

Chapter 12

The perils and prospects of dragon riding: reassurance and 'costly signals' in China–ASEAN relations

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From any vantage point, the shift in relations between China and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the past four decades has been nothing less than remarkable. Branded by Beijing at its inception in 1967 as an anti-China and anti-communist regional grouping, ASEAN, in 2007, was openly acknowledging 'the important role that China has been playing in regional and global affairs' and the 'significant' contributions that close China–ASEAN relations had brought 'to peace, stability and prosperity in the region and the world at large' (ASEAN 2007).

At the risk of oversimplification, contemporary theoretical assessments of the evolution of China–ASEAN relations largely coalesce around two main propositions. On one hand, social constructivists argue that normative suasion and change as well as regional identity formation have taken place as a result of efforts by both parties at complex engagement with one another (Acharya 1996; Ba 2006; Johnston and Evans 1999). By and large, these efforts in part attribute the stabilisation and enhancement of China–ASEAN ties to the shared reliance on the non-contractual, non-confrontational, consensus-seeking and process-oriented diplomatic convention advanced by ASEAN—namely, the so-called 'ASEAN way'. They highlight China's transition from its initial mistrust of regional arrangements, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, as nefarious strategies aimed at encircling China, to its keen embrace of such and of multilateral diplomacy at large (Johnston 2003; Kuik 2005). For social constructivists, the ASEAN way constitutes a 'counter-Realpolitik' philosophy of regional security, which promotes reassuring behaviour over traditional Realpolitik approaches that emphasise competition and coercion (Acharya 1997; Johnston 2003:123).¹

On the other hand, realists and English School pluralists are considerably less sanguine about prospects for regional peace. They see rising China's external security calculations as symptomatic of an emerging grand strategy, the key aim of which is to diminish the prospect of its ascent being hindered by other powers

in a multipolar strategic environment (Swaine and Tellis 2000; Goldstein 2005). Thus understood, despite China's 'acquiescence' to membership in ASEAN-centred regional arrangements, they question ASEAN's ability to elicit collaborative behaviour from a hegemonic China that will not bow easily to external pressure (Emmers 2001; Leifer 1996; Lim 1998). Others question the potential gains purportedly accruable to China from its participation in ASEAN-based regionalism and multilateral diplomacy in general (Wang 2000). For them, the ASEAN way is not without merit, having provided, in a limited fashion, a relatively useful 'rudimentary code of interstate conduct' that for all intents and purposes continues to guide regional relations (Leifer 1986:151–2). It remains, however, essentially an avoidance strategy for holding at bay ambitious regional aspirations for cooperation and integration that encourage interventionism and emasculate sovereignty norms (Jones and Smith 2007).

Against this backdrop, characterisations of China–ASEAN relations that treat power and reassurance as mutually exclusive categories are unlikely to be helpful for grasping a fuller picture of that complex and nuanced relationship. To be sure, social constructivists do not discount material power, nor do realists and English School pluralists disregard reassurance. That said, in advancing the ASEAN way as 'counter-Realpolitik', social constructivists inadvertently play down the softer aspects of power-balancing behaviour, which could assume the form of political balancing and/or communal/cooperative balancing (Emmers 2003; Khong 2004; Tan with Cossa 2001). Such balancing does not necessarily have to involve China and ASEAN—at least not directly. More likely, ASEAN could tacitly use surrogates—for instance, the United States and/or India—to politically balance China (Batabyal 2006; Goh 2007–08). By reducing China's strategy of reassurance and accommodation—and, of course, 'soft power'—to purely utilitarian calculation and instrumental logic, realist explanations tend to presuppose reassurance as an essentially short to intermediate-term approach, which Beijing will conceivably discard for an aggressive approach once it has acquired material power capabilities commensurate with its deeper (and possibly darker) strategic aspirations.

Without taking anything away from these important insights, this chapter offers a modest proposition that seeks to avoid exclusive treatments of power, on one hand, and reassurance on the other. In this respect, the notion of 'security seeking', despite its conceptual problems, seems a useful framework from which to analyse the evolution of China–ASEAN relations, especially because of the concept's sensitivity to power and reassurance. As part of their efforts to reassure other states about the nature of their intentions, security-seeking states implement a policy of 'costly signalling' (Kydd 2005). Costly signalling is the key mechanism that makes reassurance possible through the making of significant gestures by the parties involved that serve to prove to all each other's trustworthiness. In the context of multilateral regional arrangements that are not defined by a malign

hegemony, interstate security cooperation will likely result only if an element of trust is present. It has been argued that states can and do cooperate solely on the basis of self-interest (Oye 1986), although the strength of such utilitarianism-based claims tends to falter especially vis-à-vis Asia, where longstanding cultural enmities and negative historical memories combine with existing security dilemmas to render the pursuit of security cooperation therein difficult. Further, the region's enduring preoccupation with confidence building—and apparent inability or unwillingness to move towards preventive diplomacy, in the case of the ARF (Garofano 2002)—underscores the significance trust and reassurance have to Asia's international relations, and specifically China–ASEAN relations.

In this respect, it could be argued that China has done a fair bit of signalling to its Asian neighbours, especially via its concerted 'charm offensive', although whether that has been a costly endeavour for China is debatable.² To the extent that China's participation in ASEAN-centred regionalisms is emblematic of strategic restraint on Beijing's part, it could be said that Chinese assurance has indeed been costly.³ For its part, ASEAN has also sought to reassure China, chiefly through a longstanding engagement that relies on the ASEAN way. Some of the signals that ASEAN members issued could be construed as potentially costly to their respective national situations, although these could also have been offset by other considerations (Goh 2005, 2007–08).

ASEAN's engagement of China: from the cold to the fold?

Getting the People's Republic in from the revolutionary cold and into the regional fold, as it were, has long been ASEAN's regional 'game plan'. The strategy (to the extent it can be so called) has essentially involved extending the ASEAN model of regional security—the ASEAN *modus operandi* of soft regionalism and process-driven institutionalism—to the wider Asia-Pacific region, and providing great and regional powers a stake in the preservation and promotion of the peace and prosperity of Asia (Indorf 1987; Leifer 1996). ASEAN's regionalist approach to engaging China has been informed in part by the collective historical experience of the ASEAN member states in engaging post-'Confrontation' Indonesia. In this regard, the association's model of security regionalism can be understood as a historically tried-and-tested strategy that committed New Order Indonesia to the region through an ASEAN framework that not only provided Jakarta a regional leadership role but concomitantly assured recognition of sovereignty and non-interference for the other member nations. In like fashion, the ASEAN model would permit the endorsement of China as a status-quo leader—though not necessarily ahead of America in the power hierarchy—and responsible power/stakeholder in the web of regional institutions and ties within which it is enmeshed (Foot 2006; Goh 2005, 2007–08).

Perhaps more than any other region, South-East Asia has long been susceptible to the influence of and intrusion by the great powers. Although the end of the Cold War brought relative peace and security to South-East Asia, the geopolitical milieu of the region since the early 1990s has been shaped largely by several key developments—namely, American ambivalence regarding its strategic commitments to the region (Acharya and Tan 2006) and the rise of China as an economic, diplomatic and, somewhat less convincingly, military power (Goldstein 2005; Loo 2007; Shambaugh 2002; Swaine and Tellis 2000). A third development is the rise of regionalism in the form of ASEAN. A crucial part of the association's story has been about facilitating regional ties with external powers as much as it has been about ensuring intraregional stability (Emmers 2003; Goh 2007–08). In this regard, ASEAN regionalism has been shaped by the tension between its internal and external dimensions, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the association's longstanding efforts to engage China.

It has been argued that the contemporary Asian security order is hegemonic in kind, with China at its epicentre and ASEAN as well as other Asian countries relating to Beijing in suzerain-vassal terms (Kang 2003). Such an interpretation presupposes an effective 'bandwagoning', en masse, by Asian states with China—a claim contested by others, who point to efforts by Asian states to balance China or enmesh it within a multilateral web of regional relations and architectures (Acharya 2003–04; Goh 2005, 2007–08). Crucially, if the extant regional security discourse is anything to go by, it is more likely that ASEAN member states, despite their shared acknowledgment and relative 'acceptance' of China's growing power and influence, see China's rise as a major economic and security concern, and concur on the need for the United States—despite rising anti-Americanism within some South-East Asian societies in recent times (Liow and Tan 2008)—to remain actively involved in Asia and maintain a stable balance of power therein, provided America's efforts complement and enhance ASEAN's own initiatives on regional security (Acharya 1996). Thus understood, the association's engagement of China is essentially provisional in that it involves the integration of China into an ASEAN-defined regional order, one in which the United States plays a leading role. In this respect, while the notion of China as a 'responsible stakeholder' of the international system originated with the Americans—former US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, to be exact—it is an orientation with which ASEAN security planners can agree, as long as it coheres with their own regional ideas and praxis.

It is likely that ASEAN's complex yet provisional engagement of China has had a part to play in facilitating China's successive permutations from revolutionary regime to normal state to, if only embryonic, responsible great power. This qualified contention does not insist that ontological priority be granted ASEAN as the causal agent of change. Reciprocity played a significant part as both parties learned to accommodate one another. By the 1970s onwards, China had, in fits

and starts, volitionally begun its incremental shift away from ideology and towards pragmatism in its conduct in international affairs. This transition has more or less continued throughout the post-Cold War period to the present. In theoretical terms, it could be said that the evolution of Chinese foreign policy through successive political leadership—from that of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin and now Hu Jintao—reflects a China in transition from a quasi-expansionist state, at least in terms of its ideological support for communist movements throughout South-East Asia during the Cold War, to a 'security seeker' rather than an 'offensive realist' aggrandiser (Li 2004; Tang 2007). Arguably, ASEAN's 'China policy'—at times robust and concerted, at other times ambivalent and disjointed—played a relatively significant role in assuaging China's concerns about perceived risks of its assimilation into the post-Cold War regional order. To be sure, other factors were equally important, not least China's changing assessment, under Deng's leadership, that nuclear war with America was not inevitable, and its pragmatic emphasis on national economic development, which essentially denoted a growing reliance on and support for the US-led liberal international economic order (Chen 2008). Indeed, other than occasional hints of bellicosity where cross-straits affairs are concerned, China clearly prizes the stability and prosperity of the region, and to that extent it has largely supported the regional status quo.

In this respect, insofar as ASEAN regionalism has principally been about accommodation rather than exclusion, confidence building rather than the enforcement of rules and reassurance rather than confrontation, it is a brand of regionalism that, at least in rhetoric, resonates positively with Beijing's own 'five principles of coexistence' first articulated at the Asian–African Conference in 1955, and, of considerably more recent vintage, its 'new security concept', formally introduced to South-East Asians at an ASEAN meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan in 2002 (Deng and Wang 2005; Tan and Acharya 2008). The ASEAN way of consensus, consultation and non-interference has been celebrated—at least until the region-wide financial crisis of 1997—as a brand of regionalism that works, even though it has also gained notoriety as a poor excuse for a persistent lack of political will among member nations to advance and implement express regional goals (Jones and Smith 2007). Elsewhere it has been branded as chimerical (Nischalke 2000). It is this very model of regional security—a diplomatic approach predicated on accommodation and 'argumentative persuasion' (Adler 1997; Antolik 1990; Ba 2006; Checkel 2001; Risse 2000)—that hitherto has arguably succeeded in allaying Chinese suspicions and convincing Beijing of the ostensible value and virtue of ASEAN-based regionalism.

That said, bumps and potholes of all sorts line that road and it remains to be seen how successfully ASEAN and China can negotiate these obstacles as they arise. Further, the ASEAN way is itself evolving—ironically, in response to new challenges confronting the region, not least the rise of China—which could

complicate future China–ASEAN ties. In this respect, how the advent of the ASEAN Charter, unveiled in November 2007, and the continuing evolution of the South-East Asian region towards a regional security community could conceivably complicate ASEAN’s engagement strategy are questions of concern not only where the future of China–ASEAN relations is concerned, but the future peace and stability of Asia.

Strange bedfellows, 1980s

It bears remembering that ASEAN at its inception in 1967 was branded by China as an anti-Chinese, anti-communist alliance (Pollard 1970). The association’s engagement of China began during the Cold War years (Sen 2002; Turley and Race 1980; Weatherbee et al. 2005). That Indonesia was one of the first countries to officially recognise the People’s Republic in 1950 likely facilitated ties, despite Indonesia’s troubles with communism in the mid 1960s (Sukma 1999). Despite the pervasive concern about the prospect of Beijing’s ideological influence on internal communist subversion within South-East Asian societies—especially in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore—the Third Indochina War, which lasted throughout the 1980s, saw a cementing of the China–ASEAN political relationship as a consequence of China’s need for ASEAN’s diplomatic backing against China’s main Cold War adversaries, Vietnam and the Soviet Union, and ASEAN’s commensurate reliance on Chinese support in its diplomatic effort to prevent non-communist South-East Asia from falling into Vietnamese hands (Acharya 1996; Ba 2006:162). Crucial developments such as the Sino–Soviet split during the late 1960s and the Sino–American rapprochement of the early 1970s likely contributed, if only indirectly, to ameliorating concerns among ASEAN states regarding collaboration with China.⁴

In a rejoinder to Washington’s rapprochement overture, Beijing apparently surprised the Americans—and probably ASEAN countries—by insisting it had always been Chinese policy ‘to maintain friendly relations with all states, regardless of social system, on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ (Holdridge 1997:25). This proved a crucial gesture by the Chinese in signalling their intent for rapprochement and cooperation. In a manner of speaking, Beijing also signalled its ‘acceptance’ of Washington’s policy of geopolitical triangulation and its readiness to play this game to enhance its and Washington’s strategic interests at Moscow’s expense (Biesner 2007). After the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on Christmas Day 1978, the Chinese signalled their willingness to cooperate with ASEAN, with the latter reciprocating in kind. Mutual reassurance arguably provided a basis for China–ASEAN cooperation against a perceived common aversion. Indeed, China actively sought, more than reassurance alone, ASEAN’s involvement, as evidenced by repeated Vietnamese warnings against Chinese efforts at ‘promoting confrontation’ between the ASEAN states and Vietnam. In fact, Hanoi insisted that rather than pressuring

Vietnam, ASEAN should pressure China to find a solution to the Cambodian question (Chang 1985:141). In this respect, *de facto* China–ASEAN cooperation against Vietnam emerged as a function of mutual expedience. Nevertheless, that very basis for cooperation was removed after the termination of the Cold War and the settlement of the Cambodian conflict.

It has been argued, fairly or otherwise, that growing Chinese influence in post-Cold War Asia has arisen in relation to a concomitant diminution of American presence in or attention to Asia (Sutter 2005). This perception has led to a chorus of Asian voices, South-East Asian ones included, urging greater attention from Washington on the region (Kwa and Tan 2001). That said, it could be argued that the emergence of China–ASEAN ties during the 1980s, apart from the dynamics directly related to the Third Indochina War, was also partly attributable to regional perceptions regarding the draw down in American involvement in South-East Asia after the Vietnam War.

Decade of 'mundane accomplishments': 1990s

From as early as 1989, China, it could be said, morphed from strategic partner to strategic competitor for ASEAN, with the settlement of the Cambodian conflict and normalisation of ties between Beijing and various South-East Asian states, beginning with Indonesia. That said, China was less a competitor—if by this we mean a countervailing power—than a hegemonic presence for the considerably weaker ASEAN states, whose relations with China focused principally on managing their respective vulnerabilities and dependencies vis-à-vis the latter (Ba 2005). If anything, the sheer enormity of the Chinese presence in the region was something that could be neither ignored nor, for that matter, refused by China's considerably smaller and/or weaker regional counterparts. As Michael Mandelbaum once mused about America: 'If you are the 800-pound gorilla, you are bound to be concentrating on your bananas and everyone else is concentrating on you' (Sanger 1999). In the same way, no amount of protestations to the effect that China's rise in the post-Cold War period is inherently 'peaceful' will likely convince all South-East Asians to be completely reassured about Chinese intentions, not least when China's prodigious growth might (or, for some, has already) come at the ASEAN region's expense (Wu et al. 2002).⁵

Indeed, so acute was the perception of the threat that China apparently posed to ASEAN states in the immediate post-Cold War period that the prospect of China resorting to direct military coercion in support of its territorial claims in the South China Sea could not be discounted (Leifer 1991). In this respect, instances of China's territorial disputes with several ASEAN states—with the Philippines over Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal and with Vietnam over their land and sea borders in the 1990s—have since become, for the association, a stark reminder of unwarranted presumptions about China's goodwill. If anything, Chinese actions in the South China Sea, correctly or otherwise, gave

credence to regional worries that the ultimate strategic objective of China would be, in the words of a Malaysian maritime specialist, to 'convert the entire South China Sea into a Chinese lake' (Acharya 1996:199). This thinking has clearly not gone away. For example, a recent study argues that Chinese strategic thinkers are predisposed to regard the South China Sea, through a Mahanian lens, 'as a preserve where commercial and political imperatives demand dominant [Chinese] naval power'; in short, China views the South China Sea as its own 'Caribbean' (Holmes and Yoshihara 2006:79). A difficulty complicating reassurance efforts has to do with China's lack of transparency concerning its security policy, which has hampered attempts by ASEAN security planners to form assessments of Chinese intentions and likely actions. More crucial than prospects for potential conflict, however, is that all sides have by and large sought to avoid tensions and promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation (Lee 1997:251). Elsewhere, it has been argued that the South China Sea has remained primarily a political rather than a military consideration due to China's desire to accommodate South-East Asian concerns and the limited naval capabilities of the various claimants (Emmers 2005).

Remarkably, it was against this backdrop of strategic asymmetry and pervasive regional circumspection regarding China's strategic intentions, and initial Chinese reservations about participating in ASEAN-centred regional arrangements, that marked improvement in China-ASEAN relations during the 1990s nevertheless occurred. It reflected the growing agreement on questions of regional peace, prosperity and security and the ways those questions were best approached. Such progress was, however, measured best not in terms of 'headline-making cooperative ventures' but by a process of gradualism or 'mundane accomplishments'—that is, various minor achievements in the minutiae of functional cooperation (Ba 2006:160; Khong 1997:291). A variety of parallel frameworks for dialogue emerged within the decade. Beginning in 1991, when Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the twenty-fourth ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, China became a consultative partner (the next year), joined the ARF as a founding member (in 1994) and 'graduated' to become official dialogue partner of ASEAN (in 1996). A year later, the first ever China-ASEAN summit was conducted in Malaysia, where President Jiang and his ASEAN counterparts issued a joint statement on the collective decision to establish a partnership of good neighbourliness and mutual trust between the two parties, thereby providing the groundwork for the so-called 'Joint Declaration of the PRC and ASEAN State Leaders: A strategic partnership for peace and prosperity', announced in 2003.

What conceivably led the Chinese to set aside their initial reservations about joining and participating in the myriad regional arrangements, particularly the ARF, could be partly attributed to the process-oriented ASEAN way, the holistic emphasis of which, on the common search for new areas of agreement rather

than on contractually driven cooperation, likely persuaded Beijing that its interests would not be discounted. The very principles of the ASEAN way, the avoidance by ASEAN states of discourse that defines China as a threat, and so forth, have clearly resonated well with China. As Alice Ba (2006:160) argued, the association's pursuit of 'complex engagement'—'informal, non-confrontational, open-ended and mutual'—likely swayed China to reconsider its relations with ASEAN, to view ASEAN more positively and to be more responsive to ASEAN's concerns. The readiness to grant China a say was clearly apparent, for instance, when the ARF acceded to China's demand that the third phase of regional security cooperation as envisaged in the 1995 ARF Concept Paper—'conflict resolution'—be amended to 'the elaboration of approaches to conflict' (Tan et al. 2002:8). In all this, ASEAN 'second-track' diplomacy has arguably facilitated the building of mutual confidence and the dissemination/socialisation of regional conventions and norms (Katsumata 2003; Kraft 2000; Simon 2002; Tan 2007).

That China shares in the so-called illiberal values held by many if not most of the ASEAN countries has likely worked in the latter's favour (Kivimäki 2001). In this regard, it is possible that the controversial 'Asian values' debate of the 1990s, sparked by European criticisms of ASEAN and the rejoinders to that by some Asian elites—several from Singapore (Jones 1994)—aided ASEAN's engagement effort, not least by proving to China that ASEAN was no lackey of the West. In this respect, ASEAN involvement in that debate—which had quietly dissipated by 1997 thanks to the Asian financial crisis—arguably served as a costly signal of sorts from ASEAN to China regarding the association's 'credibility'.⁶ For its part, China's growing involvement in and enthusiasm for ASEAN-based regionalism could also be viewed as a signal of its willingness to cooperate. More crucially, it could be seen as Chinese willingness to exercise strategic restraint (Ikenberry 2001).

In this regard, ASEAN's engagement of China, in the hope that the Chinese will embrace regionalism and thereby apply self-moderation in the regional interest, is not without precedent. Here, the experience of the association's own formation, and Indonesia's role in that, has vital significance. It has been argued, for example, that Indonesia's long-preferred formula of 'regional solutions to regional problems' has found little support among fellow ASEAN members, who view the Indonesian formula as a euphemism for Indonesian hegemony in South-East Asia and as such value access to external powers as sources of countervailing power (Leifer 1989:5–6, 2000:109). If anything, Malaysia's and Singapore's experience of confrontation with Indonesia in the mid 1960s rendered difficult any ready acceptance on their part of such a formula. Thus understood, ASEAN's formation in 1967 required not only Indonesia's agreement, but its readiness to forgo its hegemonic aspirations. In this respect, it has been argued that President Suharto of Indonesia understood the importance of restoring regional confidence

and stability through locking Indonesia 'into a structure of multilateral partnership and constraint that would be seen as a rejection of hegemonic pretensions' (Leifer 1996:13). That Jakarta could be 'coaxed' into joining ASEAN indicated its willingness to cooperate with neighbouring states seeking to impose institutional constraints on it. More than anything else, Suharto realised the significance of reassuring his fellow ASEAN members by demonstrating good neighbourliness towards them (Narine 1998).

Crucially, to the extent that this example of 'political self-denial in the interest of regional order' on Indonesia's part can be 'emulated within the wider Asia-Pacific is central to any parallel between ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum' (Leifer 1996:13). In other words, as an ASEAN-centred expression of pan-Asian security regionalism, the ARF is thereby an extension of ASEAN's model of regional security, not only because it relies on the ASEAN way in its deliberations, but because the Indonesian example of strategic restraint via regionalism has become the de facto model for integrating hegemonic China into the regional order. It was Indonesia's signal of its willingness to collaborate with its neighbours, at the expense of its own regional aspirations, that served as a key foundation for the success of ASEAN regionalism. In return, Indonesia received recognition from fellow ASEAN members of its *primus inter pares* status within the association. Has the Indonesian example proved a noteworthy precedent for China to emulate? According to one analyst, 'Beijing's move to involve itself in ASEAN activities since the early 1990s was part of the country's "good-neighbourliness" [*mulin zhengce*] policy that aimed at strengthening its ties with the neighbouring countries in the wake of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989', rather than a new orientation in the conduct of Chinese foreign policy (Kuik 2005:102). Whether the Indonesian precedent has influenced Chinese behaviour towards South-East Asia is uncertain. What seems clear enough, however, is ASEAN's apparent belief that the Chinese penchant for good neighbourliness and strategic restraint is something that deserves strong encouragement and reinforcement, with the promise of regional recognition of China's proper place as a regional leader, but one very much within an ASEAN-centred framework. It amounts to an invitation to China to assume its place in the regional order as a responsible stakeholder on ASEAN's terms.

Intensification of relations: 2000–08

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen an intensification of China–ASEAN ties that builds on the developments of the previous decade. In 2002, Chinese goodwill led to the signing of the Joint Declaration of ASEAN and China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues and the Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea. The DOC was not quite a real regional code of conduct, as some ASEAN countries had hoped for, but it constituted a step in the right direction (Buszynski 2003). Both

sides agreed at their 2007 bilateral summit to expedite progress towards the establishment of a regional code of conduct. The other crucial development of 2002 was the agreement to establish the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA). The CAFTA deal clearly caught the Japanese off-guard, leading to Tokyo's attempt to catch up with the Chinese in 2005 by negotiating an ASEAN–Japan Free Trade Area, formally known as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership (Chirathivat 2002; Joint Declaration of the Leaders of ASEAN and Japan on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership, <<http://www.aseansec.org/13190.htm>>; Tongzon 2005; Wong and Chan 2003). As mentioned earlier, ASEAN and China inked their Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in 2003.

The evolution of Chinese diplomacy towards the ASEAN region from the 1990s to the present has been something to behold. From an initial distrust of multilateralism to becoming a sophisticated multilateralist, China has successfully transformed itself from past revolutionary pariah to present status-quo power. In the diplomatic–strategic arena, Beijing has advanced, with relative success, the idea that its rise to power is an essentially 'peaceful' development that does not threaten others. In the international economic arena, it has supported the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and promoted unilateral and multilateral liberalisation (Sally 2006). As Cornell historian Jian Chen (2008:148–9) has noted, 'China, in continuing its own course of development, found it necessary to establish an identity that would allow it to appear as an "insider" in the US/West-dominated international system while, at the same time, emphasising its unique contribution to the world's peace, stability and prosperity.' Indeed, so careful has China been in downplaying its ascendancy that it assiduously avoids any fanfare for its soft-power policy for fear that it could be used by Western quarters as evidence to support the purported existence of a 'China threat' (Li 2008:23).

Arguably, to the extent that Chinese reassurance has succeeded in its aims, ASEAN countries today generally regard China 'as a good neighbour, a constructive partner, a careful listener, and a non-threatening regional power' (Shambaugh 2004–05:64). To be sure, Chinese circumspection over the inauguration of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 caused a division of sorts between those in support of the EAS and those who favoured ASEAN+3 as the appropriate regional vehicle to establish the proposed East Asian Community (Kawai and Wignaraja 2007; Malik 2005). There are, however, indications that beyond the rhetoric, Beijing is seriously prepared to countenance the EAS as a possible framework for regional economic integration, notwithstanding its express preference for ASEAN+3.⁷

That China has continued its policy of reassurance towards the ASEAN region despite the proclivity of South-East Asian countries to strategically hedge between China and the United States is a good indication of Chinese restraint

and appreciation for South-East Asians' security conundrums and choices. China likewise needs ASEAN to ensure a peaceful environment in order to continue with her modernisation, as well as to 'prevent any possibility of encirclement to contain her in the future' (Wanandi 2004). It is unlikely that ASEAN will revise its overall regionalism strategy, whether in South-East Asia for managing intramural relations among ASEAN states, or in the wider Asian region for managing relations with major powers including China. At the intra-South-East Asian level, concerns about the rise of China and India have led ASEAN to take seriously regional institutionalism and community formation, as evidenced by the inauguration of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007 and, as the Vientiane Action Plan would have it, the establishment of the ASEAN Community (with distinct security, economic and socio-cultural facets) by 2020. Failure to render ASEAN more robust, so the logic goes, will incapacitate its ability to deal, competitively as well as cooperatively, with external powers.

Future ties: trouble ahead?

This chapter has argued that a mutual interest in seeking security has motivated ASEAN and China towards a strategy of reassurance and accommodation vis-à-vis each other. Ultimately, the continued success of ASEAN's brand of regionalism in ensuring that China's peaceful commitment to the regional status quo depends on whether problems that might arise in future China-ASEAN ties will be managed and resolved. As noted earlier, the ASEAN way is itself evolving—ironically, in response to new challenges confronting the region, not least the rise of China—which could complicate future China-ASEAN ties. The strength of extant China-ASEAN relations has largely been predicated on mutual adherence to and advocacy of the ASEAN way of consensus, consultation and non-interference. These very conventions, however, are ostensibly under review today as ASEAN acquires a legal identity and continues to evolve towards a regional security community. Whether this transformation will complicate the association's engagement strategy is an open question with implications not only for the future of China-ASEAN relations, but for the peace and stability of Asia. To be sure, the quality and extent of ASEAN's transformation remains debatable.

On the economic front, despite the optimism surrounding the CAFTA, nagging doubts remain about whether the paradoxes that accompany the pact can be resolved. Former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has argued that 'the more interlocked the economies of China and ASEAN are, the better it is for the long-term relationship between China and ASEAN, and to that extent the CAFTA is good news' ('ASEAN, China plan FTA', *The Straits Times*, 7 November 2001, p. 1). It has also been argued that given the evident sluggishness in negotiations within ASEAN+3, the potential significance of the CAFTA is thereby enhanced (Liang 2007:10). Given that the ASEAN Free Trade Area and ASEAN Economic Community are not expected to be implemented until 2015—indeed, some think

it will be more than 20 years before the two are fully operational—there is, however, every possibility that the implementation of the CAFTA, anticipated by 2010, could prove detrimental for some of the economies of the ASEAN region, whose own free trade areas will not be ready for another five years.⁸ Further, the CAFTA has been viewed by some as a political or diplomatic but not an economic pact, and to that extent it is uncertain whether the promised economic benefits will ever be realised (Cai 2003; Hund 2003; Sheng 2005).

China might have come in from the cold, but whether it will remain willingly within the fold of various ASEAN regionalisms—that is, as a committed supportive participant—is open to question.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Not all constructivist analysts share this more or less optimistic interpretation—for example, Haacke (2003) and Narine (2004).

² It has been implied obliquely that China's international efforts to win hearts and minds might not have been as successful in South Asia, where Chinese investments have been relatively minimal (Niazi 2005).

³ On America's resort to an institutional strategy of strategic restraint after the end of the Cold War, see Ikenberry (2001).

⁴ S. Rajaratnam, Singapore's first foreign minister, hinted at this in his broad-ranging reflection on ASEAN's historical development and new challenges in the post-Cold War world (Rajaratnam 1992).

⁵ For a contrarian view arguing that the ASEAN region's apparent loss of economic investment to China is grossly exaggerated, see Ravenhill (2006).

⁶ Not all ASEAN member states likely agreed to the concept of Asian values, not least the Philippines.

⁷ This author's personal communication with Professors Su Hao and Cai Penghong, leading Chinese security analysts, in Singapore in January 2008.

⁸ This point was made by Richard Martin, Managing Director of IMA Asia, at the Southeast Asia: The Next Phase Conference, organised by the Lowy Institute for International Policy, 6 July 1997, Sydney. See also Holst and Weiss (2004).