



ONLINE LIBRARY

(www.onekhmer.org/onlinelibrary)

Title: China's Strategic Paradox Towards ASEAN

Name of Author	Cheunboran Chanborey
Name of University	Australian National University
Country of Study	Australia
Major	International Political and Strategic Studies
Degree	PhD
Course Title	International Political and Strategic Studies
Type of Document	Commentary-Contributor to Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS)
Year	2015

China's Strategic Paradox Towards ASEAN

Cheunboran Chanborey

China has promoted its bilateral relations with Southeast Asian nations since the mid-1990s, with the objective to create an enabling regional environment for China's economic development and to build trust with its Asian neighbors.

Beijing has also been proactive in engaging with ASEAN, actively participating in all ASEAN-led multilateral arrangements including the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus. More importantly, China and ASEAN have worked closely to manage the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. As a result, China and ASEAN adopted a landmark Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea in Phnom Penh in 2002. Consequently, tension in the disputed areas subsided.

Generally, China has been quite successful in exerting its soft power in the region, particularly in changing regional perceptions on the rising power of China from that of a threat to an opportunity, or in other words, from China being a dangerous dragon to a lovely panda.

Yet, the year 2009 witnessed increasing diplomatic rhetoric and military tensions in the South China Sea. Worse still, the territorial conflict caused a political stalemate during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012 as the Foreign Ministers failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in ASEAN's history.

It is widely believed that the tensions in the South China Sea are due to the growing assertiveness of China. Yet, the current situation is quite paradoxical. Beijing has patiently spent almost two decades building up its soft power in Southeast Asia. Consequently, China could be expected to remain benign in order to win the hearts and minds of its neighbors so that any attempt to circumscribe what would be perceived as its "righteous" rise could be curtailed.

There are several plausible answers to this paradox. They include (1) increasing nationalism in China, especially manifest on sensitive issues related to national sovereignty and territorial integrity; (2) a political strategy of the Chinese Communist leaders to distract public attention from domestic oppression to regional and international developments; (3) internal friction between civilian leaders and the military; and (4) the ambition of young generation Chinese for China to assume a more important role in the regional and international arena.

These arguments are sound. However, one development that must also be considered when discussing China's assertiveness in the Southeast Asian region is the US "pivot to Asia", which has been seen, at least in the eyes of Chinese strategists, as an attempt by Washington to contain rising China.

At the ARF meeting in Hanoi in 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared publicly that the US had a national interest in the safety of navigation in and flight over the South China Sea. Since then, tension has been unabated and the Philippines and

Vietnam have been more assertive both in their bilateral negotiations with China and in using ASEAN as a framework to deal with China. Manila and Hanoi might share the same conviction that time is actually on the Chinese side and that now is the right time to push for more compromise from Beijing, given the fact that China is not yet a full-fledged superpower and, more importantly, that the US is actively reengaging in Asia.

Against this backdrop, internal division within ASEAN was imminent. The 2012 incident in Phnom Penh was inevitable given the complexity of the regional context and that power competition between major powers was on the rise. The incident provided a wake-up call for ASEAN member states to reassess the situation and chart a new direction for the grouping. It was also critical for Chinese strategists to figure out the right strategy to employ toward ASEAN.

As a major power, China has a duty to reassure its neighbors of a peaceful rise. China should be cautious about its military posture. It is not in China's interest to flex its muscles or even to alter the status quo in the disputed region. Instead, Beijing should win the hearts and minds of countries in the region through the use of smart power, or carrots, rather than hard power, or sticks.

In order to promote trust and confidence, words must be backed by concrete actions. The finalization of the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea is a good start. Most definitely, a prosperous, cohesive ASEAN is in the interest of China.

For its part, ASEAN must focus on building a rules-based community and strengthening its unity if it wants to remain relevant. As far as the South China Sea is concerned, ASEAN claimant states must seize the opportunity to conclude the COC with China. The upcoming ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) and Related Meetings in Kuala Lumpur in early August 2015 are the right time to do so, in order to avert another possible stalemate during Laos's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN in 2016.

Most importantly, ASEAN must make clear to all major powers that a balancing game has no place in

the strategic calculations of ASEAN. Instead, ASEAN is an outward-looking Community that accommodates all, opposes none – not only with reference to China and the US but also to Japan, India, Australia, the EU and others. Maintaining neutrality and an omnidirectional state of equilibrium are key characteristics for ASEAN to be relevant in the complex and unpredictable geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific.

As for Cambodia, the South China Sea maritime dispute constitutes today's most difficult foreign policy dilemma, since China and ASEAN are equally important to Cambodia's security and development. In principle, Cambodia has only one strategic choice – building a good relationship, friendship, and partnership with all nation states. Cambodia must firmly uphold rules-based international relations and raise the banner of multilateralism.

However, as a small state in the increasingly turbulent region, Cambodia might have to compromise on these principles if its sovereignty and territorial integrity are threatened, and ASEAN and the international community cannot meet the security needs of the small kingdom.

Cheunboran Chanborey is a senior research fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS) and a PhD student at the Strategic and Defense Studies Centre, the Australian National University.