CHINA - SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS: THE SECURITY DIMENSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

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INTRODUCTION

Following the improvement of China-Southeast Asia relations, security engagements were initiated by both sides through bilateral or multilateral security dialogues which had managed to down play some critical issues among them. Since it would be too broad to discuss relations between all ASEAN countries with China, this paper will concentrate the relations between China and ASEAN 5 (Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines)—the original five countries that formed the ASEAN grouping. China's diplomatic and political approach towards Southeast Asia in the last decade was seen as almost immaculate. While it is understood by many that China seeks for a stable regional environment to ensure her development is not jeopardized, her policies (actions) within the region must always be pragmatic and tolerable to further enhance her cooperation with the neighbors.

SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

The increasing influence of China in international affairs and her gradual ascend to be a more powerful state have caused concern to the adjacent smaller states of how to deal with her in the future. Therefore, Southeast Asia and China has to build the security partnership based on the foundations of

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cooperation while continuing to talk about those areas they do not agree. China has been serious in promoting the regional security partnership with the Southeast Asia countries because it believes this will benefit both sides in terms of achieving a peaceful relations as well as protecting their own interests in the long run. China has attached the importance to the leading role played by ASEAN in pushing forward the regional security dialogue as well as the cooperation which it is also seeking. These include the non-traditional security field such as counter-terrorism with a gradually expanding participation of their defense official in the ASEAN Regional Forum.[2]

RELATIONS AMIDST CHALLENGES

Can a powerful China be a benign power in the future? That may depend on its domestic, economic, political, and leadership prudence through the coming decades. China has been very persistent in her territorial claims along the East China Sea (ECS) and in the South China Sea (SCS) and so do the other countries. These critical issues are seen by Southeast Asian nations as a very challenging situation in respect to their relations. Such a concern has created insecurity and uncertainty within the region-phenomenon which has led to almost all countries in the region to embark on various methods to enhance their military capabilities. The result is increasingly insecure and this has led to security dilemmas.

The greatest test for security relations between China and ASEAN and the resolution of the security dilemma between both, is dependent on how both sides manage the sensitive question of territorial disputes. Therefore, even if the Southeast Asian nations relatively share a common perspective on China, some may be more concerned that China's rise may offer unwanted security challenges to this region while some others may be more concerned on economic competition since China offers bigger workforce, cheaper cost and bigger market. On another perspective, China's growing regional position may be viewed by some as being good because it can strike a balance against the influence of other major powers. Again, some others may react oppositely to the rise of China and seek to develop closer relations with other major power such as the United States. In reality, it is more likely Southeast Asia's security interests are served by preventing the total dominance of the region by any great power, China or the United States.

2 Xuecheng, Liu, Strengthening ASEAN-China Cooperation in the ASEAN Regional Forum, Hocketal (ed), ISEAS, Singapore, 2005, p14.

EVOLVING CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA SECURITY AND MILITARY COOPERATION

The geopolitical and economic changes in the region call for a closer cooperation among the states. From the economic cooperation, countries can expand the cooperation into other areas that serve mutual benefits to each other. China and Southeast Asian countries are aware that the disputes they have in regards to SCS will retard the economic partnership they are building. Thus China has willingly started with some positive actions with their 'New Security Concept' which embraces the principles of equality, dialogue, trust and cooperation, and a new security order should be established to ensure genuine mutual respect, mutual cooperation, consensus through consultation and peaceful settlement of disputes, rather than bullying, confrontation, and imposition of one's own will upon others. Only in that way can countries coexist in amity and secure their development. [3]

Furthermore, disputes vis-a-vis SCS has been sufficiently controlled by the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea on 4 November 2002. After that in October 2003, China acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and issued the China-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Bali, Indonesia. This Strategic Partnership does not mean ASEAN-China military pact or defense alliance. Later in December 2004, a 5–year military Plan of Action was adopted. As mentioned earlier, it was reported that the plan focuses heavily on defense and security cooperation between China and ASEAN. But unfortunately, the overall military cooperation among them has not been highly developed.

MILITARY COOERATION AND REASONS BEHIND THESE CHALLENGES

The military cooperation between China and ASEAN 5 are progressing and still at low level due to certain reasons. This is in view of the independent variables (external factor) that have a big influence on foreign policy formulation. It is about the distribution of relative power by the major power. U.S. has still maintained its influence in the region. Thailand and the

3 People's Republic of China, State Council, Information Office, China's National Defense in 2000, 'Text' of PRC White Paper on National Defense in 2000, Xinhua Domestic Service [Beijing], October 16, 2001.

Philippines are U.S. military allies and therefore the military relationship with China would be a divergence to their principles. Malaysia and Singapore also have another military agreement such as Five Power Defense Arrangements while Indonesia is having good relations with U.S.

During the first decade after the Cold War, every Southeast Asian nation was concentrating to develop their economy. Security issues were understood but the priority was second to overall economic development. This is so because during the first decade of post Cold War, China and Southeast Asia was not actually looking into developing security or defense cooperation. The priority was to develop economic and trades between them.

Moreover, the military or defense cooperation is moving rather slow because the confidence among each other has to be further nurtured. China's position as a major power which is close to the other littoral states within needs to ensure that its attitude and behavior tally with standard international procedures. Any dispute should not be settled through assertiveness and aggressiveness. Southeast Asian countries in the other hand are not really interested to engage China truly in defense cooperation. What they were doing is actually to minimize the danger of Chinese military assertiveness towards them. Southeast Asian states actually need the other major power to counter balance China's military might. Southeast Asia security development will continue to be affected by the great power rivalry and competition which drive strategic change in near future.

The other reasons for low military cooperation between China-Southeast Asia could be the elites' strategic assessments that prevent them from deciding to pursue the military relations. China aggressive attitudes before year 2000 were something that influences the elites of Southeast Asian nations to take precautions. Territorial disputes means sovereignty and this requires steadfastness in protecting them. This has made the military cooperation more complex in term of security. The influence of the elites towards foreign policy and the domestic pressure too would limit each Southeast state from establishing military relations with China.

INTERVENING FACTORS FOR POLICY IN CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

The domestic political scenario is an important factor in shaping the China-Southeast Asia relations.Besides the historical events that shaped the perspectives of many Southeast Asian countries on China, the composition

of people of each country in the region which have big number of Chinese would needs for a pragmatic leadership. As been said earlier, the suspicions on the Chinese people who were regarded as the fifth column to China by many nations in Southeast Asia would not be true at all. The leaderships of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand had been the key factor in enhancing the relation with China. Indonesia and the Philippines would have different views all together but the domestic environment in both countries which required more enhancements in economy should be looked seriously by the elites of that nations. The emphasis should be the confidence building measures and developing more economic ties with China and at the same time managing the security and stability of the region.

The Southeast Asian leaders have seen that China has participated persistently in the ASEAN-led regional institutions like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Plus dialogues. China has also become the first external signatory to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003, an important symbolic gesture toward its acceptance of ASEAN norms. More importantly, its willingness to negotiate multilaterally with rival Southeast Asian claimants of the territorial disputes over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea reassured them that Beijing is serious about its peaceful rise, at least for the short to medium-term. Currently, what are felt by most of the Southeast Asian elites is that the region should engage China both politically and economically but at the same time, it buys a strategic insurance policy mainly by facilitating U.S. forward military deployment in the region to deter Chinese assertiveness especially in the SCS.

THE WAY FORWARD

ASEAN 5 is seen as having successfully combined the elements of realism and neo-liberalism with the strategy of open regionalism. This action manages to encourage all interested foreign powers to participate and be involved in the economic, political, and security interests of Southeast Asian region. In return such action increases the capacity of ASEAN 5 to balance the power and influence of outsiders. ASEAN 5 thus uses regional integration and multilateral security as a strategy in addressing the challenges of globalization of U.S. and China in Asia. It has been noted that at present time the relation between ASEAN 5 and China is very dynamic and positive. By being small and in close proximity with a much bigger and powerful nation, ASEAN 5 would have to be pragmatically engage China bilaterally or multilaterally.

Firstly, an effective and pragmatic policy should be adopted by Southeast Asian nations that would continually churn the relation and bring about mutual benefits to all. Despite the influence of the major-power rivalry, China and Southeast Asia should continue to engage in areas of cooperation to reduce their apprehensions and increase their trust. Economic interdependence and security cooperation would facilitate the peace loving inspiration either Southeast Asia or China has.

Secondly, in order to maintain the regional stability and thus achieving own national interests, the leaders of each country would have to ensure that the policy towards China remain positive. For China, the regional stability is the main key for her to continue the economic development. China should comtime to pursue a close economic cooperation and at the same time actively engaging ASEAN 5 to promote regional peace.

Thirdly, the coming back of U.S. or U.S. re-engagement, which has actively engaging Southeast Asia region, on the pretext to protect its national interest from terrorism, can be regarded as encirclement of China. What the Southeast Asian nations have to do is to ensure that the major powers strategic interests converge with their own interests. This convergence of interests would be the strong tie that ensures the regional security and stability. Lastly, the U.S. engagement in regional security affairs as a counterweight to China needs to cautiously reviewed and Southeast Asia should be wary of U.S.'s foreign and security policy in the region. While U.S. is welcomed, none of the Southeast Asian countries or ASEAN 5 wants its dominance. In this complex playing field, the key players have adopted strategies and policies departing from the dichotomies.

CONCLUSION

With the above explanations, the security and military cooperation between China and Southeast Asian states (ASEAN 5), either bilaterally or multilaterally, are considered as the most important aspects in their relations. China is pursuing a better cooperation in these areas but there are enough evidences of the lack of enthusiasm in Southeast Asian states (ASEAN 5). The factors can be many but historical events and the current power balancing play between the U.S. and China and the Southeast Asian states (ASEAN 5) may be the major determinants of the current situations. Furthermore, U.S. re-engagement with the region, new patterns of security cooperation and SCS disputed issues contributed to the overall security development that hinder military or defense cooperation to another height.

China is obviously being more vigorous to enhance its relations using better strategic approaches to influence Southeast Asian states (ASEAN 5) other than through the trades and economic interdependency only. China and Southeast Asian states (ASEAN 5) should strive for utmost transparency in military and strategic terms. They will be neighbors forever, and they should know each other better. In sum, the two sides should do everything in their power to keep their relationship as good as they are today and constantly improve in the future.

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