Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?

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Southeast Asian states as a group employ two general strategies to protect themselves against domination by a strong China: engagement and hedging. The hedging includes maintaining a modest level of defence cooperation with the United States, which may be called low-intensity balancing against China. This is most clear in the cases of the Philippines and Singapore, and more subtle in the cases of Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. Thailand appears to practice simple hedging, while Myanmar has no alternative to cooperation with China. The region bandwagons with China only to the extent that it desires trade with China and seeks to avoid the costs of alienating the region’s rising great power. These findings suggest the region is far from passive, the United States is still a relevant player, and acceptance of China is premised on Beijing’s adherence to the promises made in its recent diplomatic campaign.

Introduction

There is little doubt that China is rising to a level of unmatched prominence in the Asia-Pacific region. How other states in the region are reacting to the growth of Chinese power, however, is a matter of some debate. In theory, two of the common responses of smaller states in the shadow of a potentially dominant or threatening power are balancing and bandwagoning. Some observers see a pattern of bandwagoning with China (Kang 2003, p. 58). Others believe the stronger tendency is for Asian states to balance against China (Acharya 2003,
For students of Southeast Asian politics, this is an important question with huge consequences for the future of international relations in the region. This article will explore this question, arguing that, while hedging and engagement are the principal Southeast Asian strategies toward China, the hedging involves a significant component of what may be termed “low-intensity balancing” with the United States against China along with efforts to maintain a working relationship with Beijing.

Terms of Analysis

The range of policy choices for small and medium-sized states facing a potential regional hegemon is broader than balancing and bandwagoning (Schweller 1999, pp. 7–16). Southeast Asian states in fact employ a mix of elements from four strategies. One of these strategies, the most general, is hedging, which means keeping open more than one strategic option against the possibility of a future security threat. A second strategy is engagement, whereby a state uses inclusion and rewards to attempt to socialize a dissatisfied power into accepting the rules and institutions of the pre-existing international order.

Balancing and bandwagoning are the remaining two strategies. A state balances against a perceived potential adversary either internally, by shifting resource allocations to strengthen its defensive capability, or externally, by cooperating with another state that fears the same potential adversary. (This article will focus on external balancing.) Balancing may involve different levels of intensity. In the case of low-intensity balancing, the balancing state attempts to maintain a constructive relationship with the targeted state. In the case of high-intensity balancing, the relationship between the balancing state and the targeted state is more openly adversarial, and many forms of cooperation between them are precluded by political tensions.

It is important to clarify the relationship between hedging and balancing. This writer has classed both hedging and balancing as strategies against hegemonic domination, but hedging is a general strategy that may or may not include balancing. Balancing is one but not the only strategy a government may employ to keep open a future strategic option. Similarly, some balancing, but not all, is motivated by a desire to keep open a future option in case it is needed. Hedging implies a present condition of strategic uncertainty. Balancing is sometimes the response, for example, to a certain and compelling threat, in which case hedging is not involved.

“Bandwagoning” has at least two distinct definitions in the international relations literature. The first is aligning with a threatening
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country to avoid being attacked by it (Walt 1987, p. 17). The second understanding of bandwagoning is “being on the winning side” in the hope of realizing economic gains (Schweller 1994, pp. 72–107).

An assessment of whether or not Southeast Asian states are bandwagoning with China essentially hangs on which of these two definitions is employed. Under the first definition of aligning with a threatening state to avoid being attacked, no states in Southeast Asia are bandwagoning with China. The conditions implied by this interpretation of bandwagoning are simply not present. China is not behaving aggressively toward any states in Southeast Asia; quite the contrary, Beijing’s recent diplomacy aims to reduce tensions with China’s neighbours, inspire confidence that China upholds the values of peaceful negotiation, multilateralism, and respect for sovereignty that ASEAN extols, and convince Asia that “China will never seek hegemony”, as Chinese leaders have proclaimed on countless occasions (Medeiros and Fravel 2003; Shambaugh 2004/05). Even the South China Sea front is relatively calm, and in any case this issue has never generated bandwagoning with the PRC.

The second definition of bandwagoning as “being on the winning side” would seem to include any case of a state making an effort to establish or maintain a favourable relationship with a strong country out of respect for the latter’s power and influence, in the hope that this relationship will open the door to future economic opportunities. By this definition, all the countries of Southeast Asia are bandwagoning with China to some degree. The entire region recognizes that China is an increasingly important political player and the potential economic powerhouse of Asia, and every government prefers to avoid the opportunity costs of antagonizing Beijing if possible.

This second interpretation of bandwagoning as profit-seeking is broad and divorced from security considerations, allowing for bandwagoning to be equated with economic cooperation. David Kang takes this approach, citing economic ties as the main evidence to support his contention that Asian countries are bandwagoning with China (Kang 2003, pp. 58, 69, 80, 81). The weakness of this definition of bandwagoning hereby becomes apparent: it says nothing about political alignment or security considerations, unlike the first definition. Economic cooperation is not predicated upon political alignment with China (Acharya 2003, p. 152). Indeed, a strong trading relationship may exist amidst significant bilateral political tensions, and will not necessarily prevent the outbreak of military conflict. Trade and investment may even be a strategy for undermining or, in the extreme case, facilitating the overthrow of a hostile government. Used in this
sense, bandwagoning becomes a synonym for economic engagement and loses the relevance in a strategic analysis that the notion of bandwagoning-for-survival retains.

**Region-wide Tendencies**

Each state in Southeast Asia has unique characteristics that bear on its policy toward China. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a few generalizations about the region as a whole. The principal foreign policy of Southeast Asian states is to preserve their autonomy and sovereignty. They seek to keep larger outside countries from using their relative military strength or political influence to dominate regional affairs or to undermine the freedom of action of the region’s individual states. This fundamental goal is comparable in importance with the desires for peace and prosperity (Chung 2004, p. 35). The key ASEAN documents, including the Bangkok Declaration of August 1967, the November 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration (ZOPFAN), and the February 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), are replete with denunciations of interference in the region by external powers.2

Southeast Asia has particular fears of China stemming from geography and historical experience. China’s sheer size and proximity, the longevity of Chinese civilization, the tributary relationship of antiquity, and the presence of disproportionately wealthy ethnic Chinese communities have all contributed to fears of China dominating the region. The PRC’s economic development and military modernization raise the possibility that for the first time in the modern era, China will soon have the wherewithal to impose its agenda upon the region. Some Southeast Asian observers see in Beijing’s threat to use force against Taiwan a harbinger of how China may deal with future disputes involving Southeast Asian states. The region took note of China’s disturbing show of force aimed at Taiwan in 1995–96. More recently, Hu Jintao’s expansion of the Central Military Commission to 11 members, including the chiefs of the PLA Navy and Air Force, suggested to some analysts that power projection will be a more prominent feature of future Chinese military planning (Montaperto 2004, pp. 79–80).

The Chinese recognize these fears and have tried to address them. Beijing began publishing Defence White Papers in response to criticism that the PRC military lacked transparency. In November 2004 China served as host of the ARF Security Policy Conference for the first time, illustrating how China has moved from suspicion about multilateralism to a willingness to discuss even high politics issues multilaterally.
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Even more important in this regard has been China’s recent approach to the dispute between Beijing and several other Asian governments over ownership of islands and other island-like features in the South China Sea. Many Southeast Asian observers have seen this dispute as a litmus test for a newly-strong China’s relations with its smaller neighbours — whether China would use its formidable military power to attempt to intimidate the other claimants, or settle the matter peacefully through good-faith negotiations. The 1995 Mischief Reef incident did much to heighten the sensitivity and significance of the South China Sea dispute. In early 1995, the Philippines discovered China had built military structures on Mischief Reef, one of the Spratly Islands over which Manila claims ownership. During the March 1995 China-ASEAN meeting, the ASEAN countries united in their opposition to China’s Mischief Reef actions. Alarmed by ASEAN’s hardening attitude, Beijing soon announced that China would thenceforth base its South China Sea claims on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Since 1998 Beijing’s actions evince a shift for the time being to a minimalist strategy of maintaining the Chinese claim while avoiding further provocation over the issue. China won substantial favour from ASEAN by signing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002. The DOC, designed to be a precursor to a stronger Code of Conduct, is short on specifics, but it has at least laid down the principle that claimants will refrain from occupying disputed South China Sea features that are presently unoccupied.

China earned more goodwill in the region by acceding to the ASEAN TAC in 2003. China and India were the first two states outside Southeast Asia to join. Beijing earned points for regional citizenship during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. China offered contributions to the International Monetary Fund’s Southeast Asia recovery programme and to individual governments. The conventional wisdom was that despite the gains it could have made by beggaring its neighbours, Beijing refrained from devaluing its currency.

Southeast Asia is the main target audience for the “New Security Concept (NSC)”, which Chinese officials formally introduced at a 1997 ASEAN meeting. The NSC sets out China’s vision for organizing international relations in the post-Cold War era. It emphasizes cooperative security, multilateral dialogue, confidence-building measures, and peaceful resolution of international disputes. The NSC aims to undermine support for containing or resisting China by asserting that China’s intentions are benign and that the values and norms Beijing seeks to promote are consistent with ASEAN’s. The NSC also denigrates key U.S. alliances with Asia-Pacific countries as part of a backward-looking “Cold War mentality” (Roy 2003, pp. 1–6).
Chinese diplomacy has succeeded to the point where most Southeast Asians seem persuaded that China does not pose an immediate security threat. Beijing has not, however, dispelled all suspicions that the PRC as a great power could in the future try to dominate the region in contravention of what Beijing now claims. Not only is the proclivity to seek domination typical of great powers generally, but China has a history of aspiring to leadership in the region. Thus Southeast Asian governments must prepare for the possibility that a strong China will demand special privileges and threaten the autonomy of smaller states.

Southeast Asian governments employ two general strategies to head off possible Chinese domination. The first is hedging by establishing links with other large outside powers as counterweights to Chinese influence. ASEAN has sought ties with not only the United States, but also Japan, Russia and India. The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) link the region with the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. As an extension of this general approach of hedging by bringing in multiple great powers to check each other, several Southeast Asian governments practice low-intensity balancing with the United States against China. Characteristic of this “soft balancing” is encouraging the United States to maintain a military presence in the region, but declining to establish a formal military alliance (Khong 2004, pp. 172–208). The sub-region exhibits some internal balancing as well; recent military strengthening by some Southeast Asian countries is partly in reaction to China’s improved power projection capabilities (Bi 1999, p. 14).

Engagement is the other strategy Southeast Asia employs to avoid possible Chinese domination. Both ASEAN as an organization and individual Southeast Asian states practice engagement. This involves encouraging Chinese participation in multilateral organizations and international dialogue and agreements. Engagement rests on the assumption that including China in regional activities will reduce tensions and bring about political convergence in two ways. First, China will develop a sense of partnership with ASEAN. Instead of feeling excluded from the benefits the region has to offer, the Chinese will develop a stake in the mechanisms that facilitate a sharing of these benefits. Second, through participation the Chinese will be socialized into “the ASEAN way”, concluding that consultation, consensus and cooperation are a more efficient means to pursue their agenda than confrontation and intimidation. ASEAN has undertaken numerous efforts to attempt to “enmesh” China by making the PRC a dialogue partner and by forming additional organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN + 3 (China, Japan and South Korea),
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and the Chiang Mai Initiative, which creates a financial safety net for participating governments, including China. China’s willingness to participate in these groupings and to make statements such as the NSC convince many observers that the engagement strategy is working as intended.

The engagement strategy explains China success in economically penetrating the region so thoroughly and quickly. China-Southeast Asia trade has already reached US$100 billion annually and is growing by at least 25 per cent per year. The pace of this expansion will increase with the implementation of a China-ASEAN free trade area (FTA), a Chinese initiative, in 2010 (2015 for ASEAN’s weaker economies). The FTA will lower tariffs to 5 per cent, giving the Chinese even larger market shares for many of their exports.

Clearly, ASEAN has rejected an approach of resisting or even slowing down the Chinese economic onslaught, and this despite the dangers posed to Southeast Asian economies. The relationship between the Chinese economy and ASEAN’s economies is largely competitive rather than complementary. Further opening the sub-region to Chinese competition will doom many Southeast Asian businesses. As a lower-cost supplier of many of the goods Southeast Asian countries produce, China will fill an increasing number of the market niches upon which Southeast Asian firms rely. The prospects are better for the region’s better-developed economies, but until wages in China rise enough to make Chinese goods less competitive, producers in the less developed ASEAN economies will suffer losses when the barriers to Chinese exports are lowered.

If expanded trade with China is not necessarily advantageous to Southeast Asia in purely economic terms, the explanation lies in the security dividend ASEAN expects. The governments of Southeast Asia evidently see the risk of overall economic loss as an investment in their political future. According to thinking that supports an engagement strategy, ensuring that the present regional order is beneficial to China will help China accept the current rules, including respect for the autonomy of its smaller neighbours.

In sum, most of the states of Southeast Asia practice what could be termed a hedging strategy in that they prefer not to antagonize any of the external great powers unless one poses a direct threat to a vital interest. In particular, they seek favourable working relations with both China and the United States, the two strong outsiders that might in the future vie for a position of leadership in the region. The region as a whole also generally sees engagement of China as a more fruitful method of gaining Chinese support for the rules of international
interaction favoured by ASEAN than taking a defensive or exclusive posture, which might prompt Beijing to work toward supplanting the system.

Variations on Common Themes

Within these generalities, the individual states of the region have their own distinct ways of responding to Chinese power.

Thailand would seem to practice a classic hedging strategy, trying to maintain good relations with both China and the United States simultaneously. Many Thais view the United States as a relatively benign major power that lacks an interest in controlling territory in the region. America is also a desirable arms supplier. International conditions, however, have dictated a close Thai relationship with the PRC. With the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina, soon followed by the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, Thailand found strategic common ground with China in their desire to check Vietnam. More recently, China’s economic takeoff has seen bilateral economic cooperation established as the main basis of Sino-Thai relations. Thailand's government has accommodated China by criticizing Taiwan and by being less than welcoming to the Dalai Lama and Falun Gong. Washington and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s government have exchanged sharp words over Thaksin’s heavy-handed crackdown on criminals and separatists. On the other hand, Thailand maintains enough of a defence relationship with the United States to qualify as a “major non-NATO ally”. Thailand obtains most of its arms supplies from America and regularly conducts exercises with the U.S. military. These ties keep open a strategic option should China become a problem in the future.

Thailand’s Iraq War policy was perhaps illustrative of Bangkok’s desire to please everyone — China, the United States, and its own population, particularly the Muslim south. Bangkok allowed U.S. forces to use Thai air bases and ports during the post-9/11 campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thailand first refused to support the invasion of Iraq, then sent troops after the end of major hostilities, and then withdrew its troops sooner than Washington wished.

According to my definition, balancing requires a perception of threat. This perceived threat may be low at a particular time, in which case low-intensity balancing would be an appropriate policy response. Hedging, on the other hand, involves positioning against the possible emergence of a threat in the future. The difference between simple hedging and low-intensity balancing depends on the determination of whether a government’s policy is based on a perceived potential future
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threat or a low-level present threat. In practice, this may be a grey area. This writer’s classification of Thai behaviour as hedging stems from the conclusion that while Thais are not completely free of suspicions about the possible consequences of a strong China (hence the need for hedging), the current sense of perceived threat appears to be minimal. Aside from Chinese support for Burma, Thailand’s chief security concern, Thailand has no major strategic disputes with China. Thailand’s political and military elites are mostly assimilated ethnic Chinese Thais, softening the ethnic/civilizational divide that can potentially raise tensions between states.

A high-intensity balancing strategy, usually seen as an act of open hostility, would greatly reduce the possibility of a stable working relationship between the balancing states and the target state. A target state may, however, allow a basically cordial relationship including economic and other forms of cooperation with a state practicing low-intensity balancing. Such a case is even more likely if the balancing state offers assurances to the target state.

In several cases in Southeast Asia, hedging involves low-level balancing with the United States against China combined with assurances toward and cooperation (particularly economic) with the PRC. These cases can be further divided into two categories. Singapore and the Philippines practice what could be called overt low-level balancing. Other states, including Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, practice very subtle or highly restrained forms of balancing.

Singaporean leaders are arguably America’s most supportive quasi-allies in Southeast Asia, regularly telling international audiences that America plays a constructive and irreplaceable role in regional security. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has, for example, described the United States as the key player in a “fallback position should China not play in accordance with the rules as a good global citizen” (Goh 2004, p. 3). The surprisingly harsh public rebuke Beijing gave incoming Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong over his visit to Taiwan in July 2004 was an example of the kind of domineering posture Singaporeans (and others in the region) fear from China. Singapore hosts the U.S. Navy’s Western Pacific logistics command and has built a pier at Changi Naval Base for visiting U.S. aircraft carriers. The island state might have offered to join a formal defence agreement with the Americans if it was not constrained by the fear of offending neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia, which publicly champion the principle of keeping foreign military bases out of ASEAN. Singapore’s relatively robust balancing may be explained by its dependence on maritime traffic for economic survival and by the fact that the island harbors security fears not only about China but also about its much larger Malay-dominated neighbours.
The Philippines, as well, practices open but low-intensity balancing with the United States against China. Preoccupied though it is with internal problems, Manila clearly perceives an external security threat in growing Chinese power, one that would persist even if the South China Sea issue was resolved. Mischief Reef was a strategic watershed for Manila, which had moved in 1991 to expel U.S. forces from their bases in the Philippines. After finding that it was too militarily weak to defend its South China Sea claims against China and that it could not rely on Asia-Pacific multilateralism to defend Philippine interests, Manila sought to strengthen its position against China by balancing with the United States (Buszynski 2002, pp. 483–500). Some of the same Philippine senators who in 1991 voted to terminate the agreement allowing American bases in their country supported the 1997 Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, which passed by a margin of more than 3 to 1. The U.S.-Philippines military relationship was further bolstered by a new Mutual Logistics Support Agreement and the Philippines’ designation as a “major non-NATO ally” in 2003. American forces now regularly exercise in the Philippines and have trained Filipino troops fighting Abu Sayyaf rebels on Basilan island. The Philippines held 18 joint exercises with the United States in 2004. Furthermore, Manila hopes the recent Joint Defense Assessment with the United States will deepen American interest in the Philippines’ security by giving Washington a role in the reform of the Philippine military and, by extension, reform of the Philippine government (Baker 2005, pp. 3–5, 8). Balancing with the United States not only affords a measure of protection against possible Chinese aggression, it is reinforced by a history of close association and a degree of ideological and cultural affinity with America.

Low-intensity balancing with the United States does not prevent the Philippines from maintaining a relationship with China that includes economic cooperation and often cordial diplomacy. The same is true of Singapore. While strategically supportive of the United States, Singapore has offsetting economic and ideological bonds with China. Lee cultivated an image as an “old friend of China”. His son and successor Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong affirms, “Our relations with China are deep and broad. The principle is mutual interest and mutual benefit” (Vatikiotis 2004, p. 30). Singapore has poured investment into the PRC and encouraged Singaporean Chinese to learn to speak the official PRC dialect of Mandarin. The ruling People’s Action Party leadership has made clear its distaste for the American political model of a vigorous multi-party system and a robust raft of civil liberties, embracing instead a soft authoritarianism that is also the ideal of many PRC elites. Furthermore, the Singapore government has harassed Falun Gong,
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allowed its domestic media organs to take lines sympathetic to China, and criticized Taiwan's government.

Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia similarly seek to avoid antagonizing China while practicing discreet and limited forms of low-intensity balancing. Vietnam has abundant historical experience with the problems posed by a strong and domineering China (Thayer 2002, pp. 265–87). Since normalizing their relations in 1991, Vietnam and China have increased their economic cooperation and made progress in areas such as delimiting their land and Tonkin Gulf sea borders and agreeing on fishing rights. Most Vietnamese political elites are highly distrustful of China and are yet to be convinced that China does not aspire to hegemony over the region. Vietnamese who fear long-term Chinese intentions see in the Spratly and Paracel Islands disputes a harsh and sometimes violent counterpoint to China’s Asia-Pacific “smile diplomacy”. In contrast to the general relaxation between China and the other claimants, tensions over the issue between China and Vietnam continue to simmer. Hanoi continues to draw protests from Beijing for inviting foreign contracts for exploring possible oil and gas resources in disputed areas and for planning a tourist cruise service to the Spratly Islands. Violence flares up on occasion. In January 2005 Chinese border guards opened fire on Vietnamese fishermen who had allegedly strayed into Chinese waters, killing nine.

Hanoi has therefore made quiet efforts to balance China by welcoming “nascent” security cooperation with the United States. Vietnamese elites verbally support an American military presence in the region to counter-balance China (Storey and Thayer 2001, p. 465; Chanda 2003). Concrete U.S.-Vietnam cooperation has recently begun with less sensitive activities such as counter-terrorism, combating drug smuggling, de-mining, search-and-rescue, and disaster relief (Storey 2005a, p. 6). In 2003 Vietnamese Defence Minister General Pham Van Tra visited Washington, his country began sending observers to the annual U.S.-led Cobra Gold military exercise in Thailand, and a U.S. naval vessel made a port call in Vietnam for the first time since 1975. In 2004 Admiral Thomas Fargo, commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, and General James L. Campbell, commander of U.S. Army forces in the Pacific, visited Hanoi, and a U.S. destroyer docked in Da Nang. The Vietnamese have sought these links despite the government’s resentment of U.S. human rights criticisms and the widespread belief that the Americans seek to overthrow socialist political systems.

In the 1970s and 1980s Malaysia considered China a substantial security threat because of Chinese support for a communist insurgency. This aspect of the Chinese threat has subsided, but the possible emergence of an aggressive and powerful China remains perhaps
Malaysia’s chief potential external danger. As one of the claimants in the South China Sea dispute, Malaysia’s interests would be served by an end to the growth of China’s military reach into Southeast Asia. The United States therefore represents an important counter-weight to China in Malaysian strategic thinking. Even under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who frequently berated the Western powers in public, Malaysia relied on Britain and the United States as the ultimate guarantors of Malaysian security. The United States and Malaysia maintained defence and intelligence cooperation even when the public diplomacy between the two countries gave the appearance that relations were poor (such as in 1998 when visiting U.S. Vice President Al Gore criticized Mahathir over the imprisonment of political rival Anwar Ibrahim). The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks provided the impetus for a more cordial diplomatic relationship as well as new cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism. Although Islam is the state religion, Malaysia is pragmatic and moderate, and thus its government feels threatened by Islamicist extremists. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage recently described Malaysia as a “strategic partner of great and growing importance”. Malaysian Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak called U.S.-Malaysia defence ties a “well-kept secret” (Najib 2002). In addition to intelligence sharing and military education exchanges, Malaysia does its part to encourage an ongoing U.S. military presence in the region. Up to 20 U.S. Navy vessels visit Malaysian ports every year, where some of them get repairs and maintenance. The aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis stopped in Port Klang in September 2004. U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel train and exercise regularly with the Malaysian military. Malaysia provides a jungle warfare training venue for U.S. troops (Storey 2005b, p. 4).

Indonesia has ambivalent relationships with both the United States and China. As a former colony that won a struggle for independence from the Dutch in 1949, Indonesia is highly sensitive to Western “neocolonialism”. From the standpoint of many amongst the Indonesian elite, the United States is a “soft power” threat through its crusade to promote democracy and human rights worldwide, which has the effect of stirring up domestic discontent and separatism. The U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq is unpopular in Indonesia and much of the public believes that the American government is anti-Muslim. Indonesia has a strong aversion to the presence of foreign military forces within its territory (the involvement of the U.S. military in relief efforts in Sumatra following the December 2004 tsunami was highly exceptional [Smith 2005, p. 5]). Reacting to misleading press reports in March 2004 that the U.S. Regional Maritime Security Initiative
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would involve U.S. Marines plying the Strait of Malacca, Jakarta bristled, along with Kuala Lumpur, saying the responsibility for policing the Strait of Malacca belongs to Indonesia and Malaysia.

But Indonesia also has several security worries about China. Indonesian military doctrine is geared to the basic mission of defending against an invasion from a powerful country to the north, a legacy of the Pacific War. Indonesian military leaders privately name China as Indonesia’s most likely military threat and do not rule out the possibility of a Chinese invasion (Smith 2003, p. 7). In the recent past, the PRC’s alleged links with the ethnic Chinese communities in Indonesia have contributed to violence against Indonesian Chinese, most notably in the massacre of tens of thousands in 1965–66. China’s claim to much of the South China Sea challenges Indonesia’s ownership of the Natuna Islands. More generally, Indonesia sees itself, perhaps unrealistically, as the future dominant power of the region. Even if Indonesia is far from achieving this status, the continued growth of Chinese influence clashes with Indonesian nationalism and with this inflated self-image.

The result of these competing considerations is a hedging strategy with a very circumspect element of balancing with the lesser evil against the greater evil. While both the United States and the PRC pose potential security problems, China is the weightier threat. Although Jakarta formally promotes non-alignment of Southeast Asian states with outside powers, in practice Indonesia accepts regional engagement with the United States to offset China’s power, provided there is no infringement upon Indonesia’s sovereignty (Storey 2000, p. 165). Indonesian leaders also make clear their desire for a restoration of the U.S.-Indonesia military-to-military links (including military education and arms sales) cut off in stages from 1991 to 1999. Jakarta allows U.S. Navy vessels to visit Indonesian ports for repairs, explaining to the public that these port calls are strictly commercial rather than strategic. The (now defunct) 1995 Agreement on Maintaining Security between Indonesia and Australia was also widely interpreted as balancing against the PRC (San Pablo-Baviera 2003, pp. 339–52). Although Indonesia’s level of defence cooperation with the United States is lower than Thailand’s, Indonesia’s policy counts as balancing because Indonesians more clearly than Thais perceive the PRC as a threat.

Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia combine their policies of discreet balancing with assurances to avoid alienating China. Hanoi tries to avoid the appearance of participating in an effort to contain China. Offending Beijing carries high costs (for example, inconvenience to or harassment of Vietnamese business people in China), and Hanoi is careful to avoid provocation or confrontation with China except in cases where the Chinese mount a direct challenge to what the Vietnamese
view as a vital national interest (such as a dispute over territory; hence the intensity of the South China Sea issue). To mollify Beijing, Vietnam has also pursued defence contacts with China, such as an agreement on security cooperation signed during a March 2005 visit to Hanoi by PRC Minister of State Security Xu Yongyue. China and Vietnam conducted their first high-level security talks in April 2005.

Similarly, Indonesia’s wariness toward China does not cut off opportunities for bilateral cooperation. Indeed, during a visit to Indonesia in November 2004, PRC State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan announced the two countries had agreed to build a “strategic partnership” (People’s Daily 2004). The PRC is a major buyer of Indonesian bulk commodities, and is a potentially more reliable weapons supplier to Jakarta than the often-moralistic United States (China, for example, does not criticize Jakarta about its treatment of the restive province of Aceh). China is also a useful political ally against Western human rights pressure and threats of humanitarian intervention.

If U.S.-Malaysia defence links have been a “well-kept secret”, this is partly because Malaysia aims to maintain a cordial relationship with China (as well as because of domestic sensitivities in Malaysia). Kuala Lumpur welcomes engagement and calls the PRC a constructive player in Asian affairs. Former prime minister Mahathir said publicly he did not consider China a threat (although he also declined to adopt the Chinese aversion to a growing regional political role for Japan). Malaysia buys a modest amount of armaments from China. In 2004, after becoming deputy prime minister, Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak forbade Malaysian ministers from making official visits to Taiwan, and Kuala Lumpur turned down an invitation to observe the Cobra Gold military exercise in Thailand.

Myanmar (as Burma was renamed by its leaders in 1989) departs from the pattern set by most of the other states in Southeast Asia. In some cases a weak country bandwagons with a threatening power because balancing is not a feasible option. At first glance, Myanmar’s policy toward China looks like bandwagoning. Myanmar shares a long border with China and occupies an area of strategic importance: the closest access point between the PRC and the Bay of Bengal. With vastly more resources of every kind than Myanmar, China is a potentially dominating neighbour, and aside from India, the other large powers are geographically distant.

What initially appears to be bandwagoning, however, must upon closer inspection be highly qualified. Historically, Myanmar tried to maintain equidistance between China and India. After the State Law and Order Council (SLORC) military junta took control of the country’s government in 1988, sanctions imposed by the United States and the
European Union forced the regime to turn to China for diplomatic support and for the cheap supplies of arms and ammunition the junta needs to keep itself in power. Since then Myanmar has become something of a Chinese client state, although many of Myanmar’s elite have concluded that their country has grown too close to China, with the consequence that in recent years (with China more powerful than ever) Yangon has sought to improve its relations with India and its economic links with Japan to partly offset the over-reliance on the PRC. Even in this case, where we find close security cooperation, there is also an element of hedging. If the evidence does not suggest a determination by Myanmar’s government that aligning itself with the Chinese is necessary to protect itself from the threat of a powerful China, we cannot conclude that this is a case of bandwagoning for survival. Furthermore, Yangon cannot be said to have “joined the winning side” if Myanmar had no real opportunity to choose sides.

Conclusions

Southeast Asian states are “bandwagoning” with China only in the sense that they want to trade with China and value maintaining good relations with China, recognizing the PRC’s potential to become the most powerful state in Asia. The most common approach in Southeast Asia to a rising China is low-intensity balancing with the United States, combined with efforts to assure and engage China.

This balancing against China occurs despite China’s efforts to assuage the fears of its neighbours and to cultivate a non-threatening and responsible international image (Medeiros and Fravel 2003; Shambaugh 2004/05). Beijing has worked diligently to remove any basis for viewing China as a threat. The Taiwan issue is the obvious and major departure from China’s regional public relations campaign. This, however, is a special case in that Beijing has obtained the region’s endorsement for the position that Taiwan-PRC relations are an internal Chinese matter. Given the parameters of China’s potential power and rapid growth (to some degree inherently threatening) and the core regime and national interests in preventing a perceived loss of Chinese territory, Beijing has perhaps achieved as much success as it could have in attempting to reduce regional worries about Chinese aggressiveness. Indicative of China’s success is the fact that Southeast Asia’s relations with China are better now than during the latter part of the last century, when China was far less powerful. Yet significant concern clearly remains within Southeast Asia.

The prevalence of low-intensity balancing in the region despite China’s relatively benign and cooperative attitude suggests Southeast
Asia would not passively accept Chinese domination that appeared to challenge important national interests — or in other words, Southeast Asia would not bandwagon with a threatening China if balancing was a viable option. Southeast Asian leaders have frequently expressed their desire to avoid a “self-fulfilling prophecy” of turning China into an enemy by treating it as an enemy. Thus, they are loathe to undertake a stronger form of balancing than is necessary, and generally seek to assure China that ASEAN is not an anti-China alliance. But the strong interest in engagement and economic cooperation with China, and the offered assurances, are all premised on the expectation that Beijing does not intend to infringe upon the autonomy of regional states or challenge ASEAN’s basic rules of international interaction. The PRC’s leadership and influence rest on China’s reputation as a peaceful and cooperative neighbour. If the region lost confidence in China’s willingness to abide by principles such as those enumerated in the New Security Concept and the TAC, we could expect the region to respond more defensively (Womack 2003–2004, p. 548).

Balancing behaviour in Southeast Asia has implications for another external power, the United States. One of the issues in Sino-American relations currently discussed by U.S. strategic analysts is the presumed loss of American influence in Southeast Asia as China gains recognition as the dominant power of Asia. But the region’s considerable tacit and formal defence cooperation with Washington indicates that America remains an important strategic player. Furthermore, the logic of balancing suggests that America will matter more rather than less to Asia as China grows more powerful. The United States, it appears, can remain an influential country in Southeast Asia as long as it wishes to.

China appears to be in a period of build-up and consolidation. Accordingly, Beijing has sought to minimize external tensions while China focuses on developing its economic, political and military power. This raises questions about China’s relations with the region after the PRC has achieved fully-fledged great power status later this century. Will Beijing continue to honour the promises of its present leaders that “China will never seek hegemony”? If not, the Chinese may find the region is willing to undertake stronger balancing measures and less welcoming to Chinese economic penetration. Many in the region already suspect Beijing may become more assertive over the South China Sea dispute in the future, especially after the Taiwan question is resolved. In the meantime, Beijing may hope that regional recognition of the “one China” principle would allow the PRC to use military force against Taiwan without damaging China’s relations with Southeast Asian states. China’s neighbours, however, are not likely to see China’s willingness to use the PLA to settle this political
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issue as completely unconnected to China’s approach to future disputes with other Asian states. An indication of PRC aggressiveness or militarism could quickly alter the region’s prevailing orientation of cautious acceptance of a rising China.

NOTES

1 The opinions in this article are the author’s personal views, not official positions of the U.S. Government, the U.S. Pacific Command, or the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.

2 These and other key ASEAN documents are posted on the ASEAN website at http://www.aseansec.org.


4 Mahathir, for example, told visiting Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that he believed Japan should not have to continually apologize about its Pacific War misdeeds (Singh 2002).

REFERENCES CITED


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