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Clashing American Images of an Emergent China and 21st-Century China-ASEAN Relations: 2001-2008+

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Abstract

This article examines the clashing images of an emergent China among American China Watchers. In the early years of the 21st century, these American China Watchers dismissed the image of China as a military threat to the US. Instead, they observed that China uses its growing economic resources and multilateral diplomacy to enhance its relations with the ASEAN member-states. Eventually, they perceived China's emergence as a constraint on American political and economic interests in Southeast Asia. They depicted China as pervasively influential and applying soft-power to engage the US in a zero-sum game in the region. However, this image is negated by a contrasting view that accentuates the limits of Chinese diplomatic gambit. In conclusion, the article links these clashing images to Beijing's foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia, and Washington's strategy of hedging against any challenge that an emergent China poses.

Keywords: *China's emergence, China's charm offensive, China-US relations, perception in international relations*

JEL classification: *F53, F59, N45, Q34*

1. Introduction

A major issue in contemporary East Asia is China's emergence as a regional economic power. In less than three decades, China was able to transform its command and slow-growing autarkic economy into a dynamic market-oriented one that has become the world's most formidable exporting juggernaut. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is now a major player in the global economy, the driving force behind the rapid recovery of East Asian economies after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and an influential regional power.

Currently, it uses its booming economy to dispense commercial opportunities and economic assistance to the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and to draw them gradually into its political orbit. These countries have realized again soon enough that China's burgeoning economy greatly benefits them. At present, regional trade flourishes due to the huge Chinese market for industrial components, raw materials, food, and other consumer exports. Thus, a vigorous economic relationship has been established between China's import growth and its increasing exports to its neighbouring states. These developments, in turn, have transformed China into an influential great power in Southeast Asia.

This turn of events has caused concerns in Washington D.C. Given the sheer size of China's economy, its growing trade, and expanding overseas investments and Official Development Assistance (ODA) with Southeast Asian countries, American China Watchers have warned that Chinese influence has pervaded Southeast Asia, in much the same way that American influence has spread in Central America and, to a lesser degree, in the Andean region of South America (De Santis, 2005: 23-36). Indeed, China has become a major uncertainty to US foreign policy in East Asia and a powerful nation with the "greatest potential to compete militarily with the U.S." (Abramowitz and Bosworth, 2003: 15; Connetta, 2006: 8). While disagreeing over China's long-tern intention and the future of US-China relations, most American China Watchers believe that "managing the rise of China constitutes one of the greatest challenges facing the United States in the early 21st century" (Scott, 2007: 158-166).

This article explores the different and clashing images of an emergent China and its increasingly cooperative relations with the ASEAN member-states among a number of American China Watchers. It addresses this pivotal question: In the light of China's emergence, how do some American China Watchers view China's emergence as an economic power in East Asia, and enhanced China-ASEAN relations? Other specific questions follow: How does China try to improve its relations with the ASEAN member-states? Is China's charm offensive undermining American influence and prestige in Southeast Asia? Historically, how do American China Watchers view this development? What are their different and clashing perceptions on China's emergence and China-ASEAN relations? What is the relationship between these clashing views and US foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the China challenge in Southeast Asia?

2. Images and Perceptions in International Relations

Since the start of the 21st century, many American China Watchers are engaged in a perennial and intense debate on how Washington should view and

respond to Beijing's growing economic and political clout in Southeast Asia. They are unanimous in arguing that China's increasing regional influence is a valid foreign policy concern for the US. The bone of contention is whether or not China has the intention and capability to challenge the US's hegemonic position in Southeast Asia. Some regard China as a formidable challenge to American interests in this part of the world. Others believe that China is a conservative, if not a constructive regional status quo power. A few argue the country it is not powerful enough to challenge the US and may, in fact, evolve into an American partner or a de facto ally. To these American China Watchers, "China, after decades of exerting only modest influence in Asia, is now a more active and important regional actor." (Saunders, 2008: 127) Thus, they all share the belief that China is a power to contend with in Southeast Asia that potentially can be either a partner or a challenge to the US.

By focusing on perceptions, this study assumes that current foreign policy debates, recommendations and positions on China's emergence in Southeast Asia are indicative of how American China Watchers view the world. This perceptual analysis considers such variables as motivation, mindset, images, and institutional affiliation among others. As a methodology, the perceptual system which builds mental representation in the form of images (or mindset) through the use of psychological mechanism, or categorization has been found to influence policy recommendation or position of scholars, analysts, and even government officials (Kulma, 1999: 76). The most prominent source of these images is their published works.

In their 1961 work *The Foundations of International Politics*, Harold and Margaret Sprout highlights the importance of perception in the formulation of policy and in policy debates. These two Princeton scholars explored the psychological environment that consists of ideas derived from the individuals' perception of conditions and events interpreted in the light of their conscious memories and sub-consciously stored in their knowledge (Sprout and Sprout, 1963: 46-47). The psychological environment may or may not correspond closely to reality but it affects policy recommendations in two ways: (1) may perceive what does not exist or may fail to perceive what does exists; and (2) since what is perceived is interpreted in the light of past experience, individuals with different backgrounds may interpret quite differently the same perceived objects or events (*ibid*.: 48).

Another classic work on the role of perception in international relations is Robert Jervis's *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. In his book, Jervis argues that it is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers' beliefs about the world and images of others (Jervis, 1976: 28). Interestingly, he points out that in policy debates, it is generally useful not to ask if anyone is right; but usually it is be more fruitful to ask why people differ and how they come to see the

world as they do (*ibid*.: 29). He also contents that differing perceptions are the root causes of many inter-state disputes. Frequently, when actors do not realize this, they misunderstand their disagreements and engage in an endless debate (*ibid*.: 31).

Since the late 1990s, there has been a plethora of works on the perceptual dimension of US-China relations. Among them are Michael G. Kulma's "The Evolution of U.S. Images of China: A Political Psychological Perspective" (Kulma, 1999: 162-188), Andrew Bingham Kennedy's "China's Perceptions of U.S. Intentions toward Taiwan: How Hostile a Hegemon?" (Kennedy, 2007: 268-287), Biwu Zhang's "Chinese Perceptions of American Power, 1991-2005" (Zhang, 2005: 667-686) and Qin Yaqing, "A Response to Yong Deng: Power, Perception and Cultural Lens." (Qin, 2001: 155-158). These works share a commonality of ideas. First, all emphasize the following ideas – international relations are notoriously rife with misperceptions and US-China relations are prone to misperceptions and misunderstanding (Kennedy, 2007: 286). China and the US tend to misperceive each other's power and capability and this fact matters significantly in their bilateral relations. Third, in tackling the environmental factors in international relations, there is a basic belief in Margaret and Harold Sprout's aphorism that "what matters is how decision-makers imagine the state's power to be, not how it actually is" (Zhang, 2005: 668).

3. China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia

With its long civilization and central geographic location, China has always considered itself as a great power in East Asia. Now, it is in a position to challenge the dominant power in the region – the US – given its considerable military capability and rapid economic growth in the past two decades. However, it does not dare confront the US head-on soon or in the immediate future. China's concentrates on economic development to ensure its comprehensive security, without subordinating its efforts to meet direct challenges from any superpower (Ong, 2002: 179). China's main pressing security concern is maintaining its dynamic economic relations with Japan, South Korea, the US and the ASEAN states. Beijing's baseline goals include rapid economic growth, continuous pursuit of economic liberalization, globalization, and social liberalization, political consolidation (for the communist party), and the upkeep of a credible and modern military force directed against Taiwan. All these are directed towards developing its regional influence and certainly not to challenge the US on a global scale (Overholt, 2008: 124).

Despite its cooperative relations with the US, most Chinese regard the world's sole superpower as a threat to their national security and domestic stability (Scott, 2007: 158). This distrust stems from Washington's tacit

support of the status quo in the Taiwan Straits and its alleged agenda of subverting the few remaining socialist states in the world through a process of "peaceful evolution" (Ong, 2002: 116). This deep-seated suspicion of the US is exacerbated by increased American military presence in Southeast Asia as a result of the Bush Administration war on terror after 9/11. Repeatedly, China has articulated the need for a new world order that is multipolar rather than unipolar as a defensive measure to what it perceives as a structural threat from the region's dominant power. More importantly, it uses its structural power to foster a regional order which allows Southeast Asia states to freely side with either of the two powers (China and the US) without making any firm commitment to any of them (Odgaard, 2007: 54). Using its prowess in the fields of security, production, and finance, China maintains a situation of "unstable balancing" in East Asia without directly challenging American pre-eminence in the region (*ibid*.: 54). To carry out this diplomatic gambit, China co-opts the Southeast Asian countries by providing them side-payments and institutional voice through its rapidly growing economy; and by supporting cooperative and integrative projects in the region.

During the 5th China-ASEAN summit in November 2001, Beijing offered its Southeast Asian neighbours a free-trade deal that could be established in the next few years. The following year, during the 6th China-ASEAN summit, the two sides signed the Framework Agreement on China-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation, paving the way for the formation of a China-ASEAN free trade zone by 2010. Since 2005, China and the ASEAN states have lowered their tariffs on more than 7,000 products.[1] Consequently, China-ASEAN trade has grown rapidly. Their two-way trade volume in 2006 amounted to US$160.8 billion, which translates into a 23.4 per cent increase from the 2005 trade level.[2] China and the ASEAN are now the fourth biggest trading partners. In July 2007, China and the 10 ASEAN member-states signed the ASEAN-China Agreement on Trade and Services, which provides for cooperation in high-technology services, energy, and construction, and for the eventual establishment of a comprehensive free-trade area in East Asia.

China boosted its economic ties with almost all of the Southeast Asian states including traditional US allies such the Philippines, Thailand and to large extent, Singapore. With weakening global demand for ASEAN exports, and the US yet to recover from the current economic recession, ASEAN-China trade relations are expected to intensify. During the 2008 China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in Nanning, ASEAN economic officials indicated their intention to deepen their trade ties with China to reduce their economies' reliance on the export markets of the US, Western Europe, and Japan.[3] The ASEAN countries hope that China's domestic demand will increase eventually and thus, provide some leverage on the sluggish growth in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

market. Early in 2007, economic ties between China and the ASEAN states were acknowledged during a seminar conducted by the China-ASEAN Business Council in Beijing. The gathering noted that over the past 15 years, bilateral economic and trade relations between China and ASEAN have developed rapidly and the mechanism for cooperation between the two sides "has been operating better and better".[4] It was also predicted that ASEAN export growth would be stimulated by East Asian countries like China and Japan, and not by long-haul markets such as Western Europe and the United States. Southeast Asian economists now label China as an "economic power that should be best viewed as a business partner, not a competitor, given the wide room it has for expansion in trade and investment relations".[5]

China also dispenses side-payments to the smaller ASEAN states, through the framework of the APT process and multilateral arrangements. Chinese diplomats consider the APT as the "main channel of East Asian regional cooperation" signifying its relative importance *vis-à-vis* other regional fora (Moore, 2004: 118). Through the APT, the PRC has consolidated its bilateral links with the ASEAN countries. It has donated US$1 million to the ASEAN Development Fund, and committed to train 8,000 ASEAN professionals within five years. It will also administer and finance a series of agro-technology training programmes for ASEAN member-states organization in 2007.[6] During the 2007 ASEAN-China summit, China hinted that it will favourably consider establishing economic and trade zones with sound infrastructure and complete industrial chains in a number of ASEAN countries that will be linked with its own economic zones along its coastal areas. China has also provided the ASEAN member-states US$750 million in loans and has invested heavily in their major infrastructure projects. In 2007, Chinese companies signed a US$2.8 billion contract to build coal-fired electric plants in Indonesia, significantly outbidding other foreign companies.[7] In the Philippines, China has agreed to finance and construct the US$450 million North Luzon rail project while Chinese agricultural technology is developing the country's hybrid rice and hybrid corn as Manila seeks to develop self-reliance and sufficiency in food production and supply.[8] Since 2002, China has also extended economic assistance and investments to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam through the framework of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS).[9] During the 2003 ASEAN Summit in Bali, China proposed to revitalize the moribund Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East Asian Growth Areas (BIMP-EAGA) through technical and capital assistance for its projects, for strengthened socio-economic relations, and intensified trade relations with the sub-regional group.

China also interacts with its Southeast Asian partners in several regional economic fora. The notion that regionalism elsewhere benefits member economies, and the fear of damage to domestic economic interests if access

to foreign markets similar to that enjoyed by competitors is not negotiated, are the primary reasons behind China's enthusiasm for regional economic arrangements. Most prominent among them are the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN plus Three (APT), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA), and the Tumen River Area Development Programme. For China, this means that each regional forum has a slightly different political and economic dynamic. But they all serve China's foreign policy goals. With domestic economic growth extremely dependent on the regional economy, Chinese leaders see regionalism as a mechanism by which countries can work together to address the vagaries and instability of the world economy. Likewise, they view regionalism as a way of responding to the forces of globalization. As a form of multilateralism, regional groupings could advance China's national security concerns by counter-balancing the US's financial and military power, which remains relatively unchecked since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

4. Promoting China's Vision of Regional Security

Another means by which China applies its stratagem of unstable power balancing is undermining indirectly the US's well-established system of alliances and forward-deployed forces in Asia. Specifically, China debunks the basis (the so-called China threat) of these alliances and their obsolete Cold War mental mode. This became too apparent when China announced its "New Security Concept" (NSC) in 1998. Premised on cooperative and coordinated security, the NSC presents a pattern of diplomatic-defense relationship with countries that are neither allies nor adversaries of China. According to Beijing, the new concept is suited to a post-Cold War environment characterized by peace and development but threatened by non-traditional (non-state) security challenges, e.g., transnational crimes, international terrorism, etc.

China has consistently promoted this concept in its conduct of regional and international security affairs. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) basically incorporates China's approach in addressing non-traditional security challenges such as terrorism, separatism, extremism, and drug trafficking (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2006: 87). In 2006, the country hosted the 6th meeting of the Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization where China and the member states signed a friendly, long-term, "good-neighbour" agreement to enhance their cooperation in economic, trade and security matters.[10] Furthermore, through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Beijing has hosted or helped finance and organized various symposia and workshops on counter-terrorism, non-traditional security challenges, and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in China and in various parts

of Southeast Asia. China also assisted Indonesia in dealing with the avian influenza epidemic last year and this year, and it announced that it would host a China-ASEAN symposium on the prevention and control of human infection with pathological avian influenza. It will also conduct training courses on reconstruction and management of disaster-hit areas for ASEAN officials and experts this year.

The establishment of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in December 2005 was the culmination of China's efforts to advance its NSC in the region. Malaysia initiated the formation of the EAS, but with China's support and active encouragement. The opportune timing of the summit boded well for China's emergence as a regional power in East Asia. This was manifested during the 2nd EAS in Cebu City, Philippines in January 2007, when China took centre stage despite the presence of the US's allies and friends, namely Australia, Japan and to a certain degree, India. Apart from signing several economic agreements with ASEAN member-states, China pushed for regional community-building and economic integration.

5. Jumping on the ASEAN Bandwagon?

Another means by which China unbalances the US's strategic clout and influence in East Asia is multilateral consultation with the region's smaller states. China was earlier averse to regional groupings, fearing that these groupings could be used by some countries to punish and constrain the PRC. During the second half of the 1990s, Beijing was actively involved in the ARF. It quickly adjusted to ARF's incremental style by using its soft-power approach in containing inter-state disputes. In dealing with the ARF, Beijing has emphasized the following norms (Haacke, 2003: 137): (1) participating on an equal footing; (2) reaching unanimity through consensus; (3) seeking common ground while reserving differences; and (4) proceeding in an orderly and incremental manner. Consequently, China was able to protect its own interests in the ARF and promote ASEAN conventions as the underlying framework for cooperation in regional security affairs. In more concrete terms, Beijing prevented the ARF from being used as a means to balance and restrain China; boosted ASEAN's leadership role in the regional forum by constraining the US and Japan; and effectively projected the image of the PRC as a good neighbour.

Beijing has also become pragmatic in managing its territorial disputes with the ASEAN states over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Though the PRC still clings to its historic claims over these islands, it is willing to settle this thorny issue through peaceful means, based on international law. In 2002, after four years of intensive negotiations, ASEAN and China signed a code of conduct aimed at demonstrating "restraint" in the South China Sea.

Significantly, the final draft included most of the text proposed by ASEAN and little of what was presented by China. In the aftermath of the 2nd EAS summit, China expressed confidence that ASEAN and China would soon be able to agree on activities and projects envisioned by the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.[11] A clear indication of the relaxation of tension in the Spratlys was the conduct of the Tripartite Agreement for Joint Marine Seismic Survey by three claimant states – China, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The survey involved a three-phase programme of data-gathering, consolidation and interpretation of about 11,000 kilometers of 2D seismic data on the South China Sea. The initial phase ended in November 2005, the second phase began in 2007, and the project was completed in June 2008. The undertaking served as a module of regional cooperation, and a major move that could build trust and confidence among the claimant states.

Also during the 2nd EAS summit, China announced its hosting of China-ASEAN workshop on peace-keeping in the later part of 2007, to promote defense cooperation, understanding and confidence among the armed forces of China and the ASEAN states.[12] The activity was considered the first of its kind between the two sides, and another important defense exchange programme aligned with the China-ASEAN regional security seminar regularly held in Beijing since 2003. At the same event, China mentioned the importance of the People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) ship visits to ASEAN ports on friendly calls in fostering friendship and mutual trust. Along with other ongoing security and military exchange programmes with the ASEAN states, this proposal could be interpreted as China's gambit to marginalize and eventually exclude the US from regional security affairs. This initiative marked a radical departure from Beijing's position in the 1990s, when it avoided any security dialogue with ASEAN member-states, let alone with their armed services.

6. First Image: From a Military to a Multi-Dimensional Challenge

During the Cold War, American China Watchers considered Chinese power in terms of its coercive element. They were taken aback when Beijing began using its symbolic, intellectual-ideological, economic and cultural resources in its charm offensive in Southeast Asia in the late 1990s and in the early 21st century. Because of the US's engagement in the Korean War in the early 1950s, American policy-makers, academics, and analysts generally perceived China in substantially strategic terms. Consequently, they overlooked the rapid growth of the Chinese economy in the late 1990s, and the development and refinement of Chinese diplomatic apparatus (Lampton, 2007: 115). This realization of China's "charm offensive" impressed upon them the centrality

of economic prowess and soft-power in China's foreign policy. Furthermore, with China's active involvement in global affairs, there was a felt need for Washington to engage Beijing in its own game of charm offensive (*ibid*: 116).

Accordingly, China has been using its growing political clout and increasing economic resources in a patient, low-key, and highly effective manner. It has greatly improved its historically problematic relations with the Southeast Asian states by taking a more cooperative approach to resolve territorial disputes, providing generous ODA packages, and forging free-trade agreements. American observers have also noted former President Bush's and his close advisers' obsession with the counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan, the declining image of the US abroad, and the previous administration's perceived inattention and neglect of East Asia. Observing the intellectual frenzy in Washington triggered by the deciphering of China's charm offensive in Southeast Asia, *The Economist* noted in 2005:

> In Southeast Asia, China has skillfully positioned itself as a central player, to the extent that Americans are beginning to feel left out. On December 14 in Kuala Lumpur the first East Asian Summit will be held, involving the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India. With no American leaders invited, there is no doubt that China will be the star of the show. Its position will be bolstered by a surging economy that is generating trade surpluses with China for several Asian countries. In contrast to the record trade deficit between China and America that is fueling so much American fear of a looming China threat.[13]

In the late 1990s and early 21st century, many American China Watchers tended to view China primarily as a regional economic and military power posing the greatest uncertainty to the US (Scott, 2007: 127). Their focus was "China's growing defense expenditures and the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)" which presents the US with far-ranging potential challenges (*ibid*.: 124). In *The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications*, the authors view China's emergence as primarily a military challenge to the US (Khalilzad *et al*., 1999). Commissioned by the Rand Corporation, this study argues that the Chinese foreign policy goal is comprehensive national power to raise living standard of the population, and set the technological-industrial base for a strong military (*ibid*.: xi). It claims that China's economic modernization is aligned with military modernization. It is projected that by 2015, China will become a formidable (military) power – one that might be labeled a multi-dimensional regional competitor that can exercise sea denial against the US Navy and threaten US operating locations in the whole of East Asia with its long-range strike capability among others

(Cliff *et al*., 2007). It further asserts that China will eventually pursue its territorial claims in the South China Sea and the Spratlys, protect its business interests and ethnic Chinese population in Southeast Asia, and secure deference from its less-powerful neighbours. (*ibid*.: 27-36).

The construct of an emergent China as a military threat to the US and its neighbouring states, however, was modified in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century. This new image projects China as a patient but confident actor using its soft-power instruments to expand its influence in Southeast Asia in particular and in the global economy in general (Garrison, 2005: 25). It recognizes Beijing's subtle and adroit diplomatic gambits to ally the fears and concerns of the less powerful ASEAN states by establishing mutually beneficial political, economic, and cultural ties with them. This representation casts China's policy of peaceful emergence as a "sophisticated neo-mercantilist approach" in competing for power that has been altered by globalization (*ibid*.: 25). Thus, China's charm offensive or soft-power diplomacy is not seen as an inherent or immediate threat to US interests in Southeast Asia although it can potentially destabilize the regional and the global economic systems in the future (*ibid*.: 25). Furthermore, this view regards China as neither America's friend nor an enemy. However, it can threaten American interest in the near term period. Hence, the US is warned to remain vigilant and not to label its relation with China as simply hostile or friendly (*ibid*.: 30).

Hugh De Santis's 2005 article contends that an emergent China will utilize its economic power and multilateral diplomacy to alter the strategic landscape of East Asia at the expense of the US (De Santis, 2005). He observes that China is now a global manufacturing hub and its regionally integrated economic power supports its geo-strategic ambitions. The China-led Southeast Asian economic integration weakens the US-centred hub-and-spoke framework of East Asian security and forces Washington to share power with Beijing in the Asia-Pacific region (*ibid*.: 31-32). He also deplores the Bush Administration's obsession with the war on terror, and its utter neglect of China's expansion of influence in Southeast Asia (*ibid*.: 23).

In his 2007 article, Jin H. Pak affirms that China uses cooperative and multilateral diplomacy to transform infamous image as a military threat to Southeast Asian states. This, according to Pak, subverts America's bilateral alliances while Washington remains enmeshed in the Middle East and Central Asia (Pak, 2007). China's use of soft power jibes its grand strategy – which is based on the adroit combination of force and diplomacy. As such, it actually does not represent a fundamental belief in the virtues of cooperative diplomacy. He predicts two possible outcomes for China's soft-power diplomacy or charm offensive in Southeast Asia: (1) the PRC can succeed in forming a regional security organization in which it plays a hegemonic role, in

which such a development could seriously dilute the US's regional influence, especially if the US does not prioritize Southeast Asia; and (2) China may encounter serious domestic and external challenges that can jeopardize its strategic goals and cause it to revert to more forceful, bilateral forms of diplomacy, including military coercion (*ibid*.: 57).

The January 2008 U.S. Congressional Research Service study also envisages China's practices of soft-power diplomacy or charm offensive will expand its economic and political clout in Southeast Asia. It asserts that "China's growing use of soft-power in Southeast Asia has presented new challenges to U.S. foreign policy in the region".[14] The study argues that China wields "power in the region through diplomacy and, to a lesser extent, draws admiration as a model for development, for its ancient culture, and an emphasis on 'shared Asian values'". It observes that "along with offering economic inducements, China has allayed concerns that it poses a military or economic threat, assured its neighbours that it strives to be a responsible member of the international community, and produced real benefits to the region through aid, trade and investment"[15]. The study acknowledges that China has shifted away from hard power to soft power and its increasing power and influence will eventually constrain US interests in the region.

The August 2008 U.S. Congressional Research Service study further reinforces this image of China wielding soft-power to undermine US influence and interests in Southeast Asia.[16] It argues that "China's influence and image have been bolstered through its increasingly open and sophisticated diplomatic corps as well as through prominent PRC-funded infrastructure, public works, and economic investment projects in many developing countries".[17] With its increasing wealth, expanding economic ties, and sophisticated diplomatic moves, China projects the image of an emergent but benign and non-threatening power. The study also admonishes American policy-makers that Beijing's soft-power diplomacy is more effective than that of Washington since the former's overseas activities and investments are conducted by strong, well-funded state-owned companies.[18] Consequently, major Chinese government activities attract more international attention and give a "hard" edge to PRC soft power.[19] In comparison, the US has little to match such centrally directed activities, particularly in the wake of years of US budget cutbacks in high-profile US international public diplomacy programmes. Furthermore, it raises the possibility that eventually, "China's charm offensive will be a means of building the so-called 'Beijing Consensus', a group of authoritarian states with market economies that can challenge the 'Washington Consensus', composed of liberal market economies governed by democratic regimes."[20]

Joshua Kurlantzick's *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* comprehensively explains China's soft power and

sophisticated diplomacy to transform its image and international relations (Kurlantzick, 2007). Chinese statecraft or charm offensive has changed people's perception of China as a threat to that of a benefactor (*ibid*.: 5). This transformation was caused in large measure by soft power, which enabled China to become a "great power". The book also discusses the history of China's charm offensive that began soon after Beijing felt the backlash of initially using hard power to intimidate its Southeast Asian neighbours. These countries condemned China's aggressive behavior and strengthened their security relations with Washington. To rectify its mistake, China focused on building its global soft power.

To Kurlantzick, China's charm offensive aims to: (a) transform China's image into a benign, peaceful and constructive actor in international affairs; (b) obtain the necessary resources to fuel its economy; and (c) build a ring of allies who will share Beijing's values of non-interference in domestic affairs and authoritarian rule (*ibid*.: 39-42). He observes that China uses economic resources, cultural tools, and migration to push its charm offensive all over the world. He notes that Washington is unmindful how China exerts its influence and that American public diplomacy apparatus was adversely affected by budget cuts and lack of Congressional support in the 1990s. In conclusion, he focuses a transformed China expanding its preeminent power in Southeast Asia, and even developing its spheres of influence in other parts of world, like Central Asia and Africa (*ibid*.: 236).

These aforementioned works dismiss the image of China as a military challenge to the US and its neighbouring states. Instead, they picture a peaceful and cooperative China wielding soft power in Southeast Asia with the US unintentionally abetting Chinese influence in the region. They portray China as posing a multi-faceted challenge to the US while projecting a "benign self-image". This benign representation is reflected by China's accommodating foreign policy based on active participation in regional organizations, providing significant amount of ODA packages, extending economic opportunities to its neighbouring countries with its increasing affluent market, and consolidating its economic and political relations with the Southeast Asian states.

All these studies are critical of the heavy-handed policies and confrontational anti-terrorism rhetoric of the Bush administration after 9/11 that have alienated a number of Asian states. They also mention the considerable erosion of American political and diplomatic clout in the region because of the ongoing and protracted US counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. To sum up, they uphold an image of China wielding its soft power that has become more apparent and intense in contrast to America's diminishing stature and influence in Southeast Asia.

7. Second Image: Visualizing the Limits of an Emergent China

Nevertheless, some China Watchers have rejected the alarmist image that China has become powerful and influential in Southeast Asia at the US's expense. They see China as a far more complex threat to American interests and power in the region. They contend as well that China's political and economic clout is beset by the US's more potent comprehensive power, the Southeast Asia countries' general distrust of Chinese power and influence, and by Chinese domestic problems. This second image of China that challenges American foreign policy cannot merely be likened to that of the former Soviet Union competing for global dominance and leadership. Albeit its increasing power, China still wrestles with enormous domestic problems, remains distracted by internal reforms and development, and appears reluctant to challenge Washington at present and in the near future. Thus, it projects a fumbling China that cannot actually challenge American interest even in the short-term period.

Hence, the second image presents a China that is hardly a peer competitor of the US. Internally, its leadership is preoccupied with ensuring the survival of the party and the regime. Externally, it is still distrusted by its neighbouring states and some of its diplomatic and political ventures are frowned upon by Asian societies. As one American scholar quips: "The rise of Chinese power generates global responses that Beijing cannot fully control and that may not be in its interests." (Lampton, 2007: 115) This image considers China as an outsider in the super-power league. Although considering that China could become a superpower in the future, the view acknowledges that it might fail to become one if it makes the wrong decision or it is overwhelmed by domestic challenges.

Dr Phillip C. Saunders' "China's Global Activism: Strategy, Drivers and Tools" examines China's emergence in the light of the second image (Saunders, 2006). Saunders accepts the outlook that China has committed its wealth of resources to improve its relations with key countries since 2001. In doing so, China has expanded its influence in many parts of the world (*ibid*: 28). The country has also taken advantage of opportunities created by Washington's preoccupation with the war on terror and the unpopularity of some of its policies (*ibid*.: 28). Saunders also recognizes that China's pragmatic and non-ideological approach to bilateral relations provides some states with an alternative or leverage against dependence on Washington. This, according to him, reduces American influence in many countries (*ibid*.: 28).

Saunders contends, however, that China's current activism in global affairs is not aimed at challenging the US since it is primarily driven by domestic forces. These domestic forces include: (a) China's anxiety over US strategic efforts to contain or subvert China; and (b) its desire for

uninterrupted access to international markets and resources. According to him, in situations where economic and strategic interests clash, the Chinese political leadership would usually compromise the later to enable the economy to grow (*ibid*.: 28). Economic factors matter more to China. This is the reason why Beijing has been accommodating to Washington since 2001. In his conclusion, Saunders draws a picture of a kind and gentle China, and notes optimistically while "China's global influence will increase, China will still operate within the framework of global institutions established by the United States" (*ibid*.: 30).

Bronson Percival's *The Dragon Looks South: China and Southeast Asia in the New Century* offers a fresh and very insightful look at China's emergence and relations with the US and the ASEAN member-states (Perceval 2007). Percival rejects outright the image of China bent on challenging the US while the Southeast Asian countries are caught in the middle and forced to choose between the two strategic competitors. He also dismisses the notion that the Beijing-Washington relationship is a zero-sum game, in which any gain for China becomes a loss for the US and *vice versa* (*ibid*.: 145). Convincingly, he argues that the two great powers have their own specific spheres of influence in Southeast Asia, but they cooperate and rely on their mix of foreign policy instruments.

To Percival, China, the Southeast Asia countries and the US are linked in a complex system of trading relations. In actuality, China and Southeast Asia are involved in the processing trade managed largely by American-owned transnational corporation. Products produced by China and Southeast Asia countries are usually exported to the US market. Moreover, the American market remains the most important for these countries. Moreover, the US and China wield different forms of instrument so that while they "sit side-by-side, they seldom bump up against each other" (*ibid*.: 145). Since the US possesses overwhelming military power, China dares not challenge the American military prowess. Instead, it persistently questions the relevance of traditional security, and belies the assumption that China poses a military threat to Southeast Asia. Percival also maintains that as a continental state, China looms as the predominant external influence in Southeast Asia, while the US, as the leading naval power, remains a security guarantor of the democracies of maritime Southeast Asia (*ibid*.: 147). In his conclusion, he argues that the seemingly US-China competition for power and influence in Southeast Asia is simplistic and misleading. According to him, these two powers are part of the four major external participants (along with Japan and India) engaged in an elaborate and complicated Southeast Asian dance (*ibid*.: 148).

This second image is likewise reflected in the Rand Corporation's detailed case study on China's emergence and the East Asian states' responses to this development from 2006 to 2007 (Medeiros *et al*., 2008). This study

depicts China as a regional power player caught up in a complicated/tragic Catch-22 situation. As the country expands its involvement and influence in East Asian economy and security, it correspondingly increases its role in Asian affairs. China's emergence has brought changes to US alliances and security partnership in Asia. Its influences, too, is pervasive that Chinese preferences and interests have to be factored in the foreign policy decisions of some Southeast Asia states. Nevertheless, the study confirms that the more China expands its regional power and influence, the more these Southeast Asian countries consolidate their economic and security relations with the US (*ibid*.: xv).

The study also acknowledges that both the US and China are jockeying for power and influence in East Asia. However, it is not a zero-sum game as regional responses do not involve choosing between the two powers. Instead, these states have forged security ties with other regional powers like Japan, India, and Australia. Smaller East Asian/Pacific powers appear as dynamic, active and to a certain degree, crafty players that confidently engage China while enjoying security commitments from the US. These states also widen their manoeuvring room by positioning themselves to benefit from their ties with both big powers (*ibid*.: xv). The RAND study depicts a China struggling to gain an offensive influence that could marginalize the US in Southeast Asia. Again, the more China asserts itself, the more these smaller powers pursue stability through an American involvement in the region. In this regard, the study tersely notes: "China's diplomatic overreaches in Asia in recent years have prompted occasional backlashes and a further embrace of the United States" (*ibid*: 232; Medeiros, 2009).

China's Rise: Challenges and Opportunities, published by the Peterson Institute for International Economics and Center for Strategic and International Studies, also casts the second image of an emergent China (Bergsten *et al*., 2008). This comprehensive study presents an affluent, benign, and cooperative China viewed with suspicion and distrust by its neighbours. China continues to cultivate soft power through its actions and policies (*ibid*.: 214). It not only extends substantive overseas financial and infrastructural assistance, but sends its doctors and teachers to other countries, provides educational opportunities in China for international students, and promotes its culture abroad. Accordingly, China has succeeded in influencing smaller states in Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, and this has enhanced the foundation of China's soft power over time (*ibid*.: 215). Significantly, the study indicates that China highlights non-military aspect of its comprehensive power, as well as its positive relationships with virtually all of its neighbours.

The study, however, observes that East Asia is generally wary of China's emergence. In fact, countries in the region are circumspect of the ultimate implication of China's transformation as a new economic powerhouse. China

has territorial disputes in East and South China Sea, and lingering border problems with India and Korea. Concerned countries are still apprehensive about their unresolved disputes with China (*ibid*.: 221). The study, in a way, equates China to the late 19th century Bismarkian Germany characterized as a contented, affluent, and relatively benign power. Nevertheless, it was regarded with distrust and suspicion by neighbouring states because of what it might do with its increasing power in the future.

8. Clashing Images of an Emergent China

China's emergence in East Asia and its improved relations with Southeast Asian states have caught the attention of American China Watchers. Since the early years of the new millennium, China's increasing trade, investment and ODA linkages with ASEAN states, made possible by its rapid economic growth and development, have brought mutually benefits to the mainland and its neighbours. Furthermore, China's new and cooperative diplomacy has been widely appreciated in Southeast Asia. Hence, some American China Watchers uphold the image of an emergent China that poses a serious economic and political challenge to American interests in Southeast Asia. They regard China as a rival or a competitor of the US as the former offers more opportunities for trade, investments, and even regional integration. Thus, Southeast Asian countries are drawn to China's economic and political orbit. Proponents of this first image of China have raised the issue of the US's neglect of Southeast Asia because of its preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another group of American China Watchers, however, rejects this image of a powerful and threatening China. Instead, they envisage an emergent China whose capabilities are actually finite, a fledgling regional power that is remotely capable of challenging the US for regional leadership or hegemony. This second image projects China as an active player in regional affairs whose diplomatic moves are sometimes undermined by its neighbouring states' inherent distrust of Chinese power and intention. It likewise accentuates China's mercantilist foreign policy, domestic problems, bad governance, and rigid adherence to a one-party system. These factors tarnish its charm offensive and overall global reputation. Although the Southeast Asian countries accept Chinese economic largesse and opportunities, they shrewdly maintain strong political and military ties with competing powers in the region like the US, Japan, and even India. In addition, this second image of China affirms that the US has latent reserves of soft power and still holds comprehensive power in the region. It projects a fumbling but nevertheless a benign China.

The existence of these two clashing images of an emergent China in the US can be linked to three factors in American society and government.

The first is the propensity of the American public, the media, and certain US government sectors to look for a new geo-strategic competitor in the post-Cold War era. Shaped by the Cold War from the 1940s to the late 1980s, this national predisposition thrives due to these ideological assumptions about China (Overholt, 2008: 236): (1) China today is simply a continuation of Mao's China that was aggressive, revolutionary, and expansionary; (2) because it is ruled by a communist party, 21st century China must be imperialistic and militaristic as the Soviet Union; and (3) the emergence of rising powers in the past inevitably triggered violent disruptions in the international system. The prevalence of these beliefs in post-Cold War American polity also explains the growing corpus of Chinese threat literature in the US since the late 1990s (Scott, 2007: 116-120).

The second factor that fuels this clash of images is the cognitive dissonance among American China Watchers on the nature and implications of China's emergence in East Asia. Based on the historical lessons of the World War II and the Cold War, it has been assumed that any rising power necessarily constitutes an automatic strategic/military challenge to the US. Since it is an emerging power, then China is likely to become a rising military power that will geo-strategically challenge the US in the near future. Noting the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the Chinese political leadership has taken a different path in its pursuit of comprehensive security. Beijing has realized the risk of adopting a clear-cut development strategy based on a "strong army, rich country" model. Instead, China concentrates on economic development and seeks a peaceful environment in which it can pursue domestic reforms and expand trading and investment opportunities with many states as possible (Ong, 2002: 180). Beijing intends to develop its comprehensive national power in the long run. However, it regards economic power as a crucial element before it can constitute the industrial and technological base necessary to support a modern military capability robust enough to deter any would-be aggressor (*ibid*.: 179). However, despite Beijing's pragmatic and cooperative approach in its current diplomatic gambit in East Asia, public opinion polls uniformly reveal that Americans have more negative views of China than do most other people (Lampton, 2007: 117). Thus, the US appears tougher and more suspicious of China than other states. Consequently, both countries view each other with deep mutual ambivalence, if not mounting distrust (Scott, 2007: 127). This generates the conflicting images of an emergent China among American China Watchers.

The two clashing images of an emergent China can also be linked with Washington's current policy *vis-à-vis* Beijing – hedging. Faced by China's increasing political and economic clout in the early 21st century, the US has decided not to confront nor contain the latter but to adopt a proactive hedge strategy to manage China's capabilities and influence its intentions. The

hedge strategy assumes that among the new powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the US in the future.[21] This strategy, however, does not consider China as an immediate threat or a Soviet-style rival. Rather, it sees China as inching its way to a direct confrontation with the US. Therefore, it prescribes that Washington openly communicate to Beijing that the US intends to remain a dominant Pacific power and that China can ill-afford a miniature arms race or a geo-political rivalry with the US.[22] The strategy also requires the US to tighten its bilateral alliances across Asia, limit Chinese influence among its allies, and steer China away from the path of confrontation with the US.

This strategy is primarily a reaction to China's diplomatic gambit of peaceful emergence in East Asia. Since the latter part of the 1990s, Beijing has reassured Southeast Asian states that China's emergence need not be feared – that no China threat actually exists. Time and again, it stresses that the rise of China is an opportunity for mutual economic benefit, and for the development of a stronger regional Asian position *vis-à-vis* the US (Morton, 2007: 1-2). Seemingly, many East Asian states now consider China as an essential economic partner and a non-threatening and constructive political actor in the region. Consequently, China has succeeded in recasting its traditional image as a military threat in East Asia. The Bush Administration then believed that it could not force its Asian allies (except Japan) to choose between the US and China as this move would not serve America's long-term regional interests. It adopted the hedge strategy in recognition of a complicated, multi-faceted, and dynamic geostrategic game in which China plays the role of a patient player ready to engage the US in both cooperative and competitive relations.

The hedging strategy, however, is fraught with paradoxes. For example, while Washington's policy *vis-à-vis* Beijing is generally pragmatic and cooperative, a Chinese threat perception still lingers in some quarters of the US government, specifically in the Department of Defense. The strategy's core objective is to integrate China into the current international system. However, the policy also provides for the strengthening of US-Japan security relations, the revitalization of American bilateral alliances in East Asia, and the deployment of additional air and naval units from the Atlantic in to the Pacific Ocean. These are clear-cut military measures intended to balance and not to entice an emerging power. These two images of China present a major dilemma in American foreign policy in an era of unipolarity – whether to consider an emergent power as a threat or a challenge to American interests and leadership or to treat it as a partner in managing the international system. Washington's policy *vis-à-vis* Beijing, in a way, fuels a debate on these two clashing images of an emergent China.

9. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's emergence as a regional power and its improved political and economic relations with ASEAN states have preoccupied many American China Watchers. Apparently, they have rejected the traditional image of China as a military/ideological threat to the US. Instead, they have depicted China as using its economic and politico/diplomatic resources to generate soft power for its charm offensive in Southeast Asia. Still, these American China Watchers are divided into two camps: one camp sees a crafty and opportunistic China that relies on soft-power and multilateral diplomacy to undermine American politico/diplomatic position in Southeast Asia and advances its own strategic interests. The other camp clings to the image of a defensive and fledgling China that applies its soft-power despite diplomatic backlashes, on wary neighbouring states, which are under the shadow of a more powerful hegemon – the US.

The first image depicts a strong and threatening China that is incrementally challenging the US interests. The second image pictures a relatively benign and possibly cooperative emergent power. These two images of China and the intense debate they unleash can be traced back to the American society's ideological assumptions about Beijing, the general propensity of the American state to seek potential foes or friends in a unipolar world, and more significantly, Washington's current policy of hedging against China. As Washington continues this hedging policy, these clashing images of an emergent China will endure among American China Watchers way into the mid-21st century.

Notes

+ This article was written by the author while he was a visiting scholar at Arizona State University in 2009.

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