However, Singapore having a cautious attitude towards China became clear last year, when a report from The Jamestown Foundation published in July 2019 found that the CCP is exploiting cultural, business and media links for influencing Singaporeans and trying to impose a Chinese identity on Singapore (Hsiao 2019, 16). Even though foreign influence is not new to either Singapore or any other country, Singapore wants to avoid being seen as ‘little China’ at all times. Due to this Chinese majority, Singapore is neither bandwagoning nor distancing itself from China but rather tries to maintain a neutral foreign policy to not spark domestic unrest (Klingler-Vidra 2012, 69). As Singapore’s prime minister Lee Hsien Loong stated in his National Day Rally speech in 2019: ‘Being a Chinese-majority country can at times put us in a difficult position, because our words and actions may be easily misunderstood’ (Sim 2019a). The similar historical and cultural ties make Singapore cautious because Singapore for a long time has had difficult relations with Malaysia and Indonesia, which both witnessed several crises due to racial issues with their ethnic Chinese minority (Li and Zhang 2013, 178). This shows that the domestic factor of being a majority Chinese country is playing a huge part in how Singapore attempts to position itself in the region and towards China.

While in Indonesian domestic politics there clearly are to be found different sentiments towards China, Singapore’s foreign policy is created in establishment circles with no strong opposition against it. While some former government officials such as Kishore Mahbubani (a former diplomat) publicly question ‘whether the island state was imprudently stepping on the toes of bigger countries’ (Jaipragas 2017), these forms of criticisms from within the government elite are rare. Immediately this statement has been countered by other Singaporean diplomats and government officials, stating that people should not have the idea that ‘there is a split in the foreign ministry’ since Mahbubani left the foreign service in 2004 (Jaipragas 2017). Singapore’s ruling elite has continually emphasized they will defend the city-state’s national interest against any major power, since this is the only way the sovereignty of their small country could be credible. Due to that, Singapore’s prime minister Lee Hsien Loong has sometimes been criticized over his not-so tactical comments on China by other domestic critics (Jaipragas 2017). This had mainly to do with Chinese actions in the SCS, and comes out of Singapore’s foreign policy strategy of not acting as a small state in world politics. These include Lee Hsien Loong’s statements on the support the international

tribunal ruling of the PCA and repeated statements on the importance of the international rules-based order. While these statements are often followed by cooling relations between Singapore and China, Singapore's ruling elite does not seem to be very affected by such situations since it is used to relations with major powers and the difficult situations this may bring.

As most other Southeast Asian countries and Indonesia, Singapore is experiencing a decreasing trust in China due to its actions concerning the SCS dispute. Even though China's rise has been viewed by Singapore to have economic opportunities, the city-state's political elite are worried about the negative implications of a rising China on the region (Li and Zhang 2013, 179). Interestingly, while Indonesia is a bigger country in facing China and is perhaps less affected by geopolitical dynamics in the region, the Singapore state elite is aware of the necessity for the city-state to be involved in ASEAN and the need of another great power in order to balance China: The US. To illustrate this, according to the survey 'The State of Southeast Asia' by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute published in 2020, 61% of the Singaporean respondents would choose to take the side of the US over China (Iwamoto 2020). As a small city-state specifically dependent on international trade and a stable rules-based order, Singapore is highly sensitive for any change in the regional order and especially has leaned towards the US for security. Singapore is never going to choose between either China or the US, even though China is pushing Singapore to understand and support Chinese position on regional issues (Hsiao 2019, 16). About such situations, Singapore's elite states that 'Singapore hasn't changed in our policy...China has emerged and feels now it is a great power...it has certain expectations (Jaipragas 2017).

Domestic Politics: Changing Sentiments and Fundamental Responses

What became clear in both the cases of Indonesia and Singapore is that the dynamics in domestic politics are fundamental in their response to China. They both have ethnic Chinese citizens in their population that is of influence in how their country's politics perceive China, either being the minority group which is often discriminated against (Indonesia) or being the majority of the population, which does not want to be seen as 'little China' (Singapore). With a strong divide in domestic politics on how to view China, the attitude of Indonesian domestic politics towards China continues to be ambiguous due to the issue of the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia, the economic power of China and

increasingly due to the perception of Chinese behaviour in the SCS. While the rise of China clearly has been used for internal political competition and the domestic political agenda, anti-Chinese sentiments also have led to Indonesia not complying to external pressure but rather pursuing a tougher foreign policy towards China in order to appease opposition groups. Despite the relatively good economic relations between the two, Indonesian internal political groups only become ever more suspicious and critical of China.

Much more so than in Indonesia, Singapore's domestic political elite is aware to be dependent on the geopolitical context. Different opinions on increasing Chinese assertiveness are less apparent in Singapore, with a strict establishment of ruling elite creating foreign policy. What became clear is that Singapore continued to never behave as a small state in the past decade, even though emerging power China is expecting this and is more and more bothered by non-claimant Singapore's active behaviour. More so than Indonesia, Singapore looks at the US to maintain strong security ties in the changing regional dynamics in the SCS. Interestingly, while in the past decade the Singaporean population slowly but surely wanted their voices heard in Singaporean politics, their preference towards a beneficial and pragmatic relationship with both China and the US without too much influence from Chinese culture agrees with Singaporean political elite's view on China.

5. Conclusion: The South China Sea Dispute and The Responses of Indonesia and Singapore

To conclude, in order to answer the research question on *how and why Indonesia and Singapore have responded to the increased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, despite both initially not being claimant states*, this thesis looked at the dimensions of economic relations and domestic political factors. Generally, it could be viewed that the increasing assertive behaviour of China in the SCS has put both Indonesia and Singapore in difficult and ambiguous positions, eventually drawing Indonesia into the SCS dispute due to overlapping maritime claims near the Natuna Islands. Moreover, both Indonesia and Singapore maintain to rely on legal precedents with mainly the 2016 tribunal ruling by the PCA as a reference to protect their own interests. Despite China not acknowledging this ruling which makes it non-enforceable, calling upon international law is one of the few instruments Singapore and Indonesia have to somehow deter China in this dispute.

While Singapore and, to a greater extent, Indonesia are economically increasingly dependent on China, which could lead to turning a blind eye to China's behaviour in the SCS,

the two Southeast Asian states have instead continued to be wary and increasingly criticized China in the past decade in order to go against its growing assertive behaviour. It became clear that this response comes out of ideas and dynamics in domestic politics insisting to not behave submissively nor accepting China to pick on them. Besides some low points in their relations, Indonesia's and Singapore's responses did not deteriorate economic relations because both states and China realized they can benefit immensely from a stable and increasing economic relation. Even though Indonesia has a tougher response in the dispute, up until now it will not go as far as to anger China as much that could hurt their trade relations since the country is heavily reliant on Chinese investment. On the other hand, while China's rapid economic development creates an important market for goods and destination for investments for Singapore, the city-state maintains to emphasize the importance of international law. Moreover, both Singapore and Indonesia have not worried about disagreements affecting their economic relations since China has never threatened to impose any type of economic sanctions. Rather than the SCS dispute, there are other factors that could affect economic relations. These include China outcompeting Indonesia in labour-intensive manufacturing and aiming to become the world's tech leader hindering Singapore's export in the long term. Moreover, there are also tensions apparent such as the lack of trust in Chinese investment under the umbrella of the BRI, the coming of Chinese workers or immigrants and the perceived threat of China to the rules-based international order which underpins international trade. These tensions lead to more suspicion and uncertainty about China's economic intentions.

This increased suspicion about China's intentions and its assertive behaviour in the SCS has been met with firm but different responses in the country's domestic politics in the past decade. What they have in common is the influence of the ethnic Chinese population, whether it be the overwhelming majority or a minority group. Being aware of the geopolitical dynamics in the region, the small city-state of Singapore may not be China's 'special partner' anymore, it does not succumb to the pressure to behave as a small state or choose sides between either China or the US. Singapore is only increasing its security ties with the US and its 'active neutrality' in the conflict, making repeated statements on the importance of the international rules-based order and free navigation in the SCS. This is because China's economy may offer chances, yet Singapore's economy is just as dependent on external markets and international trade. Cooling relations as a result of such actions and statements does not seem to affect Singapore's ruling elite since the small city-state is used to relations with major powers and therefore already regularly dealt with trade-offs between protecting its

sovereignty or 'offending' a big power. Indonesia is dealing with other dynamics in domestic politics which has led to a much tougher response to China's behaviour around the Natuna Islands in the past decade. Namely, Indonesian domestic politics has perceived China's territorial intrusions as direct violations of its sovereignty of which Indonesia has always been highly protective. With a clear divide in domestic politics on how to view China, the attitude of Indonesian domestic politics towards China continues to be ambiguous. This is because on the one hand, Indonesia wants to pick the fruits from the ever-increasing economic power of China, while on the other hand, it does not want to be bullied in their own territorial waters around the Natuna Islands. However, it seems that the threats of the ever-increasing economic power of China and its increasingly assertive behaviour in the SCS is emphasized more and more, which leads to growing opposition in the Indonesian society and domestic politics, resulting in a tougher response in order to appease domestic opposition and protect the Indonesian sovereignty around the Natuna Islands.

This thesis ends with a short future outlook. The rise of China did not stop at the beginning of 2020 and its growing economic and political power will continue steadily which will also have consequences for the SCS dispute. Recent events have shown that even COVID-19 has not stopped China stepping up its game in advancing its regional agenda in the SCS, continuing shadowing ships of other claimant states in disputed areas in the sea (Kurlantzick 2020). When tensions heighten again, economic relations will probably continue to be resilient since although Southeast Asian countries fear for negative consequences on their economic relation with China, this is not a one-directional street. Therefore, even though China becomes more assertive in the geopolitical game in Southeast Asia, so do Indonesia and Singapore. While Indonesia will not downplay maritime conflicts anymore, the question is whether domestic politics will maintain the increased assertive response to China around the Natuna Islands. Singapore is transitioning to a new generation of leaders but this most probably will not substantially influence how it positions itself in the regional dynamics. A new COC for regulating navigation in the SCS would be a good next step but since negotiations have dragged on since 2016 with little results, any further developments in the SCS dispute may be determined by who is going to most assertive in setting the rules of the game. This past decade however suggests that irrespective of what will happen in the SCS in the years to come, we are likely going to see another interesting decade in the South China Sea.

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