FOREWORD

China: Foreign Relations and Maritime Conflict

The Spratlys and Paracels disputes, being the major military-related security problem in the relations between China and some member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), can be seen as one of the major challenges posed by China’s ascendance in the global arena in recent decades, in particular within the context of the changing China-ASEAN relations. Over the recent decades, China’s highly remarkable economic expansion has made the country the central focus of the world. The emergence of China began with economic reform since the late 1970s, and over the recent decades China has gained substantial global influence in both the political and economic spheres. This has created a wide range of opportunities as well as risks especially for her immediate neighbours, the ASEAN member countries. In terms of opportunities, with a large and fast growing market, China has become the global buyer of goods and services from other countries, including the member countries of ASEAN. This is because of the need for raw materials to sustain the rapid growth of the country’s economy especially in the manufacturing sector.

The phenomenal rise of China as an economic power, as well as her heightened political and military clout that has been growing in tandem with this, inevitably brought forth, both regionally and globally, increasing concern over whether she is posing a threat to regional stability and prosperity, and if so, in what way. Despite also being viewed as a threat, China is more often regarded as an opportunity for her trade partners. In fact, as a general policy orientation, whatever her ultimate strategic concerns are, China has been untiringly reassuring her neighbours in this region that her growing influence in Asia and the world arena – her “peaceful rise” (heping jueqi 和平崛起) or even more carefully, “peaceful development” (heping fazhan 和平发展) – is a threat to no one but a benefit for all, and with the formalization in the 1990s of the framework of her foreign relations with the surrounding countries (zhoubian guanxi 周边关系) as “zhoubian shi shouyao, daguo shi guanjian, fazhanzhong guojia shi jichu, duobian shi wutai 周边是首要, 大国是关键, 发展中国家是基础, 多边是舞台” (“relations with the surrounding countries are primary; those with the great powers are the key; those with the developing countries are the foundation; multilateral relations are arenas”), her overall
foreign policy is guided by the principle of mulin fuli 睦邻富里 (in harmony with neighbours and prosper together) and her diplomatic relations with her neighbouring countries are guided by the principles of mulin, fulin, anlin 睦邻, 富邻, 安邻 (in harmony with neighbours, prosper together with neighbours, and assuring the neighbours) and yi lin wei ban, yu lin wei shan 以邻为伴, 与邻为善 (to be partner of neighbours and do good to neighbours).

Nevertheless, on the part of her immediate neighbours in East and Southeast Asia, diplomatic manoeuvres of this overshadowing giant could not probably be seen but through the smoky prism of realpolitik, wherein the primary alignment response of states is often a bid to balance against a potential or actual power or constellation of power due to the fear of being dominated or destroyed by the latter, or alternatively, to bandwagon with this rising, stronger power to gain from the benefits the latter makes possible. While with the establishment of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area in 2010 encompassing a total population of 1.9 billion, China has set to become an even more formidable pivotal power in the vibrant Southeast Asian region in the years to come, and the economic well-being of countries big and small in this region is now very much tied to China’s rise as an economic power and the engine of growth in the region, it is still inevitable that many in the region would see this Asian giant’s economic ascendance over the last three decades and the concomitant expansion of her “soft power”, if left unchecked, to be a major problem not only to the developing countries in the region but also to the rest of the world. On the part of China, geopolitical, probably more than economic rationale, is dictating her continued emphasis on Sino-ASEAN relations, including the formation of ACFTA as part of her mulin youhao 睦邻友好 (good neighbourliness and friendship) foreign policy.

On the other hand, one most notable aspect of China’s foreign policy that has often been perceived by the US and other Western powers as provocative is her global search for energy in terms of its perceived role in accelerating the global arms race and the policy towards dictatorial regimes across the globe from Southeast Asia to Africa. The global financial crisis seems to have turned into an opportunity for China to intensify her global quest for petroleum and other natural resources as while the Chinese economy is equally suffering from the crisis with slower growth, unlike many other countries, her banking system is not as badly affected by the crisis and hence is still able to extend credits to enterprises to support the major projects of the government. While China’s present foreign policy seems to emphasize cooperation and stability in order to promote her own security, development and wealth, her escalating demand for energy resources – hence the importance of the South China Sea which is rich in petroleum reserve and marine produce – is today no longer solely a matter of her own domestic concern, but is increasingly acquiring new dimensions that have a powerful influence on her international politico-
economic relations. In terms of geopolitics, the Spratlys also occupy a highly important strategic position – the key to the control of the South China Sea and critical hub in China’s sea route transport connection with East Asia, West Asia and the Indian Ocean. As more than 70 per cent of China’s import of petroleum is through the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea, the control of the Spratlys is strategically important for ensuring a safe sea route passage for China.

Thus in view of the increasing world attention drawn towards China’s foreign policy, military build-up and international relations, in particular in the East and Southeast Asian region the main flashpoints of which include the high-profile disputes over the ownership of the islands, atolls, reefs, cays and islets in the South China Sea which besides holding rich ocean resources in their surrounding waters occupy a highly important strategic position in terms of geopolitics, being the key to the control of the regional waters and the critical hub in the sea route transport connection between East Asia and Southeast Asia, West Asia and the Indian Ocean, the editorial board of the International Journal of China Studies has decided to put together a selected set of related papers submitted to the journal, after the due process of peer reviewing, to produce this issue of IJCS with a special focus on the South China Sea disputes in particular and China’s foreign relations in general. While all the papers in this issue of IJCS focus in various ways on the impact of the rise of China on the regional and global geopolitical configuration and international relations amidst the recent escalating tension in the South China Sea, readers will not fail to notice the diverse perspectives exhibited by these different papers that reflect well the consistent approach of the journal which continues to cherish the notions of academic freedom and impartiality.

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