Southeast Asian Perspectives on the Rise of China: Regional Security after 9/11

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Napoleon Bonaparte once described China as a sleeping dragon and warned not to wake it up. Now that China has awakened, it causes many nations to tremble—including the United States, the sole global power and the world's pre-eminent policeman.

The unprecedented rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a global reality. From one of the world's least developed countries in the 1970s, China had developed one of the largest economies in the world by the late 1990s.[1] The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported that from 1979 to 1997, China's gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an average rate of 9.8 percent.[2] This phenomenal economic growth has spilled over to China's defense budget, with military spending rising to 17.6 percent of China's outlays, an equivalent of $3 billion in March 2002 alone.[3] Because of the burgeoning economic and military power of China, there are enormous worries about the idea of a "China threat."

The United States has particularly expressed strong apprehensions regarding the ascension of China. The US Commission on National Security/21st Century warns that "the potential for competition between the United States and China may increase as China grows stronger."[4] Even the *Global Trends 2015* prepared under the direction of the US National Intelligence Council argues that the implications of the rise of China "pose the greatest uncertainty" in the world.[5] The Commission on America's National Interests describes China as "America's major potential strategic adversary in East Asia,"[6] while the Council on Foreign Relations has stated that "China poses significant economic, military, and political challenges for the United States and for the nations of Southeast Asia."[7] This

theme is supported by a RAND study describing China as a potential military threat to the United States and Southeast Asia.[8]

While the United States views China as a potential threat to its national security, how do Southeast Asian countries view the rise of China? What are the implications of the growth of China for regional security, especially in the aftermath of 9/11? This article aims to present Southeast Asian perspectives on the rise of China and its regional security implications since 9/11.

Southeast Asian Perspectives

Taken individually, Southeast Asian countries have varying perspectives on the many ramifications of strategic issues in the region.[9] Unlike some Western countries, however, Southeast Asian nations, taken as a whole, consider the rise of China as a great opportunity, with concomitant security challenges, rather than as a serious threat. From an economic standpoint, Rodolfo Severino, former Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), candidly describes China and ASEAN as "partners in competition."[10] There is also a widespread perception in Southeast Asia that "China will be the new engine of growth for the entire region."[11] In a report submitted by the ASEAN-China Expert Group on Economic Cooperation in October 2001, Southeast Asia optimistically views China as an economic opportunity. The Expert Group has, in fact, proposed the forging of closer ASEAN-China economic relations in the 21st century to integrate their economies.[12]

Recognizing the economic potential that China may bring to Southeast Asia, one important recommendation of the Expert Group is the establishment of an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA). The group views ACFTA as "an important move forward in terms of economic integration in East Asia," as well as "a foundation for the more ambitious vision of an East Asia Free Trade Area, encompassing ASEAN, China, Japan, and Korea."[13] The group suggests that "the realization of a China-ASEAN free trade zone agreement indicates that historical feuds and political clashes between ASEAN member states and the PRC are no longer one of the most important factors influencing ASEAN-PRC relations."[14]

This shift in the Southeast Asian perception of China is an important landmark in China-Southeast Asian relations. One must remember that from the 1950s to the early 1970s, Southeast Asian states regarded China as a dangerous

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adversary because of its perceived military expansionist scheme in Asia.[15] During the height of the Cold War, the Chinese Communist Party was believed to have supported Southeast Asian communist insurgents, causing Southeast Asia to view China as an abhorrent ideological enemy. Because of this tragic historical experience, there was a view that "China will always be seen as posing a threat to Southeast Asia, in view of her size and past experiences in which China considered Southeast Asia as within her sphere of influence."[16]

Chinese participation in various multilateral confidence-building activities at the end of the Cold War, however, has made Southeast Asia more optimistic about China's international behavior. Southeast Asia is pleased to see China actively involving itself in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) program, among others. Southeast Asia is also using these multilateral mechanisms to establish closer relations with China.

Although Southeast Asian states are presently more optimistic about their relations with China, the Chinese government's passage of a law on Territorial Waters and Contiguous Areas in 1992 and the People's Liberation Army's occupation of the Mischief Reef in July 1994 caused tremendous concerns in the region at that time. Those acts were interpreted as a sign of the "creeping assertiveness" of Beijing in the contested South China Sea.[17] Former Philippine Defense Secretary Orlando S. Mercado even described the Chinese occupation of the Mischief Reef in 1994 and the fortification of its structures in 1999 as a strong indication of China's "creeping invasion" of the "disputed South China Sea chain."[18]

China has existing territorial disputes with a few countries in Southeast Asia, namely Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Although Indonesia is not actually a claimant state in the disputes, China's territorial claims overlap with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zones. The South China Sea disputes continue to serve as major irritants in China-Southeast Asia relations. In fact, China has earlier fought with Vietnam over the Paracel and Spratly islands and had military skirmishes with the Philippine navy in the waters of the Kalayaan Island Group and Scarborough Shoal. But with the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea on 4 November 2002, there are high hopes that these irritants will be eventually resolved or at least be swept sufficiently under the rug to enable China and Southeast Asia to concentrate more on productive areas of cooperation.

China's provocative military exercises involving missile tests in the Taiwan Strait at the time of Taiwanese elections in 1996 also caused alarm in Southeast Asia. The tests were interpreted as an "arrogant display" of China's military might in the area and a flagrant indication of China's attempt to strengthen its influence in Asia. This incident frightened much of Southeast Asia because of the memory of Chinese military adventurism in the region at the height of communist insurgency. Indeed, the 1996 Taiwan incident continues to be an inhibiting consideration in Southeast Asia's relations with China.

The most recent incident causing regional worries in connection with the rise of China was the EP3 spy plane incident with the United States in April 2001. China decisively asserted its sovereign rights to protect its territorial airspace and strongly demanded that the United States apologize for "encroaching" on Chinese territory. Southeast Asia views China's reaction in this incident as an indication of China's growing confidence in international affairs. During the 1980s and early 1990s, China exhibited "a passive and reactionary pattern of behavior in foreign affairs."[19] But China's pattern of behavior has become more and more assertive recently. Since the EP3 incident increased the degree of mistrust between the United States and China, some Southeast Asian states also have been affected by it.

Encouragingly, the release of China's Defense White Paper on 9 December 2002 has created a high expectation in the region that China will be more transparent in its strategic goals and intentions. The White Paper states that China "endorses all activities conducive to maintaining the global strategic balance and stability."[20]

To assure that China's behavior will be more benign and cooperative, Southeast Asia is engaging China in the economic sphere through various bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Multilaterally, Southeast Asia is engaging China through the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, ASEAN+3, the ASEAN-China Dialogue, APEC, and the ARF. Southeast Asia understands the reality that China is dependent on the region for its own growth and prosperity.[21] Thus, Southeast Asia adheres to the formula that engaging China in the economic sphere will create more fruitful and constructive relations. Although some Southeast Asian countries have expressed apprehensions on the growing power of China in the region, this apprehension "is normally never publicly articulated" in order to establish a constructive and productive relationship with the traditional Middle Kingdom of Asia.[22]

The Aftermath of 9/11: Implications for Regional Security

The aftermath of 9/11 has greatly disturbed China's strategic scheme in Southeast Asia. The American-led war on terrorism has unleashed some "strategic losses, shocks, and reverses" in China's core strategic interests in Southeast Asia.[23] Chinese leaders themselves admit that "the nation's geopolitical position has deteriorated since the events of September 11, 2001."[24]

Since 9/11, China has reportedly changed its security calculus and been forced to reevaluate its geopolitical position vis-à-vis its relations with the United States and with the claimant states in the South China Sea.[25] In response to the shifting strategic landscape in Southeast Asia, Beijing reportedly has been launching an uncharacteristically concerted diplomatic effort toward its neighbors.[26]

Although 9/11 heavily affected the security architecture of the region, the event did not alter Southeast Asian perceptions of the rise of China, however. Southeast Asia continues to view China as a serious partner for regional growth

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and prosperity despite the existence of some irritants in the area of territorial and border disputes. Various confidence-building initiatives are now in place between China and Southeast Asia to enhance their relations in the aftermath of 9/11.

What worries Southeast Asia is the negative reaction of major powers on the rise of China and the impact of 9/11 on major-power rivalries in the region. Moreover, 9/11 has not altered the security fundamentals in Asia affecting Southeast Asia. The security problems in the Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea persist. These problems continue to encumber Southeast Asia with security dilemmas, making the region highly vulnerable to major-power politics. Yet it should be noted that Southeast Asia has always been held hostage to the power politics of major powers.[27] Southeast Asia has been one of the principal fulcrums of major-power rivalries in Asia, and the emerging security landscape unleashed by 9/11 intensified this situation. Major powers are using the war on terrorism in Southeast Asia as an excuse for their active military engagements in the region to prepare for any military contingencies in the Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula, and South China Sea. In this rivalry, Southeast Asian countries are put in a strategic dilemma in managing their relations with the major powers.

The Rise of China and the Return of the United States to Southeast Asia

One of the unintended consequences of 9/11 is the strategic return of the United States to the region. Before 9/11, many security analysts in the United States had lamented that Washington was neglecting Southeast Asia in its strategic agenda. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the United States has failed to formulate a clear and coherent strategy to guide its engagement with Southeast Asia at various levels. Security analysts have described relations between Southeast Asia and the United States as "a policy without a strategy,"[28] and as a "policy backwater in Washington."[29] American officials and security analysts have even viewed Southeast Asia for the past three decades "as marginal to security in Asia," paying more attention to threats in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula.[30] Some also have bemoaned that the United States lacks expertise on Southeast Asia in both its official and unofficial sectors.[31] It also has been observed that for most Americans, the region "remains obscure and poorly understood."[32]

Since 9/11, the United States seemingly has realized its blunder of neglecting Southeast Asia in its strategic agenda. Thus, the United States has de-

cided to bring Southeast Asia back onto its strategic radar and declared the region as a second front in the war on terrorism.

Although Southeast Asian countries welcome the US presence in the region for strategic reasons, they also express worries of American "praetorian unilateralism" triggered by the US pursuance of homeland security in the context of the global campaign against terror.[33] The praetorian element of this new American security strategy is manifested in its penchant for a military solution to win the war on terror.[34] Its unilateralist policy is reflected in its latest national security strategy, which asserts that the United States "will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise [the] right of self defense."[35]

The return of the United States to Southeast Asia is also causing security anxieties in China because of the perception that American intentions in the war on terror in Southeast Asia aim not only to destroy terrorism in the region but also to strategically encircle China. A recently published study of the Nixon Center, for example, states that the reinvigorated American presence in Southeast Asia not only aims to wage a war on terror, but also to hedge against a rising China.[36] Although American defense and security officials deny this angle, various testimonies before the US Congress and numerous reports of American think-tanks articulate a perspective of strategically encircling China to regain for America a preponderance of power in Southeast Asia.[37]

Like the United States, China also wants to maintain its presence in Southeast Asia. China regards the region as vital for its own growth and prosperity. China regards Southeast Asia as "attractive, vulnerable, and nearby," particularly with respect to the strategic waters of the South China Sea.[38] Indeed, China views the South China Sea as "golden lands of opportunity."[39]

Thus, it is also in the strategic and economic interests of China to assert its influence in the region. It "wants a sharp diminution" of US influence in Southeast Asia, "especially in terms of its military deployments to the region and its encircling . . . chain of bilateral security arrangements with many of China's neighbors."[40]

To balance the reestablished presence of the United States in the region since 9/11, China is seeking warmer ties in Southeast Asia[41] and is coming up with its own plan to cultivate close ties with all the ASEAN countries.[42] China also has begun to invest "more aggressively in Southeast Asia," because economic opportunities "have opened up after 9/11."[43] China is using its economic instrument of national power to shore up its diplomacy in Southeast Asia and to balance the preponderant military power of the United States in the region. China also has intensified its defense and military diplomacy, as indicated in its 2002 Defense White Paper.

The Expanded Military Role of Japan

As part of Japanese support to the global campaign against terrorism, Prime Minister Koizumi committed Japan's Self Defense Force ships to help the

United States in collecting intelligence, shipping supplies, and providing medical services and humanitarian relief. He also pledged to strengthen protection of US bases in Japan. Using the war on terror as justification, Japanese warships are now in Asian waters.

Southeast Asia has expressed concerns about the expanded military role of Japan after 9/11, remembering the experiences of the Second World War. But at the same time, Southeast Asia cautiously welcomes this development as a counterweight to China's growing influence in the region. As opined by Robert Karniol, the Asia-Pacific editor of *Jane's Defence Weekly*, "By Japan expanding its role, the countries in the region see it as balancing an over-dominant Chinese influence" in Southeast Asia.[44] Carl Thayer, professor of politics at Australia's Defence Force Academy, has remarked, "Anyone adding counterweight to China is welcome."[45]

China, on the other hand, views Japan's heightened military role in Southeast Asia after 9/11 as an "unpleasant" reality. Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji has warned Japan to exercise the utmost prudence in expanding its military role. He reminded Tokyo to abide by its commitment not to be a military power and to limit its defense power to its own territory and coastal waters.[46] China views Japan as "a potential threat to its political influence in the region."[47]

India's Southeast Asian Policy and the Rise of China

India also has realized the strategic importance of Southeast Asia. During the height of the Cold War, the Indian leadership viewed ASEAN as an American "imperialist surrogate," while ASEAN dubbed India as " the surrogate of the Soviet Union."[48] Thus, Southeast Asia was not part of the strategic sphere of Indian foreign and security policy.

After the Cold War, however, India reinvented its view of Southeast Asia, adopting a "look east policy" to be actively engaged in Southeast Asian affairs. India has expressed greater interest in the region because the Straits of Malacca, which connect the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, with Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia as their littoral countries, are critical to Indian maritime trade. India also wants to be engaged in Southeast Asian security affairs to balance the growing influence of China. An Indian analyst argues:

> With India's obsession towards Pakistan and with its preoccupations with China, the South East Asian region did not figure much in its foreign policy till recently. Some political analysts point out that of late, India has started taking interest in this region more with a view to balance China in the region. India in the short term cannot achieve this aim, as China has entrenched itself deeply in most of these countries over a period of time with a long term perspective.[49]

The emerging security landscape unleashed by 9/11 has prompted India to intensify its engagement in Southeast Asia. China, however, does not want to see India enlarging its regional and international stature and profile in Southeast

Asia, arguing that India's pursuit of great power status is "illegitimate, wrong, dangerous, and a sign of hegemonic imperial behavior."[50] Thus, China maintains its strategy of "keeping India out" of Southeast Asia.[51]

Australian Strategic Space in Southeast Asia

Australia views itself as an integral part of Southeast Asia from a geographic standpoint.[52] However, its strategic interests lean toward the West. Thus, the centerpiece of Australian foreign and security policy in Southeast Asia is the Australia-US alliance.

Strategically, Australia is the United States' oldest reliable ally in the Asia Pacific region and welcomes active US engagement in Southeast Asia. Australian and American interests in the Asia Pacific, in general, and in Southeast Asia, in particular, have strategically converged. This convergence of interests, especially following 9/11, is the strong tie that binds the Australia-US alliance.

In its 2000 Defense White Paper, Australia describes China as "an important strategic interlocutor for Australia."[53] As an ally of the United States, Australia views the rise of China with apprehension and continues to be suspicious of China's strategic motives as an Asian power. Australia feels uncomfortable with the growing influence of China in international and regional security affairs. Even former Prime Minister of Australia Paul Keating once said that Beijing's "size can overwhelm" and it "can be uncomfortable to live next door to a giant."[54] Thus, Australian strategists regard Canberra's alliance with Washington as a security blanket that will "provide a balance to any strategic uncertainty stemming from the rise of China."[55]

Southeast Asia welcomes Australian engagement in regional security affairs as a counterweight to China. But Southeast Asia also is wary of Australian intentions because, like Tokyo, Canberra is articulating Washington's foreign and security policy in the region. While Southeast Asian countries welcome the United States, none of them wants its dominance.

Summary and Conclusion

Southeast Asian countries are fully aware of the growing influence of China, and this growing influence has undoubtedly created some security concerns in the region. But Southeast Asian nations have officially expressed confidence that China's intentions are benign.[56] ASEAN, in fact, views the rise of China as more of an opportunity with concomitant challenges, rather than a threat.

What worries Southeast Asia in the midst of the rise of China is the reaction of the major powers to the idea of a "China threat" and the impact of 9/11 on major-power rivalries. Southeast Asia has always been held hostage to the power politics of major powers, and the emerging security landscape unleashed by 9/11 has intensified major-power rivalries in Southeast Asia. This rivalry is affecting the growth and prosperity of the region. Moreover, the security fundamentals in

Asia have not been altered by 9/11. The problems in the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea persist.

Despite the influence of the major-power rivalry, China and Southeast Asia continue to engage in areas of cooperation to reduce their apprehensions and increase their trust. China and Southeast Asia recognize the need to deepen and widen their cooperation, because both China and Southeast Asia are becoming more and more interdependent economically and politically, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. As Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan said during the China-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Brunei in August 2002, "We should keep developing the momentum of China-ASEAN ties and further expand and deepen our cooperation to better cope with the changed situation."[57]

NOTES

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