

**Corvinus University of Budapest**

**Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science**

**World Economics Program**

**Trade in Shadow**

*ASEAN-China Trade Relations amidst South China Sea Conflicts*

**Doctoral Dissertation**

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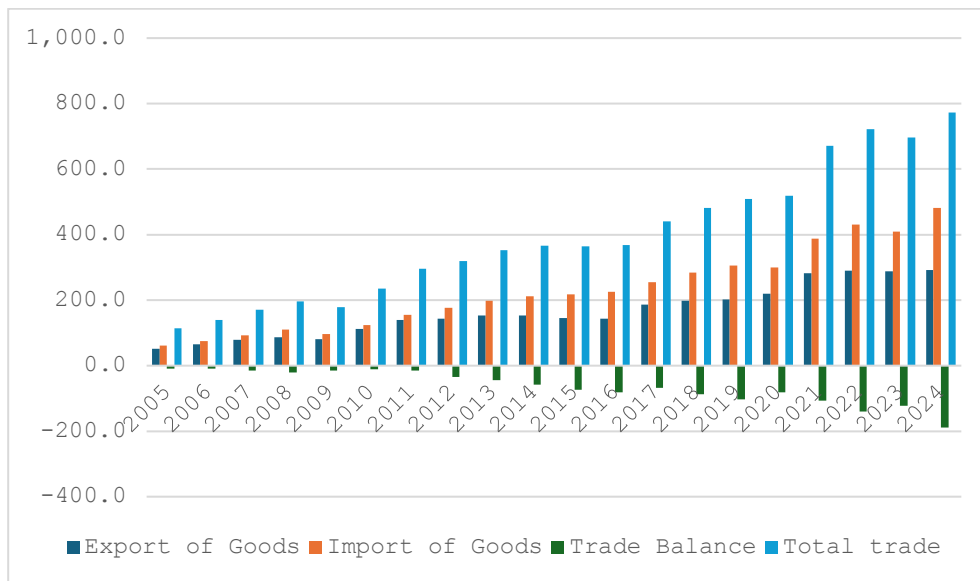
## **I. Research Background and Justification for the Selection of the Topic**

Conflict and cooperation have been among core debates in International Political Economy and International Relations. Classical and neorealists tend to treat conflict as a disruptive force that undermines cooperation and elevates security considerations above economic rationality (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). Unresolved territorial disputes, from this perspective, should generate uncertainty and ultimately suppress trade. Liberal and institutionalist traditions, by contrast, suggest economic interdependence can restrain conflict (Keohane, 1989; Moravcsik, 1997). It does so by increasing the opportunity costs of escalation and by embedding state behavior within institutional frameworks that reward cooperation. Yet, despite long theoretical debate, the empirical stance of conflict-trade relations remains contested.

The relations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China present a particular puzzle within this debate. Their relationship is defined by a paradox where there exists two parallel yet contradictory realities.

On one hand, their bilateral trade has expanded. Through ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) since 2010, both have reduced tariffs and opening borders to goods and services. Ever since, China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner. Trade between ASEAN and China more than doubled, rising from US\$ 235.5 billion in 2010 to US\$ 507.9 billion by 2019. During this period, ASEAN's exports to China grew at an average rate of 10.4% per year, while its imports from China increased by 12.5% annually. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend continued to grow. In 2020 for the first time, ASEAN became China's largest trading partner. This made ASEAN and China each other's top trading partners. The total trade between the two continued to grow, reaching US\$ 581 billion in 2020 and nearing US\$ 772 billion by 2024.

**Figure 1 ASEAN Trade with China (Billion US\$)**



By 2025, both have become each other's largest trading partners for sixteen consecutive years. Bilateral trade hit around US\$694 billion in the first eight months of 2025 alone. Manufactured goods, agricultural commodities, digital trade - all of it constitute their interdependence muscles. Alongside, institutional and technological collaboration has expanded in tandem. Even now they are working on digital economy, sustainable development, and supply chain integration.

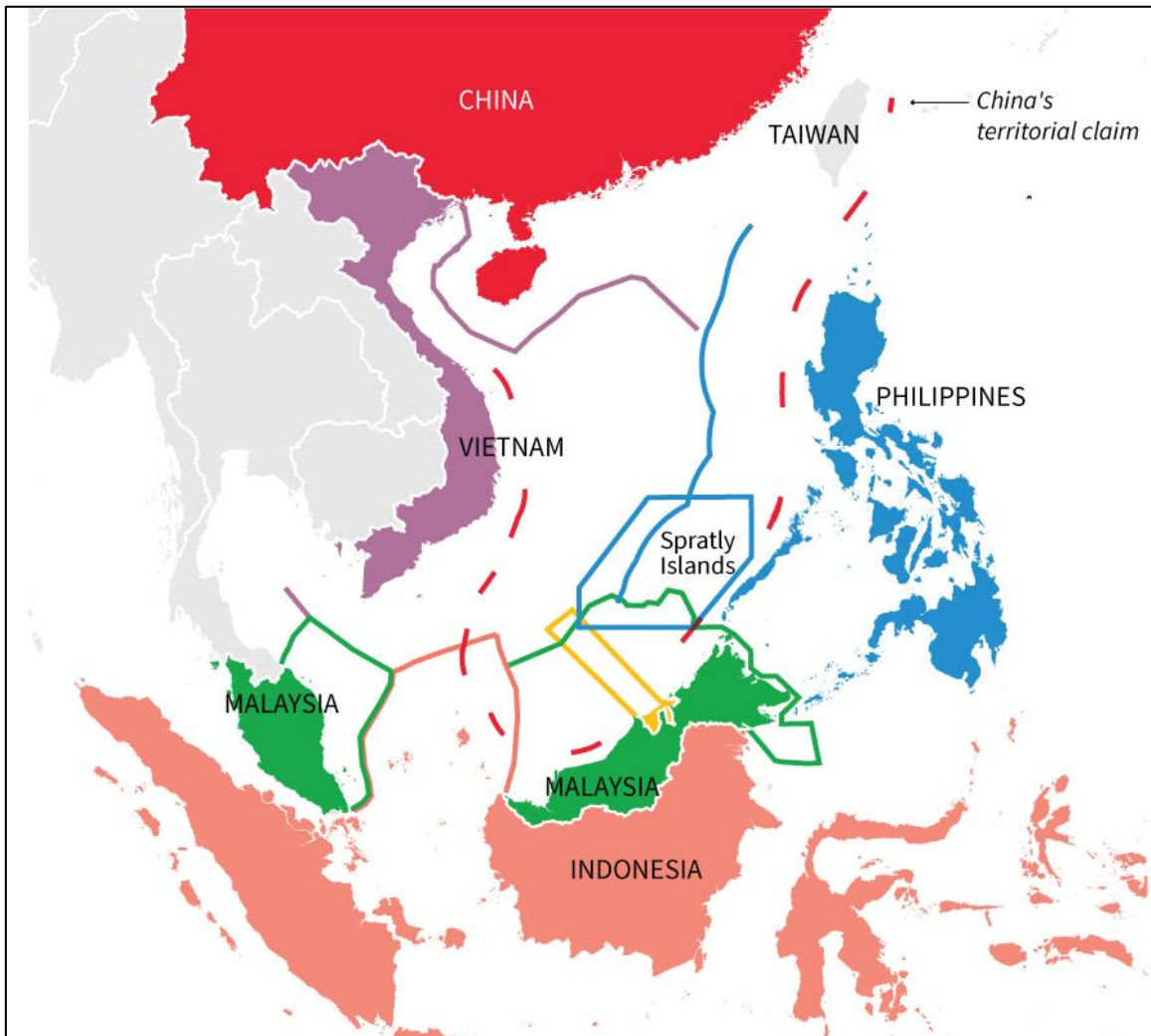
Most of China's product traded to ASEAN countries are industrial inputs. For example, in 2022, such kind of products are 80% of ASEAN's imports from China. These served manufacturing, construction, and technological needs. Electronics, machinery, chemicals, plastics, and aluminium formed the backbone of this supply. China, as ASEAN's largest trading partner, sustains the region's industrial momentum. It does so by ensuring factories, construction sites, and tech companies receive the vital materials to operate smoothly. On the other hand, over half of ASEAN's exports to China were electronic equipment and metals. Ferronickel and stainless steel stood out among these. ASEAN also contributed with coal, plastics, rubber, and agricultural products like palm oil and fruits. This exchange reflects a deeper economic interdependence, where each side sustains the other's progress.

On the other hand, between their geographical fronts lies South China Sea (SCS) as disputed waters. As known, SCS is a strategic route with abundant natural resources beneath the surface. As a shipping lane connected to the Malacca Strait and Sunda Strait, SCS is the second most used sea route in the world. Around one-third of the international freight is transported through the SCS. The Sea consists of a group of uninhabited islands with valuable

resources of hydrocarbons (oil and gas) and biodiversity (fisheries and coral reefs). However, this strategic waterway has become the source of tension among states in the region. The states disputing the waters are China Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

China's claim extends more than one thousand kilometres away from mainland China disregarding the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) covering around 80% of the sea. This coverage has been emphasized by Chinese so-called 'nine-dash line', a virtual map of claim based on Chinese historical records. China's claim covers the Paracel islands – which are claimed by Vietnam – to the Spratly Islands which are also claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei Darussalam. China has major spots in the Paracel Islands, the Spratlys, and Scarborough Shoal. China even built artificial islands on those islands (Lee, 2015) with some features such as remote sensors technology, runways and helipads, port facilities, as well as several bunkers for fuel and weapons (Steven, 2019). Meanwhile, the ASEAN littoral states refer to UNCLOS. They maintain their maritime rights based on the exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

**Figure 2 Overlapping Territorial Claim in South China Sea**



All parties recognise how crucial SCS is in terms of maritime route. Those who control over the sea would hold control over some parts of international trade. As the SCS is also believed to have abundance resources (natural gas/oil and fishery), controlling over these resources means economic advantages (Dupuy & Dupuy, 2013; Singh, 2016). Hence, incidents of military and diplomatic standoffs have become more frequent.

The issue has raised regional concerns and prompted responses from ASEAN. The most prominent effort is how ASEAN and China negotiate through a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea (COC) since 2002. Yet the Declaration is non-binding. Legal enforceability, scope of jurisdiction, and consistency with UNCLOS hinder the consensus.

Interestingly, despite the SCS tension, their economic cooperation, particularly trade, keeps going and growing. Trade volume and value are increasing. It is a paradox where economic integration deepens while sovereignty disputes remain. Hence, discussing ASEAN-China relations would see this case where military stand-offs and diplomatic demonstrations have not interrupted trade flows. Or whether the economy and military relations are two different loci to watch. There have been so many studies on ASEAN-China relations. But they are either focussing on the economic side or military-politics separately. Hence, the interplay between the economic cooperation and ongoing disputes in the SCS remains an open question.

This study, therefore, examines ASEAN–China trade relations through a framework that integrates economic analysis with political interpretation. My core questions are:

1. *To what extent do the SCS disputes impact ASEAN-China trade relations?*
2. *How have ASEAN-China trade relations persisted despite the lingering disputes?*

To address these questions, I depart from – and try to develop - this argument:

*“The disputes do not have a significant impact on ASEAN-China trade because economic growth patterns remain the primary driver of exchange, while institutional trade frameworks create a buffer that insulates trade relations from political tension.”*

The selection of this topic is justified by its broader theoretical and practical relevance. The ASEAN–China case speaks directly to contemporary debates about the durability of economic relations under geopolitical shadow and the role of regional institutions in ‘administer’ the disputes. As global politics is shaped by strategic rivalry alongside economic interdependence, understanding how states navigate within this environment is of importance. Situating the ASEAN–China ties within this condition, the dissertation seeks to contribute not only to regional studies but also to general theories of conflict and cooperation, and international political economy.

The novelty attempted to provide by this study is related to methodological concerns. The literature on trade and conflict has generated contradictory findings. Some studies associate economic interdependence with peace. Others link it to heightened conflict, with outcomes conditioned by regime transitions and institutional design. This theoretical complexity has come at a methodological cost. The field has split into two literatures that rarely engage each other. IR scholars tend to use case studies and process tracing to uncover

causal mechanisms, as seen in Copeland's historical analyses and Mansfield and Pevehouse's work on democratization (Copeland, 2015; Mansfield & Pevehouse, 2000). These approaches offer causal clarity but struggle with generalization (King et al., 1994). In contrast, economics-oriented research relies on large-N statistical designs. For example, Barbieri's dyadic analyses and gravity models by Anderson and Wincoop, or Polachek's trade flows in conflict settings (Anderson & Van Wincoop, 2003; Barbieri, 2002; Polachek, 1980). While promising, these methods often abstract away the political calculus that link economic interests to policy choices (Gerring, 2004), and remain sensitive to measurement and specification choices (Gartzke & Li, 2003).

This divide is also visible in studies of ASEAN–China relations. Quantitative economic research largely depicts a positive trajectory of cooperation. They emphasize trade growth, investment flows, and the effects of the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (Chiang, 2018; Li et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2018). Security tensions in the South China Sea are often treated as peripheral. Some quantitative studies examine conflict effects. They find that disputes reduce exports, raise trade costs, and generate economic losses (Imam & Panennungi, 2021; Mendoza et al., 2019; Wang, 2015). These works, however, cannot explain the central paradox: why economic cooperation deepens even as security tensions persist.

On the other side, IR scholarship focuses almost exclusively on geopolitical deadlock (ASEAN diplomacy, institutional weakness, and China's strategic reluctance) through qualitative analysis, interviews, and process tracing (Kipgen, 2020; Meng, 2017; Mishra, 2017; Peng & Ngeow, 2022). These studies capture political dynamics but remain disconnected from broader economic patterns.

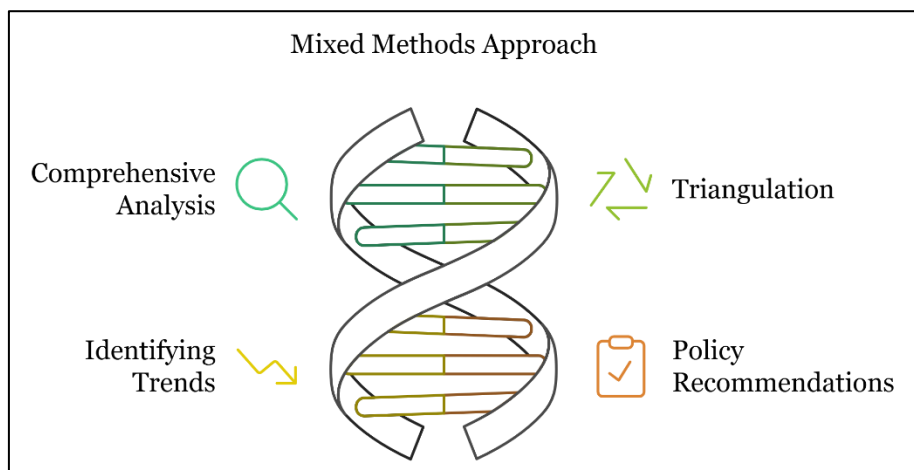
Studies combining statistical analysis with formal modelling and case studies remain exceptions. As a result, the bridge between narrative and numbers remains largely untraveled (Tzagkarakis & Kritas, 2023). This fragmentation reflects epistemological disagreements over explanation in social science (George & Bennett, 2005). Neoliberal institutionalism offers a coherent framework linking trade, institutions, and conflict behavior (Keohane, 1989; Keohane & Nye, 1973), but its conditional logic is rarely operationalized in quantitative designs. The enduring methodological gap - particularly in the ASEAN–China context - suggests the need for multi-method research that contextualizes statistical patterns within political narratives (Peez, 2024).

This study, thus, contributes by bridging this methodological divide through a mixed-method design. It integrates quantitative trade analysis with institutional-political interpretation. It situates statistical patterns of ASEAN–China trade within the South China Sea dispute, and moves beyond correlation to explain how cooperation is sustained under tension. Hence, this study not only addresses the ASEAN–China paradox but also offers a general insight for studying conflict–trade relations.

## II. Methods

I employ mixed-method research of quantitative and qualitative, that both are complement to each other: a quantitative econometric analysis and a qualitative conceptual content analysis. This approach reflects the conviction that neither approach alone, particularly in the case of ASEAN-China, is sufficient to capture the complexity trade relations amidst geopolitical tension. The justification is as follows:

**Figure 3 Mixed Qualitative-Quantitative Approach**



1. The research question requires a comprehensive understanding of both geopolitical contexts and economic factors at play. Qualitative methods help to understand the political and strategic considerations (the narratives and motivations) (Faizullaev & Cornut, 2017; Singer, 1961). Quantitative methods are necessary to assess statistical tendencies over time.
2. It allows for triangulation - a way of cross-verifying data from multiple sources and methods. It is to enhance reliability of the research findings. This ensures that the results are consistent and robust (Jick, 1979). qualitative data is cross-referenced with quantitative data, or *vise-versa*.

3. Quantitative methods are useful for analysing trends in trade flows - and to quantify the extent to which the SCS disputes have affected trade relations. Meanwhile, qualitative methods can explain underlying reasons for these trends.
4. The dual approach can provide an actionable policy recommendation as the study's conclusions are grounded in empirical data while also being informed by a deep understanding of the political and strategic context (Tzagkarakis & Kritas, 2023).

### A. Quantitative Method

I use a gravity model of international trade to examine the determinants of ASEAN–China bilateral trade flows in 2005–2024. The model is selected due to its empirical robustness in explaining trade patterns through economic size, distance, and other structural factors. The objective is to test whether conflict events in the South China Sea exert a statistical effect on trade volumes between China and ASEAN member states.

The dependent variable is bilateral trade in goods between China and ASEAN countries. The independent variables include GDP, geographic distance, consumer price indices, exchange rates, tariff levels, and a conflict frequency variable (incidents) in the South China Sea.

**Table 1 Variables of The Quantitative Study**

Variable	Symbol	Source
ASEAN's total trade with China (current million US\$)	TRA	IMF
Distance between ASEAN member countries with China (km)	DIST	DistanceFromTo.com & CEPII
ASEAN member country total GDP (current million US\$)	GDP	WB
China's total GDP (current million US\$)	CGDP	WB
ASEAN member country consumer price index (2010 = 100)	CPI	IMF
China's consumer price index (2010 = 100)	CCPI	IMF
Exchange rate ASEAN country currencies to RMB	EXC	IMF
Simple average duty (%)	DUT	WTO
Conflict with China (frequency)	CCF	Harvard Dataverse

To address potential endogeneity - particularly the possibility that trade itself influences conflict behavior - the study employs the Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimator. The GMM offers advantages compared to other techniques, especially in handling statistical challenges, namely sampling bias, autocorrelation, heteroscedasticity, and endogeneity. It

gives flexibility in accommodating unbalanced panels and can consider theoretical constraints as well (Arellano & Bond, 1991; Blundell & Bond, 1998).

## B. Qualitative Method

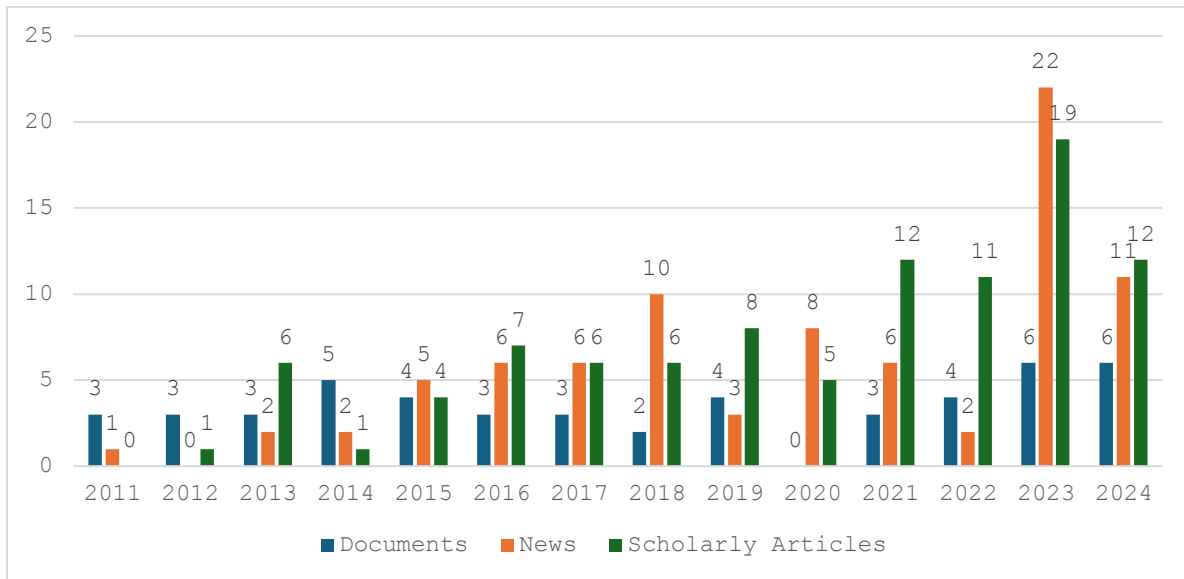
This part seeks to explain how trade relations endure despite conflict. The aim is to examine the discursive and institutional mechanisms present in ASEAN–China interactions. This qualitative part serves as a ‘robustness check’ to tell the story behind the numbers. It assesses whether the statistical absence of a trade–conflict relationship is consistent with observed political and institutional behavior. Technically, I employ deductive conceptual content analysis with neoliberal institutionalist concepts, namely *institutional arrangements*, *interdependence*, *absolute gains orientation*, and *the shadow of the future*.

**Table 2 Four Concepts of Neoliberalism**

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition / Coding Focus</i>	<i>Analytical Goal</i>
1. <i>Institutional Arrangements</i>	Formal and informal rules, norms, treaties, and dialogue frameworks.	Assess how these structures facilitate or constrain ASEAN-China cooperation.
2. <i>Interdependence</i>	Economic, financial, and social mutual reliance and shared interests.	Identify how economic ties promote cooperation and make conflict less appealing.
3. <i>Absolute Gains Orientation</i>	References to mutual benefits, shared prosperity, and “win-win” solutions.	Evaluate how prioritizing collective gain minimizes the likelihood of conflict.
4. <i>Shadow of Future</i>	Long-term expectations, sustained engagement, and trust-building efforts.	Explore how the anticipation of continued interaction encourages present-day cooperation.

Three corpora are analyzed: official documents, news articles, and scholarly works. They were specified to texts published between 2011 and 2024. To help analysing big number of texts, I use Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) in Python programming. The text retrieval was focused by two themes (as keywords): “*South China Sea AND ASEAN trade*”. The unit of analysis was individual sentences, along with context from one sentence before and after.

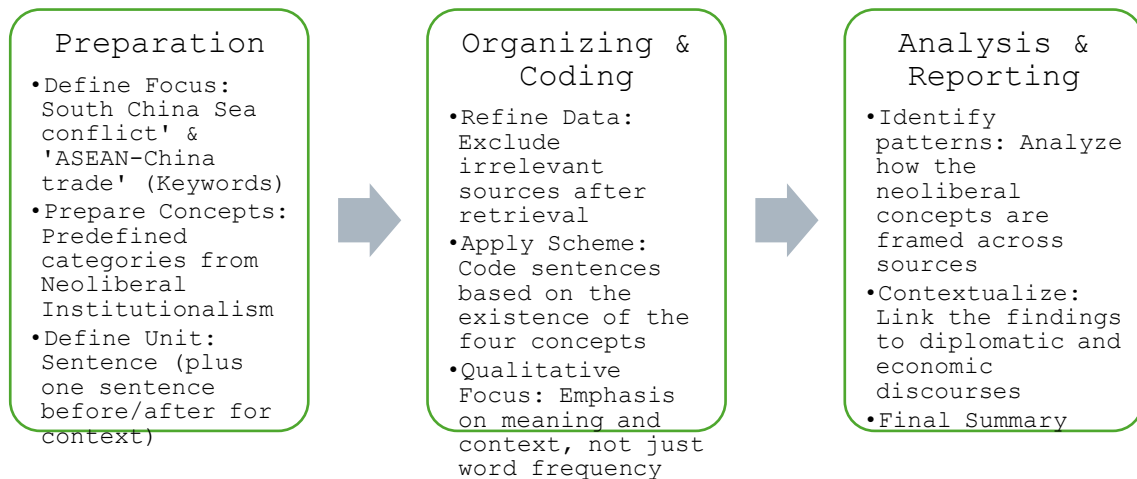
**Figure 4 Distribution of Sources**



Note: 49 official documents, 84 news articles, and 98 scholarly articles – in total 231

The coding scheme focused on the presence or absence of the key four concepts. A list of synonyms and related phrases was prepared for each concept. Retrieved data were organized, screened for relevance, and then systematically coded. This way helped to identify conceptual patterns across sources - to assess how neoliberal institutionalist ideas were framed and articulated.

**Figure 5 Processes of Conceptual Content Analysis**



### III. Scientific Results

The main scientific results are summarized as follows:

#### A. Quantitative

1. The GMM estimation demonstrates that SCS conflict frequency does not exert a statistically significant effect on ASEAN–China trade. The SCS conflicts do not disrupt trade flows. But the lack of significance does not mean conflict is irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that other mechanisms have insulated economic relations from geopolitical tensions (which the qualitative results would explain).
2. Economic fundamentals, particularly GDP, remain the primary drivers of trade flows, which is consistent with gravity model expectations. Geographic distance imposes friction on trade. Meanwhile price levels occasionally affect demand. Tariffs and exchange rates show mixed and context-dependent effects across model specifications.
3. As the conflict variable fails to achieve statistical significance, this indicates that geopolitical tension does not translate into measurable trade disruption at the aggregate level.

#### B. Qualitative

1. Qualitative analysis reveals a dense institutional architecture. The ASEAN–China relations are manifested particularly in ACFTA, RCEP, and regular summits.
2. Institutional arrangements function as mechanisms for dispute management rather than dispute resolution. They provide channels for dialogue and coordination. This is manifested among others: 1) when state dialogues refer to DOC that emphasizes ‘*self-restraint*’, ‘*peaceful means*’, ‘*confidence-building measures*’, ‘*ongoing consultations*’; 2) by ACFTA that has deepened tariff reductions, expanded market access, continued functioning during periods of heightened SCS tension; 3) By official discourse that emphasizes ‘*dialogue*’, ‘*consultation*’, ‘*mutual understanding*’- instead of legal finality, or adjudication, or zero-sum framing. Hence, Discursive institutionalization reinforces coexistence, not settlement.
3. Economic interdependence creates high exit costs for both ASEAN and China. It constrains incentives for escalation. China is ASEAN’s largest trading partner, and a

central destination for manufactured goods and commodities. Also several ASEAN economies are integrated into China-centered production networks, as stated in the *2021 ASEAN-China Joint Statement* to strengthen regional supply chains.

4. Absolute gains and shadow of the future are comparatively less present compared to the first two. But both clearly reinforce the other two. Official statements and media discourse consistently mention '*win-win cooperation*', '*mutual benefit*', '*shared future*'. Economic cooperation is framed as too valuable to jeopardize; The shadow of the future has disciplined state behavior. Long-term expectations of continued interaction discourage short-term defection. ASEAN–China summits, ministerial meetings, and working groups are held despite SCS tensions. ASEAN and China engage in regular annual summits, recurring economic and political dialogues, continuous negotiations (e.g. COC discussions). These interactions are framed as ongoing processes, not one-off events.

### **C. Synthesis**

1. The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings unveils not only the stability in trade relations but also mechanisms beneath the surface that permit cooperation amid turbulence. This synthesis shows how states find rationality in the art of coexistence: not resolving conflict but maintaining relations
2. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of mixed-method approaches in bridging the divide between econometric analysis and institutional interpretation.
3. Theoretically, the findings reinforce neoliberal institutionalism's claim that institutions and interdependence can stabilize relations under anarchy, even in the presence of unresolved security disputes.
4. Main argument of this study: SCS disputes do not have a significant impact on ASEAN-China trade because economic growth patterns remain the primary driver of the relations, while institutions act as a vital buffer to 'administer' trade from political tension.

### **D. Recommendations and Limitations**

1. Strengthen institutions. Reinforce ACFTA, RCEP, and the Code of Conduct so institutions keep functioning as buffers between trade and security tensions.

2. Depending on strategies, but if Southeast Asian countries consider China as a threat in the future, diversify the interdependence. Reduce reliance on China. RCEP has already an example.
3. Operationalize conflict management. Establish confidence-building measures to prevent incidents from escalating and disrupting cooperation.

### **E. Limitations**

1. Scope and generalizability: The ASEAN–China focus may still limit broader generalization; cross-regional comparison could test whether trade–conflict dynamics hold in different geopolitical settings.
2. Model and data sensitivity: Results show sensitivity to estimator choice and omit overlapping global shocks (COVID-19, Ukraine war); further robustness checks, alternative specifications, and crisis controls could be performed.
3. Analytical coverage: The study centers on goods trade and institutional–economic factors. It leaves services trade and non-economic influences (domestic politics, public opinion, external pressure) for future research.

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