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THEIR DIGITAL MEDIATED DIPLOMACY INVOLVING THE
#SOUTHCHINASEA**

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Abstract

This study investigates how China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have used social media platforms to shape their respective narratives and advance their international interests in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in anticipation of China's response to negotiations for the Code of Conduct for Parties in the South China Sea (COC South China Sea) in July 2023. The study compares China's and ASEAN's use of X (formerly Twitter) to frame their respective diplomatic relations and representations concerning the South China Sea. The findings show that stakeholders from both sides of the China-ASEAN relationship exhibited a degree of caution in leveraging the affordances of social media to frame geopolitical relations and address the South China Sea issue. Moreover, the author found disparities in narrative strategy between China and ASEAN and among ASEAN stakeholders. While Beijing's narratives regarding China-ASEAN relations and the South China Sea issue often pointed out contradictions in or criticized Western geopolitical expansion in the Asia-Pacific region, they generally featured a moderate and amicable tone when engaging with ASEAN. Conversely, certain ASEAN accounts featured narrative strategies that directly criticized China's geopolitical actions in the region. Nonetheless, their overall approach to China-ASEAN relations tended to maintain a positive and friendly stance, albeit with some ambiguity, as they advanced initiatives such as negotiating a code of conduct in the South China Sea.

Keywords: China-ASEAN, South China Sea, Digitalization, Mediated Public Diplomacy, Social Media

Introduction

South China Sea, a Delicate Realm Linked to China-ASEAN Relations

On February 4, 2023, at the closing ceremony of the 32nd Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Coordinating Council meeting, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi announced, as Chair of ASEAN, that Indonesia would intensify efforts to negotiate the code of conduct (COC) to manage the South China Sea dispute (Reuters, 2023). Located in Southeast Asia, the South China Sea is the third largest continental sea in the world. In recent years, this calm blue body of water has frequently triggered sharp geopolitical and military conflicts over its geography and sovereignty. The South China Sea borders countries and regions such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. It contains not only a large number of fishery resources but also abundant deposits of oil and natural gas. Moreover, it is an essential waterway connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, holding critical military value for its bordering governments. Due to economic and geostrategic interests, nearby countries have overlapping territorial claims that make this 3.3 million-square-kilometer area one of the most disputed seas in the world.

As the most important political and economic alliance in Southeast Asia, ASEAN, which now consists of ten countries, dates back to August 8, 1967, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok, Thailand. The aim was to unite the non-Communist countries in the region to prevent the expansion of the powers of the Soviet Union (Anwar, 2005). To this end, ASEAN was established with three critical functions: to reduce tensions within ASEAN, to minimize the influence of external forces on the region, and to promote the socio-economic development of the

member countries. That is, the purpose was to “accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region” and to “promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region and adherence to the principles of the United-Nations Charter” (European Parliament, s. d., p. 1). However, ASEAN continues to have concerns about regional security issues, aiming to emulate the European Union by establishing a standard security system (Narine, 2008).

As Asia’s most significant political, economic, and military power, China has official diplomatic links with ASEAN that date back to establishing dialogue between China and ASEAN in 1996 (Swee-Hock et al., 2005). Although ASEAN and China are each other’s key regional partners, China-ASEAN diplomatic and geopolitical relations are fraught with complexities in geopolitical tradition, migration, and cultural exchange. For instance, in geopolitics, China shares borders with Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam and is adjacent to the seas of the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This geographical connection has given rise to similar or identical social environments and ethnicities (e.g., the Jing nationality, Wa and Jingpo ethnic groups) and naturally involves disputes over borders. Additionally, due to its unique geographical location and social-cultural conditions, the ASEAN region has become a “middle ground” for power plays between Eastern and Western nations (Carr, 2014, p. 76). From the proposal of the Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy to the adjustment to the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the strengthening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and the proposal of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, as well as corresponding geopolitical strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiatives, the ASEAN region has consistently been a focal point of geopolitical competition (Zhao, 2021).

Moreover, the ASEAN region is the world's largest area of Chinese emigration. One example is Malaysia. During the 1950s and 1960s migration wave, many Chinese emigrants moved to Malaysia, exerting significant influence on local society. Despite the racially biased New Economic Policy, Malaysia's economic lifeline came under Chinese control within a dozen years, while political power remained in the hands of Malaysians. A racially mixed social situation resulted (Lee, 2022). Interactions with China through immigration intermediaries are intricate. Therefore, when considering foreign policy, China often incorporates emigrants (e.g., Chinese nationals, overseas Chinese, and ethnic Chinese) as a crucial part of policy design, which closely relates to China's "united front work" (Tsai & Huang, 2017 p. 91). The above factors led to a more amicable and conciliatory communication strategy implemented by China and ASEAN in the diplomatic arena. Even in the more sensitive areas of conflict, both sides have tended to choose more moderate approaches to negotiation (Ham & Tolentino, 2018), due in part to cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991).

However, China started upgrading its political claims on the South China Sea in 2011. It used the nine-dash line to demarcate geographical boundaries and establish jurisdiction over the entire South China Sea. It also engaged in marine engineering and built artificial islands to expand its maritime territory. Although the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled in 2016 that Beijing's "nine-dash line" boundary theory had no legal basis, the geopolitical undercurrents of the South China Sea dispute have not ceased. Events such as the 2020 maritime standoff between Malaysia and China (Werner, 2020) and the recent agreement between the Philippines and the United States to expand Washington's military footprint in response to potential military conflicts in the South China Sea (Mansoor & Shah, 2023) all stem from China's military establishment, recent expansion in the

region, and increasingly explicit anti-U.S. political positions (Boylan et al., 2021).

Most recently, on June 17, 2024, a violent collision between Chinese marine police and Philippine military vessels in a geopolitically disputed area of the South China Sea initiated a new public diplomacy conflict between China and the Philippines. Beijing claimed that a Philippine supply ship and two speedboats had “intruded into waters near *Ren’ai Jiao* [referred to in the Philippines as Second Thomas Shoal] in China’s *Nansha Qundao* (also known as Spratly Islands) in an attempt to send materials, including construction materials, to the military vessel illegally grounded at *Ren’ai Jiao*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson’s Office, 2024, para. 34). Beijing further stated that the China Coast Guard had rolled out China’s Coast Guard Law to “standardize the administrative law-enforcement procedures of Coast Guard agencies and better uphold order at sea” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson’s Office, 2024, para. 33). The Philippine response escalated in severity. On June 24, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro declared that Manila did not consider the incident a misunderstanding or an accident but rather “an intentional-high speed ramming” (Reuters, 2024, para. 3) and “an aggressive and illegal use of force” (para. 7).

In this study, the author examined the history of the South China Sea disputes, exploring how China and ASEAN used social media to manage diplomatic relations and address the South China Sea disputes between 2022 and mid-2023. Specifically, the aim was to understand how China and ASEAN used digital diplomacy initiatives to guide and influence their policies regarding the region. To this end, the author selected four stakeholders for observation. In addition to the digital diplomacy accounts of China and ASEAN, the author analyzed the foreign service account of a government in

the Asia-Pacific region with a pro-China political stance (Malaysia) and the foreign service account of a government in more substantial conflict with China (The Philippines). The goal was to explore how these stakeholders framed this geopolitical issue in public diplomacy by conducting a comparative qualitative and quantitative analysis of the content posted by these four digital diplomacy accounts concerning the South China Sea dispute during the same period. First, the author reviewed the history of the South China Sea dispute and discussed the conceptual framework surrounding the digitization of mediated public diplomacy. Then the author conducted analysis guided by three research questions:

- How did Beijing and ASEAN use X (formerly Twitter) to weave network structures and generate dynamics that helped disseminate narrative messages about their claims to the South China Sea?
- How did Chinese diplomatic missions and diplomats conceptualize the South China Sea issue with regard to ASEAN? What were their narrative strategies?
- What was the narrative formulation strategy of ASEAN regarding the South China Sea issue? What similarities and differences emerged across the member countries?

Brief History of the South China Sea Dispute

China's historical claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea dates back to the late 19th century, following the Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent cession of related territories by the Tsing dynasty government (Blanchard,

2000). During World War II, Japanese troops occupied the Spratly Islands (for the Chinese government: Nansha Islands) in December 1938 and invaded Hainan Island the following year (Granados, 2005). During this period, French Indo-Chinese troops surveyed and occupied parts of the South China Sea islands, including the Paracel Islands (for the Chinese government: Xisha Islands). At the end of World War II, the Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) government demarcated China's territory in the South China Sea using an eleven-dash line on maps, encompassing areas such as the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, and Macclesfield Bank. However, after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the regime built by the Communist Party of China (CPC) revised this claim to the nine-dash line still in use today.

The Philippines' claim to the Spratly Islands, although initially submitted to the UN in 1946, gained significant traction in 1956 when Filipino adventurer Thomas Cloma declared the creation of a new state called Kalayaan (The National Bureau of Asian Research [NBR], s. d.). The Philippine government based its claim on *terra nullius* and geographic proximity. Furthermore, the Treaty of San Francisco (1951) saw Japan renounce all claims to various territories, including the Spratly Islands, which became open to annexation. This historical context, combined with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), forms the basis of the Philippines' claim that the islands lay within its archipelagic baselines.

The South China Sea dispute intensified in the early 1970s following the discovery of potential oil and gas reserves (International Monetary Fund, 2012). The region's significant fishery resources exacerbated competition (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2024). China's assertion of a nine-dash line encompassing nearly the entire

South China Sea has been a major point of contention. In 1992, China passed the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, claiming the South China Sea based on historical rights dating back to the Western Han Dynasty. This law adopted territorial determinations that were not necessarily recognized by UNCLOS.

In contrast, the claims to the South China Sea and its islands by other neighboring states—Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei—are based on the so-called “effective occupation” jurisprudence established by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Island of Palmas case in April 1928 ([1928] II RIAA 829, 1928) and on the UNCLOS exclusive economic zone (EEZ)-based institutional framework for declarations of contiguous zones in the relevant sea or territory. (UNCLOS established the rules for states to determine sovereignty claims over resources based on the exclusive economic zone [EEZ] and continental shelf, which extend up to 320 kilometers from the coastline. This framework supports the coastal state’s sovereignty claims over the resources within that area.)

These claims, whether grounded in the principles of effective occupation or EEZ-based rights, often conflict with China’s historical claims. Indeed, China’s territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea extend well beyond the EEZ and overlap the legal claims of ASEAN countries. Beijing’s assertion that its sovereignty over the disputed area predates UNCLOS, leading to ongoing geopolitical disputes. China’s refusal to compromise on its territorial claims has perpetuated geopolitical conflicts in the South China Sea.

The construction of Chinese structures on Mischief Reef (also known as Panganiban Reef) in 1995 (Shambaugh, 2011) caused alarm in and drew opposition from Malaysia and other ASEAN members. In the same year, Vietnam,

Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia formally joined ASEAN, expanding the organization to ten member nations. The following year, ASEAN and China became full dialogue partners, aiming to manage differences through political-diplomatic negotiations and economic collaboration related to the South China Sea. Despite the tensions with the Beijing government over this issue during this period, Malaysia maintained a restrained attitude towards China. It continued to seek diplomatic channels to address the problem. Malaysia emphasized both bilateral and multilateral dialogue as a means of conflict resolution (Buszynski, 2012).

Beijing's declaration of the Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf in 1998 (Zou, 2001) further escalated geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea. In response, Malaysia occupied Investigator Shoal and Erica Reef and maintained offshore naval stations. Similarly, the Philippines built military facilities on Thitu Island in 1999, and the Philippine Navy intentionally ran a ship aground on the Second Thomas Shoal to maintain their territorial claim in the area.

In the 21st century, China's growing economic and political power has bolstered its confidence in the South China Sea, reflecting President Xi Jinping's theory on the "four matters of confidence" of China's "national rejuvenation" (Meng, 2019, para. 6). Beijing has expanded disputed islands and reefs through rapid land reclamation and infrastructure construction, altering the status quo with artificial islands and military installations (Leplâtre, 2023). In response, the Philippines filed an arbitration case against China under UNCLOS in 2013. Although the 2016 ruling invalidated China's nine-dash line claim (Perlez, 2016), Beijing rejected the decision and intensified its regional activities. Meanwhile, ASEAN has advocated for the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (ASEAN, 2012) and sought a

binding code of conduct with China, though progress has been slow.

Economic interdependence between China and ASEAN has grown despite diplomatic tensions from territorial disputes. The establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) in 2010 has boosted regional trade and investment, highlighting the dual nature of the relationship—conflictual in security but cooperative economically (Kosandi, 2014). Concurrently, competition for public diplomacy has intensified as both sides seek to bolster their claims in the court of international public opinion.

Digital Mediated Public Diplomacy as Emerging Soft Power Statecraft

In the context of the professionalization and day-to-day work of diplomats, Manor (2019) described the digitalization of public diplomacy as “a long-term process in which digital technologies influence the norms, values, and working routines of diplomatic institutions, as well as the metaphors and self-narratives that diplomats employ to conceptualize their craft” (p. 20). This idea hints at a socially constructed process corresponding to diplomatic communication in a digital environment, where the affordances of social media play an essential role in deploying foreign policy and shaping geopolitical narratives.

Social Media Affordances and Digital Public Diplomacy

Digitalization trends have empowered individuals and organizations to create, disseminate, and share information and foster connections with others via social media platforms built on Web 2.0 technology. Moreover, affordances that establish and nurture user relationships have evolved into a significant social phenomenon. The term “affordance”

originated in the realm of social psychology to denote “what the environment [...] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” (Gibson, 2014, p. 119). Applied to digital communication, an affordance is a “multifaceted relational structure between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes” in an environment designed for engagement (Evans et al., 2017, p. 36). Hence, in conjunction with social media architecture, affordances facilitate and shape “the nature of publicness online” (Baym & Boyd, 2012, p. 320), where “people’s social contexts, identities, and practices” further complicate network communication (Willems, 2021, p. 1679).

Scholars of digital public diplomacy have frequently examined social media affordances under the premise that social media platforms permit deliberate and strategic social actions (Bjola & Jiang, 2015). Through ongoing dialogue, social media has the potential to touch a “wide audience” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 4) and to mobilize the structural features of digital platforms and interactive activities to capture the attention of “a broad range of stakeholders and to shape their interest, affinity, endorsement, or support” (Desmoulins & Huang, 2021, p. 223). Moreover, public diplomacy scholars have explored how affordances foster *intermestic* models of digital public diplomacy (Huang & Wang, 2023). Notably, the horizontal networks made possible by social media help dissolve traditional diplomatic boundaries (Bjola & Manor, 2018). This evolution is evident in the shift in the manner and tone of expression of diplomatic representatives on social media platforms, as both domestic and foreign audiences can now offer insights and commentary on foreign policy (Brenner et al., 2002).

However, the role of affordance depends on the objectives and contexts of the actors participating in

digital public diplomacy. The same technological platform might offer different affordances to users pursuing distinct aims (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). For instance, Payne et al. (2011) and Melissen and Caesar-Gordon (2016) found that a citizen-centered and grassroots-oriented approach to digital diplomacy facilitated the deployment of foreign policies online. This communication paradigm emphasizes the open and democratic features inherent to social media platforms that foster people-to-people exchanges. Such interactions prioritize two-way communication among network members, enhance mutual trust building through durable engagement, and permit the accumulation of social capital, thereby "promoting pluralism and contributing to the creation of democracy" (Pisarska, 2016, p. 26).

In contrast, examining China's digital diplomacy campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic, Wang and Xu (2023) and Wang and Huang (2023) found that Beijing leveraged X's hashtag affordance as part of a top-down narrative framework in which the government asserted a firm political stance during the crisis. From yet another perspective, Huang and Wang (2021, 2023) examined the *intermestic* nature of China's digital diplomacy, highlighting that social media affordances allowed actors to integrate censorship and institutional self-censorship mechanisms, prepare narratives, and shape perceptions. This approach created an illusion of dialogic engagement and multiple voices on X, projecting an image of the Chinese government as open-minded and respectful of varying viewpoints inside the international social media sphere.

Digitalization of Mediated Public Diplomacy

Golan et al. (2019) conceptualized mediated public diplomacy as "the organized attempts by governments to influence foreign public opinion via mediated channels,

including paid, earned, owned and shared media, for the purpose of gaining support for its foreign policy objectives” (p. 6). Based on this definition, framing studies are endogenously intertwined with discourse and narrative analysis (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) due to their focus on how media intervenes in the mutable landscape of day-to-day politics (Entman, 2007). From a cognitive perspective (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), frame-based mediated public diplomacy is a communication process in and through which psychological and institutional environments, social settings, and practices forge a particular social reality. Alternatively, framing built and maintained through media discourse depends on narrative and symbolic devices, often aligning with the personal schemas, historical and cultural backgrounds, and political preferences of target audiences. To generate a transformative force, actors must carefully prepare the linguistic aspects of a narrative to increase favorable perception and reception (Roslyng & Dindler, 2023).

The advent of digitalization has facilitated more favorable structural conditions for public diplomacy actors, with social media affordances not only streamlining communication efforts but also helping reduce the costs of outreach campaigns. However, digitalization does not universally ensure more straightforward conditions for mediated public diplomacy; and the process of shaping social power, particularly in a digital context, remains profoundly intricate.

Indeed, digitalization introduces a multitude of ongoing, day-to-day, and fragmented communication activities, broadening the avenues through which international political discourse is disseminated and engaging a more significant segment of the population in the agenda setting of political actors (Willems, 2021). However, this widespread use of user-generated content in diplomacy has shifted

political issues from the domain of elites to grassroots populations, thereby diminishing the exclusive position of traditional diplomats and their institutions as the sole producers, distributors, and gatekeepers of diplomatic information (Huang & Arceneaux, 2024). While ostensibly facilitating continual communication and dialogue between public diplomacy actors and target audiences, social media affordances also permit the dissemination of disinformation or the manipulation of legitimate information (Freelon & Wells, 2020). The (re-)formulation of social power through mediated communication creates the “ability to push a preferred foreign policy frame” (van Ham, 2010, p. 13), a set of methods and techniques “that alters hegemony into leadership” (p. 13). In pursuit of this objective, actors can harness the digitalization of mediated public diplomacy to shift the balance toward mass persuasion (Graham, 2014). This aim involves establishing networked structures, fostering dynamics of connectivity and interactivity, and creating intertextualities among narratives required to accomplish foreign policy objectives (Huang & Wang, 2019; Zaharna & Huang, 2022). For instance, whether discussing the origins of the COVID-19 virus or allegations of Russian “genocide” in Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian War, the involved public diplomacy actors have, to varying degrees, engaged in covert manipulation, de-contextualization, or fabrication of information pertaining to the conflict (Bjola & Manor, 2024; Huang, 2024). They have aimed to maximize the effectiveness of facilitating communication among themselves in digitally mediated diplomacy, thereby misleading message recipients (Howard et al., 2023).

In this context, the digitalization of mediated public diplomacy transcends the simplistic dichotomy of content production-dissemination. Instead, it consists of a dynamic process of framing practices—a method of managing actor relationships and narrative content within a connective

interactive structure through the collaboration of various actors. These processes enable the co-construction of meaning, allowing public diplomacy actors, whether directly or indirectly, to coordinate different networks to advance global agendas, promote cultural attitudes and behaviors, foster and expand relationships with diverse publics, influence ideas, and mobilize social action to defend and promote their interests and values.

Hence, the author examined and investigated how various public diplomacy actors addressed the same geopolitical issues to shape reality on social media in the framework of digitalized and mediated public diplomacy. Guided by the following research questions, the author investigated how China and ASEAN used social media to frame their positions and interests before negotiating the South China Sea COC:

- RQ1. How did Beijing and ASEAN use X (formerly Twitter) to weave network structures and generate dynamics that helped disseminate narrative messages about their claims to the South China Sea?
- RQ2. How did Chinese diplomatic missions and diplomats conceptualize the South China Sea issue with regard to ASEAN? What were their narrative strategies?
- RQ3. (a) What was the narrative formulation strategy of ASEAN regarding the South China Sea issue?
(b) What similarities and differences emerged across the member countries?

Research Methods

Given the sophisticated nature of China-ASEAN relations, the author conducted a one-and-a-half-year observation of the diplomatic X accounts of four stakeholders: China, the Philippines, Malaysia, and ASEAN. The X API was used to gather tweets from five diplomatic accounts. On the Chinese side, because the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) directly manages two spokesperson accounts on X (@MFA_China and @SpokespersonCHN), a corpus of tweets from both accounts represented China's official stance. On the ASEAN side, the data consisted of tweets from the official accounts of the Philippines (@DFAPHL), Malaysia (@MalaysiaMFA), and ASEAN (@ASEAN). As a member of ASEAN, the Philippines has long maintained a close geopolitical relationship with the United States. Such cooperation accounts for its complex exchanges with China regarding the South China Sea (De Castro, 2015). The Philippines and China have clashed over the South China Sea in recent years, and observing the dynamics of Philippine digital diplomacy reveals the more assertive voices within ASEAN towards China. Malaysia has maintained a more positive diplomatic relationship with China due to longstanding economic and trade cooperation. The Chinese Foreign Ministry's partner network rankings also reflect this closer partnership. Malaysia is ranked as China's "comprehensive strategic partner," much higher than China's "strategic partnerships" with ASEAN and the Philippines (Li & Ye, 2019, p. 69). Therefore, exploring Malaysia's expressions of public diplomacy reveal the friendlier attitudes of countries within ASEAN toward China. Finally, because ASEAN is a regional political and economic organization, its diplomatic actions often require the coordination of multiple interests and perspectives. Thus, observing its digital diplomacy practices reveals ASEAN's voices and attitudes from an institutional perspective.

The collected data consist of English-language tweets published by the target accounts from January 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023, a period capturing the evolution of digital public diplomacy related to the South China Sea dispute. Although ASEAN advocated for consultation with China on the South China Sea COC on February 4, 2023, Beijing dragged its feet until July 2023, when it issued a statement and took action (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2023). Thus, the author looked at digital diplomacy actions from all sides in the nearly 18 months leading up to this date to explore how both sides used X to mediate their political positions. Through keyword filtering and content review, this study identified 358 tweets concerning the South China Sea issue for detailed examination (158 tweets from Chinese accounts and 200 tweets from ASEAN accounts).

The author used social network analysis (Ingenhoff et al., 2021) to examine the networks formed by username mentions in the tweets of Chinese and ASEAN diplomatic accounts. To ascertain which users possessed a more significant number of connections and exhibited higher activity levels on X, the following metrics were used: degree centrality, betweenness centrality, closeness centrality, and modularity. Moreover, the author conducted a semantic network analysis of hashtags to uncover how these accounts leveraged social media features to form thematic clusters related to the South China Sea issue. The application Gephi was used to represent in visual form the networks of mentions and hashtags (Bastian et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the author took a semio-discursive approach to qualitative and quantitative analysis of tweet content. Semiotics is a scholarly approach to elucidating meaning as it materializes in various forms (e.g., texts, images, social customs, architectural structures), collectively known as "discourse" (Lecolle et al., 2018). The semio-discursive

approach to reading a text involves constructing and presenting a logical arrangement of the meaning expressed. This methodology offers frameworks for meaning creation that facilitate reading and interpretation (Manor, 2022).

The unit of analysis was a single tweet. To ensure more accurate qualitative analysis of tweet content, the author invited a public diplomacy scholar and expert to help with the coding process. Together, the author and scholar conducted a thorough line-by-line reading and analysis of the tweets, analyzing both textual and visual materials (e.g., images and videos) to investigate how China and ASEAN crafted narratives to frame the South China Sea issue. The study relied on emergent coding to ensure that all tweet topics came from examination of the data rather than reference to previous findings (Stemler, 2001). Given that the number of tweets analyzed in this study was relatively small ($N = 358$), the coding approach involved both coders carefully reading each tweet together and discussing each coding option, reaching a complete consensus on all coding decisions. The study categorized emergent topics into the following variables:

1. Text Modality: text-only and text combined with static image, moving GIFs, video clips, or live videos.
2. Engagement Tactic Type: rational (argumentation), emotional, behavioral, and combinations. This coding metric draws on the theory of communication engagement (Johnston & Taylor, 2018), as well as the methods and approaches Huang and Wang (2020) used to examine narrative strategies for digital diplomacy. Engagement has three dimensions: affective, rational, and behavioral (Johnston, 2018). Emotional

engagement involves positive or negative emotional responses (e.g., happiness, fear, anger, encouragement, and loyalty). Therefore, the study indexed emotional engagement according to the presence of emotional expression or emotional appeal in the published content. Rational engagement refers to psychological investment in self-training and learning to build awareness or understanding of a topic (Johnston, 2018). Consequently, the study focused on indicators such as exposition, informational content, and argumentation. Behavioral engagement is a call to action. The key aspect of action engagement is whether there is a call for action in the content. For example, the following tweet from @MalaysiaMFA was coded as rational: "The Meeting also exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual concern including the South China Sea issue, developments in the Korean Peninsula, the situation in Myanmar and the conflict in Ukraine." The following tweet from @MFA_China was coded as emotional: "The US has broken its public commitment of taking no position on sovereignty claims over the islands in the South China Sea and sought to drive a wedge between countries and undermine peace and stability in the region. This is extremely irresponsible." The following tweet from @SpokespersonCHN was coded as behavioral: "He expects Indonesia and other ASEAN countries to make independent decisions and choices based on the fundamental interests of regional peace, stability, and development."

3. Narrative Strategies and Tactics: using grounded theory, the study identified 12 (6 categories) from the Chinese side and 17 (7 categories) from the ASEAN side.

Results

Through data analysis, the author and public diplomacy scholar observed that the digitalization of mediated public diplomacy in both China and ASEAN featured affordances of social media platforms that shaped narrative content. Most prominently, diplomats adopted various new forms of textual writing to convey their political initiatives and perspectives visually. As depicted in Tables 1a and 1b, ASEAN and China primarily used the “text + static image” modality to present factual information regarding the South China Sea issue ($n = 104$, 52% for ASEAN; $n = 68$, 43% for China). When articulating specific claims and viewpoints, both sides tended to use “text-only” to direct audience attention toward the content itself ($n = 82$, 41% for ASEAN; $n = 61$, 38.6% for China). Furthermore, both sides used “text + video clip” to deliver content more dynamically and engagingly ($n = 14$, 7% for ASEAN; $n = 27$, 17.1% for China). In addition, the emergence of “text + live video” in Beijing-led digital public diplomacy is noteworthy ($n = 2$, 1.3%). This trend aligns with the rapid growth of China’s short-video and live-streaming industries, particularly on platforms like TikTok. This linear presentation of specific events enables direct online interaction, attracting external attention and fostering audience engagement (Sullivan et al., 2023).

Table 1a. Text Modality of Tweets from ASEAN

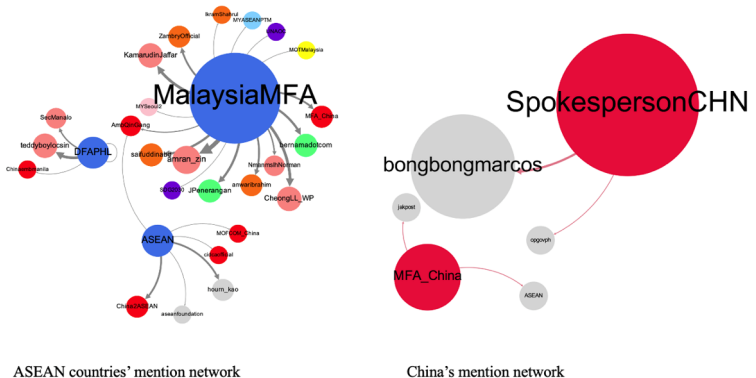
Modality	<i>n</i>	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Text + Image	104	52.0	52.0	52.0
Text only	82	41.0	41.0	93.0
Text +Video	14	7.0	7.0	100
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 1b. Text Modality of Tweets from China

Modality	n	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Text + Image	68	43.0	43.0	43.0
Text only	61	38.6	38.6	81.6
Text +Video	27	17.1	17.1	98.7
Text + Live	2	1.3	1.3	100
Total	158	100	100	

RQ1. How did Beijing and ASEAN use X (formerly Twitter) to weave network structures and generate dynamics that helped disseminate narrative messages about their claims to the South China Sea?

ASEAN and China used the mention, retweet, and hashtag functions in their digital diplomacy to structure their communication networks and deploy their communication strategies. However, significant differences emerged in the use of these affordances (see Figure 1).



Note. Node size by weighted-degree centrality. ASEAN Network: Color: Royal Blue = ASEAN accounts, MalaysiaMFA and DFAPHL, Orange = politician, Light Coral = diplomat, Green = news agency, Red = Chinese counterpart, Light Sky Blue = same country's missions/embassy, Pink = foreign counterpart (not Chinese), Purple = international organization, Yellow = governmental organization, Light Gray = ASEAN Official.

China's Network: Red = Chinese diplomatic account; Dark Gray = Philippine counterparts

Figure 1. Mention networks of ASEAN and China

While both ASEAN and China were cautious about mentions and retweets, China showed relative disinterest in interactions between actors. Chinese diplomats only used the mention function in tweets during Philippine President Marcos's visit to China to interact with him and his office, the Philippine news organization, to produce and project friendly links between China and the Philippines. Otherwise, Chinese diplomats did not use any mentions in their claims and narratives about the South China Sea. This finding relates to the specific narrative techniques adopted by China, as discussed later. For ASEAN, especially the Philippines and Malaysia, diplomats used the mention function in their content to a small and discreet extent. However, the scope of interaction was primarily limited to their own diplomats and political figures. For the ASEAN institutional account, the use of mentions was also limited to interactions between ASEAN and their officials (e.g., @hourn_kao) and China's mission to ASEAN (@China2ASEAN).

As shown in Figure 2, a difference emerged between ASEAN and China in terms of hashtag use. In the case of ASEAN, hashtags were more fixed and had a particular scope. On the one hand, when referring to the South China Sea, relevant actors use fixed hashtags such as #DFASStatement, #DFAForgingAhead (Philippines), #WismaPutra (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia), and #ASEAN (ASEAN's institutional account) to create intertextuality in relation to the content posted by their respective accounts. In addition, Malaysia's diplomatic account used the #MalaysiaChina, #DuaHala (meaning "two-way"), and #BilateralAffairs to reinforce their narratives and initiatives related to China. On the other hand, the ASEAN institutional account expressed and shaped its relationship with China through #ASEANTalk, an initiative to promote exchanges among the youth.

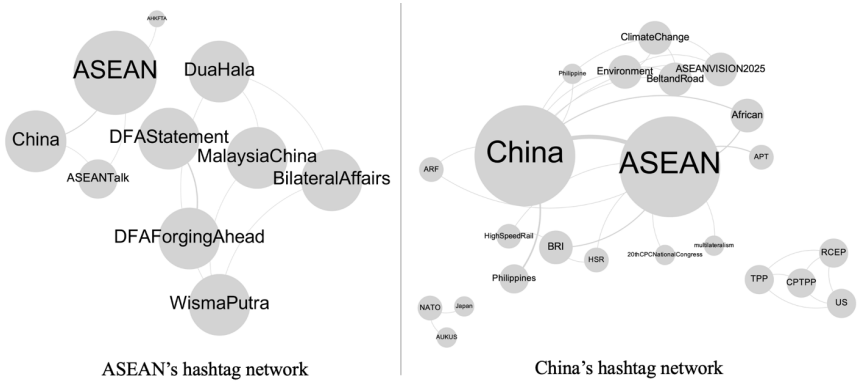


Figure 2. Hashtags networks of ASEAN and China on the South China Sea issue

On the Chinese side, hashtag use regarding ASEAN was relatively active, with #China and #ASEAN appearing frequently in Beijing narratives. Furthermore, network analysis of the Chinese hashtags revealed that when discussing China’s relationships with ASEAN, Beijing often illustrated the potential contributions it could make to regional development, particularly in areas such as climate and environmental protection (e.g., #Environment, #ClimateChange) and infrastructure (e.g., #BeltandRoad, #BRI, #AseanVision2025, #HighSpeedRail). In addition, narratives about China-Africa relations (e.g., #China, #African) appeared in some narratives to support China’s advocacy of win-win cooperation within the framework of multilateralism (e.g., #multilateralism). Finally, in the China-fabricated narratives related to the topic of the South China Sea, other multilateral organizations were mentioned by Chinese diplomats, notably #NATO, #AUKUS, #TPP and

#CPTPP, often used by Beijing to make institutional and geostrategic comparisons.

RQ2. How did Chinese diplomatic missions and diplomats conceptualize the South China Sea issue with regard to ASEAN? What were their narrative strategies?

China opted to mitigate geopolitical divisions associated with the South China Sea in its narrative content addressing ASEAN. In general, Beijing's narrative strategy revolved around two primary axes. First, it underscored China's commitment to peaceful and amicable international cooperation as a significant regional power, employing various narrative tactics and initiatives to convey this message. Additionally, it advocated for mutual trust and solidarity among regional nations, substantiating its contributions to regional prosperity with bits of factual evidence. Second, Beijing attributed the South China Sea dispute to Western attempts to destabilize the Asian region and cast China as a geopolitical adversary. Over 25.9% of the narratives ($n = 41$) criticized Western interference in ASEAN politics (see Table 2).

Table 2. China's Narrative Strategies and Tactics

Strategy	n	Tactic	n	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Demonstrate China's friendly attitude toward ASEAN	74	Demonstrate/call for bilateral (multilateral) friendship (slogans)	47	29.75	29.75	29.75
		Release Beijing's positive attitude toward ASEAN	19	12.03	12.03	41.77
		Display China's humanitarian assistance to ASEAN to shape its international responsibility as a regional power	4	2.53	2.53	44.30
		Show China's diplomatic congratulatory messages to and diplomatic receptions of ASEAN leaders	4	2.53	2.53	46.84
Use theme of ASEAN to criticize Western countries and international community	41	Attack actions of other countries or organizations (non-ASEAN) in the Asia-Pacific region	28	17.72	17.72	64.56
		Use ASEAN (or South China Sea) as a "backdrop" for bashing other countries (or countries in region)	13	8.23	8.23	72.78
Show China's positive contribution to political and economic development of ASEAN	20	Highlight China's constructive contributions and inputs to ASEAN and regional development	11	6.96	6.96	79.75
		List detailed cooperation projects and actions between China and ASEAN	9	5.70	5.70	85.44
Quote China's cooperation with ASEAN to justify effectiveness and replicability of Beijing's geopolitics, foreign policy, and international cooperation initiatives	15	Use ASEAN as prop for promoting and testifying to effectiveness and feasibility of China's geopolitical policies	8	5.06	5.06	90.51
		Cite official discourses of ASEAN and related countries (especially those in dispute with China) to endorse their friendly relations with China	7	4.43	4.43	94.94
Info-mediation	7	News release	7	4.43	4.43	99.37
Shape China's innocence facing other geopolitical powers	1	Shape China's innocence of international siege on South China Sea	1	0.63	0.63	100
Total	158		158			

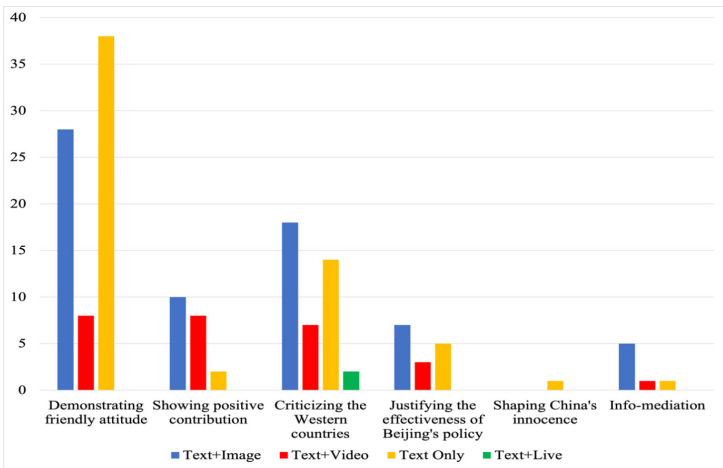
To understand China's narrative strategies, the author conducted a series of chi-square analyses to examine the relationships among Beijing's narrative strategies and other coded variables (i.e., modality type, engagement type, frame type). The results revealed significant differences between the narrative strategy and each variable. First, as depicted in Table 3 and Figure 3, Chinese diplomats used various text modalities when crafting narratives for different strategic objectives. Chinese diplomats predominantly used "text-only" when emphasizing Beijing's amicable relations with ASEAN.

Table 3. China’s Narrative Strategy and Modality Crosstabulation and Chi-Square Tests

Strategy	Modality				n
	Text + Image	Text +Video	Text only	Text + Live	
Demonstrate friendly attitude	28	8	38	0	74
Show positive contribution	10	8	2	0	20
Criticize Western countries	18	7	14	2	41
Justify effectiveness of Beijing’s policy	7	3	5	0	15
Shape China’s innocence	0	0	1	0	1
Info-mediation	5	1	1	0	7
<i>n</i>	68	27	61	2	158
	Value	<i>df</i>	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)		
Pearson Chi-Square	26.040 ^a	15	.038		
Likelihood Ratio	26.236	15	.036		
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.576	1	.109		
<i>n</i> of Valid Cases	158				

Note. ^a14 cells (58.3%) had expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count was .01.

Figure 3. Cross-analysis of China’s narrative strategy and text modality



In particular, when advocating for and promoting increased dialogue and bilateral or multilateral cooperation between China and ASEAN, Beijing often used slogan-based messaging. For instance, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying frequently tweeted slogans promoting solidarity and cooperation between China and ASEAN to underscore China's active engagement and friendly disposition toward regional affairs (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Text-only tweets published by Hua Chunying



Moreover, when leveraging ASEAN as a platform for criticizing Western interference in regional affairs or challenging the legitimacy of Western influence in the ASEAN region, Chinese diplomats commonly used text combined with static images. In such narratives, Beijing public diplomacy actors often incorporated portraits of foreign ministry spokespersons to lend an official and authoritative tone to its discourse (see Figure 5). This approach conveyed the narrative content in a formal and official manner, implying China's earnest and serious stance on the issues being addressed.

Figure 5. “Text + static image” modality in the tweets criticizing Western governments



Second, this study examined the embedded engagement intentions within the tweet content, drawing on the typology of communication engagement from Johnston (2018), who identified three types of engagement: rational persuasion, emotional appeal, and call to action. These engagement types are common in public relations and strategic communication narratives (Choi & McKeever, 2022), and their combinations can bolster persuasive discourse.

As illustrated in Table 4 and Figure 6, when Chinese diplomats emphasized Beijing’s amicable relations with ASEAN, they often incorporated behavioral engagement intentions to advocate for cooperation and mutual trust. Moreover, when China criticized Western intervention in regional affairs, Chinese narratives tended to be emotionally oriented, with less emphasis on causal reasoning. In addition, the narratives prepared by Chinese diplomats tended to mix rational discourse with emotional appeals to shape the reality they defended.

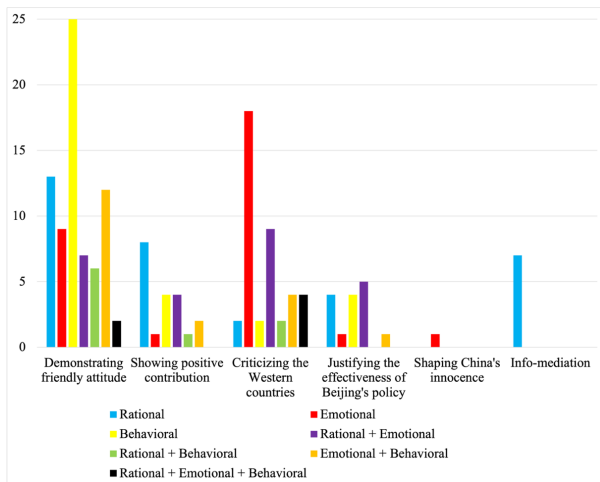
Table 4. China’s Narrative Strategy and Engagement Intention Crosstabulation and Chi-Square Tests

		Purposeful Engagement Type							
Strategy		Rational	Emotional	Behavioral	Rational + Emotional	Rational + Behavioral	Emotional + Behavioral	Rational + Emotional + Behavioral	n
		Demonstrate friendly attitude	13	9	25	7	6	12	2
	Show positive contribution	8	1	4	4	1	2	0	20
	Criticize Western countries	2	18	2	9	2	4	4	41
	Justify effectiveness of Beijing’s policy	4	1	4	5	0	1	0	15
	Shape China’s innocence	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Info-mediation	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
	<i>n</i>	34	30	35	25	9	19	6	158

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	82.419 ^a	30	< .001
Likelihood Ratio	79.510	30	< .001
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.132	1	.013
<i>n</i> of Valid Cases	158		

Note. ^a33 cells (78.6%) had expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count was .04.

Figure 6. Cross-analysis of China’s narrative strategy and engagement intention



For example, as shown in Figure 7, when describing ASEAN cooperation with China, Chinese diplomats also tended to publish content in first person to insert positive personal emotions into rational narratives to enhance personalization. Chinese diplomats also integrated anti-American sentiments into statements about the involvement of organizations such as Quad and AUKUS in the Asia-Pacific region and attributed the destabilizing factors in the Eurasia region to the antagonism upheld by U.S.-led NATO through seemingly rational inferences. However, concrete facts were not present to support this seemingly cognitive reasoning.

Figure 7. Integration of rational and emotional engagement intention in narratives



RQ3a. What was the narrative formulation strategy of ASEAN regarding the South China Sea issue?

In the face of Beijing’s expansion and its growing geopolitical and economic influence in the Asia-Pacific region, ASEAN digital diplomacy narratives about issues related to the South China Sea were softer than China’s (see Table 5). Although a few critical voices from ASEAN about China were discovered in the corpus ($n = 9$, 4.5%), most of the issues revolved around two aspects: (a) recognition of China’s positive contributions to regional development and a friendly attitude toward China and (b) demonstration of unity and coordination among its member states. In other words, ASEAN emphasized its political and economic role as a regional organization and its internal institutional solidarity, especially in the context of sensitive political issues.

Table 5. ASEAN Narrative Strategies and Tactics

Strategy	<i>n</i>	Tactic	<i>n</i>	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Info-mediation	54	News release	54	27.00	27.00	27.00
Recognize China’s positive contribution to political and economic development of ASEAN	45	List detailed cooperation projects and actions between ASEAN and China	22	11.00	11.00	38.00
		Demonstrate/recognize (market) opportunities provided by China to ASEAN in different areas	12	6.00	6.00	44.00
		Show constructive contribution and input of ASEAN-China cooperation to regional development	4	2.00	2.00	46.00
		Showcase results of trade between ASEAN and China	4	2.00	2.00	48.00
		Promote ASEAN products and brands to China	2	1.00	1.00	49.00
		Demonstrate strong links between local tourism industry and China	1	0.50	0.50	49.50
Demonstrate solidarity and cooperation of ASEAN on South China Sea issue	40	Express concerns about or call for international attention by ASEAN to situation in South China Sea	29	14.50	14.50	64.00
		Demonstrate coordination and cooperation within ASEAN to promote South China Sea COC	6	3.00	3.00	67.00
		Expose ASEAN inter-state and organization-state cooperation on situation South China Sea	5	2.50	2.50	69.50
Express friendly relations of ASEAN with China	28	Present friendly relations with China/Chinese cities	28	14.00	14.00	83.50
Defend role and solidarity of ASEAN as regional political and economic organization in geopolitical game	21	Render determination to strengthen cooperation among relevant countries, organizations, and regions under framework of ASEAN	16	8.00	8.00	91.50
		Promote progress of cooperation between ASEAN and other (non-Chinese) countries	3	1.50	1.50	93.00
		Recognize ASEAN’s own achievements	2	1.00	1.00	94.00
Criticize China	9	Criticize/protest China	9	4.50	4.50	98.50
		Update coordination and negotiation between ASEAN and China on South China Sea disputes	2	1.00	1.00	99.50
		Communicate results of cooperation between ASEAN and China on resources related to South China Sea	1	0.50	0.50	100
Total	200		200			

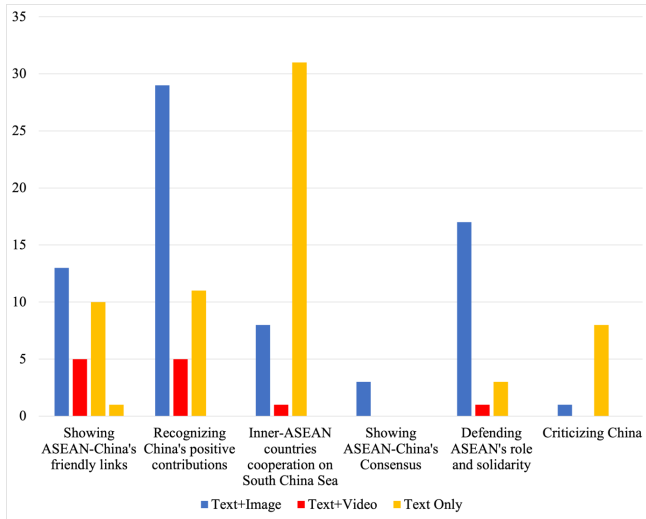
This study involved a series of chi-square analyses to examine the relationships among ASEAN narrative strategies and other coded variables (i.e., modality type, engagement type, frame type). The results revealed significant differences between narrative strategy variables and each variable.

ASEAN diplomats were similar to their Chinese counterparts in textual modalities. However, ASEAN digital diplomacy narratives generally integrated graphic elements. According to a cross-analysis of narrative strategy and text modality (see Table 6 and Figure 8), when ASEAN diplomats presented narratives demonstrating the solidarity and cooperation among their countries and other ASEAN governments on the South China Sea, diplomats used “text-only” to ensure a clear message. Chinese diplomats used this approach to express diplomatic slogans and rhetoric, ensuring accuracy and seriousness. Moreover, when showing the friendly cooperation between ASEAN and China in various fields, diplomats used text + pictures or video to show the results of economic and trade cooperation.

Table 6. ASEAN Narrative Strategy and Text Modality Crosstabulation and Chi-Square Tests

		Modality			<i>n</i>
		Text + Image	Text + Video	Text Only	
Strategy	Show ASEAN-China’s friendly links	13	5	10	28
	Recognize China’s positive contributions	29	5	11	45
	Inner-ASEAN cooperation on South China Sea	8	1	31	40
	Show ASEAN-China Consensus	3	0	0	3
	Defend ASEAN role and solidarity	17	1	3	21
	Criticize China	1	0	8	9
	Info-mediation	33	2	19	54
	<i>n</i>	104	14	82	200

Figure 8. Cross-analysis of ASEAN narrative strategy and text modality



Unlike China’s digital diplomacy strategies, which incorporated significant emotional content, the narratives of ASEAN diplomats often presented ideas grounded in factual evidence and tangible resources. Consequently, in a cross-analysis of narrative strategy and communication engagement intention, this study found that ASEAN diplomat discourse tended to be more formal and official. They typically started their narratives with concrete events to substantiate their viewpoints (see Figure 9). Examples ranged from the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs report on the government’s achievements in the ASEAN-South Korea Dialogue to the compilation of export results to China by Philippine diplomats and ASEAN’s presentation of the 17th ASEAN-China Forum on social development and poverty alleviation. These cases meticulously presented established facts and institutional opinions and attitudes in a rigorous manner.

Figure 9. ASEAN digital diplomacy narratives



RQ3b. What similarities and differences emerged across the member countries?

In contrast to the shared narrative strategies of ASEAN concerning geopolitical issues as a collective, disparities in ASEAN digital diplomacy regarding China and the South China Sea did emerge from national (the Philippines and Malaysia) and institutional standpoints. Looking at ASEAN digital diplomacy as a whole, this study found that digital diplomacy actors preferred to use the “text + image” modality. Analyzing ASEAN accounts separately (see Table 7), this study found that most of the posts from the Philippines (@DAFPHL, $n = 50$, 62.5%) and Malaysian MFA (@MalaysiaMFA, $n = 31$, 56.4%) accounts were “text-only,” and only ASEAN’s institutional account used “text + image” (@ASEAN, $n = 62$, 95.4%) in their narratives.

Table 7. Text Modality across ASEAN Accounts

		<i>n</i>	%	Valid %	Cumulative %	
MFA accounts	DAFPH L	Text only	50	62.5	62.5	62.5
		Text + Image	22	27.5	27.5	90.0
		Text + Video	8	10.0	10.0	100
		<i>n</i>	80	100	100	
	Malaysi aMFA	Text only	31	56.4	56.4	56.4
		Text + Image	20	36.4	36.4	92.7
		Text + Video	4	7.3	7.3	100
	<i>n</i>	55	100	100		
Institutional account	ASEAN	Text + Image	62	95.4	95.4	95.4
		Text + Video	2	3.1	3.1	98.5
		Text only	1	1.5	1.5	100
		<i>n</i>	65	100	100	

ASEAN’s narrative strategy: Institutionalized communication logic to project favorable ASEAN-China relations

In the public diplomacy practices of the ASEAN institutional account, most of the narratives about China and the South China Sea revolved around creating harmonious and peaceful public opinion, with the exception of the news release about the activities of ASEAN diplomats (*n* = 24; see Table 8).

Table 8. Narrative Strategies and Tactics of ASEAN Institutional Account

Strategy	<i>n</i>	Tactics	<i>n</i>	Cumulative %	Cumulative %
Recognize China’s positive contribution to political and economic development of ASEAN	25	List detailed cooperation projects and actions between ASEAN and China	17	38.46	38.46
		Demonstrate/recognize (market) opportunities provided by China to ASEAN in different areas	7		
		Show constructive contribution and input of ASEAN-China cooperation to regional development	1		
Info-mediation	24	News release	24	36.92	75.38
Express friendly relations of ASEAN with China	9	Present friendly relations with China/Chinese cities	9	13.85	89.23
Defend role and solidarity of ASEAN as regional political and economic organization in geopolitical game	5	Render determination to strengthen cooperation among relevant countries, organizations, and regions under ASEAN framework	4	7.69	96.92
		Recognize ASEAN’s own achievements	1		
Demonstrate solidarity and cooperation of ASEAN on South China Sea issue	2	Reveal ASEAN inter-state and organization-state cooperation on situation in South China Sea	1	3.08	100
		Express concern about or call for international attention by ASEAN to situation in South China Sea	1		
Total	65		65		

ASEAN’s public diplomacy narratives tended to focus on events related to relations with China. The discourse used in this context rationally defined the problem. The tweets posted by ASEAN rigorously interpreted figurative policies and diplomatic strategies. Indeed, ASEAN is a multinational regional body in the Asia-Pacific, and its public diplomacy communication practices tend to be centered around image building (Chia, 2021). In other words, ASEAN’s institutional language tends to have a smooth character because its decision-making process is democratic and its institutional public discourse often needs to “eliminate linguistic heterogeneity, mismatches, and politicization in political decision-making” through “meta-discourses and semi-official discourses” (Oger & Ollivier-Yaniv, 2006, p. 63). This approach produces homogenous discourse for foreign publics to read or hear (Huang & Wang, 2021).

Figure 10. Digital diplomacy narratives posted by @ASEAN



Malaysia’s narrative strategy: Advocating for cooperation among ASEAN members while promoting bilateral friendships with China

Malaysia has adopted a relatively polarized narrative strategy with regard to China and the South China Sea. As Table 9 shows, the last two narrative strategies of Malaysia were to shape and present friendly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation with China (see Figure 11, left); however, most of the narratives from Malaysia called for and enabled cooperation among members of ASEAN, a regional organization (see Figure 11, middle). In other words, in the case of the South China Sea, Malaysian narratives defended the legitimacy of ASEAN as a regional organization and its vital role in geopolitical disputes. Moreover, on the South China Sea issue, Malaysia sought support from other developed countries for its regional security initiatives (see Figure 11, right).

Table 9. Narrative Strategies and Tactics of Malaysian MFA

Strategy	n	Tactic	n	Valid %	Cumulative %
Demonstrate solidarity and cooperation of ASEAN on South China Sea issue	17	Express concern about or call for international attention by ASEAN to situation in South China Sea	11	30.91	30.91
		Reveal ASEAN inter-state and organization-state cooperation on situation in South China Sea	3		
		Demonstrate coordination and cooperation among ASEAN to promote South China Sea COC	3		
Defend role and solidarity of ASEAN as regional political and economic organization in geopolitical game	12	Render determination to strengthen cooperation among relevant countries, organizations, and regions under framework of ASEAN	9	21.82	52.73
		Promote progress of cooperation between ASEAN and other (non-Chinese) countries	3		
Info-mediation	11	News release	11	20.00	72.73
Express friendly relations of ASEAN with China	10	Present friendly relations with China/Chinese cities	10	18.18	90.91
Recognize China’s positive contribution to political and economic development of ASEAN	5	List detailed cooperation projects and actions between ASEAN and China	2	9.09	100
		Demonstrate/recognize (market) opportunities provided by China to ASEAN in different areas	2		
		Show constructive contribution and input of ASEAN-China cooperation to regional development	1		

Figure 11. Digital diplomacy narratives posted by @MalaysiaMFA



The Philippines’ narrative strategy: From strategic ambiguity to clarity

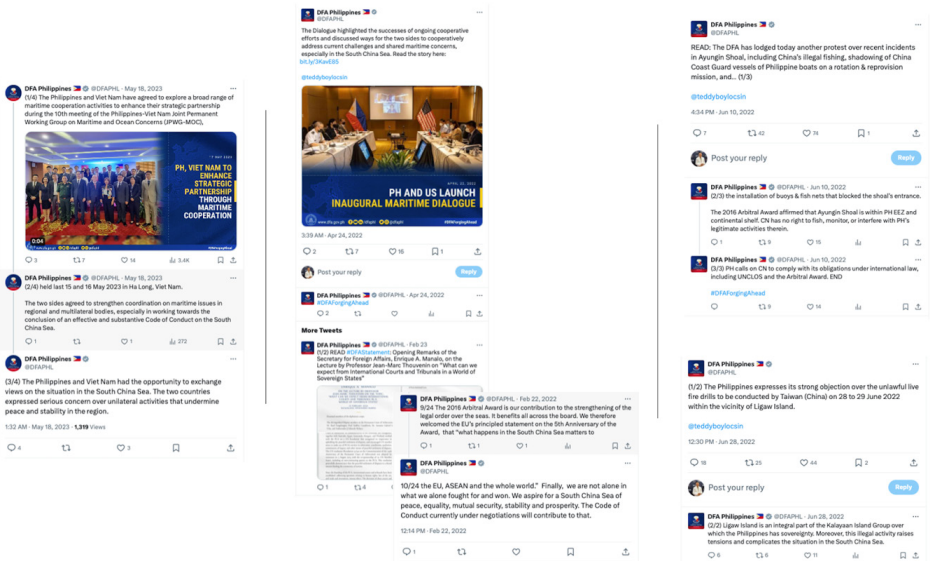
In contrast to Malaysia’s relatively close diplomatic ties with China, the diplomatic and military relations between the Philippines and China are often strained due to disputes over the South China Sea. The Philippines is transitioning from a stance of strategic ambiguity to one of clarity in its narrative strategy regarding China and the South China Sea (Gerstl, 2022). As shown in Table 10, Philippine diplomats tended to acknowledge China’s positive role in their export trade and national economic development and the amicable relations between the two governments, from president-to-president friendship to diplomat-to-diplomat connections.

Table 10. Narrative Strategies and Tactics of Philippine MFA

Strategy	n	Tactic	n	Valid %	Cumulative %
Demonstrate solidarity and cooperation of ASEAN on South China Sea issue	21	Express concerns or call for international attention by ASEAN countries on the situation in South China Sea	17	26.25	26.25
		Demonstrate the coordination and cooperation among ASEAN to promote South China Sea COC	3		
		Reveal ASEAN inter-state and organization-state cooperations on situation in the South China Sea	1		
Info-mediation	19	News release	19	23.75	50.00
Recognize China's positive contribution to political and economic development of ASEAN	15	Showcase results of trade between ASEAN and China	4	18.75	68.75
		Demonstrate/recognize (market) opportunities provided by China to ASEAN in different areas	3		
		List detailed cooperation projects and actions between ASEAN and China	3		
		Show constructive contribution and input of ASEAN-China cooperation to regional development	2		
		Promote ASEAN products and brands to China	2		
		Demonstrate strong links between local tourism industry and China	1		
Express friendly relations of ASEAN with China	9	Present friendly relations with China/Chinese cities	9	11.25	80.00
Criticize China	9	Criticize/protest China	9	11.25	91.25
Defend role and solidarity of ASEAN as regional political and economic organization in geopolitical game	4	Render determination to strengthen cooperation among relevant countries, organizations and regions under framework of ASEAN	3	5.00	96.25
		Recognize ASEAN's own achievements	1		
Showcase consensus reached between ASEAN and China on South China Sea to call for win-win cooperation	3	Update coordination and negotiation between ASEAN and China on South China Sea disputes	2	3.75	100
		Communicate results of cooperation between ASEAN and China on resources related to South China Sea	1		

However, the Philippine narratives took on a dual approach concerning the South China Sea. Similar to Malaysia's strategy, they emphasized diplomatic initiatives through the ASEAN framework, advocating for cooperation within ASEAN to facilitate negotiations with China on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (see Figure 12, left). Nonetheless, the Philippines often sought international support and pressured China by citing collaboration with European and American partners and quoting their statements (see Figure 12, middle). Additionally, the Philippine foreign service directly criticized China's geopolitical actions through its narratives on X to uphold its advocacy of the disputed ocean area (see Figure 12, right).

Figure 12. Digital diplomacy narratives posted by @MalaysiaMFA



Conclusion

This study explored the digital diplomatic narratives released by China and ASEAN on X from January 2022 to July 2023 related to China-ASEAN relations and the South China Sea dispute. Since February 2023, ASEAN has called for China's participation in consultations and negotiations for COC in the South China Sea. However, until July 2023, Beijing expressed a lukewarm attitude toward this initiative. In this context, the study explored the positions and interests of both sides by examining how they used social media to communicate.

By analyzing an 18-month sample of narratives from both China and ASEAN, this study found that public diplomacy actors on both sides used social media affordances to frame their geopolitical relations and the South China Sea issue relatively cautiously. On the one hand, the Chinese government's lack of interest in interactive affordances suggests a top-down propaganda management logic for Beijing's public diplomacy. That is, for Chinese public diplomacy actors, social media affordances provided an environment for international communication. Through the connectivity and interactivity of social media, they skillfully developed narrative networks (e.g., network of hashtags) that implicitly and subtly represented and defended their ideologies, offering justification for their foreign policy. On the other hand, despite the interactive capabilities of social media to provide a continual connection for diverse stakeholders, the use of mentions and hashtags was rare among ASEAN diplomats. Therefore, the narrative network structure of ASEAN emerged from interactions between diplomats and their domestic politicians.

In addition, the study analyzed the narratives of China and ASEAN from the perspective of communication strategy. On

the Chinese side, the frames on the South China Sea issue and China-ASEAN relations promoted the idea of cooperation led by China. In many of these narratives, Beijing diplomats emphasized mutual benefits and win-win situations, but from a rhetorical perspective, they often implied a Chinese-led or Chinese-controlled cooperation. Furthermore, Chinese diplomats often used Chinese-style political slogans to frame China-ASEAN friendship, often clashing with the political, social, cultural and linguistic context of ASEAN countries. Finally, Beijing used its cooperation with ASEAN and the South China Sea issue to attack international collaboration led by the West, especially the United States. These types of narratives, laced with disinformation and moral judgments, often featured emotional and nationalistic language in service of the “spirit of fight” that Beijing has promoted within its diplomatic communication system (Xi, 2020, title).

In the case of ASEAN, the study analyzed tweets captured from the ASEAN institutional account and the accounts of the Philippine and Malaysian foreign ministries. This analysis demonstrated the narrative logic of ASEAN as a whole, as well as their attitudes toward their relations with China and the South China Sea issue. If ASEAN’s organizational account engaged in diplomatic communication with a neutral tone to enhance its credibility and authority, Malaysia defended the vital role that ASEAN, as a regional organization, plays in the geopolitical game and emphasized Malaysia’s contributions to the conclusion of COC in the South China Sea with other Asia-Pacific members. Finally, due to its geopolitical relationship with China and the West, the Philippines shifted from ambiguity to clarity in confronting the South China Sea issue.

Although this study focused on the digital public diplomacy conducted by four key stakeholders in the

South China Sea dispute—China, ASEAN, the Philippines, and Malaysia—during a specific period, the findings provide valuable insights for developing digital diplomacy strategies for the involved parties.

China's diplomatic strategy towards ASEAN, an interstate cooperation organization, frequently featured a tactic known as shuttle diplomacy. Although this term was popularized by Henry Kissinger during his tenure as U.S. Secretary of State to describe his mediation efforts between parties not in direct dialogue, the term has acquired a new meaning in the Chinese diplomatic context. In China, shuttle diplomacy is often associated with the concept of "breaking through." The goal is to facilitate bilateral cooperation through individual dialogue or communication between China and specific ASEAN member states, thereby undermining the collective consensus within ASEAN on particular geopolitical issues. This interlocking tactic is also employed in the digital diplomatic arena, where Chinese diplomats create a favorable public opinion environment through unified and coordinated narratives, portraying openness and a willingness to engage in dialogue regarding the South China Sea issue. Additionally, the varying levels of economic and trade dependence on China among South China Sea countries enable Beijing to leverage economic cooperation with different countries in various fields in its digital diplomacy, promoting the benefits of China's presence in the region and thus weakening or neutralizing the perceived impact of the South China Sea disputes in various publics. This phenomenon also provides insight into how the degree of economic dependence on China influences ASEAN countries to be cautious in expressing their positions on the South China Sea issue.

For ASEAN, this analysis revealed that while most member countries advocated for a collaborative and united ASEAN-led approach to strengthen their negotiating leverage with

China on COC in the South China Sea, a lack of coordination also characterized their communication strategies. For instance, most communications from ASEAN institutional accounts were acts of institutional communication, with a notable absence of explicit attitudes toward geopolitical issues. Additionally, the expressions of the other two observer countries with regard to the South China Sea and China issues were inconsistent and random. Indeed, such a lack of coordination has hindered the visibility of tweets addressing the South China Sea issue, particularly those related to territorial water initiatives, in the X feeds of foreign ministries. Additionally, this lack of coordination prevents such content from forming a synergistic response to counteract China's digital diplomacy presence and the promotion of Beijing's narrative regarding the South China Sea.

Therefore, the cooperation and solidarity among ASEAN countries on the South China Sea issue requires the synergy of their digital diplomacy efforts. This, in turn, requires communication strategies in which ASEAN institutional communicators share a common understanding of the South China Sea issue with digital diplomacy strategists from other countries' foreign ministries, aligned with the overall policies of ASEAN member states. Furthermore, there must be relevance, synergy, and continuity in the deployment of communication content on a day-to-day basis to shape narratives about the South China Sea issue on social media and to maintain a consistent political communication agenda on these platforms.

The current study was exploratory based on content posted on the diplomatic X accounts of China, ASEAN, the Philippines, and Malaysia. The analysis did not include other ASEAN member states. Therefore, in future research, the author will include the diplomatic X accounts of other ASEAN member states to explore their digitalization of

mediated public diplomacy and their strategies vis-à-vis China and the South China Sea issue. On the Chinese side, the author also plans to introduce critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) to explore the conversations and speeches of foreign ministry spokespersons about the South China Sea issue with regard to ASEAN. By including the discourses of China's official think tanks, the author will be able to outline Beijing's strategic positioning and stance on the geopolitical conflict. Finally, the author plans to conduct a cognitive analysis of public policy (Hall, 2015; Huang, 2022) to explore the foreign policies and agreements between China and ASEAN on mutual bilateral and/or multilateral cooperation, outlining the historical and tactical evolution of cooperation and competition among different governments in this geopolitical region.

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