



China-ASEAN Relations: Beijing Plans for a Long-Term Partnership and Benefits from Anti-Western Sentiment

Carlyle A. Thayer*

During the third quarter of 1999, Chinese diplomacy toward ASEAN and selected Southeast Asian states took a decidedly new turn. Beijing is now demonstrating with words and deeds that it can be a positive and constructive player in regional security. China moved to diffuse tensions in its relations with the Philippines over disputed territory in the South China Sea. China also dispatched police to serve in East Timor with the UN Security Council-sanctioned INTERFET (International Force East Timor). Finally, China has continued to give priority to four regional states with which it earlier signed long-term agreements: Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Diffusing Tensions in the South China Sea

During the second quarter of the year, relations between Beijing and Manila were strained due to an assertive and vocal campaign by the Philippines to draw world attention to the Chinese occupation of Mischief Reef and continued construction activities there. Manila claimed that the Chinese presence was like “daggers pointing at the heart of the Philippines’ national security.” Manila also lamented the lack of support it received from its fellow ASEAN members.

In July, China’s Minister of Agriculture, Chen Yao-Bao, visited Manila for discussions on possible joint projects with his Filipino counterpart, Edgardo Angara. During the course of the visit Minister Chen conveyed privately a Chinese proposal for bilateral cooperation in disputed areas of the South China Sea aimed at countering piracy and drug smuggling. This message was interpreted publicly by Philippine officials as a proposal for joint naval patrols. They expressed their support for the idea only to see China back off. Obviously the message had been garbled.

Shortly after the minister’s visit, it was announced on 19 July that a Philippine naval vessel, after firing warning shots, had chased, collided with, and sunk a Chinese fishing boat. This was the second such incident in two months. Fortunately this event came on the eve of ASEAN’s 32nd annual meeting and 6th ASEAN Regional Forum. The Foreign Ministers of China and the Philippines used this occasion to discuss the incident and prevent a deterioration in bilateral relations. By the end of the quarter Filipino spokespersons were decidedly upbeat about diffusing tensions.

ASEAN's Dialogue with China

During ASEAN's 32nd Ministerial Meeting in Singapore (23-24 July), ASEAN reaffirmed support for its "one China policy." This endorsement was a gesture of reassurance to China which had reacted angrily to remarks by Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui in an interview with Deutsche Welle that China-Taiwan relations should be considered "special state-to-state" relations.

During the ASEAN-China dialogue meeting in late July, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan pleased ASEAN officials by pledging that China would be the first nuclear power to sign the protocol to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty (as long as it did not cover Exclusive Economic Zones and continental shelves). In addition, Foreign Minister Tang offered to seriously consider a draft code of conduct for claimant states in the South China Sea. The code of conduct, drafted by the Philippines and Vietnam, faced strong objections from Malaysia when it was considered by ASEAN senior officials prior to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. The code of conduct was viewed as too legalistic and too much like a treaty. The senior officials then referred the draft to a working group headed by Thailand for later consideration.

Enhancing Long-Term Relations

During the first half of 1999, China signed a series of long-term agreements governing bilateral relations into the twentieth-first century with Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. During the third quarter these agreements were given concrete expression. In July, the Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces visited Beijing. In August, China received the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the Sultan of Brunei. China also dispatched a senior delegation to attend the fifth national congress of the Vietnam Fatherland Front in Hanoi. The following month President Jiang Zemin paid a state visit to Thailand.

Malaysia. Prime Minister Mahathir paid a three-day working visit to China from August 18-20 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and to promote the development of bilateral relations. Premier Zhu Rongji honored his guest by referring to him as "a good friend of China." Prime Minister Mahathir, for his part, thanked his host for not devaluing China's currency during the regional financial crisis and for China's support of the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty. In discussions on maritime disputes, the two leaders agreed "that the South China Sea issue can only be resolved by relevant countries involved, opposing any involvement and interference by any outside force." This was a reference to statements by U.S. officials, such as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, that the United States "cannot sit on the sidelines and watch."

During the visit a number of agreements were concluded. The Academy of Sciences in Malaysia, for example, signed cooperation agreements with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Engineering. Other accords included agreements on Chinese rice and Malaysian palm oil counter trade, a joint venture for forest plantation and a pulp mill in East Malaysia, and a new Malaysian consulate in Shanghai. Three items were left on the table: a Bank of China request for a license to open a branch in Malaysia, and Malaysian requests to open a new consulate in Kunming and a Proton car assembly plant.

Brunei. The Sultan of Brunei visited Beijing immediately after Mahathir's visit and held talks with President Jiang Zemin. During the visit a memorandum of understanding on cultural cooperation was signed. According to a joint communiqué, both leaders "expressed interest in exploring possible bilateral cooperation in science, technology and defense." The Sultan reiterated his support for a "one China policy."

Thailand. There were two notable developments in Sino-Thai relations. In July, General Mongkhol Amphonphisit, Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, visited Beijing for discussions with Fu Quanyou, PLA Chief of the General Staff; Zhang Wannian, Vice Chairman of the party's Central Military Commission; and Li Peng, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.

Of greater importance was the September visit of President Jiang Zemin. His stop over on his way to the APEC meeting in New Zealand was prompted by an invitation from the King of Thailand. While in Bangkok, Jiang delivered a major speech on China's foreign policy and, specifically, relations with ASEAN. In the course of his speech Jiang appealed to common bonds uniting Asians, a shared experience of exploitation during the colonial era and a shared desire to overcome poverty and backwardness.

However, the thrust of Jiang's speech was to play on regional concerns over national sovereignty in light of NATO intervention in Kosovo, which was not sanctioned by the United Nations. Jiang argued, "Hegemonism and power politics still exist and have even developed in the international political, economic, and security fields. The new 'Gunboat Policy' and the economic neo-colonialism pursued by some big powers have severely undermined the sovereign independence and the development interests of many small- and medium-sized countries, and have threatened world peace and international security." Asia, Jiang argued, should base its relations on the Five Principles of the Peaceful Coexistence and the UN Charter.

In addressing China's relations with ASEAN, Jiang reminded his audience of China's monetary support to the IMF and its decision not to devalue its currency. He then went on to stress, "China is ready to have in-depth discussions with relevant ASEAN countries on the principles and ways of safeguarding peace and stability in this region as well as in the South China Sea. China respects and supports the Protocol to the Treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone."

Vietnam. Bilateral relations between China and Vietnam continued to improve steadily during this quarter. The China-Vietnam joint working group on the land border held its 15th meeting in Hanoi over a period of four weeks. Both sides worked hard to reach agreement by the end of the year in accordance with a deadline set by their party leaders earlier. Discussions with officials in Hanoi in August reveal that resolving the technical details involving 76 disputed areas may result in this deadline being put off until next year.

Meanwhile, cross border relations continue to develop positively. China has now completed its de-mining efforts. Postal services have been restored between Lang Son province and Guangxi. A border trade fair was successfully held in Guangxi in September, while construction on a bridge across the Nam Thi river between Lao Cai and Kehou has commenced. During this quarter Vietnam sent delegations to China representing the National Assembly, Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations,

and the Vietnam Journalists Association. China, for its part, sent to Vietnam delegations representing the Chinese Communist Party Central Commission for Document Edition and Research and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which attended the fifth congress of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. During September, Vietnam sponsored a number of public ceremonies to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

This demonstrates that relations between China and Vietnam have grown particularly close during the past three months. Increasingly Vietnamese leaders are acknowledging that Chinese reform efforts may provide some useful lessons for Vietnam. This development bears close scrutiny as there are conflicting signals. In July, Vietnam made major concessions in its negotiations with the United States on a preliminary draft of a bilateral trade agreement, and a final agreement was expected at the APEC summit in September. Yet in September the Politburo balked and no agreement was reached. Reports indicated that small scale Chinese military incursions on Vietnamese territory may have been responsible for this turnaround. Subsequent reports indicate that Chinese leaders may have persuaded their Vietnamese counterparts to wait until China reached an agreement on trade issues with the U.S. before proceeding. Both China and Vietnam need to reach agreements on trade issues with America before they can join the World Trade Organization.

Policy Considerations

China's recent diplomatic initiatives aimed at becoming a good regional citizen are to be welcomed and encouraged. For example, China's decision to provide a police contingent to INTERFET is a positive contribution to regional security. Other Chinese actions, however, if not responded to, could undermine U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia. ASEAN's re-drafted code of conduct must be kept open for accession by non-claimant states that have a direct interest in ensuring the safety of navigation in the South China Sea. Similarly, the United States must give some urgency to finding a compromise solution regarding the protocol to the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty. China should not be allowed to take the 'high moral road' on this issue. Finally, the United States must move decisively to dispel the notion that Kosovo represents some sort of model for western intervention in the Asia Pacific.

In Indonesia, Malaysia, and to a lesser extent Vietnam, there is a growing anti-western sentiment arising from the impact of the Asian financial crisis and NATO intervention in Kosovo. It is fueled by reactions against the Australian-led intervention in East Timor. American reluctance to make a major contribution to peace-building in East Timor runs counter to the official assertion that the U.S. will remain engaged in the region. The United States needs to counter Chinese appeals to outdated notions of state sovereignty and non-interference by backing ASEAN as it tries to overcome recent problems (enlargement and the financial crisis). The U.S. needs to fashion a policy of support for a more proactive role by ASEAN in addressing the region's security concerns in Indonesia and East Timor. This means support for ASEAN as it works out the principles of preventive diplomacy. The core of this renewed commitment to ASEAN must stress good governance, accountability, democratic practices, and human rights.

*The views expressed are the author's and do not reflect the policy or position of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

Chronology of China-ASEAN Relations

July - September 1999

June 22 - July 22, 1999: The Vietnamese-Chinese joint working group on the land border holds its 15th meeting in Hanoi.

July 1, 1999: Hor Nam Hong, Cambodia's Senior Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, visits Beijing for discussions with Premier Zhu Rongji.

July 6-7, 1999: General Mongkhon Amphonphisit, Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, visits Beijing for discussions with military and political figures.

July 10-14, 1999: China's Minister of Agriculture, Chen Yao-Bao visits Manila to discuss possible joint projects with his counterpart, Edgardo Angara.

July 15, 1999: Singapore Foreign Ministry issues a statement reaffirming its support for a "one China policy."

July 19, 1999: A Chinese fishing boats sinks in a disputed area after a collision with a Philippine Navy ship.

July 20, 1999: ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting in Singapore decides to refer a joint Philippines-Vietnam proposal on a code of conduct for the South China Sea to a working group headed by Thailand for further deliberation.

July 23-24, 1999: 32nd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Singapore.

July 25, 1999: Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan and Philippine Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon meet in Singapore to discuss the sinking of a Chinese fishing boat.

July 26- 28, 1999: Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan attends 6th ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference and ASEAN-China Dialogue (10 + 1) in Singapore.

Aug 3, 1999: Postal services between Lang Son province and Guangxi Autonomous Region are restored.

Aug 9-13, 1999: Cambodian Health Minister, Hong Sunhuot, visits Beijing for discussions with his Chinese counterparts.

Aug 18-20, 1999: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad visits Beijing and holds talks with Premier Zhu Rongji.

Aug 24, 1999: The Sultan of Brunei visits Beijing and holds bilateral talks with President Jiang Zemin.

Aug 27-28, 1999: Delegation of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, led by its Vice Chairman Luo Hao Tsai, attends the 5th National Congress of the Vietnam Fatherland Front in Hanoi.

Sept 2-6, 1999: President Jiang Zemin pays state visit to Thailand. He also visits Australia and New Zealand.

Sept 3, 1999: President Jiang Zemin delivers a major address at the National Cultural Center of Thailand on China's relations with ASEAN, "Enhance Good Neighborliness and Friendship and Build a Better Future Together."

Sept 12-13, 1999: APEC Summit, Wellington, New Zealand.

Sept 12-16, 1999: The 1999 Sino-Vietnamese Border Trade Fair is held in Fangchenggang, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Sept 25-26, 1999: UN Commission on Human Rights, special meeting in Geneva votes to set up an inquiry to establish responsibility for atrocities in East Timor. China challenges validity of the special meeting.