

Chinese Regionalism: China's Engagement with ASEAN and SCO¹

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The current international environment is faced with a transition of great power status between states and also an increased engagement with global institutions. With a growing economy and modernising military, the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) has acquired the capacity and motivation to approach regional institutions to engage with member-states and ultimately influence the international system. China's approach to multilateralism demonstrates a 'preference for multilateral economic cooperation, a reliance on the use of soft power, a skill in capitalising on the reciprocal relationship between multilateralism and bilateralism' and the implementation of institutional norms (Zuik, 2005). These characteristics are evident in China's multilateral approaches to the Southeast Asian and Central Asian regions – specifically in relation to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

From the outset, it is important to understand that this article is not an analysis of the two institutions, but rather an examination of China's engagement with them. I begin by assessing Beijing's engagement with ASEAN and therefore its growing influence in the Southeast Asian region. Secondly, I will consider Chinese engagement with the SCO and thus China's stabilising presence in the Central Asian region. This paves the way for an explanation of the 'ASEAN Way' and the 'Shanghai Spirit' to highlight the PRC's tendency to utilise institutional norms and frameworks to engage the international system. In other words, by using a multi-layered approach that still values bilateral relationships, China is able to engage on different strategic levels. By promoting and constructing institutional norms present in the 'ASEAN Way' and the 'Shanghai Spirit', China can cooperate with multiple states and grow in influence.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Since ASEAN's formation in 1967, negotiations and meetings have been conducted to establish declarations that function as a type of 'soft law' that binds members

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together cooperatively; though this becomes difficult when each of the individual member-states attempts to satisfy its own national interests and strategic orientations (see Cockerham, 2010; Chalermpananupap, 2014; Davidson, 2004). The ten member-states – Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei – work together in a consultative decision-making process that follows traditional approaches to decision-making unique to the region. This has evolved into numerous multi-faceted mechanisms that link with other regions and states, for example, the extensive 27-member Asian Regional Forum (ARF); ASEAN+3 (Japan, China and South Korea), and the East Asia Summit (EAS) with India, New Zealand, Australia, Russia and the United States. These serve to project the interests of the core ASEAN members, though non-members also benefit through an informal and consultative form of diplomacy called the ‘ASEAN Way’. This applies to China and its strategic partnership with ASEAN.

China’s involvement in ASEAN is an extension of its good-neighbouring policy, though with its increased economic power and persistent maritime claims, China’s relations with Asian countries are not so straight-forward as rhetoric would suggest. Rather, they have become a complicated web of rituals, risks and rivalries in which China interacts on multiple levels to influence respective member states without being overpowered by an ASEAN counterbalance (see Papatheologou, Naseer & Amin, 2014; Lim, 2008; Kulik, 2005; and Leong, 2001). Far from being overpowered, some see China as riding the wave of an ASEAN that is viewed as ‘the centre of gravity for maintaining a stable economic and geopolitical order in the region’; and by utilising more intensive economic engagement, China can lead this regional order (Shamsul & Lei, 2013). For Southeast Asian states which find themselves engaging with China to earn economic incentives, the hope is that American security commitments with member-states will balance the influence of China (Yoshimatsu, 2012).

When comparing the American and Chinese engagement with ASEAN, by 2005 China had committed to 46 different mechanisms operating in 16 different fields within ASEAN, while the US had only developed 15 mechanisms of engagement, despite the strong US support of ASEAN since its establishment in 1967 (Cheng, 2013). The US understands that it is losing its grip in the region with the secretary-general of ASEAN in 2014 declaring that there has been obvious American ‘diplomatic absenteeism’ (Dobell, 2014). China’s presence in the ASEAN+3 regional grouping means that it can directly challenge traditional great powers in the region – including Japan and by extension the United States – within the framework, ultimately capitalising on relative US strategic decline (Lim, 2008; Cheng, 2013; Papatheologou, Naseer & Amin, 2014). Present tensions in the region are typified in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute and maritime claims in the Spratly and Parcel Islands. They highlight China’s growing military capability to assert its interests. Beijing’s assertive posture in the region is said to have exposed ASEAN’s lack of conflict resolution mechanisms (the ASEAN Way notwithstanding), with the institution seen as a ‘resource-draining talk shop’ (Ogilvie-White, 2013). China, by contrast, has masterfully evolved its engagement to match its interests and its growing

power status by using the 'ASEAN Way' to its benefit. This is a concept which merits further consideration after looking at China's efforts in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

Established in 2001, the SCO brings together under its institutional mantle a Central Asia expanse covering China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with India, Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia and Afghanistan holding observer status. In addition there are three dialogue partners (Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey). The Charter of the SCO sets the priority goals of the organisation: to strengthen mutual trust, friendship and neighbourliness; develop cooperation in strengthening peace, security and stability in the region and assist in constructing just, rational political and economic international order; and to act jointly against terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations (Baizakova, 2013). Observers agree that ASEAN and the SCO share many resemblances in the way that the institutions contest traditional notions of Western liberal-democratic integration by utilising a non-interventionist mentality, codified in a set of norms (Aris, 2009). The internal mechanisms of the SCO intimately address regional concerns, for example the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which shares intelligence between states to offer training and policy suggestions to be applied to the respective states. Simply, the SCO is focused on cooperation in security matters that consequently also develops strong economic linkages. China is known for allowing ASEAN to have a driving role in the Southeast Asian region. In contrast, China exerts a major influence in the SCO, and therefore the Central Asian region. This comes from being at the forefront of establishing the institution, its economic strength and its growing military presence.

How did this happen? In 1994, PRC Premier Li Peng proposed that China-Central Asian relations should promote peaceful coexistence, mutually beneficial cooperation, non-interference in domestic affairs and respect for one another's independence and sovereignty (Yuan, 2010). Pan (2008) identifies the four benefits of the SCO for China's interests: first, it is a confidence-building mechanism for China and its potentially unstable post-Soviet neighbours; second, it provides a framework to cooperatively combat 'terrorism, extremism and separatism'; third, it couples security integration with economic cooperation which is to China's advantage considering its strong growth; and finally, with half of the world's total population as either a member or an observer, the SCO projects influence beyond its own region supporting China's policy of 'peaceful development' (see State Council Information Office, 2011). China's power and influence is wrapped in its economic strength and the ever-thickening web of regular engagements has consolidated this. China is able to project its domestic principles of sovereignty, non-interference, economic interdependence, bilateral negotiations and consultation based on historical linkages, to the greater Central Asian region through the SCO (Cheng, 2011). China's engagement with the SCO is clearly a more assertive leadership position when

compared to China's status in ASEAN. By using its economic strength, China is able to engage and influence other states to protect its own sovereignty and borders. This perspective is different to ASEAN, but both institutions use a loosely binding set of norms that China adopts for its gains. These are the 'ASEAN Way' and the 'Shanghai Spirit' – the focus of the final section of this article.

Institutional Norms: Knowing 'The Way' and 'The Spirit'

China's ability to construct and utilise norms is an extension of its strategy; this clearly manifests in Beijing's support and promotion of the 'ASEAN Way' and the 'Shanghai Spirit'. These two consensual systems stand in stark contrast to the formality and rules-bound structures of traditional Western international institutions.

The 'ASEAN Way' is founded on four principles: non-interference in the internal affairs of other members; quiet diplomacy; the non-use of force; and decision-making through consensus (Katsumata, 2003). The decision making process favours a high degree of consultation and consensus in which interactions are based on informality and discretion. This allows smaller states in ASEAN to have a stronger voice with greater powers while still maintaining their own sovereignty and independence (Beeson, 2009). The entire approach is based on the region's historical and cultural background, so that progress is made in an 'ASEAN manner, not through rules and regulations, but through consensus' (Davidson, 2004).

The strength of the 'ASEAN Way' from a Chinese perspective is that it can project itself geopolitically in the region while engaging in long-term diplomatic processes; it can use its economic strength to interconnect states while negotiations occur quietly outside the influence of Western states. The weakness, for China, in the 'ASEAN Way' is the non-use of force and principles of non-interference. While promoting these principles in its domestic affairs (and thereby deterring foreign interference in internal affairs such as secessionist issues with regard to Xinjiang and Taiwan), China's actions with territorial claims in Vietnam and the Philippines paint a different picture. It may be seen to be violating the principles of non-interference and non-use of force with respect to growing maritime power and assertive resource claims (see Zhu, 2014; Swaine, 2014; Junwu, 2012; and Roggeveen, 2014). These conflicts have hindered China's relations with ASEAN. By using discreet diplomatic processes and strong economic integration, however, Beijing can continue engagement with ASEAN on bilateral and multilateral levels. It has done this in an institution where it does not have full membership – an outcome achieved by following the 'ASEAN Way'.

China adopts a similar approach in Central Asia. The 'Shanghai Spirit' of SCO is founded on the pillars of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity and pursuit of common developments (Ying, 2013). These characteristics bear similarities with the 'ASEAN Way', particularly in respect to mutual trust, consultation, diversity and addressing cooperative development. In the previous decade, the SCO member states have signed more than 100 cooperative documents to broaden political, security, economic and cultural concerns of the region

– all abiding to the ‘Shanghai Spirit (Jiechi, 2011). By constructing the ‘Shanghai Spirit’, Chinese strategists can promote its goals well into the future. In 2008, President Hu Jintao stated that the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ lays the foundation of ‘a harmonious region of lasting peace and common prosperity’ (Pan, 2008). Thus China’s policies of ‘peaceful development’ and ‘harmonious region’ are most noticeable in its engagement with the SCO. This set of norms enables China to assert its influence in the region within a construct that maintains Chinese power over its internal affairs while addressing common issues and ignoring others that may not be relevant to the organisation.

The difference for China in the SCO is that it has taken a leading role in developing its principles and norms and therefore it has seen the benefit of the ‘ASEAN Way’ and adopted it to Central Asia. Indeed, it is not surprising to find that that ‘the “ASEAN Way” is, in many ways, similar to the SCO’s “Shanghai Spirit” of mutual trust and benefit, equality, consultation, respect for different civilisations, and common prosperity’ (Aris, 2009: 457). It is this system that typifies China’s involvement in regional institutions. By functioning within informal normative agreements, the PRC can grow and develop as it sees fit. The Central Asian and the Southeast Asian regions, through the SCO and ASEAN, are of immense benefit to the PRC.

Conclusion

China’s involvement in the international system has manifested in its engagement with ASEAN and the SCO. The difference between the two is that China did not develop ASEAN. ASEAN takes the driving seat in Southeast Asia and China engages economically and participates in the greater regional structure. In comparison, China had a leading role in constructing SCO, developing and institutionalising it to develop the Central Asian region. Different regions require different approaches, but the most obvious convergence of China’s approach to these two institutions is the approach to informal, institutionalised norms in respect to the ‘ASEAN Way’ and the ‘Shanghai Spirit’. These two processes allow China to engage at multiple strategic levels. Quiet, cooperative and consultative diplomatic processes enable China to use its economic strength to influence the regional policies.

It may be concluded that by promoting and constructing institutional norms present in the ‘ASEAN Way’ and the ‘Shanghai Spirit’, China can grow in influence by means of cooperation with multiple states. This engagement with ASEAN and the SCO, while only regional, cannot be divorced from the broader international sphere in this age of globalised politics.

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