INTRODUCTION

When a group of small states are geographically astride a much larger entity, the inescapable consequence is that the latter exerts an inordinate influence over the former. Thus has been the long-held experience of the states of Southeast Asia in relation to China. As the renowned Sinologist C.P. Fitzgerald has written, "Chinese influence, Chinese culture and Chinese power have always moved southward since the first age of which we have reliable historical evidence." ¹ Defined in terms of political geography, China is a Northeast Asian state. However, because of its huge size, China also has a leg in Southeast Asia, a geographical region which senior leaders in Beijing have always tended to view as China’s backyard.

The remarkable economic growth which China has experienced since the late 1970s and Beijing’s increasingly global orientation are expected to spawn a new Chinese activism in Southeast Asia, of which the past few years provide some initial manifestations. To be sure, Chinese economic activism has always been welcomed by the states of Southeast Asia. It is Chinese military activism, however, which is less welcomed by those states, afflicted as they are with a nagging uncertainty over the long-term potential for such activism and the effect it might have on regional peace and stability.

DEFINING FEATURES OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIAN TIES

Today, there are more factors which seem to unite China and the countries of Southeast Asia than divide them. Economics is most assuredly the driving force of the relationship. China’s spectacular economic growth is providing innumerable opportunities to the countries of Southeast Asia, which have stepped up significantly trade and investment links with the PRC. The Chinese growth phenomenon comes at a time when Japan’s economy has been experiencing structural problems, leaving it in the trough of the economic cycle. In Southeast Asia, therefore, there is a widespread perception that China will be the new engine of growth for the entire region, displacing Japan, which had played that role for the past thirty years or more.

The allure of substantial economic benefits arising out of China’s developmental boom has even impelled those Southeast Asian states which were previously cool towards Beijing, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, to exploit the long-term possibilities inherent in China’s rapid modernization. As the Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir bin Mohammed has stated:

There is a lot of benefit to be derived from the linkages and the friendship of Malaysian and Chinese peoples. Today, Malaysians are investing and helping China to develop. The past is very much forgotten and in many ways irrelevant.²
Pragmatism therefore is the defining feature in ties between China and the states of Southeast Asia. This becomes even more evident in light of certain problems in overall relations, which both sides are willing to downplay so as to secure mutual benefits.

The territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands is the most prominent problem afflicting China and four ASEAN States, namely Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. These claimants to all or part of the Spratlys, together with Taiwan, have in recent years attempted to quietly shore up their ability to enforce their claims to these islands. Part of the current Southeast Asian defense modernization and expansion programs is a consequence of contingency planning related to the Spratlys. This issue came to a head in February 1995, when it was revealed that China had encroached on the Philippines-claimed Mischief Reef in the Spratlys. That incident gave the cash-strapped Philippines a greater incentive to expand its defense budget in order to acquire warships and aircraft that would allow the Philippines to defend those areas of the Spratlys it claims. The Mischief Reef incident also seemed to concentrate the minds of the Malaysian military, given reports of renewed Malaysian interest in acquiring diesel electric submarines. In both the Philippines and Malaysian cases, it is China which is perceived as the likely belligerent at some point in the future.

Vietnam’s dispute with China over the Spratlys also highlights the extent to which the islands in the South China Sea are a potential source of regional instability. Vietnam’s approach in dealing with China’s claims to the Spratlys has been to enlist a Western third party on the side of its claims, thereby impeding possible Chinese advances into the area. This was seen in Hanoi’s 1994 award of an oil exploration contract to Mobil Oil to explore for oil on overlapping Vietnamese and Chinese claims on the Spratlys. But the Spratlys has not been allowed to stall the improving relations between the two sides since Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia. Hanoi and Beijing have tacitly agreed to delink the Spratlys from those issues of mutual concern. As a consequence, both sides have come to terms on issues they can agree on, such as normalizing activities along their common land border, while in the “interests of maintaining good ties” avoiding any detailed discussion of the Spratlys issue.

Indonesia’s sources of diplomatic tension with China involve the issue of the so-called “overseas Chinese” in Indonesia and China’s overarching claim to much of the South China Sea, which appear to include part of Indonesia’s Natuna islands. China’s expressions of “concern” over the apparently anti-Chinese riots in Medan in April 1994 rekindled Jakarta’s suspicions about China’s intentions with regard to Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese minority. Such anti-Chinese sentiment is a reality in the Indonesian body-politic, suggesting that Medan is likely to recur in the future and will be a source of suspicion and irritation in Sino-Indonesian relations. Beijing’s shifting conception of its territorial expanse, including the extent of its claims in the South China Sea, will also continue to be a source of some discord in relations with Jakarta.

China’s relations with Singapore and Thailand are the best among all the ASEAN states. Singapore constitutes one of the largest investors in China, with a major Singapore government commitment to develop a new industrial park in the Chinese city of Suzhou. It is only Singapore’s connections with Taiwan, particularly in the defense field, that represent a potential irritant. But even this factor is likely to diminish in significance as Singapore-Taiwan defense ties wind down following the establishment of formal diplomatic ties between Singapore and China in 1991. Thailand faces no extant difficulties in its relations with China. Indeed, Chinese weapons systems are widely
used in the Thai Armed Forces, including a number of warships in the Royal Thai Navy acquired from China at “friendship” prices.

The foregoing brief survey of China’s ties with the ASEAN states suggests a fairly normal relationship between the two sides. This state of affairs, however, may not necessarily obtain in the future, given that broader geopolitical changes in the Asia-Pacific could modify the complexion of the relationship, particularly in the longer term.

GEOGRAPHIC COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF REGIONAL SECURITY

As is almost universally recognized, the main pillar underpinning stability in the Western Pacific remains the United States. However, doubts continue to be raised about whether the U.S. will continue to maintain that stability in the future. U.S. credibility in the regional security realm has eroded over the last few years as a result of combination of factors: a numerical drawdown of U.S. forces in the Western Pacific; conflicting and confusing statements issued by senior U.S. officials about the direction of U.S. security policy in the region; and the relative neglect of the Western Pacific by the Clinton administration are among the more prominent of these factors.

The only element of certainty in U.S. security policy towards the Western Pacific is the numbers of troops -- 100,000 -- Washington says it will maintain in the region. Of that total, 84,000 troops are deployed in Northeast Asia -- 37,000 in South Korea and 47,000 in Japan. The focus of U.S. security policy in the Western Pacific is therefore clearly Northeast Asia, a point reinforced by the fact that U.S. forces deployed in that quadrant are weighted in favor of army and air force units that make at best a limited contribution to Southeast Asian security, as they would if the naval component of these forces were larger. The lesser emphasis on naval capabilities reinforces the geographic compartmentalization of the U.S. security posture in the West Pacific. The disposition of U.S. forces also contrasts markedly with that of China’s geopolitical position, given that China’s huge size spanning both Northeast and Southeast Asia, gives China strategic reach in both quadrants. As Colin Gray has stated: "China has weight and position." It is therefore in Southeast Asia that a potential power vacuum is evident that could well be filled by China at some point in the future. That is the primary concern of Southeast Asian states as they attempt to come to terms with the increased ascendance of China as an Asia-Pacific power.

THE PLA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA’S CONSCIOUSNESS

With the exception of Vietnam and Myanmar, where PLA ground forces could conceivably have a direct bearing on those two states’ national security, the PLA’s ability to impinge on stability in much of Southeast Asia would be largely affected via its navy and, secondarily, its air force. In that connection, Myanmar’s increasing military ties with China constitutes somewhat of a puzzle to the states of ASEAN, leaving them wondering whether the future will see the PLA projecting power from jumping-off points in Myanmar.

The Western Flank--Myanmar

Reports in the early 1990s began to point to substantially increased contacts between the Chinese military and its Myanmar counterpart. In early 1992, it was
reported that, in the preceding few years, China had supplied approximately U.S.$1.5 billion worth of armaments to Myanmar, which included fighter aircraft, patrol boats, artillery, tanks, anti-aircraft guns and missiles, and other weaponry. While the reequipment and upgrade of Myanmar’s military might in itself be of concern to neighboring countries like India and Thailand, it is increasing Chinese influence in Myanmar, and Beijing’s quid pro quo from Myanmar’s State Law and Order Restoration Council for its arms supplies, that raises qualms among regional states. The focus thus far has largely been on Beijing’s involvement in the development of a Myanmar naval base at Hianggyik Island and a radar station at Coco island, southwest of the Myanmar coast, and the possible use of both facilities by the PLA. Strategic analysts believe that these bases could in time be used by the PLA for signals intelligence (SIGINT) purposes (if they are not already so employed), or the deployment of PLA fleet units for operations into the Indian Ocean and Andaman Sea. The latter prospect would be particularly worrisome to the ASEAN states, as it would increase China’s ability to influence the conduct of maritime traffic through the Strait of Malacca. The Chinese would be able to deploy fleet units via both the South China and Andaman Seas for that purpose, a two-pronged capability which they have hitherto lacked. In contemplating the probability of such a scenario, however, two questions first need to be answered. One, does China in fact have ambitions to establish a naval presence in the Indian Ocean out of Myanmar ports? Any answer to this question would be purely speculative at this stage. And, two, will the PLA have a sufficient number of fleet units to deploy a force of appreciable size on Southeast Asia’s western flank? A look at PLA Navy’s shifting priorities might provide some semblance of an answer to this second question.

The PLA Navy’s shifting priorities

Over the last two decades that the PLA Navy has slowly been given increased importance and resources relative to the other service arms -- army, air force and strategic missile forces. The London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Military Balance 1995/96 has contended: "There is a growing evidence that the Chinese Navy is now its [the PLA’s] paramount service." Since the 1970s, the navy’s fleet components -- North Sea, East Sea and South Sea -- have tended to develop unevenly as a consequence of the twin factors of evolving PLA doctrine and Beijing’s shifting threat perceptions.

For much of the 1970s, the navy concentrated its best units in the North Sea Fleet, towards the Soviet Union’s Far East and that country’s Pacific Fleet. In the 1980s, however, as a result of the establishment of a Soviet naval presence in the South China Sea out of Vietnam’s Cam Ranh Bay, the South Sea Fleet was accorded greater attention in terms of improved hardware and increased numbers of personnel. This attention remained until the early 1990s when, with the disappearance of the Soviet threat, the focus appeared to shift towards the East Sea Fleet, headquartered at Shanghai and oriented toward the Taiwan contingency. The most notable manifestation of the shift was not in warship deployments but, curiously, in aircraft. In 1991, the PLA had reportedly decided that the 26 Su-27 Flankers that it planned to acquire from the former Soviet Union would be based on Hainan Island for South China Sea operations. However, when the aircraft were delivered to China in 1992, they were deployed at an air base in Anhui Province, not far from Shanghai, suggesting that the air force’s operational requirements for the aircraft had shifted away from the South China Sea to the East China Sea. To be sure, aircraft like warships can be redeployed from place to place, but there is a certain symbolism attached to their primary base location, in addition to providing a clear indication of immediate operational priority.
Thus, China’s finite power projection resources could be stretched very thin should the PLA ever face multiple contingencies simultaneously, even if these were to occur close to home. But this does not provide a measure of comfort to those Southeast Asian observers alarmed at the prospect of a more visible presence by the Chinese Navy in the South China Sea. These anxieties reflect an underlying fact: it is not just the numerical composition of a force that matters, but also its underlying tactical doctrine and the likely opposition it would face in any operating theater.

Individually, none of the ASEAN states has the military capability that could successfully oppose a determined Chinese advance into the South China Sea, and they are unlikely to have a such a capability in the foreseeable future. Consequently, there is a real but silent fear in Southeast Asia attached to the directions in the PLA’s modernization programs and its operational doctrine.

Local war

The decade-long restructuring of the PLA since the mid-1980s has resulted in a leaner force structure intended to acquire tasks more congruent with the current international environment and China’s place in it. The PLA envisages that if China were to be embroiled in conflict it would be high-intensity in nature and of brief duration. Such conflicts would be subsumed under the ambit of "local wars." They would involve combat operations either on Chinese territory, Beijing’s perception of its territory, or in areas close to its territory. Taiwan and the Spratly and Diaoyu/Senkaku islands would easily come within that framework. To carry out high-intensity warfare, the PLA has established rapid reaction units (RRU) or kuaisu budui, which comprise naval, air force, marine and airborne elements, whose main features are mobility and volume of firepower, but are presently lacking in out-of-area capability due to logistical constraints.

The South China Sea would be an ideal arena for the conduct of a local war once the PLA improves certain dimensions of its capabilities, particularly logistics, including a mid-air refueling capability for fighters intended to provide air cover for fleet units. If, however, PLA objectives in the South China Sea were limited to attack and destruction rather than occupation and the securing of islets, then existing capabilities would still be able to initiate actions with a high probability of success. For instance, PLA Air Force medium-range H-6 bombers, with a combat radius in excess of 1,000 nautical miles, and equipped with standoff ALCMs (air-launched cruise missiles) would pose a problem for those ASEAN air forces without airborne early-warning and control aircraft and/or air defense systems capable of dealing with supersonic cruise missiles. The military establishments of the ASEAN states are only too aware of such Chinese capabilities and the deficiencies of their own armed forces.

While stressing the essentially defensive nature of its military doctrine, China’s concept of "defense" is similar to the Russian military concept of aktionost oborony -- aggressiveness in defense. This implies an ironclad commitment to initiate hostilities so long as the Chinese political leadership feels that this is done in defense of what it deems its sovereign territories and, more broadly, national interest. The latitude given to Chinese interpretations of national security matches the approach Beijing takes with respect to the Spratly Islands and a large part of the South China Sea, insisting on both the continental-shelf principle and historical usage and administration as the basis of its
claims. Such an approach is likely to get more uncompromising as China becomes increasingly powerful and, *ipso facto*, is imbued with a *perception* that it has greater freedom of action in its "backyard" -- Southeast Asia.

*Symbolism*

Even where conflict does not occur, the mere presence of growing numbers of PLA fleet units in the South China Sea would resonate throughout much of Southeast Asia. Here, the words of Jonathan Pollack are apposite: "[t]he symbolic element of Chinese ships putting to sea, however vulnerable they might be in actual warfare, cannot be ignored." Why would this be so? Simply because in Southeast Asia, China is not perceived as being a fully-fledged *status quo* power or a country that has been completely integrated into the international system where it would readily abide by rules and norms of international conduct.

This raises the issue of a potentially greater symbol of Chinese power: the acquisition of an aircraft carrier. Regional views on China’s ambitions to develop an aircraft carrier capability for power projection seem chiefly centered on the lengthy lead-time it would take for the PLA Navy to build a single carrier and achieve full operational capability with a complement of modern aircraft. The general consensus is that this process could take ten or even fifteen years. Even then one carrier would not make much of an impression in operational terms. As such, China would require at least four carriers as the basis of viable blue-water warfighting fleet. It would take the Chinese approximately 25 years to acquire such a force. However, any suggestion of a Chinese aircraft carrier becoming operational in the medium-term lies mainly in the symbolism it would have for Southeast Asia, that is, of China’s growing strength. In operational terms, it would not be sensible to deploy an aircraft carrier -- an essentially open-ocean platform -- in an enclosed maritime domain like the South China Sea, where it would be vulnerable to attack by land-based aircraft. Thus, at least for now, talk of China acquiring an aircraft carrier is seen within Southeast Asia as highly dubious. Indeed, the Chinese themselves seemed to have realized, rather belatedly, that the cost and complexity of building and operating aircraft carriers make them an unnecessary luxury, and appear to have shelved the idea, at least of the time being.

*Missile reality*

However, the Chinese firing of ballistic missiles in August 1995 and, seven months later, in March 1996, into waters close to Taiwan brought home the reality of China’s military power to Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific. Although the missiles -- carrying dummy warheads -- were targeted near Taiwan, their launching reverberated throughout Southeast Asia, as the fall in the leading indices of stock markets in the region during those two periods vividly demonstrated.

But it is China’s massive size and geographical proximity to both Taiwan and Southeast Asia which suggests that Beijing "does not really need aircraft carriers to project conventional military power to waters adjacent to these areas; it already has the wherewithal to make the point." This includes weaponry with supposedly obsolescent military technology -- Scud-type M-9 missiles which do not as yet seem to have viable counter. Indeed, even Taiwan’s soon-to-be introduced advanced version of the Patriot air defense system might not help much in countering the M-9 as, contrary to the media hype during the 1991 Gulf War, actual technical analysis has shown that the Patriot was almost completely ineffective in dealing with Iraqi Scud missiles.
The clear impression given to Southeast Asia states by the events of August 1995 and March 1996 is that the PLA is getting bolder. The question is how have these states been dealing with an emboldened Chinese military, and how will they do so in the future.

**CURRENT AND POTENTIAL SOUTHEAST ASIAN STRATEGIES**

No one single policy or strategy has been adopted by the Southeast Asian states in their attempts to deal with China’s rise as a major power. Rather, these states have adopted a panoply of individual and collective policies and strategies, whose main objectives are to provide a moderating influence on Chinese regional behavior while simultaneously affording ample opportunities for these states to benefit from China’s developmental boom.

*Increasing China’s stake in regional peace*

Some of the Southeast Asian states believe that the rubric of economics can help keep China benign. Burgeoning trade and investment linkages have their obvious benefits to the economies of both the ASEAN states and China. Such linkages also have an indirect security element. The increasing interdependence of the economies of Southeast Asia and China has the effect of giving Beijing a stake in the peace and stability of the region. The question is whether Beijing would put its economic goals at risk by displays of military power or the overt use of force. There are two contending views on this question. One assumes that if China achieves greatness via the economic route, its political and diplomatic influence will be sufficient enough to shape the future course of events in the region, obviating the need to assert itself militarily. The other view contends that China wants it all: economic greatness and territorial aggrandizement through force of arms. Thus, any notion that Southeast Asia’s security can eventually become indivisible from China’s is a mere chimera. The first perspective seems to have a certain validity in the near and medium term. The second perspective might well have resonance in the longer term. The ASEAN states are no doubt aware of both possible outcomes. That is why they seem to have adopted a strategy of buying as much time as possible for the region, while enjoying the benefits of Chinese economic growth, before the medium term begins the transition to the longer term.

*Maintaining good regional atmospherics*

Buying time necessarily means that the ASEAN states will have to pursue a finely calibrated approach. It is important to keep in mind that in East Asia atmospherics are always at a premium, and in many cases are more salient than substance. In practical terms, the ASEAN states would strive as much as possible to ensure that the notion of "the China threat" does not become a self-fulfilling prophesy. For example, the ASEAN states have not been publicly critical of those dimensions of Chinese security policy which have implications for the rest of the region. This kind of statecraft has more to do with the enlightened self-interests of ASEAN member-states than any suggestions of doctrinaire inclinations. As Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has put it: “Small Asian nations are too prudent to express their fears [about China] publicly.”

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammed has on occasion criticized those observers who have engaged in inflating threats to East Asian security, and by so doing souring atmospherics. In May 1996, for instance, he assailed “undeterred balance-of-power enthusiasts” for exaggerating threats to regional stability and consequently
deliberately minimizing "what Asia has been able to accomplish over the last
generation."\textsuperscript{26}

This need to keep regional atmospherics good, even in the face of disquieting
developments, was best exemplified in March 1996, during the exercises conducted by
the PLA in and around the Taiwan Strait. These exercises, intended to bring the political
leadership of Taiwan into line, were an instructive experience for the countries of
Southeast Asia. Beijing’s saber-rattling, though the result of Mr. Lee Teng-hui’s attempts
to create international space for Taiwan, was also seen by the region as occurring at a
time of steady accretion in China’s economic, diplomatic and military power. As such
this was a moment of truth for ASEAN.

During this episode, the countries of Southeast Asia were largely muted in their
response to Beijing’s military actions, no matter how egregious they seemed. Beijing’s
saber-rattling had led to the diversion of international air traffic and shipping, and sent
shivers through the Taiwan, Hong Kong and other regional bourses. The stance of the
Southeast Asians appeared to have two dimensions, one largely apparent, the other far
more real. The largely apparent dimension is premised on the fact that the states of
Southeast Asia accept that Taiwan is a domestic Chinese issue. Consequently, during
the "crisis" in the Taiwan Strait they did not feel that it was their place to be seen
interfering in the domestic affairs of another country - an avowed ASEAN principle of
longstanding. The Southeast Asian states are only too aware of the proximity of
growing Chinese power, and being pragmatic they have apparently decided that the
best course of action is to reconcile themselves to that fact and to accommodate China’s
rise. (An old Asian saying sums up this attitude: "Do not knock your head against a
brick wall; best to go around it for profit.") Even well before the crisis in the Taiwan
Strait, the tongue-tied nature of the governments in Southeast Asia, when witnessing
Chinese assertiveness, caught the imagination of one observer: "Regional reaction has
been relatively subdued, reflecting more a desire not to upset China and miss
commercial opportunities offered by its huge and growing market than by any
confidence in Beijing’s intentions."\textsuperscript{27} By this essentially expedient stance, the ASEAN
states incur few costs, at least in the near-to-medium terms. The longer term is, of
course, another matter.

\textit{Locking China into a multilateral security framework}

Putting aside atmospherics, ASEAN’s more active approach in dealing with a
increasingly powerful China has been to "engage" it within a multilateral security
structure, namely the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). As Michael Leifer has stated:

When the senior official of ASEAN and its dialogue partners convened at
a seminal meeting in Singapore in May 1993, which led to the ARF,
balance of power as well as the ASEAN model were very much in mind
with China identified as a potential hegemon.

The object of the exercise was not necessarily to contain China. Indeed, it
was hoped that the nexus of economic incentive would serve to bring
about the constructive engagement which has become part of regional
rhetoric.\textsuperscript{28}

Thus, one of the key aims of the ARF has been to bring China into a security
structure with the hope that it would then operate within that framework, taking
cognizance of the interests and sensitivities of other ARF members; in other words, to lock China into a constraining multilateral arrangement. While this scheme appeared initially to be sound, subsequent events suggested that the Chinese were not prepared to be "constrained" or "engaged" on terms set down by ASEAN. China’s encroachment onto the Philippines-claimed Mischief Reef, which came to light in February 1995 (but which had occurred some months earlier, most likely in October 1994) is a disquieting case from the ASEAN perspective. It was disquieting because hitherto, in enforcing its claims to the Spratly Islands, China had always tended to encroach on Vietnamese-held islets in the chain, deliberately avoiding the ASEAN claimants—Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei. Mischief Reef changed all that, indicating that Beijing, possibly with a view to the impending membership of Vietnam in ASEAN in July 1995, was no longer going to make a distinction among the various Spratly claimants. This apparent Chinese policy change caught the ASEAN states completely by surprise. After the initial surprise, ASEAN seemed resolved to take a unified stand against China. Senior officials of the grouping, meeting their Chinese counterparts in April 1995 in the Chinese city of Hangzhou, told the Chinese that Beijing’s actions in the South China Sea were very serious and that it should cease building military structures on disputed islands. Now it was Beijing’s turn to be surprised at the turn of events—a unified stand by ASEAN. On the issue of Chinese assertiveness, ASEAN’s stand was previously less apparent and, also, it came amidst the diplomatic row between Singapore and the Philippines over the hanging of a Filipina maid after she was convicted by the Singapore courts of double murder. That Singapore together with Thailand stood behind the Philippines in presenting a united front to China was indeed significant.

This unified ASEAN stand on the Spratly Islands issue seemed to draw a more conciliatory tone from China at the August 1995 ARF meeting in Brunei. At this meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen gave the clear impression that Beijing was now willing to discuss the Spratly issue multilaterally with ASEAN, and to accept the Law of the Sea Convention as a basis for negotiations to resolve the dispute. The Foreign Minister’s remarks were widely applauded by other ARF governments. His remarks, however, seemed to ring hollow when Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Shen Guofang, reasserted the old position affirming China’s sovereignty over the islands, contending that the ARF was not an appropriate place to discuss what he characterized as a "bilateral" issue. There were no regional expressions of dismay over Shen’s statement, however.

Thus, Beijing seems adept at turning regional atmospherics to its own advantage. Some observers in Southeast Asia have called this the "three steps forward, two steps back" approach, whereby China would advance into the South China Sea and when confronted by expressions of regional disquiet would give the impression of being conciliatory, then when the dust had settled it would make a further advance into the area.

The logical end result of an apparent Chinese minuet — "three steps forwards, and two steps back" — is one of steady and inexorable advance. There seems to be a general appreciation of this fact in the back of the minds of governments of every ASEAN country, though they are unlikely to articulate it publicly, again because they do not want regional atmospherics to get murky and "the China threat" to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The reticence of ASEAN officialdom is not, however, shared by influential individuals in non-governmental positions, such as Jusuf Wannandi of Indonesia’s Center for Strategic and International Studies. As Wannandi has argued, "In the end, if China is not willing to play according to the rules of the games and heed her
own promises, then ASEAN’s attitude towards her will be sour and ASEAN will take a stronger stand towards China in the future.  

*ASEAN multilateral defense?*

If the near and medium term suggest a lack of criticality toward China as a threat to peace and stability in Southeast Asia, the longer term suggests otherwise. It would only be in that particular circumstance -- that is, when the threat is obvious -- that ASEAN would likely contemplate anything approximating a formal alliance arrangement to meet that threat. As one author has noted with regard to the geostrategic situation in the Asia-Pacific: "A state that suddenly becomes more assertive will frighten its neighbors, which will likely respond by forming an alliance to contain the threatening state." In so far as Southeast Asia is concerned, this observation certainly has some historical resonance. Vietnam’s December 1978 invasion of Cambodia, while not frightening non-communist Southeast Asia into forming an alliance to contain Vietnamese expansionism, certainly provided the catalyst for a joint ASEAN stand to confront, and lead world opinion against, Vietnam.

Today, ASEAN cooperation in the military realm is chiefly confined to bilateral defense ties and is exemplified in a so-called "spider’s web" of defense relationships among member-states. The reliance on a bilateral, as against a multilateral, approach to defense and security issues has largely been a consequence of the differing threat perceptions of each of the member-states, compounded by the latent suspicions and territorial disputes within ASEAN. A suddenly assertive China, however, could well provide a coalescence in threat perceptions by the ASEAN states, resulting in the shelving of bilateral disputes so as to deal with the larger security issue that affects the whole of Southeast Asia and indeed the wider Asia-Pacific. Thus, China, contingent on its future regional behavior, could well provide the spark for a significant strategic rationale to ASEAN, and a unified strategic policy for the grouping.

To that extent, where previously it was inconceivable for the ASEAN states to contemplate multilateral defense links, a China that begins to militarily assert itself could make such links possible. The naval arena would be where these links would be most sharply felt. The contributions of ASEAN navies of numbers of warships to a Standing ASEAN Naval Force (SANF) represents a promising concept that seems inconceivable today, but might prove relevant in the 21st century. A prospective SANF could well prove its worth in dealing with any large scale Chinese incursion into the South China Sea that results in the interdiction of heavily trafficked sea lines of communications. As has already been noted, individually the navies of the ASEAN states would not be a match for the PLA’s South Sea Fleet. In combination, however, they could well be more than a match. Indeed, as Larry Wortzel has contended, with regard to just three of the ASEAN states: "Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore all have small navies, but they are equipped with the latest in anti-ship SSMs [ship-to ship missiles] -- the Harpoon and the Exocet. Combined, they would present a credible challenge to the PRC naval task force."  

**CONCLUSION**

In the near to medium term the states of Southeast Asia will most likely adopt a suitably deferential stance in relations with their large northern neighbor. China is expected to exert a greater economic, cultural and diplomatic influence in what it
considers its "backyard" over the coming decade. Beyond the near to medium term, however, things are less clear. Nothing in the ASEAN experience suggests that the grouping subscribes to principles which are inflexible. In the conduct of their international relations, the ASEAN states have been agnostic, and they will likely give China substantial freedom of action so long as it does not lead to a situation of conflict or Chinese interference in the sovereign rights and affairs of member-states. Should those lines be crossed, however, it is likely that ASEAN deference towards China would be put aside in favor of a stronger and united stand. The question that naturally arises is whether by that time China’s strength would have grown to such proportions that ASEAN, as a collective entity, would be unable to stem China’s ability to dictate terms. The answer to this question is likely to become clearer perhaps in a decade from now. Until then, a mix of pragmatism, adroit diplomacy, internal cohesion and expanding military capabilities will be the predominant ASEAN approach in its relations with the PRC or any other aspiring major power in the Asia-Pacific.

10 Ibid.
13 One such observer is B.A. Hamzah, who heads the Malaysian Institute of Maritime Affairs and who has warned about the possibility of China’s "Tibetization" of the South China Sea. Quoted in Barry Wain, "Beijing and Hanoi Play With Fire in South China Sea," *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 20 July 1994, p.5.
17 Rizal Sukma, "China’s Defense Policy in the Asia Pacific," *The Indonesian Quarterly*, vol.23, no.1, p.82.
19 I thank Paul Dibb for this observation.


23 This, however, is not stopping the Royal Thai Navy in its plans to base its Spanish-built helicopter carrier on its eastern seaboard in a reversal of earlier intentions to base it on the western seaboard.


25 Quoted by Wain, "Beijing and Hanoi," p.5.


27 Wain, "Beijing and Hanoi," p.5.


29 Ibid.


34 Ibid.

