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Session III: Asia's China Strategy II: Towards a Regional Order

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While there is much debate in Asia and the wider world over the nature of China's international outlook, the Chinese leadership undoubtedly has a fairly clear vision of how it would like China's role in its region to develop, even if this vision may be the subject of debate between elements within its foreign and security policy-making apparatus.

The entirety of China's foreign policy is evidently not captured by the rhetoric of 'peaceful rise', Beijing's 'new security concept' emphasising economic and political cooperation, or the eminently reasonable principles enunciated in 2005 (China will not seek hegemony or play power politics; China recognizes the equality of all nations; China will not exercise double standards; the UN Charter and UN norms are sacred; China will use peaceful negotiations to resolve disputes; China opposes terrorism and WMD; China respects civilizational diversity).

To be sure, Beijing has made considerable efforts to reduce tensions in Asia since the 1980s as part of its 'independent foreign policy of peaceful development'. It has entered into a major rapprochement with its former Asian major power rival, Japan, and to a lesser extent with India. It has engaged with Russia and Central Asian states in the SCO. China has adopted a cooperative stance in relation to Southeast Asia, has recognised the significance of regional institutions such as ASEAN, and has sought to cement closer links with the region through mechanisms such as ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asian Summit, as well as enhanced bilateral partnerships with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN itself. Its economic and political relations with regional states have grown closer; it has also resolved some of its boundary disputes, notably with Russia and on land with Vietnam.

Despite these positive developments, though, the reality of China's foreign and security policy practice suggests that there is a harder and sharper edge to Beijing's international and regional outlook than its rhetoric suggests. In particular, it seems clear that China still seeks to prevent the rise of strong powers around its periphery and to undermine the regional security role of non-Asian powers, particularly the United States. Some assessments go further, suggesting that China seeks to re-assert the historical China-centred regional order in which other Asian states tacitly defer to its superior power.

Moreover, one does not need to subscribe to what is sometimes dismissively called the 'China threat theory' to recognise that – like any other state – the leaders of the world's most populous country engage in power politics and hold in reserve increasingly significant hard power instruments. China is certainly acquiring the attributes of a great power, in terms of growing military capability as well as economic strength and political confidence. China's military modernisation programme may be aimed above all in the first instance at helping to persuade Taiwan to acknowledge Beijing's sovereignty. However, there seems little doubt that China – again, like other major powers – sees a wider long-term role for its armed forces in terms of projecting force to defend and support national interests in its own region (and perhaps ultimately further afield).

Asia's China strategies

The notion of 'Asia' – a contested concept rather than a definite geopolitical entity – exercising a 'China Strategy' is not really credible: Asia's states are highly diverse in their outlooks and interests, have signally failed to reach consensus on a spectrum of strategic matters, and certainly do not hold either positive or negative views of China in common. China's growing, all-round power certainly has particular significance for its Asian neighbours, but there has been a striking lack of unanimity in their national responses. Indeed, individual Asian states' national responses to China's rise have often manifested internal ambiguities and contradictions.

Nevertheless, there is certainly interest across the whole region in benefiting from China's rapid and far-reaching economic advance, both in the present and the projected future. There is a widespread view in Asia that China's continuing economic rise is inevitable and that it would be self-defeating not to welcome closer economic relations with China, as a location for and increasingly a source of investment, as an important customer for natural resource exports and as a source of manufactured imports. But, of course, there are also significant concerns over the implications of China's growing economic power, particularly in Southeast Asia, where economies are more vulnerable, governments have sometimes seen China as a source of competition for foreign investment, and the powerful economic role of local ethnic Chinese business remains a live issue.

Turning to the politico-security implications of China's rise, no Asian state except for Japan has clearly identified this as a potential security threat. Overall, regional states' views of China's increasing power and confidence are characterised by ambivalence: there is no black-and-white view, just shades of grey. In part this is because of the co-existence of a sense of the economic opportunity that China represents on the one hand, and more or less submerged concerns over the challenges that China's growing comprehensive national power may increasingly pose on the other.

In Southeast Asia, there is a historical dimension to concerns over China's rise. In Vietnam's case, resistance to China's power has been a defining characteristic of national identity; Beijing's last attempt to enforce Vietnam's compliance using military force occurred less than 30 years ago. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, memories of relatively recent interference by Beijing through local ethnic Chinese minorities and communist parties along with the historical experience of Chinese suzerainty underlie contemporary distrust of China's strategic motives in the region. However, China's willingness to use hard power in support of its extensive territorial claims in the South China Sea since the 1970s has undermined its expressions of good intent towards Southeast Asian states. Vietnam has felt the brunt of China's maritime pressure.

There is a minority view in parts of the region – particularly Southeast Asia - that China's rise is positive to the extent that it injects greater multipolarity into the regional great power presence. In addition, South Korea, traditionally concerned with keeping Japan at bay, looks on China's rise with ambivalence despite Seoul's current status as a

key US ally. If Korea in the future was reunited following the Pyongyang regime's collapse, its foreign and security policy might be freed from present constraints. Whether this would lead to a closer alignment with China or simply a loosening of links with the US is impossible to predict.

Across the region, however, there is broad if implicit agreement that China's rise should be managed through this great power's integration into some form of regional order that would provide a context for Beijing to exercise its growing power responsibly and peacefully. The key question, though, concerns what sort of regional order this should be, and there is no consensus on this within the region. Nor is there agreement on how inclusive this regional order should be. There has been a trend towards expanding the scope of 'the Asia-Pacific' to include India (in large part as a counterweight to China within the emerging regional order). However, whether or not states with key roles in the Asia-Pacific's economy and security but lying beyond the traditional geographical definition of Asia and still possessing populations with ethnic European majorities – that is, the United States, Australia and New Zealand - have a legitimate place in the order remains controversial.

Components of the emerging regional order

There are three main ingredients in the emerging security order in the Asia-Pacific that are relevant to regional states' concerns with China: national diplomatic and military strategies, policies, doctrine and capabilities; bilateral and multilateral security arrangements between Asia-Pacific states, including 'non-Asian' powers; and institutional arrangements that engage China.

The key role that national strategy and policy plays in the regional order is, remarkably, often overlooked. For example, it is often claimed that ASEAN has prevented armed conflict among its members since it was founded in 1967. Leaving aside the fact that it ignores border clashes, stand-offs at sea and 'near-misses', and the parts played by the regional role of the US and other non-Asian powers, good luck and in most cases the absence of sufficiently important motive for conflict, this claim fails to take proper account of the role that prudent, restrained national leadership and national military capabilities aimed at deterrence have played in maintaining peace in Southeast Asia.

Similarly, national policies play leading roles in Asian states' responses to China's rise. These take the form not just of efforts to derive national advantages from China's economic rise, but also diplomatic and military policies that respond to perceived threats and opportunities implicit in China's rise as a major power in the region. For example, as Japan's security policies have become more extroverted since the 1990s, concern over China has often lurked behind the flimsy veneer of concern about North Korea as a justification for acquiring new defence capabilities. Moreover, over the last several years Vietnam has attempted to bolster its limited naval and air power to provide at least a military tripwire as China increases its pressure (not least through naval deployments) on Hanoi's claims in the Spratlys.

More often, though, national responses to China's rise have involved acquiescing in Beijing's strategies through bilateral arrangements. Several of Southeast Asia's weaker and smaller states, influenced primarily by China granting development aid without strings, have developed close, multi-dimensional bilateral relationships with China. Many observers – not least in the Philippines itself - viewed Manila's agreement on joint development in the vicinity of the Spratlys as evidence of capitulation to Beijing's economic blandishments for fear of jeopardizing bilateral ties. Few states in the region dare to help Taiwan in its quest for 'international space' and China severely criticized Singapore when its prime minister visited Taipei, despite a standing bilateral arrangement that acknowledged the city state's interest in maintaining its longstanding if unofficial bilateral political links.

Even the larger Asia-Pacific states, however, recognise that their relatively limited power potential means that they are ill-equipped to deal with China on a purely national basis. Concern over China's rise is by no means the only reason for regional states' interest in maintaining and developing politico-security cooperation with each other and with non-Asian powers, but it provides an increasingly powerful rationale. During the present decade, ASEAN members have attempted to lay the groundwork for intensified multilateral security cooperation amongst themselves through the mechanism of the ASEAN Political-Security Community and the related ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting, although these efforts have so far tended to highlight the obstacles in the way of closer intra-ASEAN collaboration.

However, it is within the framework of US security alliances and partnerships that more significant developments have taken place. China is never explicitly identified as the focus, but it is widely assumed that concern over Beijing's incipient regional assertiveness has provided the main stimulus for Washington's promotion of trilateral US-Japan-Australia security collaboration (and tentatively a quadrilateral format involving India), and efforts to 'multilateralize' other existing partnerships through mechanisms such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium and the Cobra Gold and CARAT exercise series.

Simultaneously, regional states have intensified efforts to enmesh China in inclusive multilateral institutional arrangements. The essential, if unstated, aim is to socialise Beijing into accepting regional norms of international behaviour, thus ensuring that China develops as a benign major power and responsible stakeholder in regional security that will not threaten other Asian states' interests. At the superficial level, China has indicated its acceptance of regional norms by acceding to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and by agreeing to the ASEAN-sponsored Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 1992.

Given the hugely disproportionate scale of China's power, however, engagement is necessarily a long-term process. Relevant institutional arrangements to promote this objective include formal dialogue mechanisms such as ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asian Summit, the impetus for all of which has largely come from within ASEAN. In the meantime, since 2007 China has already demonstrated its recognition of the significance of the pan-regional defence-focussed IISS Shangri-La

Dialogue by elevating its participation to vice-ministerial level. It also seems likely that ASEAN will attempt to engage China's defence establishment in regional security dialogue through the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) process. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal earlier in 2008 for an overarching Asia-Pacific Community potentially provides another mechanism for engaging China at the highest level of regional exchange on both economic and security matters.

Because of the inchoate status of what many politicians and analysts now refer to as the 'regional security architecture', as well as the continuing unfolding of Beijing's growing power and assertiveness, it is too early to judge the success of regional institutional arrangements in protecting other Asian states' interests in the face of China's rise. However, these arrangements constitute only part of a broader picture: Asian states' national strategies, and these states' enhanced security connections with each other and with the US are also important. Moreover, China is a global power, not just a regional power, and its broader relationship with the international system and with other major powers (primarily the US) will crucially affect its place in the Asia-Pacific regional order. The relative importance of these various elements that constitute the regional order – that is, which of them are more or less significant in terms of maintaining peace – is, however, impossible to estimate. It is clear, though, that China's rise is provoking a variety of security-related apprehensions that show no signs of diminishing. In these circumstances, maintaining a stable regional order – in which an architecture based on institutions has a part to play – will necessarily be a long-term process.

Europe's role: a footnote?

Since the 1990s, the European Union and its member states have become involved in several regional and inter-regional dialogue mechanisms whose ambit to a greater or lesser degree includes Asian security. Most importantly, these include the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM, which includes all EU members), the ASEAN-EU foreign ministers' meetings (all EU members), the ASEAN Regional Forum (the EU itself) and the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue (France, Germany and the UK). Involvement in these meetings is justified on various grounds. Two members of the UN Security Council P5 are European nuclear weapon powers, who still pretend to a global security role of sorts. Individual European states do have residual security commitments in Southeast Asia and to South Korea, and occasionally deploy relatively minor military forces to the region for exercises and training. European governments and companies have promoted themselves as important sources of military equipment for many Asian states. Europe and its member states have important economic stakes in the region, and common interests with Asian states in relation to transnational security concerns such as terrorism, WMD proliferation and the ramifications of climate change. So, Europe does possess tangible interests in Asian security.

However, the corollary of this – that Asian states see Europe as having a legitimate and significant role in the security of their region – is not necessarily true. Many Asian states –

notably China, but also Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia – remember the European colonial role in Asia with distaste. Europe’s strong focus on human rights issues and the promotion of democracy further complicates some Asian states’ attitudes towards cooperation on political and security issues. From many Asian viewpoints, it is evident that Europe’s focus remains above all on its own continent in terms of consolidating and codifying the post-Cold War expansion of the EU and, in security terms, managing problems on the union’s periphery, first in the Balkans and now in relation to a newly assertive Russia. At the same time, the lack of a strong, cohesive European identity in foreign and security policy, and a distinct lack of European capacity for force projection, undermines the prospect of the EU playing a significant security role in the Asia-Pacific. European states have certainly committed themselves heavily in Afghanistan in western Asia, but this effort appears likely to constitute a precedent for any direct or substantial involvement elsewhere in Asia in the foreseeable future.

The extent to which Europe may play a major role in the emerging Asia-Pacific regional security order seems, realistically, to be limited. It is often said that Europe’s niche contribution to Asian security dialogue lies in the realm of informed input regarding ‘soft’ security – essentially to do with economic, human, environmental and other ‘non-traditional’ issues. The EU and its members could nevertheless undertake rather more ambitious activities in future. Europe might have a potential if relatively minor part to play in the larger Asia-Pacific strategic picture, where some Asian states (Singapore, for instance) might welcome it as one of a number of counter-balances to China’s role as that rising superpower is engaged in regional security institutions. But for such a role to be credible, Europe will need to become more informed, cohesive and active in the Asia-Pacific political and security debates to which it already has access, and to develop a more convincing ability to exercise useful, concrete roles. The EU has already demonstrated some willingness to engage in niche conflict resolution and peace-monitoring roles, most notably in Aceh. More could perhaps be done along similar lines in the future.