



Southeast Asian Perceptions of Major Power Relations in Northeast Asia by Chien-peng Chung

There are perhaps as many Southeast Asian perceptions of the behavior of the U.S., PRC, and Japan in Northeast Asian affairs as there are countries in Southeast Asia, if not more. However, in the search for a lasting and peaceful order in East Asia, states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have individually, or as a group, adopted what I would call a strategy of hedging. While heavily promoting trade and investment and otherwise helping China integrate into the international trading system, several ASEAN states have also offered base facilities and logistic support to American forces, as well as encouraged Japan to complement its economic weight in Southeast Asia by playing a more active role in United Nations peacekeeping or regional attempts to fight piracy, smuggling, or wanton destruction of the environment. This is to ensure that no one major power can, in the future, dominate East Asia in a way that is averse to the interests of ASEAN.

ASEAN states are engaging in such pragmatic hedging behavior to optimize economic benefits and minimize security risks in response to an environment of uncertainty driven principally by the rise of China as an economic and military power. Uncertain of its future foreign and security policy orientations, ASEAN governments strongly believe that the increasing interdependence of the economies of Southeast Asia and China has the effect of giving Beijing a stake in the peace and stability of the region. Although they recognize the U.S. strategic presence as a stabilizing element necessary for continuing economic development, ASEAN states have, since the end of the Cold War, been unsure of long-term U.S. commitment to maintaining its current force level. They also worry that, given the unpleasant historical memory which the Chinese have of Japanese imperialism, attempts by the U.S. to permit or persuade Japan to take a more independent or active security posture in the region would likely provoke an arms build-up by the Chinese, which might in turn lead to a regional arms race.

ASEAN countries recognize that it is conducive to regional peace and stability to have some multilateral security arrangement in place for the purpose of regular consultation, which is why they pushed to set up the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993-4. Although ASEAN wishes to remain the core of the ARF, Southeast Asians are realistic enough to know that peace and prosperity will be determined by the dynamics of interaction among the major powers in Northeast Asia. Still, as another manifestation of their hedging behavior, ASEAN states have created the forum of ASEAN+3 in their post-ministerial meetings since 1997, to promote economic linkages and maintain a direct line of communication with Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul. This forum may take on even greater saliency if American or Western interest in economic

engagement or strategic stability of East Asia become less than enthusiastic due to differences in socio-political values, difficulties with protectionistic trade measures, or pressure from Western domestic economic, social, or political groups on labor standards, human rights, environmental protection, and other issues.

In a major way, the perceptions held by Southeast Asian countries of China's role and the need for U.S. involvement in the region are colored by their position on the Spratly islands and other territorial disputes with China, and the directness of the economic and security impact on the individual country of China's activities in the South China Sea. Not surprisingly, having had the experience of being involved in direct contact with the Chinese military and fishermen over the disputed South China Sea islands, Vietnam and the Philippines are most in favor of an expanded U.S. role in Southeast Asia, although Vietnam has not been as expressive as the Philippines in voicing this. Malaysia and Brunei also have maritime territorial disputes with China, but together with Indonesia, prefer to manage the rise of China through the expansion of economic ties and by relying as much as possible on their own military capabilities, although they are not unwelcoming of an American presence. Thailand, because it has always desired a counterweight to Vietnam in Indochina; Myanmar (Burma), because of Chinese support for its government; and Singapore, because of its predominantly Chinese population, small size, and concern about how regional stability may affect its vital trading links, all advocate an active Chinese role in the region and the world, although Singapore especially would like to keep the U.S. fully engaged in Northeast and Southeast Asia.

What has been described are not so much the application of different strategies of containment, self-reliance, or engagement vis-à-vis China, but rather the reflection of the varying hedging measures of engagement – reluctant, cautious, or enthusiastic – on the part of regional countries with little choice but to shape the rise of a China that is as non-threatening to their national and collective interests as possible. ASEAN is generally of the opinion that any Code of Conduct on the South China Sea reached multilaterally between China and the Association, or bilaterally between China and member states of ASEAN, should be more than official statements of goodwill, although that alone is a good start. It should develop provisions for monitoring progress and adjudicating differences, and have legal validity under the provisions of international law, international maritime law, and declarations of the current Law of the Sea regime. Perhaps something can also be learned from confidence and security-building measures – arms control, establishment of “hot-lines” and “lines of control,” and sovereignty-shelving – which have been progressively adopted by China with Russia and India over the last dozen years, and could be applied to resolve the South China Sea issue.

ASEAN states would like Japan to play a bigger political, diplomatic, and security role in the affairs of Northeast and Southeast Asia, especially on the Korean Peninsula and in the South China Sea, to complement its already significant trade, investment, and aid posture in ASEAN, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea. However, the peoples of Southeast Asia also have unhappy memories of Japan's role as an aggressor in the Pacific War, and thus worry about the possible augmentation of Japan's security involvement in the Asia-Pacific as more than a logistical base for the U.S., as provided for in the enhanced 1996 U.S.-Japan security framework. Southeast Asian countries are not particularly alarmed by the occasional nationalistic outbursts of certain politicians in Japan, given that of late, Japan has been very preoccupied with extricating itself from the economic doldrums that it has found itself in. However, although appreciative of its role in bringing about peace in Cambodia, ASEAN governments are also reluctant to come right out and endorse a more prominent security profile for Japan out of deference to the anti-imperialist sensibilities of China, and to a lesser extent, North and South Korea. For this reason, they are wary of China's unfavorable threat perception regarding the possible deployment of a Theater Missile Defense system on or around Japan.

As to the recent summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, no one in Southeast Asia had unrealistically high expectations, so most have been pleasantly surprised at the enormous amount of goodwill and tantalizing prospect of eventual reunification generated from the success of the talks. Southeast Asians were no doubt heartened that the hitherto reclusive and isolationistic North Korean leader decided to reach out to his southern counterpart, and felt that, with the meeting between Kim Jong-il and Chinese President Jiang Zemin earlier, the Chinese had already exerted some positive influence to convince North Korea to open up its economy and maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula by eschewing any attempt to develop nuclear weapons.

ASEAN governments welcome the entry of both China and Taiwan into the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the granting of Permanent Normal Trading Relations (PNTR) status to China by the U.S. Congress. They also welcome North Korea's participation in the ARF, the possible removal of the U.S. trade embargo on North Korea, and dialogue among North and South Korea, China, and the U.S. on the issue of nuclear proliferation. Indeed, ASEAN governments would welcome any measure undertaken by the major powers to maintain the status quo and diminish the possibility of the occurrence of instability on the Korean Peninsula, in the South China Sea, and in the Taiwan Straits. This is because they are worried that either a collapse or expansion of the North Korean state, or any conflict between North and South Korea, China and Taiwan, or China and Southeast Asian countries over the disputed South China Sea territories, would divide the Asia-Pacific into two mutually antagonistic blocs, drawing in the U.S. and Japan on one side, against China, with perhaps Russia, on the other, with small and weak Southeast Asian states caught helplessly in the middle.

The issue of reunification between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan is for the people of the two places to decide, but even after reunification, and certainly before that, the Taiwan Straits would still be international waters under the current regime of the Law of the Sea. This means that, in the event that peace is disturbed in the Taiwan Straits, or for that matter, in the South China Sea or around the Korean Peninsula, and the sea lanes of communications (SLOC), or trade and investment flows in the Asia-Pacific are put in jeopardy, then countries in the Northeast and Southeast Asian neighborhood can be expected to express their legitimate concerns and consult with one another to explore ways whereby peace in the region can be restored.

ASEAN as a security-cum-economic forum is currently in a state of listlessness, with individual countries very much more preoccupied with their own problems rather than regional concerns. While Thailand and the Philippines championed "flexible engagement," hitherto known as "constructive intervention," until objections from several other ASEAN member states halted their efforts, other Southeast Asian countries with less participatory political systems prefer to adhere to the long-standing ASEAN norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of other member states. This is despite the lack of cooperation among ASEAN countries themselves in tackling the Asian economic crisis, the South China Sea dispute, and the occasional pervasive haze across both sides of the Straits of Malacca. The economic crisis in the past three years has not only retarded quite a few Southeast Asian economies which had been growing rather rapidly until then, but seriously affected the political stability and economic growth of Indonesia, widely regarded as ASEAN's center of gravity by virtue of its territorial size, population, and economy measured according to Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Also coming to the fore are the long-simmering ethnic and religious tensions which are attracting cross-border sympathies and affecting diplomatic relations among ASEAN member states, the Sipadan kidnapping by the Abu Sayyaf group being a case in point, just as the force most responsible for holding the Association together - rapid and sustained economic growth - has become quite elusive in the last few years. Still, Southeast Asians are generally confident that, if the recent region-wide economic recovery can be sustained, and the situation in Indonesia stabilizes, ASEAN would yet come around, and again become an economic force and diplomatic presence worthy of the attention and respect of the major powers.

Dr. Chien-peng Chung is an Assistant Professor at Singapore's Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies. This article is drawn from his remarks at the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) North Pacific Working Group which was held in Ulaanbaator last month.