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THE SELECTED ASEAN NATIONS' MILITARY CAPABILITIES FACING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES

ABSTRACT: The security situation in Asia in the South and East China Seas marine areas is influencing the stability of the whole continent. Security fragility is causing military build-up and Chinese military development maritime claims are major factors causing concerns of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. It is complicated by an uncertain future toward US commitment in Asia. The paper is focused on military capabilities of ASEAN nations which are directly involved into South China Sea maritime disputes: Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. They are developing their military potentials due to threat assessment, security situation and within their resources. The paper is not analysing PLA capabilities but is referring to them. Moreover, Taiwan is not discussed as the focus is on ASEAN countries.

KEYWORDS: ASEAN, South China Sea, Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, maritime disputes

INTRODUCTION

The security situation in Asia, especially in relation to the South and East China Seas, has its influence on the overall situation there in many domains. Especially security followed by military build-up has an influence on the relations among nations there. Among them China is obviously the major factor as the nation is not only a regional power but it is extending its global ambitions along with capabilities to play such the role. The country is also forwarding security related ideas: the conceptual one “anti-access/area denial” and the territorial one “two island chains”. Those are enhanced by economic and partially security ideas: “String of Pearls” and “One Belt, One Road”². The maritime disputes in the South China Sea are the present-day concern for countries grouped in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and there is a danger that the complex approach by Beijing will influence each of them individually and the organization as the whole. It is complicated by an uncertain future of the US commitment causing investments into military capabilities.

The paper is focused on analysing military capabilities of ASEAN nations which are directly involved in the South China Sea maritime disputes. They are developing their military potentials due to their threat assessment, security situation, and within available but limited budget which is requiring a clear establishment of priorities. The nations to consider are Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. The paper emphasizes the quantity and quality of current status of armed forces and main factors toward modernization of military capabilities. The main research question is: What is the efficiency of selected nations' military capabilities in the specific environment in the South China Sea? The paper is not analysing

¹ Opinions expressed by the author are his own views and they do not reflect in any way the official policy or position of the governments of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania or Poland.

² Also known as: *The Belt and Road* or *The Silk Road Economic Belt* and the *21st-century Maritime Silk Road*.

specifically PLA³ capabilities but is referring to them in conclusions. Moreover, Taiwan is not discussed as the focus is on ASEAN countries. The study includes the following factors: level of military forces (quantity and quality of military forces, level of training and battlefield experience); abilities of using paramilitary and civilian resources in military operation. The paper is based on available open and official sources and during the preparation of the study theoretical research methods were adopted including analysis, synthesis and comparison.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN RELATION TO THE SOUTH CHINA SEA BASIN

The US presidential election in November 2016 generated some concerns for the Asian security especially as the expectation was that Donald Trump would not win and there will be just minor adjustment of ongoing US Asian pivot. However, according to *The Diplomat* the result of the election is that “U.S. allies and partners in the region may no longer be able to count on the kinds of the reassurance about Washington’s security commitment that they have grown used to” and the newly elected president “will instil a much greater sense of uncertainty – even anxiety – in U.S. allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁴ Such concerns are a challenge for major US allies, Japan, South Korea and especially dangerous for small nations because those, when searching for security guarantees, were looking for balancing options. So, they were considering an alliance with the US as a dominant power “to avoid domination by stronger powers”⁵, and in that context it was related to a threat coming from too strong influences posed by regional countries like China or India.

Among the smaller countries belonging to ASEAN (see the fig. 1) many are considering rising China as a possible threat for their security. The nations usually had no common voice avoiding challenging Beijing and they were even preventing each other from making

Fig. 1. The member nations of the Association of South-east Asian Nations.

Source: “Asean on the cusp of greatness”. *Business Circle*, 5 May 2015. <http://www.businesscircle.com.my/asean-on-the-cusp-of-greatness/>, Accessed on 23 November 2016.



³ PLA - The Chinese People’s Liberation Army.

⁴ Tatsumi, Y. “Trump Wins: Implications for US Allies and Partners in Asia”. *The Diplomat*. 09 November 2016. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/trump-wins-implications-for-us-allies-and-partners-in-asia/>, Accessed on 22 November 2016.

⁵ Read about theories: Walt, S. M. “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power”. *International Security* 9/4. 1985. 3–43.

joint statements related to Chinese policy in the South China Sea as it happened in 2012 during ASEAN summit. Currently there is a change in such attitude as presented by the joint communiqué released by the foreign ministers of the ASEAN member nations during the organisational forum in Myanmar in August 2014. The language was tougher: “we urged all parties concerned to exercise self-restraint and avoid actions which would complicate the situation and undermine peace, stability, and security in the South China Sea and to settle disputes through peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force.”⁶

The countries’ fragility in many domains including economy is complicating the organisation’s situation as it is not a collective security body. The growing power of leading Asian nations is causing them to make decisions about future as they “do not want to be bullied just because we’re small.”⁷ They have also many internal issues as economic stagnation, political instability, social unrest, and growing crime, which make them very vulnerable and susceptible to external influences. Moreover, Islamic fundamentalism and religious radicalism are influencing all domains of national existence and they are rather anti-West in nature. There are also many bilateral disagreements within ASEAN causing cooperation more complicated and being a factor to be used to disunite the organization in making any common effort to improve the situation of the South East Asia in general.

The territorial disputes on the South China Sea are a major source of hostilities with the focus on Spratly Islands (table 1) and Paracel Islands as China is continually presenting decisive approach in relation to its rights there.⁸ The islands have economic and military importance allowing using them for deploying air force and navy assets. It is already ongoing e.g. on Woody Island within the Paracel Islands, as the newly constructed runway could be used by PLA Air Force (PLAAF) to “enhance Woody Island’s utility as a military base from which to project power in the South China Sea”.⁹

Table 1. *Islands occupied by respective countries within Spratly Islands.*

No.	Country	No of occupied islands	Number of troops, installations
1	China	7	260, a few helicopter landing pads
2	the Philippines	8	480, air strip (1300m.)
3	Vietnam	24	600, air strip (600 m.)
4	Malaysia	3	70, air strip (600 m.)
5	Taiwan	1	100, helicopter landing pad

Source: Z. Śliwa, *Maritime disputes in East Asia and Pacific region– stormy waves of international relations, Security and Defence Quarterly No 1(6) 2015, the National Defense University, Warsaw, March 2015, p. 123.*

⁶ Hardy, J. “Analysis: ASEAN finds voice over South China Sea dispute”. IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly. 14 August 2014. [http://www.janes.com/article/42006/analysis-asean-finds-voice-over-south-china-sea-dispute?utm_campaign=\[PMP\]_PC6110_E14%20DF%20NL%20SECURITY%2008_19_2014_DW_Deployment&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Eloqua](http://www.janes.com/article/42006/analysis-asean-finds-voice-over-south-china-sea-dispute?utm_campaign=[PMP]_PC6110_E14%20DF%20NL%20SECURITY%2008_19_2014_DW_Deployment&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Eloqua), Accessed on 24 November 2016.

⁷ Hardy. “Analysis: ASEAN finds voice over South China Sea dispute”.

⁸ For details about maritime territorial disputes in East Asia read: Dolven, B., Kan, S. A. and Manyin, M. E. “Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: Issues for Congress”. CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service. 30 January 2013. <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42930.pdf>, Accessed on 25 November 2016.

⁹ Hardy, J. “China expands runway, harbour at Woody Island”. IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly. 24 August 2014. http://www.janes.com/article/42538/china-expands-runway-harbour-at-woody-island?utm_campaign=%5bPMP%5d_mpc6110_E14%20DF%20NL%20SECURITY%2009_02_2014_DW_Deployment&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Eloqua, Accessed on 24 November 2016.

There are also incidents in the South China Sea airspace, which is linked with US Navy patrols and reconnaissance missions to monitor the status of Chinese island base construction. The flights are occurring in the vicinity of the Hainan Island, which is an important PLA Navy (PLAN) Submarine Base, including basing strategic nuclear submarines. The South China Sea disputes are involving the ASEAN nations namely Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam and to a lesser extent Brunei – ASEAN-4. All of them are concerned about a possibility of an open conflict and those nations are investing into their armed forces. Nevertheless, they are fully aware that left alone none of them is capable to face the overwhelming power of the PLA. Recognizing the fragility of the situation and respecting “twin visions of peace and prosperity” it guides “ASEAN and China to exercise self-restraint, refrain from the use of force, undertake practical maritime cooperation, and promote peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea.”¹⁰ It is important to notify that the South China Sea’s disputes are not the only hot spot in East Asia as there are a few more as presented in fig. 2. Those are involving almost all the nations in the region including Russia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The last three countries are US allies having bilateral security arrangements related to collective defence, ambiguities with Beijing, and building their military potential for uncertain future.



Fig. 2. Maritime disputes in the East Asia and Pacific. Source: prepared based on: “East Asia Political map 2011”. University of Texas Libraries, Austin 2011. http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/txu-pclmaps-oclc-780028873-asia_east_pol-2011.jpg. Accessed on 23 November 2016.

The ASEAN nations still have not been unified in their common approach toward Beijing especially as it tries to engage them on bilateral base to exploit it for their own purposes. Nevertheless, “progress on the bilateral front does not undermine, deny, or contradict any multi-lateral or international framework, but rather creates new opportunities to bring those organizations and platforms into the talks and to incorporate them into bilaterally accepted decisions”.¹¹ The complicated situation supports the improvement of relations with Washington by those smaller actors and initiation of attempts to unify efforts. For ASEAN-4 nations enhancement of military capabilities is a challenge as of economy and also political factors but it is necessary to increase their territorial integrity and capabilities to face claims within the South China Sea.

¹⁰ “Fact Sheet on ASEAN Community 2015”. The ASEAN Secretariat Community Relations Division (CRD). December 2015. 2. <http://asean.org/resource/fact-sheets>, Accessed on 24 November 2016.

¹¹ Sprangler, M. “Rebalancing the Rebalance”. *Parameters* 44/2. 2014. 20.

THE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF SELECTED ASEAN NATIONS

The Royal Brunei Armed Forces

Brunei Darussalam is a small country located on the northern coast of the island of Borneo, bordering Malaysia. The territory is divided into two separate areas. The terrain is mostly flat, except mountains on the south and marshlands on the east; its 75% is covered by rain-forests, which favours defenders.¹² The beaches are sandy, suitable for amphibious operations. It can be assumed that the area is conducive to defence using asymmetric and hybrid methods including guerrilla warfare and sabotage actions. Brunei has a specific political system in Southeast Asia, because it is a constitutional monarchy in the form of Sultanate. Executive power is exercised by the government, headed by the Sultan, and the legislative power is exercised by the sultan himself. It is worth noting that Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah was crowned in August 1968¹³ and serves as prime minister, minister of finance, minister of foreign affairs and trade, defence minister and foreign minister.¹⁴ The Legislative Council has an advisory role, and legal restrictions to the power of the Sultan as head of state are symbolic. In fact, the Sultan of Brunei has almost unlimited power, which makes this system closer to a constitutional absolute monarchy rather than a constitutional monarchy with a number of restrictions for the role of the ruler.¹⁵ It is worth noting that the royal family has ruled Brunei continuously for six centuries. This model of governance is conducive to the development of the armed forces, where all the important decisions, including the purchase of weapons, depend on the ruler, which reduces and shortens the decision-making process.

Brunei regained independence from Britain on 1 January 1984, so training system and military equipment are similar to the British model, especially as armed forces have continued training in close cooperation with the troops of the United Kingdom and Singapore. Military equipment comes from US and Europe (mainly from UK). Brunei troops took part in numerous humanitarian missions and peacekeeping operations, but there is a lack of combat experience. It can be assumed that a policy of defence of Brunei is mainly based on close military cooperation with the United Kingdom, Singapore and with the United States.¹⁶ The cooperation is enhanced thanks to the oil and gas fields in Brunei as an 'ally' in the eyes of London and Washington. This alliance is the cornerstone of the defence concept.

¹² Engbers, P. "Forest cover of Borneo and Brunei". Panaga Natural History Society. Nov 2010. https://www.bsp.com.bn/panagaclub/pnhs/Focus_On_Forests.html, Accessed on 23 November 2016.

¹³ "Brunei country profile". BBC. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12990058>, Accessed on 23 November 2016.

¹⁴ "Brunei Darussalam". Poland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warsaw. http://www.ms.gov.pl/pl/polityka_zagraniczna/inne_kontynenty/azja_i_pacyfik/stosunki_dwustronne_azja_pacyfik/brunei__darussalam;jesionid=CC02DC42BF92E13041F4E69F4E13951F.cms2, Accessed on 23 November 2016.

¹⁵ "Brunei Darussalam: Constitution and politics". The Common Wealth. <http://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/brunei-darussalam/constitution-politics>, Accessed on 23 November 2016.

¹⁶ (...) *the current era of U.S.-Brunei relations began in 1984 when Brunei became fully independent from the United Kingdom and the United States and Brunei established diplomatic relations. A memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation was signed in 1994. In 2011, Brunei and the United States held an inaugural Senior Officials Dialogue, creating a new forum for high-level coordination and communication. The most recent iteration of this dialogue was a High-level Officials Meeting in London in November 2015 which covered issues including trade, security, human rights, defense, regional cooperation, and academic exchanges. "US relations with Brunei". US Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2700.htm>, Accessed on 24 November 2016.*

Table 2. *Manpower and major equipment of the Royal Brunei Armed Forces.*

Manpower	Main equipment	Remarks
ARMY (Ground Forces)		
4,900 active duty	Light Tanks – 20	Scorpion (16 to be upgraded)
700 reserve	APC (Wheel)	45VAB
	ARTY	MOR 81mm – 24
	ARV	2 Samson
NAVY		
1,000 active duty	Patrol and coastal combatants – 12	Corvettes – 4; Patrol cruiser and boats – 8
	Amphibious/Landing Craft – 4	Landing Craft Utility – 4
AIR FORCE		
1,100 active duty	Transport Aircraft – 1 (7 trainer aircraft)	Transport – 1 (CN-235M); Trainer – 7 (PC-7; Bell 206B Jet Ranger II; UH-60)
	Multirole helicopters - 18	Bell 212; Bell 214 SAR; Bo-105; S-70i Black Hawk
PARAMILITARY		
2,250	Gurkha Reserve Unit – 400-500 troops	Light aircraft – 5 (2 BN-2 Islander, 3 Lancair 320)
	Royal Brunei Police – 1750 troops	10 Patrol and coastal combatants: 3 Bendaru; 7 PDB-type
FOREIGN FORCES		
3 trg	Singapore	1 trg camp with infantry units on rotation; 1 trg school; 1 hel det with AS332 Super Puma
550	Great Britain	1 Gurkha bn; 1 trg unit; 1 hel flt with 3 hel

AIFV – Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle, *APC* – Armoured Personal Carrier; *UAV* – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, *ARV* – Armed Response Vehicle, *Recce* – Reconnaissance

Source: *The Military Balance 2016; Global Firepower Military Ranks 2016*, “Air Force readies to go digital”. *Bangkok Post*, 11 Feb 2016. <http://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/air-force-readies-to-go-digital/859956>, “Navy to build B5.5bn missile-equipped patrol vessel”. *Bangkok Post*, 29 Feb 2016. <http://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/news/880568>, “Brunei gives four Black Hawks as present to Malaysia”. <http://airheadsffy.com/2015/01/23/brunei-gives-four-black-hawks-as-present-to-malaysi>, Accessed on 23 October 2016.

The Brunei armed forces are quite small (see table 2) and also unsuited for defence its territory. The Army gained some experience during humanitarian missions and peacekeeping operations, but only as part of the multinational forces.¹⁷ The Army do not exercise regularly; it has a limited number of obsolete light weaponry. Their combat capabilities are degrading and they are not able to execute operations independently or to fight within combined joint operations with armies from other nations. Actually, the Air Force does not have any combat

¹⁷ Early, E. “Bilateral Training in Brunei Preps Forces for Global Humanitarian Ops”. America’s Navy. 8 November 2009. http://www.navy.mil/Submit/display.asp?story_id=47553, Accessed on 25 November 2016.; “USS Freedom Visits Brunei, Prepares for Operation Damayan”. America’s Navy. 18 Nov 2013. http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=77724, Accessed on 25 November 2016.

aircraft (there are plans to order 8 FA-50s in the future¹⁸) and there is only a limited number of transport helicopters allocated (including modern UH-60 Black Hawks). Brunei does not have basic capabilities as air defence system and reserve training do not exist, moreover, paramilitary organizations are ordinary police with inadequate value during a conflict.

The country is relying on strategic allies so Washington is developing common relations with Brunei and as a result the Sultanate's soldiers started to be involved in joint military exercises and training programs with the United States.¹⁹ Furthermore, since 2011 there have been some plans to purchase military equipment from regional US allies e.g. South Korea. In March 2016 information was published that Brunei raised its defence budget by about 4.7 percent to 564 million Brunei dollars (408 million US dollars) for the next fiscal year: 2016-2017.²⁰ This significant change shows that the Sultan of Brunei changed the approach to defence strategy, which probably is a result of establishing closer relationship with the US and as of perception of threats coming from China's policy in the South China Sea. It is possible to assume that Washington took steps to progressively strengthen the mutual ties with this country. The greatest guarantees of the security of the Sultanate are still natural resources ensuring external support. The second reason of US support is Brunei's membership in ASEAN and its geographical location: on the one hand it is close to the Spratly Islands and also bordering unpredictable Malaysia, which is important for Washington. Since 2016 this second reason has become more important for Obama and the Trump Administration, because it is hard to predict the policy of the new president of the Philippines.

The Royal Brunei Armed Forces without the support of the strategic allies of the country (US, UK, Singapore) do not have capabilities to protect national territory. Land and air forces use old and non-effective equipment. Furthermore, troops do not have real battlefield experience (for example, opposite to Burma soldiers). Only Special Forces like the Gurkhas have real combat value but those are limited in number when compared to real needs. With the support of the Gurkhas the Brunei's army can conduct protracted guerrilla operations in the south (mountains) and east (marshland) part of country.

Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF)

The country was "one of the drivers behind the creation of ASEAN in 1967"²¹ looking for common efforts to increase the security of the whole region. It was also rather cautious to challenge China although it was clear that their islands disputes will not be abandoned. The main reason for the balancing option was connected with possible profits coming from economic development and possible profits when cooperating with Beijing. However, following the growing pressure from China to control the Spratly Islands and continuous development of military related infrastructure Malaysia verified such a course of action and it started to invest into security by developing security relations and building military capabilities. It

¹⁸ Pryce, P. "Bolstering Brunei's Defences: A Small State's Strategic Guidance and Procurement". <https://www.offiziere.ch/?p=20316>, Accessed on 25 November 2016.

¹⁹ "US relations with Brunei".

²⁰ Parameswaran, P. "What's Behind Brunei's New Defense Budget for 2016?". *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/whats-behind-bruneis-new-defense-budget-for-2016/>, Accessed on 24 November 2016.

²¹ Chang, F. K. "Comparative Southeast Asian Military Modernization: I". *The ASAN Forum*. 1 October 2014. <http://www.theasanforum.org/comparative-southeast-asian-military-modernization-1/>, Accessed on 25 November 2016.

was based on the requirement to preserve national maritime interests. The decisions were accelerated by the Chinese warships' naval and amphibious exercise near Malaysia-claimed James Shoal in March 2013, which continued in February 2014. It was definitely among factors showing the real threat of losing the disputed islands in the long-term as of lack of capabilities to deny such the claims. Defence budget in 2014 was USD4.92bn and was decreased to USD4.74bn in 2015 as an effect of the lower GDP. The estimated budget for 2016 is to be reduced again²². Its support faces conventionally understood security and also unconventional ones, such as radical movements and even natural disasters, where the armed forces provide support to civil authorities. Other challenges are related to "piracy, smuggling, kidnapping, terrorism, illegal fishing, and encroachments by regional neighbours like Indonesia and the Philippines."²³ Recognizing its own vulnerabilities Malaysia proposed the creation "of an ASEAN militaries Ready Group on HADR, a dedicated force comprising of specialists grouped under a single banner, which has found support in the ASEAN member states."²⁴ Since 1971 Malaysia has been maintaining international cooperation within the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) along with Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. The FPDA has never been tested but it is "an effective conflict management tool and has contributed, directly and indirectly, towards MAF's development and enhancement of its professionalism."²⁵

Among services especially navy and air force has caught an attention of the leadership as for now. Navy capabilities to protect extensive coastline started to be increased from 2010 as the country has increased the number of its principal surface combatants up to 12 vessels and as for now it possesses 10 frigates and 4 corvettes. It is organized into three Regional Commands: Kuantan (East Coast); Kinabalu (Borneo) and Langkawi (West Coast). Navy modernization is based on the plan to acquire New Gowind-class corvettes which are designed for operation in littoral waters and will be equipped for anti-submarine warfare, anti-ship missile, and medium-range surface-to-air missile (SAM) assets. It is part of the SGPV (Second Generation Patrol Vessel) - LCS (Littoral Combat Ship) program.²⁶ The navy also acquired two French diesel-electric attack submarines 'Scorpene' in 2009 located in the naval base at Sepanggar Bay. The navy is supported by a large number of patrol boats belonging also to Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and Marine Police. The amphibious capabilities are underpinned by the possession of landing crafts which could be of value to conduct missions involving marines and Special Forces in relations to a variety of big islands and small islets. The capabilities to react to a threat are to be enhanced by intent to create a coastal-surveillance system as it is to increase the capabilities of offshore surveillance, to monitor sea lines of communications and coastal defence. The challenge is related to the ability of BHIC shipyard in Lumut to deliver the required vessels on the agreed time.

²² *The Military Balance 2016*. London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016. 271; 116:1, 211–306, DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2016.1127567.

²³ Parameswaran. "What Does Malaysia's New Defense Budget for 2016 Mean?". *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/what-does-malysias-new-defense-budget-for-2016-mean/>, Accessed on 24 October 2016.

²⁴ "ASEAN Security Outlook 2015". ASEAN. 2015. 49. <http://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ASEAN-SECURITY-OUTLOOK-2015.pdf>, Accessed on 25 November 2016.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁶ "Royal Malaysian Navy future Gowind SGPV-LCS program update with Boustead Heavy Industries". *Navy Recognition*. 25 April 2014. <http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/naval-exhibitions/dsa-2014/1768-royal-malaysian-navy-future-gowind-sgpv-lcs-program-update-with-boustead-heavy-industries.html>, Accessed on 25 November 2016.

Table. 3. *Manpower and major equipment of the Malaysian Armed Forces.*

Manpower	Main equipment	Remarks
ARMY		
80,000 active duty	Main battle tank - 48	PT-91M Twardy
50,000 reserve	Light tank - 21	Scorpion-90
	Recce – est. 296	Variety of types
	AIFV - 90	31 ACV300 Adnan (25mm Bushmaster); 13 ACV300 Adnan AGL; 46 AV8 Gempita IFV25 being delivered
	APC - 787	Tracked – 265; wheeled - 522
	Artillery - 424	Towed – 134 (105 and 155 mm); MLR – 36; mortar 254
	Helicopters - 10	Transport - AW109
	Air defence - 67	SAM – 15 Jernas (Rapier 2000); toed guns 35 and 40 mm– 52, variety of MANPADS
	Amphibious - 165	Damen Assault Craft 540 (capacity 10 troops)
NAVY		
14,000 active duty	Submarines - 2	Tunku Abdul Rahman (FRA Scorpene) with 6 single 533mm TT with WASS Black Shark HWT/SM-39 Exocet ASHM
1,000 reserve	Frigates - 10	
	Patrol and coastal combatants - 37	Corvettes - 4; patrol boats - 33
	Mine warfare - 4	Mahamiru (ITA Lerici)
	Landing craft - 115	
160 active duty	Naval aviation Helicopters - 12	Anti-submarine warfare Super Lynx 300 – 6; multirole AS555 Fennec – 6
AIR FORCE		
15,000 active duty	Aircraft - 67	Fighter – 21 (F-5E/F Tiger II; 8 MiG-29N/UB/NUB); fighter/ground attack – 26 (F/A-18D Hornet; Su-30MKM); tanker – 4; transport - 33
600 reserve	Helicopters - 62	Multirole – 17 (SA316 Alouette III); transport 45
PARAMILITARY		
est. 24,600 servicemen	Police General Operations Force	
est. 4,500 servicemen	Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency	Controls 5 Maritime Regions, patrol and costal combatants boats – 191
est. 2,100 servicemen	Marine Police	Patrol and costal combatants boats - 132
	Police Air Unit	Transport aircraft (17) and helicopters (2)

Manpower	Main equipment	Remarks
est. 24,600 reservists	People's Volunteer Corps	some 17,500 armed

AIFV – Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle, APC – Armoured Personal Carrier; MLR – Multiple Rocket Launcher.

Source: *The Military Balance 2016, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 9 February 2016, Chapter Six: Asia pp. 271 – 274; 116:1, 211-306, DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2016.1127567.*

The Air Force is facing a challenge related to aging fleet of aircraft being currently in service. Air force includes one air operation headquarter, two air divisions, one training and a one logistics command. It has also one Integrated Area Defence Systems headquarter. The country possesses both US- and Russian-made aircraft requiring separate logistics which makes sustainment costlier. In order to achieve the desired level of aircraft in full operational capability the number of sorties was limited. The MiG-29N/UB/NUBs and F/A-18Ds are from the 1990s and are requiring replacement to ensure the effective defence of the large airspace. The acquisition of Su-30MKMs allowed the establishment of one fighter/ground attack squadron but it not a solution of problems for limiting air force capabilities to support land forces and navy in conducting joint operations. Further limitations are caused by reduced pilot training as they have only 60 flight hours per year. The country is also short of airborne early warning and control aircraft and air-to-air refuelling capabilities possessing four KC-130H 'Hercules' which is not enough to extend the range of aircraft and increase the number of sorties.

The major capabilities are represented by the Army as it has some 80,000 troops and some 50,000 reservists. The forces are divided into two military districts as of geography and into four area commands, which are the equivalents of divisions. The Army is composed mainly of light forces as there are only one tank regiment and one mechanized infantry brigade. Consequently, the light forces approach is linked with terrain and vast areas covered by jungle requiring specifically organized, equipped, and trained troops to operate there. The equipment has been procured some years ago and it is requiring modernization to meet more challenging requirements to defend effectively but there is no direct threat against the Malaysian mainland so decisions are postponed. Major shortcomings are related to air defence assets, there is a lack of attack helicopters and the limited number of army transport helicopters makes the support by the Air Force inevitable. The Army has a large number of assault crafts and those could be used for operations along the coastline and for the protection of the possessed Spratly islands but the cooperation with the naval and air forces is necessary within joint efforts. For amphibious and airborne operations Special Forces will be mainly used. Those are composed of the Special Service Group and the elite 10th Parachute Brigade being a part of Rapid Deployment Force. RAND report estimated that the Army "can move a rapid-deployment force and three airmobile battalions to the Spratlys with a combination of C-130s and amphibious craft under navy escort."²⁷

The Malaysian armed forces are focused on acquisition of modern weapon system for all the service with priority for the Navy and the Air Force. There is an urgent need

²⁷ Sokolsky, R., Rabasa, A., and Neu, C. R. "ASEAN Defense Policies and Expenditures". In *The Role of Southeast Asia in U.S. Strategy Toward China*. RAND Corporation, 2001. 51.

for the delivery of new platforms to replace older ones and to upgrade existing weapons systems as those are aging, every year limiting the units ready to be employed in combat. The modernization is affected by “the country’s economic slowdown and the government’s prioritization of domestic spending continued to restrict efforts to develop the maritime and air capabilities that the armed forces’ leadership saw as a necessary response to China.”²⁸ The military budget shortage is causing modernization programs to be delayed or cancelled influencing overall capabilities of each service and ability to conduct any major joint operation. Nevertheless, it is expected that “the budget level will not affect the acquisition of equipment critical to boosting the country’s aerial and maritime capabilities, including six Second Generation Patrol Vessel – Littoral Combat Ship (SGPV-LCS) vessels, Starstreak ground-based air-defence missile systems, and the Airbus A400M Atlas transport aircraft.”²⁹ The incoming decisions within the 11th Malaysia Plan 2016 – 2020 will show the future of the Malaysian Armed Forces.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)

The military forces of the Philippines are projected to solve internal conflicts and manage crisis situations, especially to fight Muslim insurgents in the south of country. Until the withdrawal of the US forces from the Philippines, the national government’s policy was strictly connected with Washington’s policy in this area. Since 2011, when clashes with China in South China Sea area started, the government of Benigno Aquino III has focused on creating stronger military capability in the disputed area. Unfortunately the defence budget was too low to meet those ambitious plans.³⁰ The situation evolved on 10 May 2016, when Maverick Rodrigo Duterte won the election³¹ as he has threatened to end the long term security cooperation with the US and to seek closer relations with China. During his visit in Japan he said that he wanted the American troops to leave the Philippines in next two years.³²

According to Military Balance 2016 the Philippines military forces count 125,000 soldiers and they are supported by paramilitary organizations and significant amount of reservists (see details in table 4). The country is divided into five areas and one National Capital Region Command. The Army is armed with a limited number of Scorpion light tanks and heavy vehicles comparable to light tanks and some Armoured Personal Carriers. Fire power is ensured by some 254 artillery assets with calibres ranging from 75 to 155 mm. The Navy has just one frigate, a number of patrol and coastal combatant craft supported by logistic and support ships. The amphibious capabilities are enabled by the possession of landing ships and landing crafts. The Navy can use also airplanes and helicopters but with transport capabilities only. The Philippines Navy has a quite large component of Marines:

²⁸ *The Military Balance 2016*. 212-213; 116:1, 211-306, DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2016.1127567

²⁹ Parameswaran, “What Does Malaysia’s New Defense Budget for 2016 Mean?”.

³⁰ *The Military Balance 2014*. London: The International Institute For Strategic Studies, 2014. 273–275.

³¹ “Philippines election: Maverick Rodrigo Duterte wins presidency”. BBC. 10 May 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36253612>, Accessed on 24 October 2016.

³² Parameswaran, P. “Will Duterte end the US-Philippine military alliance?”. *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/will-duterte-end-the-us-philippine-military-alliance/>, Accessed on 29 October 2016.

8,300 with their own four amphibious and one combat support CSSs which are important assets when considering specific coastline and islands' disputes.³³

Fig. 3. *Geographical location of the Philippines*

Source: "Evidence of Change in Philippine Culture and History". http://www.oocities.org/gex_brb/pagetwo.html, Accessed on 29 October 2016.

The advantage is a quite large component of Special Forces, including Marines, as those could conduct effective jungle operations against criminal groups or partisans, and also against conventional enemy. The support could be provided by the Philippine National Police and a paramilitary organization can be organized based on units of civil population and create quite large resistance movement at the rear of the enemy forces. If a large scale conflict should happen, Philippine Special Forces could be deployed to provide the force protection of bases and logistic centres used by Allied forces (e.g. US) located on the South China Sea islands. The map in fig. 3. shows the geography and topography of individual islands. This way, it is possible to observe the geographical conditions favouring the defence.

Table 4. *Manpower and major equipment of the Philippines Armed Forces (AFP).*

Manpower	Main equipment	Remarks
ARMY		
86,000 active duty	Light tank - 7	Scorpion
100,000 reserve	AIFV – 36	2 YPR-765; 34 M113A1 FSV
	APC – 299	Tracked – 76: 6 ACV300; 70 M113; wheeled - 223; 77 LAV-150 Commando; 146 Simba
	Artillery – 254>	Towed – 214: 105mm 204 M101/M102/M-26/M-56; 155mm 10 M114/M-68, Mortars – 40+: 81mm M29; 107mm 40 M30
	Light aircraft – 4	1 Beech 80 Queen Air; 3 Cessna 170/172/P206A
	UAV – 1	Medium Blue Horizon
	ARV – 3	ACV-300; Samson; M578
NAVY		
24,000 active duty	Frigate – 1	Rajah Humabon (ex-US Cannon) with 3x76mm gun

³³ "U.S. Significantly Boosts Military Funding for SE Asia". Voice of America. 26 August 2013. <http://www.voanews.com/content/hagel-se-asia-corrected/1737438.html>, Accessed on 27 October 2016., "Philippine Defense Reform (PDR)". [globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/philippines/pdr.htm). <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/philippines/pdr.htm>, Accessed on 27 October 2016., "DND and AFP: Transforming while Performing". Armed forces of the Philippines. <https://web.archive.org/web/20060128011809/http://www.afp.mil.ph/0/news/transforming.php>, Accessed on 27 October 2016.

Manpower	Main equipment	Remarks
15,000 reserve	Patrol and Coastal Combatants – 68	
	Amphibious – 37	Landing ships – 5, landing craft – 32:
	Light Aircrafts – 6	4 BN-2A Defender; 2 Cessna 177 Cardinal
	Helicopters – 13	Medium - 4; Light – 9
8,300 Marines	Amphibious – 4	AAV 59: 4 LVTH-6†; 55 LVTP-7, ARTY 31+ TOWED 105mm 31: 23 M101; 8 M-26, MOR 107mm M30
	Combat support – 1	1 CSS bde (6 CSS bn)
	APC (Wheel) – 42	19 LAV-150 Commando; 23 LAV-300
	ARTY – 31>	TOWED 105mm 31: 23 M101; 8 M-26, MOR 107mm M30
Naval Special Operation Group	Combat and Combat Service Support Units (14 units)	1 SEAL unit, 1 diving unit, 10 naval spec ops unit 1 special boat unit, combat service support, 1 EOD unit
AIR FORCE		
15,000 active duty	Aircraft – 42	Fighter – 25, transport – 14, Surveillance and Special Mission – 3; (plus 56 trainer aircraft)
16,000 reserve	Helicopters - 123	Multirole – 96 (AW-109E, MD-520MG, W-3A, W-3A, UH-1H/HP/D, 412EP-CUH), Ambulance – 18 (S-76A, 205A), VIP transport – 9 (412EP/HP, S-70A-5)
PARAMILITARY		
40,500	Philippine National Police	Light aircraft – 5 (2 BN-2 Islander, 3 Lancair 320)
50,000	Citizen Armed Forces Geographical Units	

AIFV – Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle, APC – Armoured Personal Carrier; UAV - Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, ARV – Armed Response Vehicle

Source: *The Military Balance 2016; Global Firepower Military Ranks 2016; “Philippine Marine Force Recon”*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xuU3edg6b0>, Accessed on 29 October 2016.

The landform is not favourable for classic attack because of numerous islands, lagoons, creeks, shallows, undulating terrain and jungle. It is almost impossible for larger warships to operate between islands and only limited (as of jungle cover) air support will be available. As major cities, including capital, are located in the north part of Luzon Island the access to that part is limited. There are many straits between the jungle-covered shores of the island, and sea and land could be mined easily and make every attack very costly. This is why the Philippines is a great “naval base” to control the surrounding waters. Compared to China, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam or even Thailand, the Philippines military forces are similar to military police forces. They are using quite old equipment and possibly they even do not have enough capabilities to protect their own territory against stronger opposing forces. Their military forces are able to fight organized crimes groups or Muslim insurgents, but still lack key combat elements to conduct joint operations in the long term. However, Phil-

ippine forces can support their allies when those are to conduct operations in the region. Both the land forces and the navy are prepared to protect the country and deploy soldiers between islands but they are more suitable for guerrilla warfare than classic, conventional defence, and definitely they are not prepared to any offensive operations. Their advantage is the good knowledge of the terrain and support of local population. But special operations units could conduct limited attacks against the disputed islands and mainland as they are trained similarly to the US Special Forces.

The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)

Vietnam is a very specific country in South-East Asia. It has very long military tradition, and great empires like the US, UK, France or China were not able to control it. It is also a communist state and the ruling political party shares power with army. The economic growth of Vietnam supported the modernization of the armed forces during last decades. Historically, Vietnam was usually opposite to China and the US but the situation changed lately when Hanoi started to develop cooperation with Washington, being under pressure by the growing power of Beijing. Currently Hanoi is more open for international cooperation, including military domain, and it is investing more both in defensive and offensive capabilities. The focus is on enhancing the power of its national naval and air forces. This is a response to the necessity to protect national territorial integrity by adopting such concepts as Washington's 'preventive attack' and Beijing 'active defence'. It is impossible for Hanoi to counterbalance the Chinese power without cooperation with international partners as the probability to deter China is growing. The disputes involving Vietnam's partners in ASEAN could help Hanoi to create a powerful opposition to face Beijing's demands³⁴; fig. 4 illustrates the complexity of claims, including Vietnam's expectations.



Fig. 4. *Spratly and Paracel islands claims.*

Source: ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-12/south-china-sea-hague-to-hand-down-ruling-on-un-case/7587656>, Accessed on 11 November 2016.

PAVN military counts 482,000 troops in three services and paramilitary organizations (see details in table 5). To enhance combat power the armed forces conduct large reserve training programs which could ensure that as many as 5,000,000 troops are to be ready to fight if Vietnam should be attacked by external enemy. The territory is divided into eight military districts (including the capital). The army is divided into four Corps Headquarters

³⁴ Military History Institute of Vietnam. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002., Chandler, D. P. *A history of Cambodia*. Sydney: Westview Press; Allen & Unwin; Boulder, 1992.

and it has two mechanized infantry divisions and twenty three light infantry divisions six???, one Special Forces unit and a variety of battalions and regiments. Those are supported by combat support and combat service support units. The army possesses a significant number of main battle tanks and light tanks but those are rather older versions of Russian equipment. Similar situation is related to infantry combat vehicles. The advantage of land forces is the number of artillery assets as those could deliver desired fire support.³⁵

The Vietnamese Navy has only four tactical ‘Kilo-class’ submarines (two under construction), seven frigates (two under construction and four in plans) and a variety of patrol and coastal combatant craft including eleven corvettes. Among them submarines and ‘Gepard’ frigates are modern and their constant modernization is one of the priorities. The Navy has also mine countermeasures and amphibious capabilities.



Fig. 5. Vietnam's Naval Regions

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vietnam_Naval_Regions.jpg Accessed on 05 December 2016.

The main combat power of the Air Force is based on four fighter regiments and four fighter-bomber regiments. There are also two transport regiments and two attack/transport helicopter regiments.³⁶ The numbers are reasonable but the aircraft are older generation assets and are unable to conduct effective operations against a more developed Air Force, like that of China.

³⁵ *The Military Balance 2016*, 296–298.

³⁶ “Vietnam Military Strength”. Global Fire Power. http://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=vietnam, Accessed on 24 October 2016.

Table 5. *Manpower and major equipment of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN).*

Manpower	Main equipment	Remarks
ARMY (Ground Forces)		
412,000 active duty	Main Battle Tanks - 1,270	70 T-62; 350 Type-59; 850 T-54/T-55; (45 T-34 in store)
5,000,000 reserve	Light tanks – 620	300 PT-76; 320 Type-62/Type-6
	RECCE – 100	BRDM-1/BRDM-2
	AIFV – 300	BMP-1/BMP-2
	APC – 1,380	Track: 280: 200 M113 (to be upgraded); 80 Type-63 Wheel: 1,100 BTR-40/BTR-50/BTR-60/BTR-152
	Artillery – 3,040>	Self-propelled 30+, towed 2,300, MRL 710+, mortars
NAVY		
40,000 active duty	Submarines (tactical) – 6	4 SSK: Hanoi (RUS Varshavyanka) with 6 533mm TT with TEST-71ME HWT; 2 SSI: Yugo† (DPRK)
	Frigate – 2	2 Dinh Tien Hoang
	Patrol and Coastal Combatants – 71	Corvettes – 6; patrol boats - 65
	Mine Warfare/Mine Countermeasures – 13	
	Amphibious – 38	Landing Ships 8, landing Craft 30
	Logistic and support – 30	
27,000 Naval Infantry	Aircraft – 6	Light DHC-6-400 Twin Otter
	Helicopter – 14	10 ASW 10 Ka-28 Helix A; 4 TPT
AIR FORCE		
15,000 active duty	Aircraft –307	Fighter – 73 (MiG-21bis Fishbed L; MiG-21UM Mongol B); fighter-bombers – 73 (Su-22M3/M4/UM Fitter; Su-27SK/Su-27UBK; Su-30MK2); transport – apx. 141 (Mi-8 Hip; Mi-17 Hip H; M-28 Bryza);
16,000 reserve	Helicopters - 180	Multirole – apx. 120 (Mi-8 Hip; Mi-17 Hip H; Mi-171; Mi-24 Hind), Transport – apx. 60 (Mi-8 Hip; Mi-17 Hip H; M-28 Bryza)

AIFV – Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle, APC – Armoured Personal Carrier; UAV - Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, ARV – Armed Response Vehicle, RECCE – Reconnaissance

Source: *The Military Balance 2016; Global Firepower Military Ranks 2016; "Vietnam Military Strength". Global Fire Power. http://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=vietnam; Accessed on 24 October 2016.*

In general, the Vietnamese Armed Forces are huge in members but they have obsolete equipment; however, as history presented in the specific climate and geographical conditions that could be used to challenge a stronger and more modern enemy. Furthermore, those forces are capable enough to face any small nation in the region. As for Vietnam, it is considering

the development of its Navy as submarines are able to detect and destroy enemy vessels and are usable in the case of maritime disputes. The advantage in general is very high number of quite well trained reservists and for any enemy it is a factor to be taken into consideration. The Air Force is possibly to weakest point in the Vietnamese defence system but according to Vietnam War experience it is proved that a stronger enemy can take control over the air-space but it does not mean that the enemy will win the war. In the case of an external attack Vietnam's armed forces will probably start massive partisan movement skilfully exploiting geographic features. It is worth to highlight that Vietnam's military forces are not prepared to attack other countries, but they are well prepared to defend their own territory. This is one of the main reasons why Vietnam is developing its navy to be ready to face a possible maritime conflict with China.

CONCLUSIONS

The general trend of ASEAN-4, and in general in Asia, is to increase navies and air forces' capabilities to extend force projection as those capabilities are of critical importance to protect national interests in the South China Sea. Each state described above has its own specific strategy of using defence capabilities to fight against military threats. Brunei is the weakest state because of the limited quantity and poor quality of its current military equipment, and the lack of proper training of reserves. It cannot defend itself in the case of a major attack and has limited options to create an effective guerrilla movement in case of occupation. The Philippines shifted lately toward US support to deter a military aggression. It focused its limited funds on developing ground forces as those are easier to develop in short time and they are required to fight internal threats. The Philippines has one of the weakest military forces in the whole of East-Asia, and in fact they are more prepared for guerrilla type warfare than for a conventional conflict. Manila is able to create a mass partisan movement in the case of the occupation of the country. Malaysia has a reliable number of troops but must consider replacement of their obsolete equipment, and the development of combat support capabilities. It possesses a large number of assault crafts to defend coastline and to react in the case of claims for Spratly Islands, by employing Special Forces within amphibious and airborne operations. The limitation is poor coverage by air force and support by navy as there is a lack of joint abilities. Vietnam is focusing its efforts on border protection, especially the coastal waters, and is prepared for defence. Vietnam has a massive territorial defence system based on a large number of reservists but limited by obsolete but still operational equipment. It is aware of the fact that the advantage is extremely difficult terrain and tough climate, which are very helpful to balance the combat power of much more powerful, modern and numerous enemies. The most capable service in Vietnam is navy, but without modern ground and air forces any joint operations are impossible, both defensive and offensive. None of these ASEAN-4 countries have capabilities to conduct modern joint operations and they are not prepared to conduct combined operations uniting their capabilities. Also, offensive capabilities are very limited along with a shortage of force projection assets enabling quick and decisive reaction in the case of an assertive approach of any pretender. Vietnam has just initiated the transformation of the current defence nature of its military forces into defensive-offensive ones. Similarly to other nations, especially Malaysia and the Philippines are considering the modernization of armed forces but the processes are relatively slow and some programs are questionable.

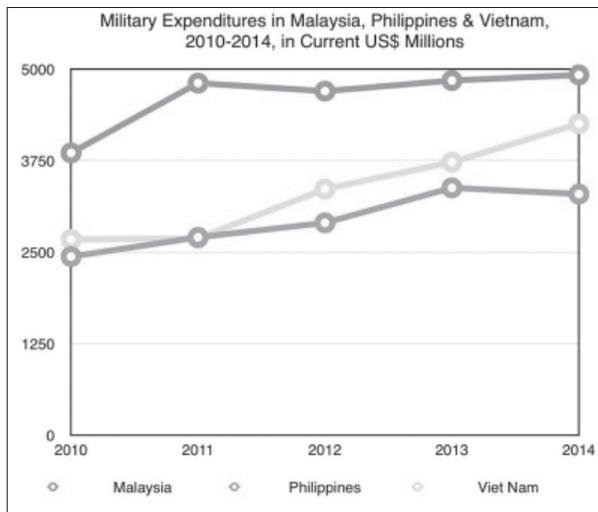


Fig. 6. *Military expenditures in Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam 2010 – 2014 (millions, USD)*

Source: "Analyzing Southeast Asia's Military Expenditures". *cogitASIA*. 7 May 2015. <http://cogitasia.com/analyzing-southeast-asias-military-expenditures/> Accessed on 24 November 2016.

The Chinese ambitions are accelerating an arms race in relation to ASEAN-4 involved into islands disputes. The PLA budget reaching some USD146bn in 2015 is showing the scale of differences as total budget of all the ASEAN-4 reached less than USD12bn. The increase was visible in years 2010-2014 (see fig. 5) but lately it was slower, only the Philippines and Vietnam produced an increase between 2014 and 2015. Brunei noticed a decrease but some 5% growth is expected in 2016-2017 compared to Malaysia with a downgrading trend. Also Japanese growing involvement into regional affairs, defence spending (41bn in 2015) and change of constitution allowing the use of the military abroad were noticed.

The nations are looking for other options to enhance security and still balancing option is favourable. An example of cooperation is the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the US and the Philippines, signed on 28 April 2014 as it "provides a legal framework for the increased rotational presence of US armed forces in the Philippines. The precise details of when, how many, what types and the location of this rotational presence will be worked out in the future. This may well prove to be a test case of the ability of the US to rebalance its forces in Southeast Asia."³⁷ The agreement could be seen by Beijing as the deterrent tool in relations to the South China Sea's disputes as neither Manila nor any other ASEAN nation is strong enough to face alone any escalation of the situation. What is also of critical importance is that ASEAN as an organisation is not capable to support it militarily. The armed forces' build-up is in general going on in South East Asia, fuelled by maritime disputes, and it caused a 17% rise of arms sales in the last 5 years. The major contributors are China and India but Japan is also speeding up such processes, being involved in the East China Sea disputes. The ASEAN nations are unable to compete in that rivalry and they are observing closely the situation in the US after the elections, and the interactions among major regional powers. This process is supported by promoting organisational and national interests using international forums. Especially the development of capabilities like power projection, amphibious and expeditionary capabilities, which are not purely defensive in

³⁷ For details of the EDCA read: Thayer, C. "Analyzing the US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement". *The Diplomat*. 2 May 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/analyzing-the-us-philippines-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement/>, Accessed on 24 November 2016.

nature, are recognized as a threat, because they could be easily used to solve the disputes over the islands by implementing joint air – sea warfare concept. It is obvious that without a strong, modern foreign support these countries are unable to compete militarily with China over the disputed islands. In the future they could even revise their approach toward security by considering bandwagoning option as a security guarantee, which could make China the winner in the South China Sea maritime area.

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