

## **FRIEND OR FOE? THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE HEGEMONIC AMBITIONS OF CHINA AND RUSSIA**

### **¿AMIGO O ENEMIGO? EL ROL DE ORGANIZACIONES REGIONALES EN LAS AMBICIONES HEGEMÓNICAS DE CHINA Y RUSIA**

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#### **Abstract**

Do regional organizations support or undermine great powers' hegemonic ambitions? How do their hostilities affect regional organizations? To answer these questions, this article analyzes China-ASEAN dynamics after the Scarborough Shoal standoff and Russia-CIS relations after the Russo-Georgian War. I hypothesize that CIS supports Russia's ambitions in the "post-Soviet region," ASEAN unity threatens China's interests, and the chosen incidents disrupted cohesion inside both organizations. Using text analysis, I find mixed support for these hypotheses. Despite observing that CIS supports Moscow's ambitions, China rejects third-party intervention, and the standoff disrupted ASEAN consensus, the war caused no visible reaction inside CIS.

**Keywords:** International Relations, hegemonies, regional organizations, Russia, China

#### **Resumen**

¿Las organizaciones regionales consolidan o socavan las ambiciones hegemónicas de grandes potencias? ¿Cómo afectan sus acciones hostiles a organizaciones regionales? Este artículo analiza las dinámicas China-ASEAN después del incidente del Atolón de Scarborough y Rusia-CEI tras la Guerra Rusa-georgiana. Mi hipótesis plantea que CEI apoya las ambiciones rusas en la región "pos-soviética", la unidad en ASEAN amenaza los intereses chinos y los incidentes escogidos perturbaron la cohesión en ambas organizaciones. Se encuentra que CEI apoya las ambiciones

rusas, China rechaza la intervención de terceros y el incidente alteró el consenso en ASEAN, la guerra no tuvo efectos en el CEI.

**Palabras claves:** Relaciones Internacionales, hegemonías, organizaciones regionales, Rusia, China

## **Introduction**

Inside the field of International Relations (IR), the importance and effectiveness of international organizations (from here on IOs) has long been a controversial topic. There is no better proof of this than the persistent debate between the two dominant IR paradigms in the North American academic field: liberalism and realism. Neoliberals argue that IOs allow states to achieve their interests through cooperation and maintain a lasting peace between them (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Keohane & Martin, 1995). In opposition, realism, and its variants give little importance to IOs because the international system is inherently anarchic, where competition and mistrust prevail between states (Waltz, 2000). However, for the English School, a theoretical approach largely unknown in North American academia, an IO's effectiveness depends on the primary institutions – a set of practices and rules that dictate relations between 2 or more states – that regulate it (Stivatchis, 2017). This perspective offers us a more sensitive analysis of the historical dynamics between states and their regional contexts, allowing for a more complex but complete understanding of the role of IOs. Thus, an IO can be a "friend" or "foe," depending on the primary institutions that rule it.

This research project centers around the following questions: 1) Do regional organizations support or undermine the hegemonic ambitions of great powers in their region? and 2) How do hostile actions by these regional powers affect IOs in the region? To answer these questions, I analyze the dynamics between China and the Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN) after the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012 and those between Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) after the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. In recent decades, the South China Sea has been a hot spot, with skirmishes erupting sporadically between the states that court its resource-rich and strategically well-placed shoals, including China and ASEAN member states. The Scarborough Shoal standoff was one of these instances and proved how ill-equipped ASEAN is to deal with these disputes. At the same time, Russia has been trying to reclaim its hegemony over the former Soviet sphere of influence for decades after multiple regional states started to fraternize with Western IOs. Their most recent attempt to discourage integration into these is its ongoing invasion of Ukraine, but it is the 2008 Russo-Georgian war that

establishes the precedent. My hypothesis states that 1) China, having various maritime disputes with ASEAN member countries, sees this organization as a threat to its regional interests; 2) the CIS favors Russia's hegemonic ambitions in its former sphere of influence or "post-soviet space"; and 3) both the Scarborough Shoal standoff (2012) and the Russo-Georgian War (2008) eroded the cohesion inside ASEAN and CIS. Through text analysis, my findings offer mixed support for these hypotheses. On the one hand, China rejects ASEAN mediation on its maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), advocating for bilateral negotiations. Likewise, the CIS' lack of response to Russia's invasion of Georgia during the 2008 war suggests it favors Moscow's hegemonic ambitions. While this study finds evidence that the Scarborough Shoal standoff undermined ASEAN's internal cohesion, I found no evidence that the Russo-Georgian War affected the CIS similarly. These conclusions offer a nuanced outlook on the role of IOs in power dynamics and regional cooperation, with China's case highlighting instances where IOs are "foes" to superpower interests, while Russia's case demonstrates that IOs can also be "friends" that support hegemonic ambition.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical frame, research design, and case selection*

My research adopts the English School of International Relations as its theoretical approach, using Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* and Adam Watson's *The Evolution of International Society* as its theoretical references. Mainly, I use its definition of *institutions* as the set of norms and practices that determine or regulate relations between a group of states (Bull, 1977). This, together with its concept of *secondary institution* (organization or IO) —bureaucratic bodies whose operation is governed by primary institutions (Stivatchis, 2017)— allows us to understand how a hegemonic relationship can be upheld through a regional organization. In other words, if a de facto regional hegemony led by a superpower already exists, this dynamic will be reflected in the primary institutions that regulate relations between the states of the region. Since primary institutions determine how IOs act (Stivatchis, 2017), a hegemony or sphere of influence will also manifest in the region's secondary institutions (or regional organizations). On the other hand, if a regional great power has hegemonic ambitions, this will also appear in the primary institutions it promotes.

According to the English School, hegemony occurs when a state exclusively controls the foreign relations between a group of states or has indirect influence over the military, normative, or cultural aspects of the region with the consent of the regional

states but allows them to remain independent in domestic matters (Costa-Buranelli, 2017; Watson, 1992). Thus, this research article defines "hegemonic ambitions" as a state's intention to establish or preserve a zone of influence, placing itself as the leading voice in its region's international matters and opposing the intervention or mediation of international organizations or other great powers. Similarly, a regional organization has "internal cohesion" when its members maintain a united front. This cohesion is destabilized when dissidence between members causes external actors and even the members themselves to question the autonomy or legitimacy of the organization.

This research project is descriptive in nature and uses text analysis to examine primary sources such as charters, multilateral agreements, and official statements made by Chinese and Russian officials on the selected incidents. I analyze the ASEAN+3 (APT) charters instead of ASEAN's because they are the ones that dictate ASEAN-Chinese relations since Beijing is not a member of this IO. These documents include The Joint Statement on East Asian Cooperation at the 3rd APT Summit (1999), the President's Statement at the 11th APT Summit (2007), and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the Sea of South China (2002). For the CIS, I examine the Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States (1993). Next, I analyze official statements from the Chinese and Russian governments regarding the chosen incidents to identify the primary institutions mentioned and promoted. Afterward, I processed all the primary institutions found using NVivo, turning these data into word clouds that better visualize which institutions are the most mentioned. All the data collected is summarized in Table 1 comparing ASEAN-China and CIS-Russia dynamics.

Dimension	ASEAN and APT	CIS
Centralization	Low – rotating chairmanship between member states and a relatively small number of employees in its secretariat.	High—fixed offices in Minsk and a high number of employees; its ruling body is the Executive Committee.
Independence	Not independent – its decisions are made through consensus. Very sensitive to their interests and influence.	Not independent – although formally independent, it is obvious Russia dominates this IO. Inability to make decisions that harm Russia.
Reaction to the chosen incident	In the ASEAN summit celebrated months after the Scarborough Shoal standoff, the IO failed to release a joint statement for the first time in its 45 years.	No reaction regarding the 2008 Russo-Georgian War was found; no sanctions nor mediation.
Effect on internal cohesion and stability	Disruptive, the unity and effectiveness of the ASEAN was called into question.	No visible effect on the organization's internal stability. However, decades later, two more members intended to leave the CIS.
Is it a "friend" or a "foe" to the superpower's hegemonic ambitions?	Foe	Friend

TABLE 1: DIMENSIONS ANALYZED IN THIS RESEARCH  
SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION

## Methodology

### *Case studies and results*

#### ***1. ASEAN in China's hegemonic ambitions: Does one dragon support another?***

Created on August 8, 1967, the ASEAN aims to promote Southeast Asian cooperation in the economic, social, technological, and educational fields and promote regional peace following the statutes of the United Nations (UN) (The Founding of ASEAN, n.d.). Its members are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Initially, this new organization was intended to defend the region from external influences and confront the spread of communism in neighboring countries (Council of Foreign Relations, 2022). However, with the end of the Cold War, the IO expanded its membership to other countries and former regional enemies (ASEAN Member States, n.d.; Council of Foreign Relations, 2022). In 1999, the ASEAN Plus Three (or APT) forum was created to include China, South Korea, and Japan in regional cooperation (ASEAN Plus Three, n.d.; East the Asian Summit ASEAN, n.d.).

In the three documents analyzed regarding ASEAN-China dynamics, as shown in Figure 1, the most frequently mentioned primary institutions are *war (peace)*, *international law*, and *diplomacy*. These three institutions only tell us a little since they are prevalent in IO charters. The institutions mentioned less frequently prove to be more enlightening. Notably, the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the SCS mentions the institution's *freedom of navigation*. It includes a section calling all parties to refrain from populating uninhabited islands, reefs, atolls, and cays. This demonstrates that ASEAN tries to maintain a neutral position on maritime disputes in the SCS. It does not refer to them as such but as uninhabited territories, indicating that this subject is highly controversial among its members.



FIGURE 1: WORD CLOUD OF THE INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED IN THE APT CHARTERS AND THE DECLARATION OF CONDUCT OF PARTIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA  
SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION

On April 8, 2012, the Philippines sent a warship to Scarborough Shoal after Chinese fishing boats were sighted in the area. China sent surveillance vessels to protect its fishermen, arguing that the Philippine vessel prevented them from leaving the bay and violated Chinese sovereignty. The Philippines declared its intention to resort to international mechanisms, such as asking ASEAN to intervene or appeal to UNCLOS, while China insisted on solving the matter through bilateral negotiations. Located 123 miles off the Philippine coast, the shoal is claimed by China, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Beijing cites various historical maps to support its sovereignty over the Scarborough Shoal, which they call Huangyan Island. According to its government, China has officially administered the atoll since the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th century, and maps drawn since then have always marked it as a Chinese territory (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines, 2012). The Philippines claim sovereignty over this territory, known to them as Bajo de Masinloc, because it lies in their exclusive economic zone according to UNCLOS, and several historical maps drawn during the Spanish colonization identified the shoal under this name (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines, 2012).

In July, a few months after the standoff, ASEAN held its annual summit in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. In these meetings, the heads of state and foreign ministers of the member countries discuss matters of regional cooperation. At the end of each meeting, they must issue a joint communiqué summarizing the points considered. The hosting government holds the ASEAN chairmanship for that year, granting it veto power over the organization's joint statements issued at that summit; in 2012, that role and power fell to Cambodia. During one of the meetings in Phnom Penh, a debate broke out about whether to include the issue of SCS territorial disputes in the final communiqué. Countries like the Philippines and Thailand

argued that it should at least indicate the issue had been raised, as it was another area of cooperation between ASEAN countries. In opposition, Cambodia advocated for its exclusion since this type of dispute fell under bilateral relations and, therefore, ASEAN should not interfere. Despite attempts to persuade the Cambodian representative to compromise, Cambodia vetoed the inclusion of SCS territorial disputes in the joint statement. Failing to reach a consensus on what should be included in this document, ASEAN failed to issue a joint statement for the first time.

This episode called into question ASEAN's effectiveness and unity. Several international newspapers highlighted the divisions within the organization, alluding to the "cacophony" (Higgins, 2012) and "acrimony" (Chal Thul & Grudgings, 2012) among its member countries. In November of that year, during the APT summit, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda again brought up the SCS issue, citing its impact on the stability of the Asia-Pacific region (Szep & Pomfret, 2012). Shortly after, Cambodia's foreign ministry responded, claiming that ASEAN leaders had agreed not to internationalize the SCS issue (Szep & Pomfret, 2012). This rekindled tensions, particularly on the Philippines' side, prompting its president, Benigno Aquino, to denounce Cambodia's statement. Aquino claimed that no such consensus had been reached at the last ASEAN summit and that his country would seek other routes to ensure its sovereignty over the SCS territorial disputes (Szep & Pomfret, 2012). Many saws China's shadow in this time of chaos within ASEAN, as Cambodia is one of its main Southeast Asian allies and receives substantial economic aid packages from Beijing (Bower, 2012; Council of Foreign Relations, n.d.; Higgins, 2012). The Chinese Foreign Ministry echoed the Cambodian government's statement, declaring that ASEAN had reached a "common position" not to internationalize territorial disputes in the SCS (Szep & Pomfret, 2012). This disruptive intervention, which caused ASEAN's authority and independence to be questioned, demonstrates that China sees ASEAN as a menace or a "foe" to its ambitions as a superpower in the SCS region.

In its official statements regarding maritime disputes with the Philippines since the Scarborough Shoal standoff, Beijing has always emphasized bilateral negotiations, refusing to internationalize the issue. China has considered the Philippine government's insistence on taking this dispute to international courts as an act of bad faith since both countries had long agreed to settle their disagreements through bilateral negotiations. Despite this, in January 2013, the Philippine government instituted arbitral proceedings against China under Annex VII of the UNCLOS through the Permanent Court of Arbitration (Permanent Court of Arbitration, n.d.). In the following month, Beijing stated in response to this appeal, emphasizing that

maritime disputes with the Philippines should be resolved through bilateral negotiations. China also refused to send a representative to the proceedings since it did not recognize the arbitration process initiated by the Philippines (Permanent Court of Arbitration, n.d.). Figure 2 shows *bilateral negotiations* are the most frequently mentioned institution in official Beijing communiqués regarding Sino-Philippines tensions after the Scarborough Shoal incident. Hence, China is against third parties mediating in the SCS, particularly IOs such as ASEAN, to the point that it is willing to sabotage this organization through its allies. This supports my hypothesis that China sees ASEAN as a “foe” to its hegemonic interests in the SCS.



FIGURE 2: WORD CLOUD OF THE INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED IN THE PRC’S STATEMENTS REGARDING THE SCARBOROUGH SHOAL STANDOFF WITH THE PHILIPPINES  
SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION

## 2. *The CIS in Russia’s hegemonic ambitions: Wolf under IO’s clothing?*

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was founded in 1991, just after the disintegration of the USSR (CIS Internet Portal, n.d.). It is therefore not surprising that all of its member states are former Soviet republics – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia (now a former member), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan (CIS Internet Portal, n.d.). The organization fosters regional cooperation on various issues, particularly regarding the economy, security, migration, and science (Historical Reference CIS, n.d.). Its administrative body is the Executive Committee, whose headquarters are in Minsk and Moscow (Executive Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States, n.d.).

The most frequently mentioned primary institutions in the Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States are war (peace), international law, and sovereignty (Figure 3). As with ASEAN/APT, the first two institutions only tell us a little since they are found in almost every organization worldwide. However, the institution's sovereignty and territoriality indicate that, for the new republics that founded this organization, ensuring dominance within their borders and avoiding



foreign intervention in their territories was of the utmost importance. Another institution worth highlighting is historical ties (Figure 3). All the member countries of the CIS were part of the Russian Empire and the USSR or were under its zone of influence. Therefore, these countries have historically been under a regional hegemony led by Russia. Despite the USSR's collapse in 1991 and many of these states establishing alliances with other powers, the fact that historical ties are included, with the hegemonic relations they entail, suggests that these dynamics continue, legitimizing a hegemonic relationship in Russia's eyes. Therefore, this charter contradicts itself. On the one hand, it gives much weight to its member states' sovereignty (an institution Russia will not respect in the future in the case of Georgia and Ukraine). On the other, it alludes to historical links between the states, which occurred under Russia's hegemony in the region.



FIGURE 3: WORD CLOUD OF THE INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED IN THE CHARTER OF THE CIS  
SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION

In August 2008, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili ordered his troops to seize Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, after years of tension between the secessionist region and the central government. Soon after, Russia, which had unofficially supported the region's separatist movement, responded by moving its troops across the border and bombing Georgian positions (Tangiashvili, 2008). The fighting lasted five days, culminating in Russia taking control of Tskhinvali. Back in 2006, Saakashvili had accused Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister at the time, of supporting separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Tensions between the two countries escalated until Moscow decided to back the secessionist regions and use this as an excuse to intervene and display its military might in Georgia, which was moving closer to the Western IOs like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) (Fernández, 2006; Levy, 2008; Tangiashvili, 2008). A few months before the conflict broke out, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the press that Russia's support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia was due to its respect for the institutions of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law. As shown in Figure 4, sovereignty and international law were

the most frequently mentioned institutions in Russian statements regarding the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, despite their actions not concurring with them. Here, we see one of the most significant flaws in analyzing institutions based on official declarations and charters: the institutions officially mentioned are sometimes not observed or practiced in real life.



FIGURE 4: WORD CLOUD OF THE INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED IN RUSSIA'S STATEMENTS REGARDING THE RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR (2008)

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION

Unfortunately, this study has not found any CIS official statement regarding the Russo-Georgian War, either because they do not exist or due to lack of funds to access them. Therefore, no precise data can be offered about the CIS' reaction and how it affected its internal cohesion. However, a year after the war, Georgia withdrew from the CIS, citing the IO's inaction towards Russia after the conflict as their breaking point (Interfax-Ukraine, 2009). Since then, two other members have approached NATO and the EU – Moldova and Ukraine – hinting that Russia's actions in Georgia called into question the CIS' role in the region (Picheta, 2023). In both cases, Russia has tried to destabilize these countries by supporting secessionist movements or by invading their territory (Picheta, 2023). The CIS, for now, seems to do nothing.

Nonetheless, this silence is revealing. The CIS' inaction has allowed Moscow to do what it pleases with other member states without impunity. This makes the organization appear more like a mechanism to keep the post-Soviet space under Russia's yoke. It can be concluded that Russia sees the CIS as a "friend" in the region.

## Conclusion

The dominant paradigms inside the field of IR – liberalism and realism – have always been at odds regarding the role IOs play on the international stage. According to them, IOs consist either of 1) entities that benefit all of its member states by fostering cooperation among them or 2) bureaucratic organisms reflecting the

interests of the great powers that dominate them. Using the English School's theoretical approach, this study finds evidence that organizations can fulfill both functions, depending on the primary institutions that regulate their relations. As previously mentioned, the functioning or effectiveness of IOs depends on the norms that formally and informally dictate relations between their members. Regional organizations, therefore, are what institutions make them.

In the cases of ASEAN and the CIS, this rationale appears in the former's vulnerability to maritime disputes and the latter's inaction against Moscow. ASEAN's primary institutions underscore economic cooperation and mutual accord, fostering economic growth in an underdeveloped region decades ago. This way, the Southeast Asia region (or at least most of its states) has lifted itself out of the yoke of great powers near and far. However, as seen in the 2012 ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, its emphasis on consensus can leave it vulnerable to outside influence through its poorest members. Likewise, since none of its primary institutions deals with resolving territorial disputes (just avoiding them), ASEAN's internal cohesion is constantly threatened by its members and non-members' race for the natural resources and strategic leverages the SCS atolls offer.

In contrast, the CIS' actions do not coincide with the institutions of sovereignty and territoriality cited in its charter. The actual ruling institutions seem rooted in historical ties, thus maintaining the "post-Soviet space's" economic and political dependency on Russia. Hence, while ASEAN is a regional organization that can threaten significant power interests, the CIS appears to be a formal mechanism that favors Russia's hegemonic ambitions – a wolf in IO's clothing. Lastly, although my research contributes to the field's understanding of the role of IOs in hegemonic interests and how great power hostilities affect these organisms' cohesion and international legitimacy, my analysis is limited to two regional IOs and two specific critical incidents. Further investigation should look at more episodes of tension between ASEAN and China, between the CIS and Russia, or other regional powers and organizations to help strengthen the applicability of these findings.

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