

Can the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Change the Game in Security Cooperation?

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We live in strange times. The international system we operate in is not the easiest of environments out there, largely due to anarchy. Anarchy structures the relations of the members of the system and this breeds mistrust and insecurity amongst them. This then forces states to rely only on themselves to guarantee their survival and security.

States continuously find ways to minimize the effects of anarchy, either by increasing transparency via confidence-building measures or by institutionalizing norms and practices. Different states are inclined towards certain types of “doing” international relations. Some prefer engaging with others through multilateral means, while others are biased towards bilateralism. Regardless, states find that their preferred method requires some tweaking from time to time, given the changing interests of others, as well as regional or international strategic trends that pervade the system.

Lately, strategic partnerships have come to the fore as a novel way of interacting with others in the international realm. China champions this particular way of conducting relations. This kind of alignment embraces the idea that partners share similar concerns and objectives, and one example of this is the ASEAN-China strategic partnership that was created in 2003. Strategic partnerships also cover a wide range of issue-areas, making them more wide-ranging than the mostly military connotation of alliances.

Despite this, however, strategic partnerships seem more effective in some areas, and less so in others. Economics proves to be the area where strategic partnerships work best, and this can be seen in the creation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement in 2010. Although platforms are in place to boost political and security cooperation, the maritime domain remains challenging. The competing claims in the South China Sea are relentless. Meanwhile, the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea only had its Guidelines adopted in 2011, and the conclusion of a full-fledged Code of Conduct is still a long way off.

Against this backdrop, I argue that while strategic partnerships are a new way of “doing” international relations, more enhancements and customizations need to be done to address maritime security issues. In order to support this claim, I first examine the novelty of strategic partnerships in the disciplinary study of international relations, and how the ASEAN-China partnership is a unique mode of cooperation. Second, I move on to trace the situation in the South China Sea. My objective here is to identify the areas that need improvement, and to

diagnose the causes of tension. I end with some prescriptions on how to get the ASEAN-China strategic partnership back on track.

Strategic Partnerships in Theory

Despite the existence of anarchy and the potentialities of conflict, states inevitably realize that the benefits of cooperation far outweigh the costs. The effects of anarchy are then mitigated when states engage in cooperative mechanisms in either the multilateral or bilateral level. The ASEAN-China strategic partnership is a good example of security cooperation, not least because it is an arrangement between a state and a regional organization. This collaboration embodies the two sides' mutual interests and enables the achievement of shared goals. Indeed, it is a new type of alignment in international relations.

In the multilateral level, states form regional or international organizations on a wide range of functional areas. For instance, ASEAN is a collective effort of states in Southeast Asia to address issues like politics and security, trade and investment, information and communication technology, agriculture, and human resource development, among others. As states interact more and more with each other within these arrangements, practices solidify into norms, which eventually become cemented and institutionalized. In ASEAN, this takes the form of values like consultation and consensus. These practices are done with regularity that they are now ingrained in members when they conduct affairs with each other. The more that states form regional or international organizations, the more likely they are to pave the way for the creation of regimes. Regimes can not only regulate states' behavior, but they can also facilitate the establishment of security communities. In the literature, ASEAN is seen as a "nascent" security community.

States also find bilateral ways to mitigate the effects of anarchy, primarily by engaging in balances of power. Bandwagoning is one such example. This occurs among weaker states that form alignments with the source of the threat. Balancing via alliances is more common. Assuming that alliance formation is accomplished, this mode of security cooperation begs the question of how to manage and sustain the relationship. Alliances are at risk of defection in the form of abandonment or entrapment.

It is because of these risks that strategic partnerships offer a new method of security cooperation in international relations. Strategic partnerships are structured collaborations between states and are different from alliances or coalitions. They are more flexible than alliances since they are neither targeted at a specific country nor contain binding military commitments. They are best understood as a new security practice, and they likewise signal the emergence of new forms of security governance.

Strategic partnerships have the following properties. First, they are organized around a general purpose or system principle (e.g., security) rather than a specific task (e.g., deterring or fighting a hostile state). In other words, strategic partnerships emerge out of the common interests of actors. Second, they are goal-driven rather than threat-driven. Third, they are informal and entail low commitment costs, therefore permitting autonomy and flexibility and minimizing the abandonment/entrapment risks of alliances. Finally, economic exchange is a key

driver of partnership. If these properties are present, strategic partnerships are usually formalized in multiple written documents, statements, agreements, and memoranda of understandings. They then stimulate the development of institutional links at governmental and non-governmental levels. This may translate to setting up mechanisms for summit meetings between top leaders, working to develop ties between respective military establishments through joint military exercises, establishing a stronger economic relationship, and fostering greater awareness of each other's culture.

Strategic Partnerships in Practice

While strategic partnerships are considerably a new phenomenon in international relations, they are studied as operating within a collaboration continuum, in terms of their formation, implementation, and evaluation. In practice, the ASEAN-China strategic partnership demonstrates China's consistent strategy in the region, which is to stabilize its periphery. Indeed, the current state of regional peace is attributed to China's role in setting rules and organizing a network of security-relevant relationships in both traditional and non-traditional security fields. Thus, the relations between China and ASEAN can be said to be a positive rather than a zero-sum game.

These partnerships are formed as a response to an uncertain environment, much like ASEAN and China from 1967 onwards. The relationship was formed in the midst of the Cold War and the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam, thereafter Vietnam's intervention and subsequent occupation of Cambodia, the end of the Cold War, and the financial crisis in 1997. Both sides found a good strategic fit in each other, and hence as a response to uncertainty, their operating system principle is that of ensuring peace and prosperity in the region.

As regards its implementation, ASEAN and China are currently putting into effect the Plan of Action 2016-2020 to implement the 2003 Joint Declaration. In terms of political and security cooperation, both sides utilize various ASEAN Plus One platforms, including summits, ministerial and senior officials meetings, as well as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. Aside from the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the 2011 adoption of the Guidelines to implement the DOC, China expressed its intention to accede to the Protocol to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. In 2013, ASEAN and China commemorated the tenth anniversary of their partnership by highlighting eleven priority areas of cooperation: agriculture, information and communication technology, human resource development, Mekong Basin Development, investment, energy, transport, culture, public health, tourism, and environment. Addressing non-traditional security issues like terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, sea piracy, money laundering, international economic crime, and cybercrime are also part of the extensive reach of the ASEAN-China strategic partnership.

Clearly, strategic partnerships have a distinctly Chinese flavor for conducting or "doing" international relations. The increase in the number of China's strategic partners is a reflection of its efforts to embrace globalization and a multi-dimensional diplomacy, as well as its desire to shape a favorable world order. In the context of the ASEAN-China partnership, the successes in

some areas – as seen in the relationship’s formation and implementation – must be extended to others, particularly in addressing and solving maritime disputes. The positive evaluation of the relationship is therefore dependent on how closely aligned it is to its claim of being comprehensive. Comprehensiveness here must be understood as not just widening the range of issues that the ASEAN-China strategic partnership covers, but also in being able to deepen its reach and commitment to effectively deal with situations and put in place sustainable solutions.

Maritime Security in Southeast Asia

Maritime security is one of the more delicate issues facing the ASEAN-China strategic partnership. Arguably, mechanisms are in place to discuss maritime issues, such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the Six-Point Principles, among others, but the ASEAN-China strategic partnership needs to deal with this head-on by not compartmentalizing it and instead treating it as inextricably linked to others. In other words, failing to realize the connectivity of the South China Sea issue with the totality of the ASEAN-China strategic partnership will only make the relationship less effective.

To be fair, ASEAN has more experience in conflict management rather than conflict resolution. Indeed, ASEAN is more a facilitator instead of an active mediator. Still, the South China Sea issue’s challenge to ASEAN is to agree on a collective response. This is proving to be difficult, not least because ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization with varying positions, responses, and interests. It will also be tough because ASEAN members differ in the way they view the South China Sea dispute. In fact, they have oscillated between standing together and apart at different times. There are even critical differences in the claimants themselves: the Philippines and Vietnam have been the most vocal, whereas Brunei and Malaysia prefer softer approaches. An equally compelling factor is that members differ in their relations with China.

These difficulties notwithstanding, a draft Code of Conduct was done in 2000. The areas of disagreement included geographic scope, restrictions on construction on occupied and unoccupied features, military activities in waters adjacent to the Spratlys, and policies concerning the detainment of fishermen found in dispute waters. As early as 2000 therefore, the draft COC was not meant to be an instrument to settle disputes. Instead, it was meant to serve as a rules-based framework and confidence-building mechanism. When discussions on the COC proved too tense, the Declaration on Conduct was released in 2002. The DOC is a non-binding political statement that set out four confidence-building measures and five voluntary cooperative activities. A Joint ASEAN-China Working Group was created to implement the DOC. Meanwhile, Indonesia’s initiative and leadership resulted in ASEAN’s Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea. These principles aim to fully implement the DOC, to carry out the Guidelines for the implementation of the DOC, the early conclusion of a Regional COC, full respect of universally recognized principles of international law, continued exercise of self-restraint and non-use of force by all parties, and the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law.

Other developments include the 18th ASEAN-China Summit in November 2015 where both sides reaffirmed their commitment to each other. They agreed to maintain the momentum of

regular official consultations and aim for the early conclusion of a COC on the basis of consensus. And finally, there is the award in favor of the Philippines. While it is a moral victory and signals the triumph of legal principles, and despite early analyses as to how China, ASEAN, the Philippines, and the United States will respond, much of what will happen are not set in stone. In sum, the ASEAN-China strategic partnership is called on to do so much more in the maritime domain. First steps have indeed been taken, but more needs to be done in order to strengthen the partnership and make it more comprehensive and more sustainable.

Prescriptions

It now becomes clear that while strategic partnerships are a welcome addition to “doing” international relations, the ASEAN-China relationship needs to be upgraded or customized to make it more attuned to geopolitical and geostrategic circumstances. There are three ways to do this. First, maritime security needs to be de-securitized in the interest of confidence building. Developmentalism offers an alternative to the security framework because it focuses on economic issues where logic leads to a more cooperative approach. This also moves the focus from the issue of sovereignty to joint development and regional cooperation. It may also help to de-securitize the maritime domain via legalism where actors are urged to focus on principles rather than actors. This entails going back again and again to the principles and commitments enshrined in, among others, the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the 2002 Declaration on Conduct, and the 2008 ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action.

Another way of customizing the ASEAN-China strategic partnership is to enhance China’s new concept of “a new type of major power relationship” with the United States. An improved US-China relationship will therefore be the crux in redirecting their joint approach to key issues like North Korea, maritime disputes in East and Southeast Asia, military-to-military ties, economic relations, and cyber security.

A final way to improve the ASEAN-China relationship is to upgrade the partnership. Quasi-alliances and strategic pivots may prove too cumbersome, but perhaps the key is an alignment that is somewhere in between a partnership and an alliance. If ASEAN and China can combine their current status with forms of multilateralism, then that can be a game changer.