



China in Asia Seminar Series

Seminar 8: “Will China Wield ‘Soft Power’ in Asia?”

December 12, 2005

CORE GROUP SUMMARY

The Core Group discussion centered on the extent of China’s soft power and its potential ability to gain influence in Asia at the expense of other major powers such as the U.S., Japan, and India. Several members also talked about whether China’s policies toward Southeast Asia derive from broader global policies or reflect a more specific strategy aimed at countries on China’s borders.

An expert on China and security issues noted that Chinese activities in Southeast Asia – trade and investment initiatives, non-traditional security agreements, and low-key military cooperation agreements – are mirrored in other regions such as Latin America and the Middle East. Beijing is making a global effort to establish relationships in order to obtain support in forums like the United Nations and to pursue broader interests such as access to energy resources and raw materials.

A Southeast Asian expert agreed, suggesting that Beijing pursues a hierarchy of interests. The first priority is Taiwan, the second is securing energy and other resources, and the third focuses on Southeast Asia and sea lines of communication (SLOCs). The irony in Southeast Asia is that Chinese efforts are unlikely to significantly change Taiwan’s status and China does not possess the blue water navy needed to protect the SLOCs.

However, although most members agreed that China is making similar inroads into other regions, several felt that Asia is a higher priority for Beijing. One China scholar pointed out that China’s buffer policy is really nothing new. China has always exerted a great deal of influence around its periphery; Chinese policy has only recently shifted to one of “peaceful rise,” cooperation, and mutual benefit after a failed bid in the late 1990s to undermine U.S. security relationships in the region by promoting the “new security concept.” China remains very sensitive about its borders. For instance, the Chinese leadership is concerned the U.S. will establish some kind of military relationship with Mongolia.

This scholar argued that China’s strategy of reassuring its neighbors has benefited the United States. China has been forced to accept U.S. moves to establish closer military relationships with Taiwan, India, and Japan, including plans for cooperation on ballistic missile defense. A Japanese businessman said that China’s rising power has benefited Japan by ending its “security hiatus” and forcing a more serious debate about national security. Another participant noted that despite the recent deterioration in Sino-Japan relations, China’s rise has fostered greater cooperation between the U.S. and Japan and more frank dialogue between Japan and China. Japan is hedging against China, but is also engaging in direct military-military dialogue, including efforts to influence younger PLA officers by foundation funding for visits to Japan.

Most participants agreed that although China’s message of peaceful rise and cooperation is appealing, Southeast Asia is not entirely convinced. A senior security specialist emphasized the fact that countries in the region continue to hedge in their relations with China and the United States. Although the Chinese economy presents a number of opportunities, it is also a threat for some sectors. On the

security side, countries welcome a peaceful and cooperative China, yet U.S. regional alliances are not weakening.

A Southeast Asian expert noted that when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice decided not to attend the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting this year, high-level officials from other countries also cancelled. Another Asian expert pointed out that at the 2005 Asia Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur the Malaysian Prime Minister gave a very pro-Beijing speech and China was praised for its modest role in tsunami relief efforts while the U.S. was ignored. However days later at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, countries paid great attention to the U.S. delegation while overlooking China. Although China has established new defense relationships in the region, the U.S. security relationships with Thailand and the Philippines have also improved over the past two years.

A China expert wondered what benefits China actually achieves with its soft power since Beijing appears to ask for very little in return. He suggested one Chinese objective may be to thwart potential U.S. efforts to contain China or to win regional support in a Taiwan contingency. By establishing security partnerships in the region, cooperating on non-traditional security issues, and opening talks on joint military dialogue, Beijing avoids a direct challenge to Washington while making it harder for countries to align with the United States against China. If Beijing's objective is limited to this goal, then its policy has been very successful.

However a strategist felt that the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN+3, and the run-up to the East Asian Summit (EAS) indicate that China seeks a larger role in the region. Beijing has leveraged its soft power resources to lobby for greater influence.

This raised a question about India's regional role in economic development and security. Some countries in Southeast Asia, like Singapore, have encouraged greater Indian involvement. India has joined the ARF, signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and participated in the EAS. Other participants noted that India has a more limited economic footprint in the region and has weaker historical ties and a less influential diaspora than China. However another member pointed out that India does not pose the same concerns about governance and territorial disputes that China does.

Despite China's budding security relationships with the region, a China expert highlighted the huge gap between Chinese bilateral and regional security agreements and U.S. security ties in Asia. An Asian specialist argued that the weakness of Chinese security ties shows that China really only has soft power tools at its disposal. He asserted that due to culture and geography, the U.S. cannot win the soft power debate in Southeast Asia as long as China continues its restrained policy of peaceful rise. However, U.S. strengths lie in its hard power capabilities and democratic values; these are the areas the U.S. is promoting. A trade expert asserted that soft power often only achieves soft ends and never really provides leverage on hard security issues. There are also questions about whether China's soft power in Asia would evaporate if it began using force to pursue its objectives.

Other members questioned whether democracy and hard power actually help the U.S. in Southeast Asia. One participant said it depended on how we defined soft power – that in his mind soft power does not need to be promoted. Another participant said it depended on what issues countries in the region care about. A third member questioned whether democracy really was a U.S. soft power tool in Asia. A Southeast Asian expert argued that India and Japan do not spend much time discussing democracy with the region.

A China expert noted that although the group had identified a number of areas where Chinese and Southeast Asian interests diverge; China has established mechanisms such as the Greater Mekong Initiative and the South China Sea dialogue with Vietnam to discuss potentially contentious issues. Given the protracted consensus building inherent in the “ASEAN Way,” will such mechanisms allow China to defuse conflicts of interest indefinitely without making any substantive concessions?

A participant responded that China gains huge credit for at least the appearance of engagement, but that countries will recognize whether Beijing is serious about using these mechanisms to resolve disputes. However countries are reluctant to label China as the source of problems because this might be counter-productive. Another specialist suggested that ASEAN countries are comfortable with processes that don't get much done, so that China's approach might work for quite a while.

A security specialist remarked that what matters in the region is perception. There are areas where China needs to be careful about fostering negative perceptions, such as Chinese dams on the Mekong that harm countries down river or the rise of “ugly Chinese” in border areas. However Beijing has contained major negative reactions on these issues so far. This is in part due to a lack of a cohesive ASEAN China policy.

In response to questions about whether Chinese rhetoric about “Asia for the Asians” would have much appeal, Southeast Asia specialists suggested this would have limited appeal but noted the need to distinguish between countries and populations that have different perceptions of China. Another participant pointed out that we must also differentiate between soft power supported by the Chinese government and other soft power channels such as ties between ethnic Chinese communities. These channels were very important in some countries and less important in others.