Chapter 5

Multitrack Diplomatic Approaches to Border and Territorial Disputes in Southeast Asia and Soft Balancing

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Multitrack Diplomacy and Security in Southeast Asia

Conducting security dialogues through multilateral frameworks in Southeast Asia has been a rather recent development. During the Cold War, the Asian security environment was poised with ideological divisions dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States, lingering deep-seated historical animosities among states and great differences in economic development. There was not adequate confidence and trust to engage in any major multinational regional cooperation in the security arena. On the other hand, the strategic environments of post-Cold-War Southeast and East Asia have been in a situation when various proposals for a more structured and inclusive institutional security architecture were designed to encourage an increased confidence among states and the overall readiness to conduct multilateral consultations. These processes have been in particular driven by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which faced a dilemma of how to position itself in the region in the early 1990s. The pressing concerns were the uncertainty of US presence and Washington’s future commitment to the region, in addition to apprehension over a rising China. At that time, ASEAN was not fully accommodating to US requests with regard to basing rights (as in the case of the Philippines not renewing the US lease at Subic Bay in 1991), and it was not fully engaging China within its frameworks (Acharya 2014; Emmers 2003; Simon 1996).

In response to these uncertainties, the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) were established to enable regional confidence-building through informal track-two mechanisms and to contribute to state-centric

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2 ASEAN acted in accordance with the 1967 Bangkok Declaration which stipulated that the foreign bases would be temporary and only the host countries would decide when to end the agreement.
interests within ASEAN, as well as to the newly created track-one framework – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. Thus, this proliferation of channels of multilateral discussions opened an opportunity for member states to moderate great power interests and create a more predictable and stable regional security environment, though both the United States and China were skeptical of these processes at the beginning (Kuik Cheng-Chwee 2005; Mack in Malone and Yuen 2003; Leifer 1996; Garrett and Glaser 1994; Shirk 1994; Yan and Chu 1994).

The primary focus of this chapter is testing whether ASEAN through its government-to-government and non-official multilateral structures began to “socialize” China towards regionally responsible behavior and a commitment to shared norms. Consequently, this work contributes to a better understanding of contemporary soft balancing behavior, which is used when states try to limit the power of a hegemonic actor or a state perceived as threatening. It further provides a case study of the use of regional organizations and the extent to which the engagement of regional powers, China in particular, is based on multilateral regional frameworks. The case of China’s change of policy from bilateral to multilateral involvement and engagement of the “ASEAN Way”, as a distinctive set of norms upon which decision-making and consensus building are based, in the 1990s is striking. It demonstrates an altered approach to Beijing’s interactions in forums where it is active. China has benefited from its participation in the ARF and CSCAP by creating networks of dialogue and gaining multiple opportunities to discuss economic cooperation with ASEAN member states.

The discussion below directly responds to the major debate as to whether China was socialized and gradually internalized ASEAN’s norms of behavior (Hines 2013; Ba 2006, pp. 157–179), or whether China cleverly manipulated its relations with Southeast Asian nations to reshape the regional order (Wuthnow, Li and Qi 2012; Goldstein 2007; Johnston 2004; Mearsheimer 2001). It concludes that China initially embraced multilateralism as a measure to improve its image in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident, and ASEAN (Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand).

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3 “ASEAN Way”, a style of diplomacy or code of conduct, evolved in intra-ASEAN. It is characterized by soft institutionalization, with six norms: sovereign equality, the non-recourse to use of force and the peaceful settlement of conflict, non-interference and non-intervention, the non-involvement of ASEAN to address unresolved bilateral conflict between members, quiet diplomacy, mutual respect and tolerance (see Connors, Davidson and Dosch 2004, p. 81).

4 For China, the most important forums are the meetings of ASEAN + 3 and those under the umbrella of the ARF, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA).