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Security Issues Between China and Southeast Asian: What Problems are they Facing and How to Solve Them?

by Dao Shulin

Introduction

China and Southeast Asian countries are close neighbors with long-standing traditional friendship. Bilateral relations, however, once experienced twists and turns over the Cold War years. The end of the Cold War is, therefore, brought about ever-closer bilateral economic/trade exchanges and security dialogue.

Yet some problems, security issues in particular, still linger, hindering further development of friendly bilateral relations. They are mostly due to the sequels of the Cold War, such as: (1) the new world order has not yet been built, and in this “particular period”, the new problems are constantly emerging while some old ones have still been existing, and the changing security environments of Southeast Asian and China also have been bringing some problems; (2) the concepts of the Cold War are still haunting and influencing the thoughts of some people in the region; and (3) misunderstanding fomented by the Cold War and some historical problems have become one key barrier factor affecting exchange and communication between two parties. How to adopt a correct attitude
towards these issues and handle them is a important mission that bearing on not only their relationship but also the stability and developments in the region. Their amicable solution takes on great significance.

Post-Cold War Asia-Pacific Security Situation

1. Current overall security posture in Asia-Pacific

Generally speaking, Asia-Pacific has entered a relatively stable period today, with peace, cooperation and development as the main trends. Former hot spots engineered by the super powers have been cooling down; regional economies are rapidly growing, leading, to unprecedented economic/trade cooperation. The main features are as follows:

(1) A new pattern "international pluralism under two systems" has taken shape in Asia-Pacific, with the United States, Japan, Russia, China and ASEAN constituting the major players. Regional strategic forces are thus multilateral balanced with scattered power centers and heightening interaction and interdependence.

(2) Establishment of diversified mechanisms of security dialogue at all levels has been put on the agenda. At present, bilateral and multilateral security dialogues have been carried out on a full scale. In Asia-Pacific, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has actually developed into a main venue for multilateral security dialogues.

(3) Significant adjustments have been made in each local countries' regional security strategy with the focus on improving self-defense capability. Former bipolar US-Soviet security arrangement has changed qualitatively together with regional military postures. Indigenous countries are readjusting their regional security strategies. Many of them are speeding up the step of defense modernization and enhancing their military strength.

(4) All regional countries have without exception listed economic development and regional economic cooperation as top of priorities.

(5) There are still some latent crises in the region, showed by
uncertainties in some countries' future trends, instabilities in international relations, inconsistencies in strategic thinking and policies toward Asia-Pacific Region, such as the political trends of Japan and Russia are still unclear, the relationships among the five forces in the region still have not put in order, the vestiges of the Cold War's ideology and conception of hegemonies and power politics still have a broad market, some hot spots often meet with setback, and disputes over territories and ethnic and religious problems frequently take place among some relevant countries, just like the row flaring up between Japan and South Korea over some isles in the Sea of Japan claimed by the two allied countries, which had their tension escalated. Those all would affect the stability of the region.

2. Security environment for China and Southeast Asia

(1) Changes in Southeast Asian security environment

The end of the Cold War has brought about changes in Southeast Asian security environment in the following aspects:

First, contention and confrontation between Washington and Moscow came to an end. Now the US, Japan, China and ASEAN possess vital economic/security interests in this area and have become the key forces for safeguarding regional peace and stability. ASEAN nations, with their growing influence, intend to be the masters of Southeast Asian affairs themselves.

Second, the two regional blocs, ASEAN and Indo-China begin to cooperate rather than confront with each other; integration of Southeast Asia has been developing with vigor. In May 1994, senior officials and relevant experts from ten Southeast Asian countries held a conference in Manila and put forward the concept of establishing a Southeast Asian community. In July 1995, Vietnam joined the ASEAN ranks. This symbolized the beginning of Southeast Asian integration.

Third, the tendency of pursuing collective security is mounting. With the creation and development of a Greater ASEAN, Southeast Asian countries have intensified their coordination in regional security matters.
Besides, ASEAN is trying hard to reinforce the mechanism of ARF by setting three working groups and setting forth some new ideas and suggestions.

Fourth, current contradictions in the region are different from those in the past. Internal security environment in all the countries has improved notably. Since anti-government armed forces have either disintegrated or collapsed, international disputes have stood out over territorial land/waters, resources, environmental issues, investment & trade, armaments race, ethnic and religious problems.¹

(2) China's security environment

The end of the Cold War has also brought about big changes in China's security environment. China has improved its relations with all neighboring countries as a result of the disappearance of direct external military threats. But a lot of uncertainties have led to complexity in China's security environment and posed some latent challenges.

First, the tendency of China containment by some elements of the major powers, particularly those in the US, is becoming increasingly evident. Washington regards China as a growing "factor of instability", assumes China "to adopt aggressive foreign policies," and it's emergence "will inevitably be a destabilizing factor in the Asia-Pacific region - and thus a threat to American interests."² Western media and politicians are drumming up "China threat" and "containment of China." A Hong Kong based publication Asiaweek says "that is particularly so now that US politicians have begun to call for closer cooperation between Washington and the region to restrain China," and "some are ever suggesting a revival of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) formed to contain Communist expansion."³ In recent years, various incidents, such as Sino-British dispute over Hong kong, readjustment in US-Japan relations,

³. Ibid., p.10.
establishment of US-Vietnam diplomatic relations, upgrading of the US-Taiwan relations, intensified US activities in Southeast and South Asia, all testify to the increasingly clear Western strategy and policy of China containment, some neighboring countries have begun to harbor misgivings about China’s rapid modernization and tend to fall easy prey to the western plot.

Second, the 3-Ts issues of Taiwan, Tibet and territory faced by China are becoming increasing striking in China’s concern.

1) The most urgent issue is separatism in Taiwan. Nowadays the ever-rampant Taiwanese separatist activities have pushed cross-Straits relations at stake. The separatists have done the wrong thing not only for their showing provoke to China’s new collective leadership led by President Jiang Zemin at the wrong time when the new superseding the old in mainland, but also for their striking the feelings of Chinese people;

2) Ethnic/religious separatist movements, with the Tibet issue in the fore, are harmful to China;

3) Disputes over territorial land/waters may damage China’s relations with its neighbors. The Nansha (spratlys) issue has complicated security environment for Southern China.

3. A comparison of security strategies between China and ASEAN countries

(1) Security strategies of ASEAN countries

ASEAN countries have readjusted their security strategies in response to changes in regional security environment, with three focal points: comprehensive security by strengthening not only “national defense resilience” but also “regional defense resilience;” closer cooperation for regional security; attention to external rather than internal. As a consequence, ASEAN countries are now concerned with:

1) Speeding up the integration process so as to gain a big say in world affairs. At the same time, they have been reinforcing bilateral and
multilateral military cooperation within the region, by boosting "joint regional defense" and expanding the "security zone." 4

2) Augmenting their military strength by building up their naval and air defense. Over the past few years, ASEAN countries have increased their military budgets by a big margin aiming at improving their military capabilities with the focus on boosting naval and air defense. 5

3) Promoting the development and improvement of ARF and building up an ASEAN-centered security system. Meanwhile, they reinforced the Asian-Pacific security mechanism by enhancing "a second-track" through hosting non-governmental forums among scholars. 6

4) Maintaining and improving relations with neighboring countries, relations with the major powers in particular in an effort to keep them balanced with each other and maintain multi-dimensional foreign relations in pursuit of self-determination neutralism and a non-nuclear regional environment. 7 And maybe this can explain why recent years ASEAN countries have been actively on the one hand attracting European Union to Asian-Pacific affairs and expecting to build East Asia Economy Caucus (EAEC), and on the other hand, they have also been endorsing continuously to keep US military presence in the region.

(2) China's security strategy

In the post-cold war era, China is no longer faced with direct military threat. Defense of national economic development and territorial integrity has therefore become the country's major security concern. That is why China is now applying a kind of purely and positively defensive strategy, the content of which is as follows:

6. Such as Dialogue meeting between ASEAN-ISIS and CICIR, CSCAP and Kuala Lumpur Round Table Conference.
7. ASEAN Summit Meeting in Bangkok (December 1995) adopted Documents on Southeast Asian Non-nuclear Zone.
1) To accelerate the modernization of national defense. For the time being, compared with the military forces of the developed countries, China's armed forces are still very backward and cannot keep pace with the current economic development and meet the needs of safeguarding territorial integrity. Hence the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) pointed out that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) "must intensify preparations against war, improve national defense capabilities so as to ensure the smooth progress of reform and opening-up as well as economic development, fulfill the sacred mission of safeguarding national interests and national sovereignty over territorial land, sea and air as well as national maritime rights." 8

2) To support the establishment of a collective security mechanism. 9 At the first meeting of ARF held in July 1994, China put forward five proposals for peaceful settlement of disputes, and end to armament race and nuclear proliferation, and promotion of security dialogue. 10 These represent basically China's ideas of security cooperation in Asia-Pacific.

3) To pursue good-neighbor policy for facilitating peaceful settlement of disputes as well as reducing the possibility of military conflicts. China stated explicitly that the focus of its diplomacy "should be to energetically develop good-neighbor relations with surrounding countries and to strive to build a peaceful environment." 11 Recent years, China has made great efforts to maintain the close ties with its neighbors, especially with the Southeast Countries, enhanced further the cooperation with ASEAN countries on many major affairs. China has consistently been advocating for principle of "shelving disputes aside for joint economic exploitation" to solve some disputes left over by history.

Security Issues over Current China-Southeast Asian Relations

1. Development of bilateral relations

(1) During the cold war years, bilateral relations had experienced a tortuous course. Problems related to activities of local Communist parties, the status of overseas Chinese, as well as ideology and social system hampered relations between China and some ASEAN countries. For example, Sino-Indonesian relations stopped for 23 years since 1967; China then did not have diplomatic ties with Singapore and Brunei; Not until the mid-1970s did China begin to set up diplomatic relations with Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. As for Indo-China, diplomatic relations were established with Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the 1950s and early 1960s. China even once developed “comradely and fraternal” relations with Vietnam and Laos. Later, Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorated in the wake of Vietnamese anti-Chinese activities. This indirectly affected Sino-Laos relations. But China always enjoyed friendly relations with Cambodia and supported consistently Cambodian war against Vietnamese invasion. China also worked with other Southeast Asian countries and the international community in seeking a political settlement of the Cambodian issue. Sino-Myanmar relations have been basically normal since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1950. Bilateral border issues were resolved smoothly and quickly in the early years.

(2) After the end of the cold war, China developed rapidly and comprehensively its relations with Southeast Asian countries. China resumed diplomatic relations with Indonesia, normalized relations with Vietnam and Laos, and established diplomatic relations with Singapore and Brunei. Between the two sides, there have been regular exchanges of visits and contacts between various kind of groups and at the high levels.

China also developed and improved its relations with ASEAN. In recent years, dialogues between China and ASEAN at different levels and through various channels have always been under way, concerning
matters like economic cooperation, trade relations, scientific-technological cooperation, regional security and so on. China now has become a consultative partner of ASEAN and has twice attended ARF.

2. Outstanding issues

There are still latent obstacles in the current friendly relations between China and Southeast Asian countries, mainly in the following areas:

(1) Disputes over territorial land maritime rights left over from history, especially the disputes over the sovereignty of Nansha Islands (Spratly Islands). This dispute might evolve into factor detrimental to security in Southeast Asia and relations Between China and the relevant countries which will not abandon lightly the isles and reefs seized illegally but exploit all means to contend for their possession. The involvement of big powers has further compounded the problem. China has handled the current situation with prudence, calm and restraint, advocated for peaceful settlement through negotiations, and put forward the proposal of “shelving disputes aside for joint exploitation.” China has expressed its readiness to resolve this dispute by way of peaceful negotiations with the relevant countries under the guidance of commonly recognized international laws and contemporary marine laws.  

12 Yet, it is unlikely to achieve total settlement for such a complex issue overnight. Even Winston Lord, US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs acknowledged that while tension over the Spratly Islands had eased, it would take many years to resolve the territorial row among China and five neighboring countries.  

13 It will possibly remain an outstanding issue in the relations between China and Southeast Asian countries for some time.

(2) Some individual Southeast Asian countries still have lingering misgivings about China. In the past few years, some elements in the US and Japan have been spreading the notion of “China Threat” on various

occasions and by different means in a bid to drive a wedge between Southeast Asian countries and China and provoke fear, suspicion and vigilance in these countries. Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, for example, talked irresponsibly to Southeast ASEAN countries saying “China is going to be a much more formidable military power than it is today,” and noting that China has in the past “shown itself ready to use the implied threat of that military power.”\textsuperscript{14} In fact, westerner’s comments are groundless and unfair, and some have ulterior motive, till now Chinese military capability is actually limited. Comparing with its neighbors, we can see the development of Chinese military is still on a low level and under a normal scale. Dr. Walden Bello, the codirection of Focus on the Global South, a program in Chulalongkorn University’s Social Research Institute, in his comments on the question of “is China the enemy in the Asia-Pacific?” noted that the China’s defense spending has been rising recent years “must be interpreted in light of the fact that in relative terms.”\textsuperscript{15} Maybe we can say the aim of some westerners spreading China threat and Chinese expansion ambitious is to accelerate the arm’s race in the region, promote the sale of their weapons and rise their declining defense industries. But some Southeast Asian countries which have thoughts of their own and keep sober-minded, just like Malaysia, have publicly refuted the nonsense of “China Threat.”

Besides, some Southeast Asian counties understandably desire to be masters of their own house by keeping a balance among big powers. They may play into the hands of some Western powers against their own will. This may affect relations between China and Southeast Asia.

(3) Issue of overseas Chinese, though solved to satisfaction of the parties concerned, if not handled with care, may affect Southeast Asian countries’ relations with China. This had been a sensitive matter in Southeast Asia. There are about 21 million overseas Chinese and naturalized Chinese in Southeast Asia, or 78% of the world total.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Agence of France Presse (APF): “US military presence needed to counter China, Nkorea: Thatcher,” Jan 22, 1996.
\textsuperscript{15} Walden Bello, “Is China the enemy in the Asia-Pacific?” The Nation, February 9, 1996.
\textsuperscript{16} See Lian He Zao Bao, Singapore, April 6, 1993.
The majority of overseas Chinese are now citizens of their residence. They must be loyal to their countries. And they play a beneficial role of promoting friendship and better understanding between China and Southeast Asia. But past experience merits our attention, some anti-Chinese elements may sow seeds of discard and provoke ill feelings for China and damage the relations between China and Southeast Asian countries. We must work together to guard against such occurrence.

(4) The Issue of Taiwan may also affect relations between China and Southeast Asia. Firstly, Taiwan’s “Substantial Diplomacy” in Southeast Asia has become an obstacle to China-Southeast Asia relations. In the past couple of years, the Taiwanese authorities chose Southeast Asia as a breach and put forth a “Southward thrust Policy” in order to enhance substantial relations with Southeast Asian countries and create a situation of “two China” or “one China, one Taiwan.” They intend to carry personnel exchanges beyond non-governmental level by using economic/trade issues. Secondly, tension across the Straits would harm the interests of Southeast Asian countries. In the past few years, Taiwanese separatist activities in Taiwan have been growing rampant. This led to intense relations across the Straits. China declared explicitly long ago that she would not tolerate any action of national secession, If the Taiwanese separatists should take a risk in desperation, it may damage Southeast Asian countries’ interests and affect peace and stability in the region.

For Lasting China-Southeast Asian Friendship

China and Southeast Asian countries are all developing countries in East Asia. In recent years, their economies have been developing rapidly. The two sides enjoy common political, economic and security interests in Asia-Pacific. Since the new Asian-Pacific order is yet to take shape, there are many variables. It is only natural that some problems and contradictions may crop up between the two sides. They can and should be solved through patient consultations based on the Five Principles of Co-existence in the interest of safeguarding regional peace and prosperity. Meanwhile, we should pay attention to the following aspects:
1. To recognize that China is a factor for safeguarding regional peace and development.

   (1) China is part of the dynamic East Asia. Since 1980s, China has become an important component of the growing economy in East Asia. Rise in China’s import/export and its absorption of direct foreign investments have stimulated international capital flows into East Asia. China has already become an important factor for the dynamic regional economy.

   (2) China faces a long-range task of economic development. The Chinese government once again pointed out at the 8th National People’s Congress (NPC) and in the “9th Five-years Plan” that the guiding principle is to concentrate on economic construction. Internal stability and stability in the surrounding countries are the two prerequisites for China’s peaceful and smooth economic development.

   (3) China’s development will not harm its neighboring countries. In the current interdependent international relations, it is the comprehensive progress of science, talents and information rather than the expansion of territorial land that determines a country’s strength.

   (4) The goal of china’s defense modernization is to enrich its self-defense capability. Although defense modernization constitutes a component of China’s modernization, yet it has to be subordinated to national economic construction. China is solely interested in enhancing its defensive capabilities only.

2. To promote common strategic interests.

   First, the evident common interests for China and Southeast Asia are economic development and defense of regional peace and stability. As

parts of the dynamic East Asia, China and Southeast Asian countries will continue to sustain their comparatively rapid economic growth for a considerably long period. The prerequisite for such a high speed is peace and regional economic cooperation;

Second, the common task facing both China and Southeast Asian countries is how to improve East Asia’s social/economic development model. Along with the rapid economic growth, Southeast Asian countries and China are both exploring for the most suitable development model for themselves. How to enhance individual sense of social responsibility, preserve traditional East Asian values, achieve social stability so as to support economic development have become common goals pursued by both parties;

Third, the world-famous Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have become the common norms for China and Southeast Asian countries to settle disputes in international relations.

These three aspects combine to serve as the base for China and Southeast Asian countries to further deepen their friendly relations.

3. To strengthen mutual trust and mutual understandings and to promote exchanges and communication at all levels and through all channels.

The present Asia-pacific is characterized by interdependence and mutual restraint. Therefore, the two sides should enhance their mutual trust and understanding. This is a matter of great importance. China made its own contribution in this aspect by publishing white papers on National Defense recently. Cool-headed and objective analysis is needed. One should not be misled by some Western media and fall easy prey to their slanders.

4. To reinforce bilateral political security cooperation and promote Asian-Pacific stability.

The meeting of ARF and informal summit conference in the form of APEC played important roles in strengthening regional stability. But
owing to the diversity of cultures and the complexity of issues in so many countries, the existing multilateral dialogue mechanisms are not able to solve all the problems in detail and in time. thus all the countries should:

(1) endeavor to improve bilateral relations, resolve problems left over from the past, clear up estrangement as well as suspicions and consolidate the basis for regional security dialogue;

(2) further amplify coordinating security mechanisms, magnify confidence-building measures;

(3) enhance Southeast Asian status in the Asia-Pacific region, guard against the bit powers’ intervention in the regional affairs, particularly in the military arena;

(4) strive to establish monitoring apparatus at all levels as soon as the conditions are mature.

Besides, bilateral problems have to be handled with care. The two sides should:

(1) avoid complicating the Nansha (Spratly) Issue, promote consultations in various forms and through different channels and avert military conflict. Because this issue involves China and many other countries, and some problems are very complicated, we can not solve these questions overnight, and we also can not put these matters of “competing claims” into a orderless wrangle among all countries which have different positions, so, peaceful settlement could only be obtaines through bilateral consulations and negotiations. The parties concerned may shelve some disputes and explore common economic benefits cooperatively. The Nansha (Spratly) issue should be solved step by step.

(2) appropriately treat the Issue of Taiwan. The Chinese government has repeatedly stated that it firmly opposes countries with diplomatic relations with People’s Republic of China to establish any official relations with or conduct exchanges of official nature with Taiwan. But China has never been opposed to non-governmental economic/trade and cultural exchanges between those countries and Taiwan. It is a matter of fact that Southeast Asian countries have close economic relations with Taiwan. However, it is
advisable for them to consider the overall situation, treat this issue with strategic vision, observe fundamental principles for international relations and keep their commitment not to have any official relations with Taiwan, avoid aggravating regional turbulence, and avoid playing into the hands of Taiwanese separatist and independent forces.

(3) disconnect Issue of Overseas Chinese with state relations with China. At present, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are mainly naturalized and China does not recognize double citizenship. So Southeast Asian overseas Chinese have already become components of their countries of residence. Contradictions between those overseas Chinese and other nations in their resident countries are entirely domestic issues and have therefore no connections whatever with China and consequently should not affect relations between Southeast Asian nations and China. In recent years, overseas Chinese in some Southeast Asian countries invest in and do business with China for commercial interests rather than political motivations. Anti-Chinese sentiments provoked by persons with malicious intent should not be allowed to impair friendly relations between China and Southeast Asian countries.

Conclusion

Relations between China and Southeast Asian countries should be developed and preserved by both sides and problems should be solved by themselves through patient and peaceful consultations. The two parties bear important historical responsibilities. At present, they must:

1. Deal with international relations and regional disputes under the guidance of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. To some thorny disputed contentious issues can be put aside, and relevant countries could cooperate in some areas of exchanging maritime information, making joint action against the piracies and exploration of the ocean, and so on.

2. Endeavor to establish relations of mutual trust and confidence, seek common grounds and the best way to solve existing problems between them by strengthening exchanges at all levels in fields like politics, security and culture;
3. Enhance multi-level, multi-channel political security dialogue and explore all kinds of means to maintain regional stability;

4. Promote the development of comprehensive security with the focus on economic cooperation. Try to solve all the thorny issues in the spirit of consultations and friendly cooperation to serve their common interests and defend peace, stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region.

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