The Role of Contextual Factors in Shaping EU Digital Diplomacy Discourses on Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea

Introduction

- On 12 July 2016, an international tribunal in The Hague ruled in favor of the Philippines in a maritime dispute against the China.
- In response, the EU issued a statement expressing that they are "committed to maintaining a legal order of the seas and oceans based upon the principles of international law, UNCLOS, and to the peaceful settlement of disputes" (Council of the European Union 2016).
- The declaration was communicated to Philippine audiences using its online platform.

Introduction

- The EU Delegation's actions exemplify "digital diplomacy", broadly defined as the pursuit of foreign policy objectives using the Internet and social media.
- The European bloc has mainly used Facebook as its platform for digital diplomacy.
- This paper argues that even if the European bloc is a non-determinant actor in the Sino-Philippine territorial dispute, it has published posts on the topic, articulating its position on the matter that is couched in the language of multilateralism and international legal norms.

Problem Statement

- The paper examined the discursive nature of online articulations, focusing on the ways that contextual factors shape the digital diplomacy transmissions that the EU publishes for Philippine audiences.

Underpinnings in Academic Literature

1. *Maritime Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea*
2. *EU Foreign Policy*
    1. The consensus constraint
    2. Normative power Europe
3. *Digital Diplomacy*
    1. *Not just sending messages, but listening.*
    2. *Studies generally in case study form.*
4. *Discourse*
    1. The dialectics of context and articulations.

The Method Assemblage

- Data obtained by searching through all published Facebook posts. Keywords used included "South China Sea", "territorial dispute", or "maritime".
  - The method employed in this study follows a similar procedure used in previous work done by scholars who also used social media posts as their data source (Schwartz and Ungar, 2015; Farquhar, 2012).

- Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach as Interpretive Scheme (Four Levels)
  1. The text itself
  2. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity
  3. The immediate situation
  4. The broader socio-political and historical contexts.

Findings

- Since the launch of the EU Delegation's Facebook page, it has published sixteen posts that have made reference to the maritime disputes in the South China Sea.
- Of the sixteen posts found, only five address the maritime territorial dispute directly.
- The articulations archived were found to reference two main levels from Wodak's Framework:
  - Intertextual and interdiscursive
  - The broader socio-political and historical level

Intratextuality and Interdiscursivity

- Intertextuality – Explicit references to published texts
  - The UNCLOS was particularly prominent.
    - Example: An EU statement declaring its support for "maintaining a legal order for the seas and oceans based upon the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)" (VPHR Statement 2016).
  - Sharing of links to press statements or articles.

- Interdiscursivity – Broader references to bodies of thought
  - Discourse of multilateralism, including associated concepts such as international law and the peaceful resolution of disputes.
  - Toponymy – The use of South China Sea vs. West Philippine Sea

- The EU's digital diplomacy transmissions built upon existing texts and discourses.

The Broader Socio-Political and Historical Context

- Analysis of the data found that posts were prompted by **significant events**, such as:
  - The result from the UNCLOS Arbitral Tribunal deliberations
  - High-level meetings of government officials
    - Example: Meeting between the Philippine President, the European Commission President, and the European Council President during the 9th ASEM.
  - News of Chinese incursions into disputed islands.
    - Example: Philippine diplomatic protests over the presence of "threatening" vessels in April 2021.

Discussion

- Data indicate that the EU's digital diplomacy articulations on the South China Sea territorial disputes are shaped by the context in which they are produced.
- This study's findings revealed that the digital diplomacy transmissions on the issue of territorial disputes were very uncommon.
- The EU mainly uses normative power (Manners 2002, Whitman 2011), to pursue its foreign policy objectives.

Afterword

- With the publication of the Indo-Pacific Strategy in September, the European bloc appeared to shift into a more assertive stance.
- Developments are also underway to increase military cooperation between member states with the negotiation of the Strategic Compass.
- These shifts in context are likely to coincide with changes in the nature of the EU's articulations. It would be worth considering how these developments will impact its digital diplomacy articulations.

End