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| Sommario/riassunto | China's engagement with ASEAN over the South China Sea, from the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea to the ongoing negotiations on the Code of Conduct (COC), exhibits a dynamic continuum with two constants: 1. Dismissal of any legally binding instrument that would constrain China's freedom of action; and 2. Persistent territorialization of the SCS despite Beijing's simultaneous diplomatic engagement with ASEAN. The continuity is juxtaposed with elements of change in China's engagement with ASEAN, as afforded by the former's growing power and influence. This metamorphosis is manifested in China's efforts to undermine ASEAN unity, robustly assert its claims in the SCS, and use economic statecraft towards ASEAN member states in return for their acquiescence. China's more "active" engagement in the COC over the past three years is tactical and does |

not signify a fundamental change in its long-term strategy that seeks to eventually establish its sovereignty and control over the SCS based on the nine-dash-line (NDL). The divergent positions between China and some ASEAN member states on the COC, especially its scope of application, self-restraint elements, legal status and dispute settlement mechanism, are not easy to reconcile. The COC may end up being a non-binding political document with a general scope of application, which will have little effect in regulating the contracting parties' behaviour.
