

Courting China: Track 2 Diplomacy and the Engagement of the People's Republic

See Seng Tan

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ASEAN 40th Anniversary Conference, “Ideas and Institutions: Building an ASEAN Community?” jointly organized by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), in Singapore on 31 July – 1 August 2007.

The premise of this chapter is that non-official or Track 2 diplomacy has been vital to ASEAN's strategic engagement of China. Getting China in from the revolutionary cold and into the regional fold, as it were, has been a key part of ASEAN's pursuit of peace, stability and prosperity for the Southeast Asian region. The strategy has essentially involved extending the ASEAN model of regional security—a soft regionalism, as it were—to the wider Asia-Pacific region, and providing regional powers such as China with a stake in the preservation and promotion of the peace and prosperity of Asia.¹ This has led to a spate of regional institution building, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and, most recently, the East Asia Summit, all of which have ASEAN as their common hub.

To be sure, the “ASEAN Way” of consensus, consultation and non-interference has been viewed by many as a poor excuse for a persistent lack of political will among member-nations to advance expressed regional goals.² Yet it is this model of regional security that has arguably succeeded in allaying Chinese suspicions concerning multilateral diplomacy and convinced Beijing of the value and virtue of ASEAN-based regionalisms. In this respect, the role of Track 2 actors in engaging China and socializing the Chinese to the diplomatic culture and conventions of the region has been an important contribution to an expansion of international society, ASEAN-style. Against this backdrop, how have Asian Track 2 processes, practices and personages contributed to regional security in general and the diplomatic engagement of China in particular?

Track 2 in Asia

Modern diplomacy includes official and non-official processes, all working—though not necessarily in any coordinated fashion—to influence the policy process. How effective second-trackers are in their efforts depends on “the extent to which their policy recommendations find their way into official policy, the value attached by government officials to their views and the presence or absence of institutionalized mechanisms for the transmission of their policy advice to official policy makers”.³ Understandably, not all support the idea, much less the practice, of Track 2 diplomacy. Reservations among regional state elites over the role of Track 2 still animate the complex relationship between official and non-official tracks.⁴ For the most part, Asian second-trackers—especially members of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) in Southeast Asia and the Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific (CSCAP) in the Asia Pacific—have laboured long and hard at rendering themselves relevant to both national and regional policy establishments, so much so that it has been said of these regional security studies communities that they have in fact serviced rather than challenged the agendas of regional governments.⁵ In this regard, the relationship between both tracks is interdependent and symbiotic.⁶

Asian Track 2 processes have by and large accommodated state interests in their deliberations. Indeed, state presence is an integral element for strengthening the interaction between academe, the business community and state apparatuses.⁷ But states do not have dominant control over the Track 2 agenda. This said, the sensitive nature of some Track 2 discussions is reflected in the occasional failure by participants to check their nationalist loyalties at the door during discussions. Regional governments have also acknowledged the contributions of second-trackers. This has been most obvious in the ASEAN region, where emerging challenges confronting regional states and societies from the 1980s onwards highlight the need for more regional meetings of experts and scholars “in the face of politico-security and economic issues and problems affecting ASEAN”.⁸ For instance, ASEAN-ISIS has received formal recognition at annual ASEAN ministerial meetings for its contributions to regional diplomacy, not least in the formation of the ARF.⁹

Courting China

The evolution of Chinese diplomacy towards the ASEAN region from the 1990s to the present has been a sight to behold. From an initial distrust of multilateralism as a possible Western attempt at encirclement to becoming a sophisticated connoisseur of multilateral diplomacy and regional institutionalism, China has successfully transformed itself from past revolutionary pariah to a “prudent regional power, more traditional and conservative, a pro status quo power and one which is starting to link up with the region more intensely and responsibly”.¹⁰ In the international diplomatic-strategic arena, Beijing has advanced, with relative success, the idea that its rise to power is an essentially “peaceful” development that threatens none.¹¹ In an era of perceived US unilateralism and growing anti-Americanism, Beijing has assiduously cultivated ASEAN through demonstrating remarkable sensitivity towards the region’s concerns, taking pains to soothe nerves and win friends through engagement with various ASEAN countries on a bilateral basis.¹² In 2002, Chinese goodwill led to an agreement to establish the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and also to the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.¹³ Furthermore, the extent to which the Chinese appear to have aced their education on multilateral diplomacy is evident in their contributions to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the sole security forum serving the Central Asia region.

Today it has become conventional wisdom to assume the significance of ASEAN’s contribution in encouraging and facilitating China’s robust involvement in regional multilateral arrangements.¹⁴ ASEAN’s engagement of China has no doubt been complicated by regional circumspection about Chinese motives and power.¹⁵ This said, 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”. Equally important, 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 has argued, the “complex engagement” approach of ASEAN—one deliberately “informal, non-confrontational, open-ended and mutual”—has likely swayed China to reconsider its relations with ASEAN, to view ASEAN more positively and to be more responsive to ASEAN’s concerns.¹⁶

In courting China, Asian Track 2 processes have been significant in helping to build mutual confidence and disseminate regional conventions and norms. Leading second-trackers, such as Indonesia's Jusuf Wanandi, have long advocated the region's deep engagement of China, rather than its containment.¹⁷ Since the early 1990s, numerous consultations and cooperative activities have been and continue to be conducted by ASEAN-ISIS, CSCAP and the Network of East Asian Think-tanks in which Chinese academics, analysts and officials have been intimately involved. For instance, in CSCAP, the designated parallel track in support of the ARF, the Chinese have clearly benefited from the many opportunities for multilateral dialogue and cooperation afforded them, not only with their ASEAN counterparts but also with security intellectuals and practitioners from major powers such as Japan, India, Russia, the US and the European Union.¹⁸ Likewise, the Chinese have also profited from their tutorials with Canada-based second-trackers on security ideas that enjoy currency in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁹

For second-trackers who argue for engagement with China, the key to regional peace and stability in the post-Cold War period boils down to two interests: ASEAN's desire for a new regional order in contemporary Asia, on one hand, and the effort to secure China's clear commitment to and pacific participation in that regional order, on the other.²⁰ Wanandi and others have long seen the emergence of a cooperative security arrangement in the region as key to realizing both interests.²¹ In their view, such a "cooperative regionalism" would likely win Beijing's support for ASEAN and the APT, and thereby ensure China's peaceful integration into East Asia because "China needs ASEAN for a peaceful environment to continue with her modernization, and to prevent any possibility of encirclement to contain her in the future".²²

At the same time, Track 2 leaders have by and large also demonstrated a clear-eyed appreciation for power political considerations:

ASEAN countries recognize that their security, both at home and in the region, depends on a pluralism of power. In regional terms, ASEAN needs both great powers (China and the US) to be present in the region. ASEAN needs the U.S. presence to maintain a balance between the great powers in

the region, and ASEAN also would like to have China incorporated in the region in cooperative security arrangements.²³

Clearly, Wanandi and other second-trackers believe the importance of the complementary role of the ARF, the sole multilateral security forum serving the Asia Pacific, to the other regionalisms in institutionalizing a politico-military balance among its great power members that would stabilize the region.

Finally, Track 2 has also been useful as a channel through which the Chinese have signalled their ostensibly pacific intentions, support for multilateral diplomacy and appreciation for ASEAN-led regional arrangements and initiatives to their regional counterparts. For example, the propagation of China's "new security concept" (*xin anquan guan*)—the Chinese version of cooperative security (*hezuo anquan*), as it were—that began in 1997 was done through numerous Track 2 fora as well as official channels.²⁴

Conclusion

Despite continued regional circumspection over China's so-called "peaceful rise (now 'development')", ASEAN's pursuit of deep institutional engagement with China has arguably succeeded in part due to the contributions of Track 2 diplomacy, whose processes, practices and personages have helped socialize the Chinese to the diplomatic culture and conventions advanced by ASEAN and embedded in various ASEAN-based regionalisms. Indeed, the absence of references in official ASEAN security discourse to China as a strategic threat is a testament partly to the socializing efforts of the second-trackers.²⁵

Significantly, the argument here has not been that China's graduate education in diplomatic conventions and regional norms significantly reduced misunderstanding and disagreement between the Chinese and the rest. Rather, it is that their participation in multilateral diplomacy has provided useful confidence-building opportunities and relevant venues for them to discuss sensitive concerns with their regional counterparts in frank and constructive ways. In this regard, the aims of Track 2 diplomacy—forming habits of dialogue, encouraging inclusive, cooperative and non-confrontational security

approaches, achieving a mutual understanding of perceived threats and security goals, identifying new perspectives, innovations and ideas of security—have more or less been realized.²⁶ In digesting these lessons along with the more traditional principles of sovereignty and non-interference, the Chinese today demonstrate keen appreciation for and skilful appropriation of international practices that might have eluded them had Track 2 not undertaken the challenge of constructively engaging China.

It would certainly behove the security of the region for the longstanding partnership between ASEAN and Track 2 networks to be strengthened and enhanced. Indeed, Track 2's role in capacity and confidence building could assume even greater significance in view of ASEAN's ongoing renovation towards a rule-based regionalism. This chapter has argued that the ASEAN Way has contributed significantly to ASEAN's success in courting China. Institutional reform, however, could change the way the association has traditionally operated. The ASEAN Way would not be immediately jettisoned but would be "supplemented by a new culture of adherence to rules".²⁷ This development, though incremental, would likely have ramifications for ASEAN's ties with China and other extra-regional powers. In this regard, enhanced cooperation between both official and non-official tracks would be essential to the future peace and security of Asia.

¹ See Michael Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Extending ASEAN's Model of Regional Security*, Adelphi Paper no. 302 (Oxford: IISS/Oxford University Press, 1996); and Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

² David Martin Jones and Michael L.R. Smith, "Making Process, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order", *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007), pp. 148–184.

³ Carolina G. Hernandez, *Track Two Diplomacy, Philippine Foreign Policy, and Regional Politics* (Manila: Center for Integrative and Development Studies, University of the Philippines Press, 1994), p. 6.

⁴ See Seng Tan, "Nonofficial Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Civil Society or 'Civil Service'?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 3 (2005), pp. 370–387.

⁵ David M. Jones and Michael L.R. Smith, "Is there a Sovietology of Southeast Asian Studies?" *International Affairs* 77, no. 4 (2001), pp. 843–865.

⁶ See, for example, Charles E. Morrison, "Track 1/Track 2 Symbiosis in Asia-Pacific Regionalism", *The Pacific Review* 17, no. 4 (2004), pp. 547–565; Herman J.S. Kraft, "Unofficial Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: the Role of ASEAN-ISIS", *CANCAPS* no. 23 (Toronto: Canadian Consortium on Asia-Pacific Security, 2000); and Hiro Katsumata, "The Role of ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies in Developing Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region", *Asian Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2003), pp. 93–111.

⁷ Lawrence T. Woods, *Asia-Pacific Diplomacy: Nongovernmental Organizations and International Relations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993), p. 150.

⁸ Carolina G. Hernandez, "The Role of the ASEAN-ISIS", *ASEAN-ISIS Monitor* 6 (April 1993), p. 1.

⁹ See Joint Communiqués of the Twenty-sixth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Singapore, 23–24 July 1993 and the Twenty-eighth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Bandar Seri Begawan, 29–30 July 1995, available at

<http://www.aseanhrmech.org/downloads/1993_Joint_Communique.pdf> and
<<http://www.aseansec.org/2087.htm>>(accessed 21 August 2007).

¹⁰ Jusuf Wanandi, “China after the Communist Party’s 16th congress”, *The Jakarta Post*, 21 November 2002, available at <http://www.csis.or.id/tool_print.asp?type=opinion&id=55&op_id=102>(accessed 21 August 2007).

¹¹ See David Shambaugh, “China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order”, *International Security* 29, no. 3 (2004/05), pp. 64–99.

¹² See Evelyn Goh, “China and Southeast Asia”, *FPIF Commentary*, 12 December 2006, available at <<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3780>>(accessed 21 August 2007); and Alice D. Ba, “China and ASEAN: Re-navigating Relations for a 21st Century Asia”, *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (2003), pp. 622–647.

¹³ Leszek Buszynski, “ASEAN, the Declaration of Conduct, and the South China Sea”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25, no. 3 (2003), pp. 343–362.

¹⁴ Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003), pp. 5–56.

¹⁵ See essays in Evelyn Goh (ed.), *Betwixt and Between: Southeast Asian Strategic Relations with the U.S. and China* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2005).

¹⁶ Alice D. Ba, “Who’s socializing whom? Complex engagement in Sino-ASEAN relations”, *The Pacific Review* 19, no. 2 (2006), p. 160.

¹⁷ Jusuf Wanandi, “ASEAN’s China Strategy: Towards Deeper Engagement”, *Survival* 38, no. 2 (1996), pp. 117–128.

¹⁸ Desmond Ball, *The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP): Its Record and Its Prospect*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence no. 139 (Canberra: Australian National University, 2000).

¹⁹ The intellectual content of those meetings led to the volume edited by David Capie and Paul Evans, *Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002).

²⁰ Jusuf Wanandi, “ASEAN and China Form Strategic Partnership”, *The Indonesian Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2005), pp. 328–331.

²¹ Jusuf Wanandi, “The Need and the Challenge for an East Asian Multilateral Regional Institution”, *Asian Affairs* 6 (2005), pp. 91–102.

²² Jusuf Wanandi, “The effects of leadership changes in East Asia (Part 1 of 2)”, *The Jakarta Post*, 27 January 2004, available at <http://www.csis.or.id/tool_print.asp?type=opinion&id=55&op_id=81>(accessed 21 August 2007).

²³ Wanandi, “ASEAN’s China Strategy: Towards Deeper Engagement”, p. 127.

²⁴ Nan Li, “The Evolving Chinese Conception of Security and Security Approaches”, in See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (eds.), *Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation: National Interests and Regional Order* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 53–70.

²⁵ Evelyn Goh, “Introduction”, in Goh (ed.), *Betwixt and Between*, p. 3.

²⁶ Sheldon W. Simon, “Evaluating Track II Approaches to Security Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific: The CSCAP Experience”, *The Pacific Review* 15, no. 2 (2002), pp. 167–200.

²⁷ Tommy Koh, Walter Woon, Andrew Tan, and Chan Sze-Wei, “The ASEAN Charter”, *PacNet Newsletter* no. 33A, 6 September 2007, available at <http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,4038/type,3/>(accessed 11 September 2007).