

## **China's Long-Term Relations with Southeast Asia: Beyond the Pivot<sup>1</sup>**

*by Dr R. James Ferguson*

### **Introduction: Frontiers, Politics and Culture**

Early China's southward expansion over two millennia from its core zone north of the Yangtze River allowed it to engage nearby states. Regions along the Yangtze and in what is now southern China were gradually absorbed into an enlarging cultural sphere that was eventually integrated into China's imperial domain (basically by the third century B.C.E). Thereafter, when unified, dynastic China engaged Southeast Asia states with a relative but not absolute preponderance of power. China's linkages via diplomacy and trade led to it being at the core of a set of power relations that came to be formalized as the 'tribute system', though China was never an absolute hegemon of Southeast Asia as a whole.<sup>2</sup> These perceptions have returned in new forms in the 21st century, with China's economic and military 'rise' being viewed at times as a return to its rightful, historic place, or at least a practical re-balancing of East Asian relations (Harris 2005; Stuart-Fox 2004; Shih 1993).

However, a more assertive PRC since 2008 has also raised intensified threat perceptions both in Southeast Asia and the United States, which remains the strongest 'external' power engaged across the region (Christensen 2011; Wang 2011, Glaser 2011), with PRC only partly balanced by credible Japanese and Indian capacities. In sum, Southeast Asian states have sought to engage China in new patterns of regional dialogue that assure them of trade and investment benefits, sustain a regional diplomacy focused on ASEAN, and reduce the likelihood of military conflict, but also hope to hedge against the 'hard power' capabilities of their northern neighbour. Through 2012 this trend has deepened, with America's 'pivot' towards strategic engagement in Asia being paralleled by growing defense spending through 2007-2011 in Japan and India, as well as in China itself (Hofbauer, Hermann & Raghavan 2012; Bloomberg 2012). Indeed, the Asia-Pacific in one view is 'experiencing a permanent, almost routinized, multilateral arms race of which the much-discussed growth of the Chinese military is only a part.' (Scobell & Nathan 2012) Behind current trends, moreover, lies a long history of political and cultural engagement that has shaped the borders, nationalities and development of East Asia as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, PRC had used the term 'hegemon' critically of both Soviet and U.S. dominance, and rejects this as a description of their foreign policy, along with crude interpretations of China as a rising 'superpower' (Wang 2011). Recent formulations within PRC have moved towards a 'harmonious world' concept aimed at providing a safer international system in which China can be an active player - cooperation with Southeast Asia has been a stepping stone in this agenda (Yee 2008; Yu 2008; Dellios & Ferguson 2012). Critics view this as a ploy to soften threat perceptions of China's rising economic and military capabilities (see Callahan 2008).

## **Facing South**

At first focused on the Yellow River and regions north of the Yangtze River, China emerged as a powerful 'Middle Kingdom' able to culturally influence and militarily engage neighbouring states during its expansive phases. We can see this process in the absorption of what is today an integrated part of Southern China, the region of Suzhou (just inland from Shanghai). The early Kingdom of Wu (sometimes called Gou-wu) is mentioned in Chinese annals from the 7th century B.C. onwards, and was at first viewed as a proto-Chinese state on the southern side of the main Chinese cultural, with the city being completed in 508 B.C. (Moser 1985; Fan 1993). Thereafter Chinese customs and language began to influence the area, and by the Han dynasty the area was largely sinicized (Moser 1985: 144).

In other words, what we call China proper in contrast to Southeast Asia was based on a shifting line of cultural and military influence that moved southwards over centuries until limited by the resistance of other states, including the later impact of British and French colonial possessions. This would crystallize into the modern borders of the twentieth century: some would become highly militarized, e.g. the Vietnam-China border, while others would remain relatively porous, e.g. the border with Myanmar, which was complicated by the emergence of ethnic armies within a challenged federal state (Sturgeon 2004). The modern border between China and Vietnam was largely the outcome of the French protectorate which was established over North Vietnam in the 1880s, which forced the Qing dynasty to renounce the tributary relationship which it had held with Vietnam. The land border was based on agreements between France and the Qing in 1887, 1895, and subsequent years (Duiker 1986).

Key steps in this southward enlargement included the absorption of Yunnan in the Southwest, and the northern parts of what was then a diversified cultural zone that stretched north and south of modern borders with Vietnam. Early southern Chinese contact with Southeast Asia may go back as far as the Warring States period (approx. 463-222 B.C.E.), with definite trade contact with the southern regions being attested by the third century C.E. An early account of archipelagic Southeast Asia was written at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when the Chinese monk Fa Xian (Fa Hsien) returned from India via Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, (recorded in his book, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, Fitzgerald 1993; Simkin 1968). We see both official engagement of Southeast Asia by the state and its policies, but also a slow filter of Chinese traders and settlers that would eventually form important minorities across the region. Subsequent diasporas would continue under the Han, the Tang, during the Mongol periods, and as a way of escaping Manchurian dominance (from the 17th century). Other motives included attempts to escape strict financial control of trade in most periods, and families fleeing from official persecution, as well as impoverished coastal dwellers seeking better opportunities (see Wang 1994 for one account).

This enlargement of the Chinese cultural zone southwards meant that China would come to have an enormous influence on mainland Southeast Asia, with Nanning and the region of modern Guangxi, just north of modern Vietnam, being 'incorporated' into Chinese control after 214 B.C.E. when the Emperor Qin Shi Huang nominally unified the area. From 111 B.C. the region of northern Nam Viet was largely 'pacified', while after 25 C.E. Chinese migration from the north began in earnest and the influence of Chinese cultural practices began to transform both Guangxi and the Tongkin Delta area. From the ninth century in particular, Nanning became a strategic location in Southern China, with Nanning literally

meaning 'peace on the southern border' (Chapius 1995: 20-33; Holmgren 1980: 54-56; Ferguson 2000).

In reality, however, this strategic area was a porous zone of political interactions, even after Dai Co Viet secured its freedom circa 939 A.D, and thereafter a major invasion of Chinese territory was conducted in 1075 (Fan 1995). Another round of large-scale conflict emerged after 1406 with the large-scale invasions of Chinese armies, with the region becoming a Chinese province between 1407 and 1428, though Ming forces thereafter forced to withdraw (Wade 2008).

Relations with Vietnam, stretching over two millennia, remained complex: -

For nearly one thousand years, Vietnam was an integral part of China: and even after independence was restored in the tenth century, Vietnamese rulers frequently accepted what is often described as a "tributary relationship" with China and often turned to their powerful northern neighbor in time of need. Yet, for the Vietnamese, respect has often been tinged with fear and suspicion. For more than two millennia, China represented the primary threat to the independence and national identity of the Vietnamese people, and it is not too much to say that the Vietnamese nation has been formed, in considerable measure, in the crucible of its historic resistance to Chinese conquest and assimilation. (Duiker 1986: 1; for 21<sup>st</sup> century trends based on 'mature asymmetry', see Thayer 2010)

In spite of the development of a strongly independent national consciousness, the Vietnamese state was profoundly influenced by Chinese administrative practises and by Confucianism, which was formally adapted by Vietnam as its state ideology in the fifteenth century. Indeed, the stimulus from Ming technologies and administrative practices from the late 1420s may have helped empower the Dai Viet, allowing them over the next century to destroy the Cham state and expand into parts of Laos (Wade 2008). If China viewed itself as culturally superior to Vietnam (Annam), it had quickly developed a respect for the southern neighbour, as noted in a report to a Ming Emperor, which stated that Vietnam is 'a land in the southeast, not of low culture, having distinct customs, and if we called them barbarian no other barbarian would rival them. On the contrary, Annam is a civilized country that must be treated with circumspection.' (Chapius 1995: 124)

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to subjugate Southeast Asia had occurred during the 13th century under the Mongol Yuan dynasty, which tried to influence Cambodia, invade parts of northern Burma and Annam, and sent a punitive expedition against a Javanese kingdom (Wade 2008: 611; FitzGerald 1993: 17-26). These efforts largely failed, but thereafter the potential of Chinese diplomatic power was often mobilized as part of a regional politics that sought to accommodate different 'mandalas' of power as competing states expanded their influence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as early as the 7th to 8th centuries, major civilizations were linked by naval routes, e.g. contact between China and the *mandala* system of Srivijaya, which flourished 7-13th centuries, focusing on south-east Sumatra (Simkin 1968; Mackerras 1992; Highham 1989; Watson 1992; Sardesai 1994). Likewise, the Mongol intervention may have been one of the background factors allowing the rise of the Majapahit mandala through the late 13th to early 16th centuries (Hall 1992; SarDesai 1994). It was an extended island domain, with trading networks focused on east Java, linking cultures and commodities in Southeast Asia and China

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<sup>3</sup> In its political sense 'mandala' can be viewed as a zone of influence of influence and prestige focused around a central kingdom or state and is a better description than 'empire' for some of these early Southeast Asian polities. See a classical Indian analysis of the functioning of these states, KAUTILYA *The Arthashastra*, translated by L.N. Rangarajan, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992.

(Hall 2001: 89-99). In one view, China for a time provided a counter-balance to other great powers such as Majapahit, acting as an 'alternative security system' (Wade 2008).

Likewise, the region of Nanzhong (on China's southwest border, modern Chinese Yunnan, Guizhou and southern Sichuan), the land 'south of the clouds', would face Chinese incursions from the century B.C.E. onwards (Herman 2009). Yunnan would need to be reincorporated by major military operations by the Chinese in 1380, and thereafter from the mid-15th century impinged upon Tai and Tai Mao polities with divide-and-rule strategies that pushed Chinese influence southward (Wade 2008). In the case of Yunnan, Chinese policies included the use of military expeditions, the appointment of Chinese officials to help traditional rulers, followed by the replacement of locals by Chinese officials, and the creation of state and military farms, thereby completing the region's absorption (Wade 2008; Herman 2009).

The naval expeditions of the early 15th century under Ming Dynasty indicate the greatest expansion of diplomatic influence, sometimes viewed as an effort to impose a *pax Ming* across the region (Wade 2008). The great fleets of Zheng He engaged in patterns of exploration and influence that ranged across Southeast Asian waters and across the Indian Ocean (Reid 2000). Though these were great diplomatic and military expeditions, e.g. their ability to change rulers in Sri Lanka (1411 C.E.), they still had limited ability to fully shape regional politics. However, key regional states gained benefit by engaging in China's tribute system: major Southeast Asian states 'enfoeffed' by Chinese recognition included Siam (from 1453), Malacca (in 1459), Annam in 1460, and Champa in 1478 (Wade 2008: 583). Major kingdoms such as Annam, Ayudhya and later on Siam (Thailand) would eventually assert themselves as strong kingdoms able in the long-run to retain their independence, but were still strongly influenced by Chinese policies.

Beyond state policies, a gradual flow of Chinese settlers had begun to position themselves within wider southern communities. In Borneo and the Malay peninsula, mining and trade activities also gave small Chinese communities the ability to establish patterns of self-government and economic cooperation which had proto-democratic features (Wang 1994). In general, this southward movement of Chinese traders and Chinese cultural influences is an enduring feature of Chinese history (Fitzgerald 1972). Through the period 1400-1700, Chinese emerged as traders and junk operators in a vigorous maritime network reached as least as far as Malaysia and Japan (Lockard 2010). By the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the diaspora of Chinese traders, miners and settlers would form enclaves throughout Southeast Asia, shaping the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of later states including Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Traders, merchants, miners, shopkeepers and others would form the nucleus of this Chinese diaspora which continued down into the early 20th century. We should not be too stereotyping in assessing the occupations of these Chinese immigrants - some became involved in agriculture and fishing, as well as in the production of specific cash crops such as pepper and sugar (Reid 1997). In some cases Chinese cultural groups formed important business and social cores that were only partly assimilated into the wider society, as in Thailand (Jory 2000), mixed cultural traditions in some communities (as in the Nyonya Baba of Malaya, Singapore and Java), or would find themselves as distinctive trading communities with limited integration (as in some parts of the Indonesian archipelago, especially after its widespread conversion to Islam).

Through these processes, many regional states came to recognize China as an indirect but at times useful suzerain under the 'tribute system', while trade networks linked China into the wider Indo-Asian maritime trading system that would be gradually displaced by European

naval powers (Chaudhuri 1990). This regional system had fully declined by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20th century, however, China emerged as a troubled Republic undergoing only slow modernization. In this context, China was unable to resist Japanese aggression without international help, partly routed by allied operations against Japanese forces in Southeast Asia and by overland and air routes across Burma. Thereafter China was caught in a massive civil war between Nationalist and Communist forces, with some elements of Kuomintang (KMT) forces pushing into northern Burma and Thailand (Lintner 1993; Linntner 1994). The greater challenge for Southeast Asia, however, would be the emergence of the People's Republic of China not only as a strong Chinese state, but as a Communist power wishing to revise the international order.

### **The People's Republic of China: From Threat to Opportunity**

With the emergence of a communist People's Republic of China from 1949, threat perceptions and fears of insurgency shaped relations with the European colonies and post-colonial states in Southeast Asia. The growth of revolutionary parties across the region, including communist parties in Malaya, Thailand, Burma, the Philippines and Indonesia, led to fears of polarized Chinese minorities conducive to the export of revisionist ideologies. Chinese advisers, support and material were important in Vietnamese resistance to the French, in the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), and provided lower level support for insurgencies in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. This trend was complicated by the growing split between the USSR and China from the 1960s, with Vietnam aligning itself with the Soviet Union geo-politically.

Thus the civil war in Indonesia in 1965-1966 was in part a purge of leftist and communist elements, with Indonesia for decades thereafter cautious of Chinese foreign policy and Chinese language communities within the country. These policies began to soften as PRC itself underwent reform, improving through the 1980s, and normalized diplomatically in 1990. However, even as late as 1996 Indonesian military exercises near the Natuna Islands (with its gas fields) seemed to be a signal directed against a possible Chinese claims to parts of Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (Johnson 1997). These tensions were considerably less intense than the long-term disputes about sovereignty and access to energy resources in the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, with disputes among PRC, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Although low level naval confrontations occurred, e.g. naval clashes between Vietnam and PRC in 1974 and 1988, these tensions were temporarily reduced (but not solved) through a gradual move towards dialogue and multilateral cooperation (see Rosenberg 2010; Emmers 2010; Scobell & Nathan 2012) once China became a dialogue partner with ASEAN from 1996 (see below for renewed tensions through 2011-2012).

Tensions between Vietnam and PRC peaked in the border war of 1979, in which China launched a short, punitive (but very costly) war to limit Vietnam's influence in Cambodia and Laos, made in response to perceived border incursions and due to threat perceptions over Vietnam's military alignment with the USSR (Zhang 2005). Although Chinese forces managed to penetrate deeply into the northern areas of Vietnam, the cost in armament and lives showed that the PLA was less militarily capable than it had hoped. As China's relations with Russia improved and as the PRC began its open door policy, these tensions were gradually reduced. Disputes existed over land borders with Vietnam and over claims to resources in the Gulf of Tonkin, but many of these were resolved through the late 1990s.

From 1997 both Vietnam and China sought new ways to strengthen cooperation in offshore oil and gas exploration between their national oil corporations, thereby reducing some of the confrontations which occurred between 1992 and 1994 when China and Vietnam awarded exploration contracts in disputed areas to different overseas exploration companies (Xinhua 1999a). Bilateral disputes were largely resolved or shelved after 1999 (Xinhua 1999b), allowing the reopening of the land border with Vietnam, thus leading to strong bilateral trade flows over the last two decades. By 2009 PRC was Vietnam's third largest export destination with 9% of exports going to China, and was its main source of imports, some 23.9% (DFAT 2010). However, ongoing tensions over claims in the South China Sea have forced Vietnam to maintain a pattern of balanced 'struggle and cooperation' with its powerful neighbor, as well as improving its politico-military dialogue with the United States (Thayer 2011).

In general, the threat of military conflicts being escalated by external players (as in the Vietnam War), combined with real underdevelopment across much of Southeast Asia, lead to a search for regional solutions, at first driven by Thai, Malaysian and Indonesian interests. The formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from 1967 was seen as a way of enhancing economic and diplomatic cooperation, with all ten Southeast Asian states joining by 1999. Aimed at boosting economic development and diplomatic cooperation, ASEAN also sought to reduce 'great power' conflicts and proxy interventions (Palmer 1987). In spite of continued ideological threat perceptions (which began to fade in the 1980s), a second strand of dialogue and engagement was developed by ASEAN to moderate China's emerging power.

Once Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia, and once US-China relations improved, all ASEAN members by 1991 came to normalize relations with PRC (Ba 2003). Thus, PRC became an early dialogue partner with ASEAN (moving from consultative to full status through 1991 to 1996) and then joined the emerging ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which embraced most of the Asia-Pacific in regular security dialogue (Wong 2007). In general terms, these regional policies were an extension of PRC's policy from the early 1990s of 'good-neighbourliness' (*mulin zhengce*) whereby it wanted to end its relative isolation after 1989, reduce threat perceptions, and gain greater regional influence (Kuik 2005: 103). This was run through the ASEAN-Plus-Three, the ARF, and also from 1995 by the regular ASEAN-China dialogue process, which involves meeting of senior officials on political and security issues (Kuik 2005: 104-109). After the fading of initial suspicions that the ARF's multilateral dialogue might be used as a tool for asserting US policy, and thereby might force concessions in the South China Sea, PRC was willing to use multilateral dialogue with ASEAN as a core part of its foreign policy, perhaps hoping to influence future norms in the East Asian region (Kuik 2005).

China gradually turned towards a dialogue approach with Southeast Asia, even with some linkage to sensitive security issues, e.g. via the Indonesia hosted South-China Sea workshop from the early 1990s and then via convergence on an emerging *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*, seeking to ensure that disputes were resolved by peaceful means (signed in 2002). This was part of a wider process in which China and ASEAN forged a *Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues*, recognizing that a wide range of transnational and trans-border issues needed regional cooperation (Wong 2007). In general, a linkage among economic, diplomatic and military issues was operating across bilateral and regional levels through 2002-2005:

Greater political and economic trust has also had a positive effect on military relations between China and ASEAN nations. China has signed memorandums of understanding

regarding national defense and cooperation with six ASEAN members since 2003. Military exchanges have also expanded steadily in recent years. China sent 46 defense delegations to nine ASEAN nations between 2003 and 2005, during which time 45 defense delegations from 10 ASEAN nations came to China . . . . More noteworthy still, a mechanism for bilateral defense dialogue, of deputy secretary level, with Vietnam and the Philippines commenced in 2005 (Wong 2007).

By 1999 PRC was an integral part of the ASEAN-Plus-Three grouping (along with Japan and South Korea), while China signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003, and became a leading member of the East Asia Summit (EAS) process from 2005. In this setting the EAS was viewed as being particularly conducive for Chinese policies, with initial U.S. absence in this grouping, though Japan to some degree (then Australia and India) may have balanced these trends. Part of the process for engaging in the East Asian Summit had been the signing the ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which China and India had done in 2003, and the U.S. from mid-2009 in an effort to re-engage ASEAN diplomatically.

Behind this process was a debate between East Asian and wider Asia-Pacific groups as the main drivers of regional cooperation. From China's point of view, a true East Asian Community may be a useful long-term goal, using multi-track, multi-speed and multi-institutional approaches focused on ASEAN groups (see Dellios 2010). This would allow a stronger role for China in an East Asia that has been shaped into a benign environment economically and politically, undercutting the leverage of the U.S. in spite of its strong alliance links with Japan, South Korea, and lesser military cooperation programs with Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and even Vietnam (Ikenberry 2004; Tow 2004; Miles 2010). It is not surprising that the Obama administration, as commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq reduced, began a stronger Asia engagement in order to enhance its global strategic significance (Duchâtel 2011; Scobell & Nathan 2012; Freeman 2012).

Alongside these diplomatic agreements, Chinese efforts to boost trade and economic integration were accelerated by the 2002 agreement for a prospective ASEAN-China free trade area (Chin 2003: 19-20). From 2010 the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area came into full implementation, boosting inter-regional trade flows. This was seen by ASEAN and PRC as based on economic complementarity but also as a means to resolve some national development blockages:

For the other less developed ASEAN states, Southeast Asia's resource-processing, raw materials industries may be able to complement the Chinese economy. One of the most significant elements of this flurry was a 15 year plan to lay out the infrastructure and stimulate economic development in phases with the purpose of creating a national market in China that transcends fragmentary macro-regions and breaks down barriers in the areas of trade, investments, port access and logistical permeability between Chinese provinces. (Lim 2008)

Thus cooperation between South China's coastal areas with Vietnam and the Philippines, Yunan's trade with Myanmar and Thailand, and Guangxi as a 'gateway' into Southeast Asia reduced development that lags in these sub-regions (Xinhua 2011; Rong 2010). China's trade with ASEAN increased from US\$7.9 billion (1991) to US\$292.7 billion (2010), for the first half of 2011 reached US\$171.1 billion (an approximate 25% year-on-year increase), and is expected to expand despite PRC's leadership transition through late 2012 (*The Star* 2012).

In turn, such trade agreements may be particularly important for less developed states within ASEAN:

In less-developed mainland Southeast Asia, China's participation has made feasible region-wide economic development plans for the Greater Mekong Subregion initiative of the Asian Development Bank, drawing international investment for infrastructural projects.

These connect the poorer states – Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam – to the markets of China and Thailand, while improving China's access to raw material supplies and ports in the Indian Ocean and East China Sea. These schemes have also spurred Japanese and American interest and investment in Mekong regionalism.

More prominently, China's initiative for a free trade agreement with ASEAN overcame the nagging problem of galvanizing an economic integration project. When it came into effect in 2010, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement formed the world's largest free trade area, comprising 1.9 billion consumers and US\$4.3 trillion in trade. (Goh 2011)

Although concerns have continued about the competitiveness of workforces within Southeast Asia compared with China, and whether small and medium size enterprises can effectively engage in the large free trade area, in the end ASEAN elites feel that engagement with the rising PRC economy has long-term gains for national economies. In general, PRC is now viewed as a leading policy maker within regional economies, and Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao during his visit to Indonesia could speak confidently of the relationship 'forging ahead in all respects' (in *Jakarta Post* 2011). Recent suggestions have also been made that PRC should provide the lead in reducing reliance on the U.S. dollar in regional trade flows, as well as reduce regional financial risk via the Chiang Mai initiative, which has evolved into the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM) which works across East Asia (the ASEAN-Plus-Three). The initiative allows for currency swap arrangements (short term) with the ability to draw on a reserve pooling mechanism of \$120 billion to protect against currency depreciation and temporary liquidity shortages (Samboh 2011; Sussangkarn 2012).

### **Failing Charm**

There has been a serious return to heightened regional tensions with the PRC through 2010-2012, partly driven by wider Asia-Pacific and global issues. Thus, in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting in June 2010, it was asserted by the PRC that the South China Sea had emerged as a 'core interest' for China, resulting in a rebuttal from the U.S. Secretary of Defense, stating that the US 'oppose[s] the use of force and action that hinder freedom of navigation (in Goh 2011). In the following ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010, Yang Jiechi (Chinese Foreign Minister) warned Southeast Asia 'against coordinating with outside powers in managing territorial disputes with Beijing' (in Christensen 2011). However, this was largely a reaction against a rather assertive engagement of the U.S. in ASEAN policies by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose comments on freedom of navigation and disputed maritime zones again seemed targeted at Beijing's claims (Christensen 2011). In particular, Clinton's speech included the comment: 'Legitimate claims in the South China Sea should be derived solely from legitimate claims to land features,' apparently rejecting PRC's wider claims as not based on UNCLOS (the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea) principles (in Valencia 2010). This seemed out of step with the general tone of ASEAN diplomacy, a problematic move since the U.S. had signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, designed to encourage a respectful, cooperative and non-confrontation approach to regional diplomacy. At the same time, maritime Southeast Asian states were willing to use U.S. support in their disputes with China over territorial and resource claims which had so far proved intractable.

These tensions were then exacerbated by bilateral disputes with the Philippines over claims in

the South China Sea and naval confrontations near Scarborough Shoal in April 2012, by ongoing tensions with Japan over disputed islands (known as the Senkaku islands in Japan and Diaoyu in China), and the perception of the U.S.'s Asian pivot as directed against China's regional interests. Through 2009-2012, the U.S. administration reasserted its diplomatic and then its strategic interests in East Asia. Beginning with the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2009, followed by membership in the East Asian Summit (EAS) process and a round of visits of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in 2011-2012, the Obama administration declared that it was 'back' in Asia and that the United States was 'a Pacific Power and we are here to stay' (Scobell & Nathan 2012). From 2011, this included agreements for the stationing of marines in northern Australia (perhaps designed to ensure strong engagement of its southern ally) as part of a revamped Pacific power strategy focused on controversial 'Air-Sea Battle' doctrines (Frühling 2012). There are dangers, however, in relying on a narrowly military 'pivot', as expressed by a former U.S. ambassador:

In the new world order of regions, East Asia is once again the global center of economic gravity, as it was until the mid-XIX Century. It is also increasingly Sinocentric. The factors driving this return to centrality for China are mainly economic and political rather than military. We have nonetheless chosen to respond with a mainly military "pivot" that is transforming intrinsically trivial territorial disputes between China and its neighbors into broad US-China strategic rivalry. The so-called "pivot" foretells a prolonged struggle by Americans to restrict China's influence in its own region. (Freeman 2012)

In wider contexts, the PRC over the previous decade had sought to engage Southeast Asia in a 'charm offensive', using positive economic diplomacy to reduce threat perceptions across the region, while in turn ASEAN sought to 'manage' the rise of China (Lim 2008). ASEAN benefitted from the economic dynamic of a rising China, but needed to balance PRC's strategic power by continued engagement with the US, Japan and India. Specific bilateral tensions remained, e.g. disputed claims within the South China Sea, concerns over Chinese dams on the upper tributaries of Mekong River and the Irrawaddy River, regional tensions over PRC's economic influence in Myanmar, and territorial conflict with Japan (Burke 2011). The reality of China's military modernization, especially in terms of maritime reach, air-power projection and evolving high-tech capacities, were regularly noted in Southeast Asian media and academic circles (Goh 2011; Segura & Wu 2009; Lijun 2006; Yahuda 2011). However, these capacities should not be exaggerated, since China's military remains largely overstretched with a wide range of roles including defending extended land and maritime borders, supporting internal stability, and new roles under the umbrella term of 'Military Operations Other Than War' (MOOTW), including peace missions and humanitarian assistance roles. As such, the PLA still has limited power projection capacities into the wider Indo-Pacific, and except for localized conflicts, would still have to engage asymmetric and access-denial strategies in any conflict with the United States (Scobell & Nathan 2012).

Moreover, as a whole, economic realities have complicated specific military and political tensions, with ASEAN still at the core of a wider, multifaceted Asian engagement of China. These factors have increased the diplomatic importance of ASEAN and its related forums, but also placed the organization amid the bilateral tensions of powerful states, including China, Japan, India and the U.S. How well Southeast Asia manages these relations will be crucial in charting development towards a brighter regional future that requires a stable and cooperative China.

In particular, as much effort needs be put into developing a 'warm peace' rather than

allowing a slide into a new ‘cold war’ (see Freeman 2012). This means that serious disputes on sovereignty and resources can no longer be readily ‘shelved’ as part of ASEAN diplomacy. Nor should these relatively small and specific disputes be allowed to undermine wider relationships among ASEAN, China and the United States. There is a danger that extrinsic U.S. needs and perceptions (in terms of its global role and internal funding debates) will undermine the more nuanced engagement of China by its Asian neighbours:

American views of China often seem to have less to do with its realities than with the effects of enemy deprivation syndrome on our national strategic imagination. China is presented as a peer competitor compounded from past adversaries of the United States or as a sort of fun-house mirror-image of America as we rose to regional and then world power, combining putative aspirations for an Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine with an alleged lust for full spectrum dominance of the global commons. This sort of misperception does wonders for defense budgets but provides a very poor basis for national strategy. (Freeman 2012)

To prevent a spiraling pattern of conflict, it is necessary to lay foundations for solid peace based on cooperative security. Recent theories of ‘phase zero’ (adapted to lay the groundwork for preventive diplomacy), ‘strategic communication’, and ‘mutual strategic confidence’ need to replace reactive policies of containment and ‘offensive defense’ (Duchâtel 2011).

Strategic communication includes that idea that it is crucial to communicate with a competitor, or even with an adversary nation during emerging conflict or wartime (Freeman 2012). This has long been theoretically recognized in the Asia-Pacific, and aside from bilateral dialogues has been institutionalized by security dialogues in groupings such as the Asian Regional Forum (ARF), the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings-Plus and the Shangri-La dialogue held regularly in Singapore. In terms of bilateral relations, there has been a rhetorical understanding of the need for China-US understanding, e.g. during U.S. secretary of Defense Leon Panetta’s visit to China in September 2012:

During his visit, Panetta emphasized the need for the United States and China to expand military relations. Military-to-military contacts between the PLA and the United States Armed Forces have historically been unstable, disrupted by disagreement over issues in the bilateral relationship. Most recently, China suspended military exchanges in response to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in January of this year. Panetta argued that a stronger relationship between the Chinese and U.S. militaries was important in order to increase mutual trust and cooperation. Increased military-to-military ties would also help to enhance understanding about both sides’ defense policies and avoid potential miscalculation as the two militaries come into increasing contact with China’s military modernization and the United States’ rebalancing of defense forces towards the Asia-Pacific. Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie was in agreement, stating, “the two sides should, within the framework of building a China-U.S. cooperative partnership, promote a new type of military relations featuring equality, reciprocity and win-win cooperation in an active and pragmatic way.” In a step to build military-to-military ties, Panetta invited China to participate in the U.S.-sponsored Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in 2014. China had complained about being excluded from the naval exercises off Hawaii earlier this year, which included 22 nations. (USCPF 2012)

However, alongside this, there have been announcements of a U.S. ‘rebalancing’ towards the Asia-Pacific region, with prospects of 60% of US naval forces being based in the Asia-Pacific by 2020, along with a focus on agile, flexible forces using ‘cutting-edge’ technology (Panetta 2012). This may be an effort to engage the region from a position of strength, with Panetta emphasizing this in his June 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue speech (the 11<sup>th</sup> IISS Asia Security Summit):

I know that many in the region and across the world are closely watching the United States-China relationship. Some view the increased emphasis by the United States on the Asia-Pacific region as some kind of challenge to China. I reject that view entirely. Our effort to renew and intensify our involvement in Asia is fully compatible – fully compatible – with the development and growth of China. Indeed, increased U.S. involvement in this region will benefit China as it advances our shared security and prosperity for the future.

In this context, we strongly support the efforts that both China and Taiwan, both have made in recent years trying to improve cross-strait relations. We have an enduring interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. The United States remains firm in the adherence to a one-China policy based on the Three Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act.

China also has a critical role to play in advancing security and prosperity by respecting the rules-based order that has served the region for six decades. The United States welcomes the rise of a strong and prosperous and successful China that plays a greater role in global affairs. (Panetta 2012)

It remains to be seen, however, whether these signals of strategic empowerment will lay the foundations of engagement and future peace, or are interpreted as ambiguous patterns of engagement and containment that will heighten tensions.

We can see this ambiguity in the way an emerging strategic doctrine has been used by the United States. ‘Phase Zero’ was explained by Charles Wald as an evolving concept design to ‘prevent conflicts from developing the first place’ by shaping regional information environments and helping partner nations develop their capacities (Wald 2006). It was viewed as essential as part of the wider U.S. strategy against international terrorism, and particularly applicable in Africa, parts of the Middle East, the Caspian region, and Southeastern Europe. It was also a central mission for the new Africa Command (AFRICOM) from 2008 (Center for Global Development 2007). Taken further, Phase Zero could lay the basis for improved cooperation with NGO’s in the Asia-Pacific during humanitarian emergencies and stability operations, thereby enhancing U.S. soft power (Wang 2008). If successful, Phase Zero campaigns might eliminate the need for later phases of conflict, and secure national goals without war-fighting (Wald 2006).

However, there are negative aspects to this Phase Zero concept. It has also been suggested the long-term shaping of the environment to defeat an enemy ‘before war begins’ has been a constant in Chinese strategic culture for more than two-and-a-half thousand years. Therefore, according to some, the U.S. needs to extend Phase Zero into a wider campaign:

If the purpose of Phase Zero is to be changed to reaching a decision - winning - in the steady-state environment, it must be discussed not only in terms of bending the enemy’s will but as including all components of national power - diplomatic, informational, and economic, as well as military - that can be brought to bear against an adversary. (McDonald, Jones & Frazee 2012)

The problem with this analysis, however, is that it needs an adversary, focuses on coercion rather than persuasion, and entirely misplaces the notion of soft power as influencing and attracting others. Rather than focus on compelling an opponent, a truly ‘smart’ strategy would seek to ensure that the other actor’s perceptions and motivations are changed to avoid a clash of wills. If not necessarily ‘allies or friends’, such states would be transformed into non-aggressive strategic competitors, rather than direct adversaries. Thus, there is a need to ensure that wider Phase Zero operations are not lead by military commanders as campaigns, but as genuinely diplomatic agenda aimed at deepening the foundations of peace, rather than

‘winning wars by non-military means.’ (Center for Global Development 2007) ‘Phase Zero’ needs to be reinterpreted in this wider framework to reduce the current cycle of aggressive diplomacy, strategic manoeuvre, and continued military modernization. Rhetoric aside, the alignment of regional capacities and alliances seems to resemble advance positioning for relative benefit prior to the onset of conflict. It is time for a reconceptualised Phase Zero that generates and sustains circles of peaceful engagement in both East Asia and the wider Asia Pacific.

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