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**No. 226**

**Rising Power... To Do What?  
Evaluating China's Power in Southeast Asia**

**Evelyn Goh**

**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies  
Singapore**

**30 March 2011**

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## Abstract

Drawing on China's relations with its relatively weak neighbours in Southeast Asia where we ought to find evidence of China getting other states to do what they otherwise would not have done, this paper asks how and how effectively China has converted its growing resources into influence over other states, their strategic choices and the outcomes of events. First, it adopts the framework of structural and relational power, further disaggregating the latter into persuasion, inducement and coercion as modes of exercising power. Second, it accounts for the reception to power by offering an analytical framework based on variations in the alignment of the extant preferences of the subjects and wielders of power, which determine the degree to which alterations are necessary as part of an exercise of power. The analysis identifies key cases particularly demonstrating three categories of Chinese power: its power as 'multiplier' when extant preferences are aligned; its power to persuade when pre-existing preferences are debated; and its power to prevail in instances of conflicting preferences. It finds that the first two categories of power have been most prevalent, while there have been very few instances where Southeast Asian states have done what they would otherwise not have done as a result of Chinese behaviour. These findings suggest that even though China's power resources have increased significantly, the way in which it has managed to convert these resources into control over outcomes is uneven.

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**Dr. Evelyn Goh** is Reader in International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is in receipt of a two-year ESRC Mid-Career Development Fellowship from 2011 and is working on a book project on East Asian regional order, contracted with Oxford University Press. She is Visiting Research Fellow at RSIS in February–March 2011.

## **Rising Power... To Do What?**

### **Evaluating China's Power in Southeast Asia**

#### **Introduction**

That China (PRC) is one of the most powerful states in the world is no longer a contested claim. It conducted its first nuclear test in 1964, is one of only four states with successful space programmes, and it commands the world's largest army. Already the top exporting nation and second largest economy, China is expected to overtake the United States in terms of economic output in 20 to 30 years' time. Besides its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, the PRC's leading role is evident in the G20 and G77 groupings. Increasingly, the international community looks to Beijing to work alongside Washington to manage global financial crises, climate change and nuclear non-proliferation. China's cultural presence is being revived internationally in the realms of language, tourism and sport.

Thus, we face an urgent debate about how China is using and will use its growing power.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this burgeoning discourse makes clear the difficulty of determining just how powerful China is. How and how effectively has China converted its growing resources into influence over other states, their strategic choices and the outcomes of events? Cataloguing China's increasing material resources does not in itself demonstrate that China is powerful. To evaluate meaningfully the extent and limit of Chinese power, we need to revisit some basic issues of context and methodology. How do we know when China exercises its power? In which significant issues/areas can we draw conclusions about China's intentions from its actions? Much of the existing literature on China's rise seems relatively untouched by conceptual debates about power: it is either bound by realist assumptions of material power

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. Daniel W. Drezner, "Bad Debts: Assessing China's Financial Influence in Great Power Relations", *International Security* 34(2), Fall 2009, pp. 7–45; Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects and the U.S. Response", *International Security* 34(2), Fall 2009, pp. 46–81; Hugh White, "Why War in Asia Remains Thinkable", *Survival* 50(6), December 2008, pp. 85–104; Aaron Friedberg & Robert Ross, "Here be Dragons: Is China a Military Threat?", *The National Interest* 103, September/October 2009, pp. 19–34; Robert Fogel, "\$123,000,000,000,000\*", *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2010; Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, New York: Penguin, 2009.

automatically generating certain responses from the subjects of its exercise, or immersed in a welter of claims about Chinese ‘soft’ power.<sup>2</sup>

To advance our understanding of Chinese power, two sets of questions are particularly pertinent. First, how relatively important are the different sources of China’s power? How can we situate meaningfully China’s so-called ‘soft’ power alongside its military and economic power? Second, the major insight of the behavioural revolution—that power is relational and thus the efficacy of its exercise depends upon the response of the subjects of power—must be brought to bear. Power is most obviously at work when the extant preferences of actors are not aligned, and one actor manages to persuade the other to change her preferences. The following analysis draws on China’s relations with its relatively weak neighbours in Southeast Asia where we ought to be able to find evidence of China getting other states to do what they otherwise would not have done. Posing the question this way may seem to be somewhat retrograde, given the current challenges of studying ‘productive’ and other forms of ‘insidious’ power,<sup>3</sup> but as this article shows, the processes and outcomes of China’s exercise of power are not straightforward, even in a relatively ‘easy’ case.

The following section outlines the conceptual framework of relational power, disaggregated into persuasion, inducement and coercion as modes of exercising power; and the analytical framework that accounts for variations in reception to power. The next section analyses key cases demonstrating three categories of Chinese power in Southeast Asia: power as a ‘multiplier’ when extant preferences are aligned; power to persuade when pre-existing preferences are debated; and power to prevail in instances of conflicting preferences. It finds that the first two categories of power are most prevalent, while there are very few instances where Southeast Asian states have done what they would otherwise not have done as a result of Chinese behaviour. Even though China’s power resources have increased significantly, the conversion of these

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. John Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise”, *Current History* 105, April 2006, pp. 160–162; Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007; Chris Alden, *China in Africa: Partner, Competitor or Hegemon?* London: Zed, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Barnett & Raymond Duvall (Eds.), *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

resources into control over outcomes is uneven. The final section discusses the implications for understanding the nature, extent and limits of Chinese power.

### **Conceptualising China's Growing Power**

As a foundational concept in politics, power has been subjected to substantial study, be it about the basis of control, sources or effects.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the literature about China's rise pays relatively little attention to conceptualising China's power. It has reflected the growing attention paid, since the 1970s to political economy and since the 1990s to 'soft' power,<sup>5</sup> but tends to segregate artificially 'hard'/'soft', and material/ideational power.<sup>6</sup> We need to move beyond such dichotomies to address two critical issues: the role of structural power especially with regard to China's growing economic strengths; and how to account for the relational aspect of power.

Structural power refers to the power relationships arising in social structures within which the identity of actors is constituted by their relative positions and roles.<sup>7</sup> This is often illustrated by the capitalist system in which the owners of capital wield power from their positions over the owners of labour.<sup>8</sup> Susan Strange usefully expanded the concept to include not only the ability to shape patterns of production, but also security, credit and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> For an economy the size of China's, structural power is crucial for understanding its impact on the global system of production and consumption. While structural power is often regarded as unintentional power accruing from position, actors who possess sufficient resources can also deliberately work to improve their structural positions and wield influence

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<sup>4</sup> David Baldwin, "Power and International Relations", in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse & Beth A. Simmons (Eds.), *Handbook of International Relations*, London: Sage, 2002, p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004; Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*. Critiques of this approach include: Steven Lukes, "Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds: On the Bluntness of Soft Power", and Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft' Power Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and Attraction", both in Felix Berenskoetter & M. J. Williams (Eds.), *Power in World Politics*, London: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. David Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money and Minds*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008; Phillip C. Saunders, *China's Global Activism: Strategy, Drivers and Tools*, Institute for National Strategic Studies Occasional Paper No. 4, October 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Barnett & Duvall, *Power and Global Governance*, Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method", *Millennium* 12(2), 1983, pp. 162–175; James Carporaso, "Dependence, Dependency and Power in the Global System: A Structural and Behavioural Analysis", *International Organization* 32(1), 1978, pp. 2–43.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Strange, *States and Markets*, London: Pinter, 1986.

over others' choices.<sup>10</sup> Many works implicitly address China's growing structural power, but how China exercises such power needs to be explored more explicitly.

To further dilute the dichotomous discourse about Chinese power, we need to move away from scorecards enumerating its economic, political and social sources of power, towards more sophisticated analysis of how it exercises power.<sup>11</sup> Modes of exercising power can most usefully be conceived of in three categories: (a) coercion, or action designed to compel another actor to do something by credibly signalling the costly consequences of his failure to comply; (b) inducement, or getting another actor to behave in a particular way by offering a reward; and (c) persuasion, by which one actor convinces another that it is in her best interest to do as he wishes.<sup>12</sup> Coercion and inducement work by sanction, while persuasion relies on conviction. Clearly all three modes combine material and ideational sources of power: for instance, while persuasion is constituted by values and ideas, it is often accompanied by economic or social inducements.

The paramount difficulty with persuasive power lies in measurement, since it involves evaluating changes in the beliefs of the subjects. It is impossible to excavate clearly the causal links between China's actions and the policies adopted by other states without access to policymakers' convictions and decision-making.<sup>13</sup> However, at a more basic level, the effectiveness of an actor's exercise of power depends in a significant part on how it is received by others. For instance, Nye states that 'attraction' in an exercise of 'soft' power is most likely to lead to desired outcomes when there exist "willing interpreters and receivers". Indeed, popular culture is "more likely to attract people and produce soft power... in situations where cultures are somewhat similar rather than wildly dissimilar".<sup>14</sup> This implies that 'soft' power is most likely to succeed in 'easy' cases where like attracts like. The effective exercise of power depends significantly upon the pre-existing preferences or beliefs of the

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. Stephen Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World Against Global Liberalism*, University of California Press, 1985; Patrick Holden, *In Search of Structural Power: EU Aid Policy as a Global Political Instrument*, London: Ashgate, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See John M. Rothgeb, *Defining Power: Influence and Force in the Contemporary International System*, New York: St. Martin's, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Roderick Martin, *The Sociology of Power*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> See the extended methodological discussion in Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, Chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, pp. 16–17.

subjects, and this must be made explicit. Conversion of resources into influence is easiest when the preferences of the powerful and the subject are pre-aligned, most challenging when they are in conflict initially. The effectiveness of exercises of power then depends upon the subjects' motivations and calculations, which may combine instrumental (push) as well as normative (pull) reasons. Weaker actors may conform to the will of the strong not only because the latter wield greater incentives or sanctions or legitimacy, but also to further other agenda.

This highlights an enduring methodological concern: in order to demonstrate most convincingly the effects of power, one needs to start with a situation of conflict<sup>15</sup>—in contrast to saying that *B* chose a policy similar to *A*'s because they shared the same preferences in the first place, the case would be made more strongly if one could show that *B* started out with a very different set of interests and preferences, but upon exposure to *A*'s coercion, inducement or persuasion, made different policy choices that he otherwise would not have made.<sup>16</sup>

The framework adopted for the following analysis draws together the above issues. Table 1 summarises key case studies in which China has been seen to exercise power: economic regionalism, countering the 'China threat' discourse and territorial conflicts. These cases also demonstrate different modes of exercising power and variation in the reception of power. The ideal pre-condition for China to achieve its desired outcome is when the extant preferences of the other states are similar to its own. Here, power is exercised primarily via a multiplier effect to mobilise similar preferences into collective action: for instance, China's deliberate policies to marshal its growing structural power to promote economic regionalism. Situations in which extant preferences are undecided, present opportunities for China to influence its neighbours by providing evidence that its own preferences are more accurate or desirable. In the debate about whether China is a threat, persuasion and inducement are key modes of power for China's narrative of 'peaceful rise'. The extent to which these efforts bear fruit depends on push/pull factors working on the other states. The

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<sup>15</sup> Contrast Max Weber (Ed.), *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978; and Talcott Parsons, *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*, New York: Free Press, 1967.

<sup>16</sup> Harold D. Lasswell & Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950; Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power", *Behavioural Science* 2:3, 1957, pp. 201–215.



least predictable outcomes are associated with opposed extant preferences. When faced with diverging interests, the powerful actor has to invest in a mix of persuasion, inducement and coercion, to bring others' preferences in line with its own. Here, some of the most difficult of such issues are not only territorial disputes, which relate to changing motivational variables in other states, but also external factors such as security relations with other great powers. However, the power to prevail in these cases would provide the most credible evidence of China's relational power.

Table 1.

Type of power	Extant preferences	Aim	Modes of power	Potential for achieving desired outcome	Potential for demonstrating exercise of power	Cases
Power as multiplier	Aligned	To exploit structural position for mutual benefit using policies to generate deliberate collective outcomes	(Structural) intensification, inducement, persuasion	Ideal	Poor	Economic regionalism
Power to persuade	Debated/undecided	To tell the better story, to assure and convince	Persuasion, inducement, argumentation, demonstration	Mixed	Reasonable	Countering the 'China threat' discourse
Power to prevail	Opposed	To ensure that self-interest and preferences are protected by altering other actors' preferences and behaviour	Coercion, inducement, persuasion	Unpredictable	Very good	Taiwan status, South China Sea disputes

### Assessing China's Power in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia presents an apparently 'easy' case for investigating China's rising power because of the significant asymmetry of power between China and its 10 small

neighbours, which possess relatively weak military capabilities and/or small populations and economies. In economic terms especially, China's rise has had drastic effects on the region. China's trade with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grew dramatically from US\$8 billion in 1980, to US\$78 billion in 2003, to US\$178 billion in 2009, during which it became ASEAN's largest external trading partner.<sup>17</sup> However, the economic relationship is imbalanced: ASEAN's trade deficit with China increased six-fold between 2000 and 2008, while ASEAN investment into China outstripped Chinese investment in ASEAN US\$52 billion to US\$2.8 billion in 2008.<sup>18</sup> As the world's preeminent low-cost manufacturer,<sup>19</sup> China also threatens to divert foreign direct investment from ASEAN.<sup>20</sup>

Politically, Southeast Asia has welcomed China's re-emergence since the end of the Cold War, accepting the 'one China' policy and severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan, while also leading the way for China's participation in regional institutions.<sup>21</sup> Militarily, several Southeast Asian states—especially Vietnam and the Philippines—have directly experienced China's growing power in the form of armed clashes over maritime territorial disputes, and analysts warn about a regional arms race.<sup>22</sup> So, if China's power has indeed grown, we would expect to see its impact in altered preferences and behaviour of these weaker neighbours. Indeed, some analysts argue

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<sup>17</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN-China Free Trade Area: Not a Zero-Sum Game", 7 January 2010, <http://www.aseansec.org/24161.htm>. Detailed ASEAN trade figures are currently available up to 2009; see <http://www.aseansec.org/stat/Table20.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> "ASEAN jittery about trade pact with China", *The Straits Times* 17 February 2010.

<sup>19</sup> John Ravenhill, "Is China an Economic Threat to Southeast Asia?", *Asian Survey* 46(5), September/October 2006, pp. 653–674; Tan Khee Giap, "ASEAN and China: Relative Competitiveness, Emerging Investment-Trade Patterns, Monetary and Financial Integration", in Evelyn Goh & Sheldon Simon (Eds.), *China, America and Southeast Asia: Perspectives on Politics, Economics and Security*, London: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Some political economists argue that ASEAN FDI flows were more negatively affected by the Asian financial crisis and ASEAN's own problems in financial regulation. See Friedrich Wu *et al.*, "Foreign Direct Investments to China and ASEAN: Has ASEAN Been Losing Out?" *Economic Survey of Singapore*, 2003, [http://www.mti.gov.sg/public/PDF/CMT/NWS\\_2002Q3\\_FDI1.pdf?sid+92&cid=1418](http://www.mti.gov.sg/public/PDF/CMT/NWS_2002Q3_FDI1.pdf?sid+92&cid=1418); C. Busakorn *et al.*, "The Giant Sucking Sound: Is China Diverting Foreign Direct Investment from Other Asian Countries?", *Asian Economic Papers* 3:3, Fall 2005, pp. 122–140.

<sup>21</sup> See Alice Ba, "China and ASEAN: Renavigating Relations for a 21st Century Asia." *Asian Survey* 43(4), 2003, pp. 630–638.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Richardson, *Energy and Geopolitics in the South China Sea*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2009; Mak Joo Nam, "Sovereignty in ASEAN and the Problem of Maritime Cooperation in the South China Sea", in Sam Bateman & Ralf Emmers (Eds.), *Security and International Politics in the South China Sea – Towards a Cooperative Management Regime*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.

that Beijing is “intent upon establishing a preeminent sphere of influence” and that “China is rapidly becoming the predominant power in Southeast Asia”.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, while the power asymmetry might have made coercive power an attractive option, China has chosen instead to focus on inducement and persuasion vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. Chinese leaders have tended to emphasise the non-material aspects of power, such as the doctrine of peaceful rise and the principles of equality and mutual benefit.<sup>24</sup> Beijing’s successful diplomatic focus on Southeast Asia since the mid-1990s has led scholars to suggest that Chinese intentions are benign.<sup>25</sup> These complex regional trends offer rich ground for exploring China’s conversion of resource power into influence over outcomes.

### *China’s Power as a Multiplier: Economic Regionalism*

In assessing the impacts of China’s rise on Southeast Asia, trade and investment figures are only partial manifestations of China’s power. China’s economic growth has profoundly changed the structure of the regional political economy and affected the developmental trajectories of individual states.<sup>26</sup> China’s structural power is most evident in the reorganisation of the regional production network. As international corporations take advantage of China’s low wages, Southeast Asian economies have been reoriented into a regional production chain: the key manufacturing countries are continuing to produce electrical and office machinery and telecommunications equipment, but instead of exporting assembled products directly, they produce components supplied to final assembly plants in China. The finished goods are then exported from China to the United States, Japan and the EU. Because Southeast Asian

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<sup>23</sup> Marvin Ott, “China’s Strategic Reach into Southeast Asia”, Presentation to the U.S.-China Commission, 22 July 2005; Dana Dillon & John Tkacik, “China and ASEAN: Endangered American Primacy in Southeast Asia”, Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No.1886, 19 October 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Joel Wuthnow, “The Concept of Soft Power in China’s Strategic Discourse”, *Issues & Studies* 44:2, June 2008, pp. 1–28; Ren Xiao, “Towards a Chinese School of International Relations?”, in Wang Gungwu & Zheng Yongnian (Eds.), *China and the New International Order*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 293–309.

<sup>25</sup> See David Shambaugh, “China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order”, *International Security* 29:3, Winter 2004/5, pp. 64–99; Evelyn Goh, “Southeast Asian Perspectives on the China Challenge”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30:4, August 2007, pp. 809–832.

<sup>26</sup> Shaun Breslin, “Power and Production: Rethinking China’s Global Economic Role”, *Review of International Studies* 31:4, October 2005, pp. 735–753.

manufacturing is now focused on intra-industry trade with China, Chinese economic policies have significant influence over their economic health and viability.<sup>27</sup>

One could argue that structural power has shifted to large multi-national firms rather than to China alone.<sup>28</sup> And China can and does use the lure of its markets to cause others to change their preferences.<sup>29</sup> However, the focus here is instead on another type of deliberate structural power: how Beijing has tried to consolidate its position as the region's economic driver by driving East Asian economic regionalism.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, China is not simply using its economic power to induce or coerce, but rather as a force multiplier to convert shared preferences into regional economic integration. These policies of regional cooperation reflect its imperative to foster a conducive external environment for China's economic development.<sup>31</sup>

This type of structural multiplier power is made possible by aligned preferences about the imperative of economic development. Regional policymakers agree that the most important guarantee of a country's stability is sustained economic growth. Nationbuilding in the under-developed and often ethnically disparate ASEAN states entailed delivering economic growth to ensure regime legitimacy.<sup>32</sup> With China's economic reforms in the 1980s, Southeast Asian worries about competition were accompanied by a desire to exploit the opportunities that China's rise within the world capitalist system would provide.

During the Cold War, Southeast Asian states were unable to mobilise effective regional economic cooperation. As a rising regional power, China has lent weight and momentum to translating the shared developmental imperative into economic

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<sup>27</sup> Ravenhill, "Is China an Economic Threat to Southeast Asia?"; John Wong & Sarah Chan, "China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement", *Asian Survey* 43(3), 2003, pp. 506–526.

<sup>28</sup> Shaun Breslin, *China and the Global Political Economy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Breslin, "Power and Production"; Steven Gill, "New Constitutionalism, Democratisation and Global Political Economy", *Pacific Review* 10:1, 1998, pp. 23–38.

<sup>30</sup> See Christopher Dent, *East Asian Regionalism*, London: Routledge, 2008; John Ravenhill, "Understanding the New East Asian Regionalism", *Review of International Political Economy* 17:2, May 2010, pp. 173–177; Melissa Curley & Nick Thomas (Eds.), *Advancing East Asian Regionalism* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> See Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia".

<sup>32</sup> Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia*, London: Routledge, 1989; Muthiah Alagappa, "Comprehensive Security: Interpretations in ASEAN Countries", in Robert Scalapino et al. (Eds.), *Asian Security Issues: Regional and Global*, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1988, pp. 50–78.

regionalism. In so doing, China exercises power via a ‘multiplier effect’: its size produces economies of scale, and its political clout lends significance, even legitimacy, to the enterprise. Beijing does not need to change others’ preferences; only to identify common imperatives, initiate policy action and commit resources to the issue. Beijing has managed to multiply its structural power into economic regionalism by promoting economic development in the least developed parts of the region, and by mobilising the more developed parts towards a putative trading bloc.

The first example is located in mainland Southeast Asia consisting of Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. For these under-developed post-communist economies, China is especially influential as an economic model. Beijing has capitalised on the shared development imperative not only by improving bilateral strategic relations, but also generating regionalism that promises these countries long-term economic integration. China’s participation has made feasible region-wide development plans for the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) initiative of the Asian Development Bank, which has drawn international investment for infrastructural projects.<sup>33</sup> These connect the poorer states to the markets of China and Thailand, while improving China’s access to raw material supplies and ports in the Indian Ocean and East China Sea.<sup>34</sup> China is now the largest trading partner and investor in Laos and Cambodia. It supplies significant development assistance and soft loans, including a \$10 billion investment commitment in April 2009.<sup>35</sup>

The second example pertains to the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). A prime example of China’s ability to identify and act upon shared preferences with alacrity, this Chinese initiative leapfrogged the nagging problem of an ASEAN FTA. While ASEAN began negotiating its own FTA in 1992, trade liberalisation was hampered by domestic regulatory weaknesses, and competition

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<sup>33</sup> The GMS programme should not be confused with other regimes for joint resource and ecological management of the Mekong River basin, on which there has been markedly less progress. See Evelyn Goh, *Developing the Mekong: Regionalism and Regional Security in China-Southeast Asian Relations*, Adelphi Paper No. 387, London: IISS, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

<sup>35</sup> Mitsuhiro Kagami (Ed.), *Economic Relations of China, Japan and Korea with the Mekong River Basin Countries*, Bangkok Research Centre Research Report No.3, Bangkok: BRC, IDE-JETRO, 2010; Brian McCartan, “A Helping Chinese Hand”, *Asia Times*, 30 April 2009; Brian McCartan, “China Bridges Last Mekong Gaps”, *Asia Times*, 18 June 2010.

between Southeast Asian economies with similar production and trade profiles.<sup>36</sup> Coming into effect from 2010, CAFTA is the world's largest free trade area, comprising 1.9 billion consumers and US\$4.3 trillion in trade. By 2008, China and ASEAN accounted for 13 per cent of global trade, and attracted 10 per cent of total global FDI.<sup>37</sup> China managed to galvanise the economic integration project beyond ASEAN, towards a broader regionalism. With their competing manufacturing profiles and small industrial and tertiary sectors, ASEAN had not been able to achieve significant intra-regional trade for 30 years.<sup>38</sup> China's growth has driven demand for Southeast Asian products—especially electrical components, machinery, plastics, rubber and oil—and China-ASEAN trade grew by an average of 26 per cent per year between 2003 and 2008. CAFTA also allows ASEAN to take advantage of the rising demand for consumer goods from China's expanding middle class.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, China's power as a multiplier in CAFTA does not flow out of straightforward economic inducement. Trade liberalisation with China has brought significant problems—parts of the Thai agricultural sector have been unable to compete with imports of cheap Chinese produce and continuing Chinese non-tariff barriers, while Indonesia is delaying implementation of CAFTA regulations to protect its core industries from Chinese competition.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, China's effort in promoting CAFTA is disproportionate to the relative size of the ASEAN market.<sup>41</sup> Ravenhill has shown that these preferential trade agreements have been driven by political rather than economic interests, and argues that China's CAFTA initiative was mainly a “diplomatic masterstroke” to assuage ASEAN fears of China's

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<sup>36</sup> Francisco Nadal de Simone, “A Macroeconomic Perspective of AFTA's Problems and Prospects”, *Contemporary Economic Policy* 13(2), April 1995, pp. 49–62; Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, “Collective Action Problems and Integration in ASEAN”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 28(1), April 2006, pp. 115–140.

<sup>37</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, “ASEAN-China Free Trade Area: Not a Zero-Sum Game”, 7 January 2010, <http://www.aseansec.org/24161.htm>

<sup>38</sup> John Ravenhill, “Economic Cooperation in Southeast Asia”, *Asian Survey* 35:9, 1995, pp. 850–866; Vinod K. Aggarwal & Jonathan T. Chow, “The Perils of Consensus: How ASEAN's Meta-Regime Undermines Economic and Environmental Cooperation”, *Review of International Political Economy* 17:2, May 2010, pp. 262–290.

<sup>39</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, “ASEAN-China Free Trade Area: Not a Zero-Sum Game”, 7 January 2010, at <http://www.aseansec.org/24161.htm>

<sup>40</sup> “Thai-Chinese FTA faces ongoing problems”, *Bangkok Post*, 13 September 2009; “ASEAN jittery about trade pact with China”, *The Straits Times*, 17 February 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Yang Jiang, “China's Pursuit of Free Trade Agreements: Is China Exceptional?”, *Review of International Political Economy* 17:2, May 2010, pp. 238–261.

accession to the WTO.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, CAFTA reflects converging beliefs in China and Southeast Asian states about the use of economic instruments to pursue political objectives.

CAFTA and GMS regionalism also illustrate the ideational appeal of China's developmental approach, which reinforces two key principles that ASEAN holds dear. The first is sovereignty—China's absolutist rhetorical stance on this principle accords with the sensitivities of these small states, which appreciate being treated as functional equals by China while receiving preferential agreements in recognition of their relative poverty. Second, the alternative path of maintaining a capitalist economy without concomitant political liberalisation has been pursued by a small number of regional states like Singapore and Thailand;<sup>43</sup> now others look to China as an important model for authoritarian capitalism. While the claim of an alternative 'Beijing consensus' is too far-fetched, China's model of state intervention in economic practice is particularly important in the context of the region's disillusionment with international financial institutions after 1997.<sup>44</sup>

China's influence as a 'multiplier' of economic growth and regionalism is crucially important in accounting for China's political successes in Southeast Asia. However, this does not provide good evidence for China's relational power because Beijing did not have to get others to do what they did not want to do. Furthermore, there have been outcomes beyond Beijing's control. For instance, Laos, the poorest of the Southeast Asian countries, has benefitted significantly from the GMS initiatives. Yet, rather than relying solely on China, Vientiane has capitalised on Chinese interest to bargain with other large international donors. The most high profile example is funding for the controversial Nam Theun II hydropower project: after years of delay over its environmental impacts, the World Bank agreed to underwrite private

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<sup>42</sup> John Ravenhill, "The 'New East Asian Regionalism': A Political Domino Effect", *Review of International Political Economy* 17:2, May 2010, pp. 178–208 at p. 200.

<sup>43</sup> Denny Roy, "Singapore, China and the 'Soft Authoritarian Challenge'", *Asian Survey* 34(3), March 1994, pp. 231–242.

<sup>44</sup> Ngaire Woods, "Whose Aid? Whose Influence? China, Emerging Donors and the Silent Revolution in Development Assistance", *International Affairs* 84:6, 2008, pp. 1205–1221; Jean Grugel, Pia Riggirozzi & Ben Thirkell-White, "Beyond the Washington Consensus? Asia and Latin America in Search of More Autonomous Development", *International Affairs* 84:3, 2008, pp. 499–517.

financing for it in 2005, partly because Vientiane was exploring Chinese funding.<sup>45</sup> The other example is the plethora of multilateral and bilateral FTAs that have been negotiated by ASEAN states since the CAFTA agreement, with Japan, the United States, South Korea, Australia and India. ASEAN states have tried to ensure that growing Chinese economic power is balanced out by strong economic ties with other economic powerhouses.<sup>46</sup> Hence the importance of the motivations and reactions of the subjects of power in determining the effects of exercises of power: China's intentional structural power has not precluded Southeast Asian states from capitalising on this momentum to diversify their economic options.

### *China's Power to Persuade: 'Peaceful Rise' v 'China Threat'*

In contrast, China's power to persuade Southeast Asian states that its rise is not threatening involves bringing the latter to a particular point of view. Persuasive power is about the propagation of dominant beliefs, which, once accepted, constrain and align the preferences of the subjects with those of the powerful actor. The most popular derivation is Nye's proposition that others are attracted to American culture and values and so become 'co-opted' into supporting its foreign policy behaviour.<sup>47</sup> But he tells us very little about the causal mechanism between cultural attraction and getting others to do what you want them to do in terms of specific foreign policy goals.<sup>48</sup> Instead, for Nye, the role of culture boils down to "the background attraction... of American popular culture... [that] may make it easier... for American officials to promote their policies".<sup>49</sup> At a deeper level though, persuasive power can be more insidious, whereby an actor exercises power over another "by influencing,

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<sup>45</sup> "Dams Back in Fashion", *The Economist*, 9 April 2005; "NTPC Signs US\$1 Billion Loan Agreements", Nam Theun II Power Company Ltd News Release, 3 May 2005.

<sup>46</sup> On this diversification strategy, see Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order: Analysing Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies", *International Security* 32(3), Winter 2007/8, pp. 113–157.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Public Affairs, 1990; Nye, *Soft Power*.

<sup>48</sup> An issue that Nye admits but eludes by the observation that the problem is shared with analyses of other forms of power – Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 6. On Chinese soft power, see Bates Gill & Yanzhong Huang, "Sources and Limits of Chinese Soft Power", *Survival* 48:2, 2006, pp. 17–36; Zheng Yongnian & Zhang Chi, "Soft Power in International Politics and Observations on China's Soft Power", *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics] 7, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 12.



shaping or determining his very wants”, so as to “prevent conflict from arising in the first place”.<sup>50</sup>

The understanding of persuasive power here is more overtly instrumental. The best starting points for studying persuasion are situations in which extant preferences of the subjects are unclear or undecided, such as the prominent international debate in the 1990s about whether the rise of China was a threat. The nature of the controversy ruled out coercive action on Beijing’s part, making even more salient its persuasive power in shaping international perceptions about the PRC. However, there is a limit to how much we can isolate the persuasion variable in any analysis of real-world state behaviour: when persuasive power is exercised consciously by a state, it usually consists of the construction of a dominant image, legitimising policy action and associated inducements. It is unlikely to focus on the incidental diffusion of socio-cultural values as ‘soft’ power theorists suggest.

In recent history, debates about China’s identity have been most intense after 1989. Adding to concerns about its rapid economic growth and rising military expenditures, Western countries were also suspicious of China’s communist regime. The central government’s violent crackdown on protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989 galvanised these suspicions, and fuelled an international discourse on the ‘China threat’.<sup>51</sup> From 1996, an official Chinese campaign to counter the China threat thesis became apparent.<sup>52</sup> This campaign contained three elements that together aimed to shape world perceptions of China as a benign, responsible great power.

First was an alternative narrative of China’s benign resurgence, marked by the ‘New Security Concept’ mooted by President Jiang Zemin in 1997. He rejected the ‘old Cold War security outlook’ which emphasised great power competition, collective defence, unilateralism and absolute security. In contrast, the new security

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<sup>50</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 1974, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> See Nicholas Kristof, “The Rise of China”, *Foreign Affairs* 72:5, November/December 1993, pp. 54–79; Denny Roy, “The ‘China Threat’ Issue: Major Arguments”, *Asian Survey* 36(8), August 1996, pp. 758–771; Richard Bernstein & Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Kropf, 1997); Bill Gertz, *The China Threat: How the People’s Republic Targets America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> The Chinese government stepped up its diplomatic campaign following two high profile conflicts: the 1995–1996 Taiwan Straits crisis, and the armed clashes between China and the Philippines over the Mischief Reefs in the South China Sea in 1995.

concept privileged mutual trust and benefit, equality, inter-dependence and cooperative security. It also stressed the importance of international norms and the role played by the United Nations.<sup>53</sup> Chinese officials repeated reassurances that China would never seek hegemony, that China remained an underdeveloped country that needed a peaceful international environment, and that its military expenditure was defensive.<sup>54</sup>

Since 2003, this narrative has revolved around the “peaceful rise” concept, subsequently amended to “peaceful development”. The essential aim is strategic reassurance of China’s neighbours and other powers that China’s resurgence will not threaten their economic or security interests because of China’s “peaceful intentions”, limited national capabilities, favourable security environment, historically peaceful outlook and development trajectory.<sup>55</sup> In 2005, President Hu Jintao introduced the “harmonious world” concept, stressing “democracy in international relations”, and respect for “the right of each country to select its own social system and path of development”.<sup>56</sup> By downplaying ideology in international affairs and turning the table of democracy from the domestic to the international, this was a response to remaining suspicions of the Chinese communist government.

Nye’s discussion of American soft power stresses that others’ reactions are conditioned also by the consistency of U.S. actions with its professed national values. Beijing uses policy action more instrumentally to substantiate its claims of being a benign status quo state. The most persuasive demonstrations of its benignity were Beijing’s mostly successful efforts to negotiate outstanding border disputes; China’s

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<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/t27742.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Hebert Yee & Zhu Feng, “Chinese Perspectives on the China Threat”, in Herbert Yee & Ian Storey (Eds.), *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), pp. 21–42; Yong Deng, “Reputation and the Security Dilemma: China Reacts to the China Threat Theory”, in Alastair Iain Johnston & Robert S. Ross (Eds.), *New Directions in the Study of China’s Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 186–214.

<sup>55</sup> Zheng Bijian, “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great Power Status”, *Foreign Affairs* 84(5), September/October 2005, pp. 18–24; PRC State Council Information Office, “China’s Peaceful Development Road”, 12 December 2005, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/152684.htm>; Bonnie S. Glaser & Evan S. Medeiros, “The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of Peaceful Rise”, *China Quarterly* 190, June 2007, pp. 291–310.

<sup>56</sup> Hu Jintao, “Striving to Establish a Harmonious World with Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity”, speech at the Summit Meeting on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the United Nations, 16 September 2005. See also Yuan Peng, “A Harmonious World and China’s New Diplomacy”, *Contemporary International Relations* [English Version] 17(3), 2007, pp. 1–26.

increasingly adept diplomacy since the late 1990s in engaging with other states and international institutions; its highly publicised restraint during the Asian financial crisis; provision of aid to countries struck by natural disasters; and promises of large investment and aid packages to East Asian neighbours in 2009 during the global financial crisis. There are limits to some of these policies: for instance, most of China's remaining unresolved territorial disputes are with its East Asian neighbours. Still, Beijing has tried to persuade the world that it will not disrupt the international order by signing up to key international institutions, and complying with international arms control and disarmament agreements. In 'mimicking' the normative behaviour within these regimes, China was accessing a crucial symbol of great power status.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Chinese officials worked to gain entry into the WTO partly to consolidate the notion of China as a huge economic opportunity.<sup>58</sup> Regionally, China's full participation and socialisation in ASEAN institutions—including Chinese initiatives such as CAFTA, a defence minister's dialogue, and proposals for a regional bond market—appear to have buried the China threat theory.<sup>59</sup>

The final element of China's persuasive power is economic inducement. Normative persuasion and material inducement are often co-instruments of power, and China's reassurance drive has included selective easing of barriers to trade and investment, using the promise of access to the China market to induce policy change. For instance, Beijing used the prospect of bilateral free trade negotiations to gain formal recognition from individual countries as a 'market economy', gradually challenging its WTO status as an 'economy in transition'. China has concluded trade agreements with ASEAN, Pakistan and New Zealand, and is in negotiation with Australia, India and South Korea. Beijing pushed for the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement with Hong Kong and Macau in 2003, exerting political pressure on Taipei by making Taiwanese businesses feel like they might be losing out on opportunities in the mainland.<sup>60</sup> Its 'Early Harvest Programmes' with some ASEAN

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<sup>57</sup> Johnston, *Social States*, Chapters 2 and 3; Ann Kent, *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations, and Global Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), Chapter 2.

<sup>58</sup> Yong, "Reputation and the Security Dilemma", p. 201.

<sup>59</sup> Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia"; Johnston, *Social States*, Chapter 4.

<sup>60</sup> Yang Jiang, "China's Free Trade Agreements and Implications for the WTO", draft paper presented at ISA convention, March 2008, available at: [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/2/5/0/8/6/pages250869/p250869-1.php](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/5/0/8/6/pages250869/p250869-1.php), p. 10.

countries—the partial lifting of trade barriers on selected goods—have been portrayed as favourable treatment, whereby China “gave more and took less”.<sup>61</sup> Such policies that combine inducement and attraction amount to a strategy of “pacification, harmony and enrichment” towards neighbouring countries.<sup>62</sup>

How do we gauge the regional reception to China’s power to persuade? It is extremely difficult to establish causal links between China’s diplomacy and changes in target states’ policies. The ‘soft power’ literature traditionally uses polling data to show positive changes in public opinion about the powerful state to demonstrate successful exercises of power. Such analysis is clearly problematic if it lacks a credible further link between public opinion and the state’s actual policy choices. This aside, even polling data on its own reveals less than one might expect. For instance, different polls in recent years have tracked rising proportions of East Asian sample populations who view China positively.<sup>63</sup> Yet, other indicators muddy potential conclusions. A large survey of Asian public opinion in 2008 found, for example, that while majorities in all surveyed countries saw China’s influence in regional affairs as ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ positive, strong majorities were also ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ uncomfortable with the idea of China as leader of Asia. While pluralities were ‘somewhat worried’ that China could threaten them militarily in the future, similar proportions of those polled had the same worries about Japan, and to some extent, the United States.<sup>64</sup> In a region that is suspicious about its resident great powers and ambivalent about hegemony, it is difficult to draw significant conclusions from the apparent moderation in public opinion about China.

It is clear, however, that policymakers in Southeast Asian states have been reassured by China’s more cooperative and moderate policy actions since the mid-1990s.<sup>65</sup> But this reassurance has its limits and the more developed Southeast Asian states especially are not rolling over into a Sinocentric sphere of influence. Their

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Yuan, “A Harmonious World”, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> E.g. those cited in Gill & Huang, “Sources and Limits of Chinese Soft Power”, pp. 23–25; Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, passim.

<sup>64</sup> See Christopher B. Whitney & David Shambaugh, “Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multi-national Survey of Public Opinion”, Asia Soft Power Survey 2008, Chicago Council on Global Affairs in partnership with East Asia Institute.

<sup>65</sup> Shambaugh, “China Engages Asia”; Evelyn Goh & Sheldon Simon (Eds.), *China, America and Southeast Asia: Perspectives on Politics, Economics and Security*, London: Routledge, 2008.

willingness to be receptive to Chinese reassurance arises from a belief in the possibility of socialising China into international society, and of growing interdependence leading to prosperity and peace.<sup>66</sup> Hence, China's power to persuade is rooted in its ability to continue offering economic inducement and to sustain benign policy action. Apart from economic redistribution to offset some of the adverse effects of its economic competition on poorer neighbouring states, China's neighbours are also watching to see whether and how it tries to prevail in more serious conflicts of interest.

### *China's Power to Prevail: Territorial Conflicts*

The most reliable way to gauge the effective exercise of power is to make linkages between the powerful actor's actions and the subject's policy choices on a significant issue where their extant preferences are opposed, but the subject changes its policy at some cost. In the face of divergent interests, the powerful actor does not rely on persuasive instruments and uses inducement and coercion to alter subjects' preferences. Again, the outcome depends on the subjects' motivations, making even more important close analyses of their decision-making processes. In the case of China and Southeast Asia, the most significant issues on which to look for evidence of Chinese influence include: policies on Taiwan; defence relations with the United States; support for regional security ties that exclude the United States; and policies on territorial disputes. On these potential hard cases, it is difficult to find significant changes in Southeast Asian states' policies to date.

One potentially strong case of China trying to prevail in a conflict of interest may be the Philippines altering its stance in its claims to the Spratly Islands. The Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are disputed by six claimants: the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei. All except Brunei maintain military structures on some of these rocky islets. Vietnam and the Philippines have experienced the most tension with China over these disputes. Following the 1995

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<sup>66</sup> See Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order"; Alice Ba, "Who's Socializing Whom? Complex Engagement and Sino-ASEAN Relations", *Pacific Review* 19(2), June 2006, pp. 157–179. This assumption has been challenged within the theoretical literature; see Edward Mansfield & Brian Pollins (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Economic Exchange and Armed Conflict*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

discovery of Chinese military structures on Mischief Reef, claimed by the Philippines and lying within its exclusive economic zone, Manila led a unified ASEAN effort to engage Beijing in multilateral negotiations. A Declaration of Conduct was signed in 2002, whereby the parties agreed to exercise restraint and seek peaceful resolution of the conflicts.<sup>67</sup>

In September 2004 though, Manila changed its multilateral stance and confidentially signed an agreement with Beijing for joint survey of potential exploitable oil and gas resources around the Spratlys. That this was a costly move for the Filipino government is indicated by the with-holding of details until 2008. For critics, the agreement undermined ASEAN's collective stance and Filipino leadership in forging that cooperation. The bilateral agreement undermined the Declaration of Conduct, which obliges all parties to agree upon the modalities, scope and locations for any cooperation. The agreement also undercut other Southeast Asian claims while legitimising China's claims. Manila included in the agreement certain areas not claimed by China, thus putting in question Filipino sovereignty in these areas.<sup>68</sup> In March 2005, Vietnam joined the modified and renamed "Tripartite Agreement for Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking in the Agreement Area in the South China Sea" (JMSU).

To what extent was this change in the Filipino and Vietnamese stance affected by Chinese power? China utilised a range of instruments to persuade, induce, and coerce Manila and Hanoi into altering their preferences. On the one hand, Beijing presented the concept of 'joint development' as a credible alternative to confrontation or a multilateral code of conduct. Joint development would be conducted bilaterally by national oil companies rather than governments, thus circumventing the problems associated with ASEAN-based negotiations. On the other hand, critics charged that 'joint development' Chinese style was a convenient means for Beijing to claim

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<sup>67</sup> The implications of this non-binding declaration are debatable – see Leszek Buszynski, "ASEAN, the Declaration on Conduct, and the South China Sea", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25:3, 2003, pp. 434–63; Wu Shicun & Ren Huaifeng, "More Than a Declaration: A Commentary on the Background and Significance of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea", *Chinese Journal of International Law* 2:1, 2003, pp. 311–320.

<sup>68</sup> See Mark Valencia, "The Philippines' Spratly 'Bungle': Blessing In Disguise?", Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online 08-022A, 18 March 2008, <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08022Valencia.html>

territory over which it has little plausible legal claim.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, reports indicated that Filipino President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was mainly persuaded by those with business interests in China, against the opposition of officials in the Foreign Ministry.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, economic inducement was an instrument in Beijing's success. The agreement was part of a package of bilateral agreements signed by Arroyo and Hu in 2004–2006, which included pledges of \$1.6 billion in Chinese loans and investments, and military assistance to the Philippines worth more than \$1 million.<sup>71</sup> Critics suggest that the Spratlys agreement was a quid pro quo for these commercial agreements. Against this is the wider backdrop of the inducements offered by the CAFTA—Manila, which had initially opposed the FTA agreement, accepted the Early Harvest Programme in early 2005. Bilateral trade grew from US\$1.77 billion in 2001 to US\$8.29 billion in 2008, and by 2006 China was the fifth largest ODA provider to the Philippines, supporting a number of high-profile large infrastructural projects by the Arroyo government.<sup>72</sup>

Potentially, Vietnam's change of stance could present an even stronger case of China's power to prevail, given the more acute disagreement and conflict between Vietnam and China over the South China Sea.<sup>73</sup> However, it appears that Hanoi was willing to participate in the JMSU mainly because it covered areas of the South China Sea not claimed by Vietnam.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, coercive power was evident in China's management of the Spratlys dispute. Three sets of events in 2007 highlight what regional observers have noted as a “further escalation of the situation... and a clearer Chinese assertiveness in advancing its territorial claims”.<sup>75</sup> Even after the Declaration of Conduct, the Chinese navy continued manoeuvres in the area to assert its territorial claims. Chinese naval

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<sup>69</sup> Barry Wain, “Manila's Bungle in the South China Sea”, *Far Eastern Economic Review* January/February 2008.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Luz Baguioro, “Beijing offers Manila \$2.6bn in funds”, *The Straits Times*, 28 April 2005; and “Philippines warms to China with care”, *The Straits Times*, 7 June 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Ian Storey, “Conflict in the South China Sea: China's Relations with Vietnam and the Philippines”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 30 April 2008, available at: <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Ian-Storey/2734>

<sup>73</sup> Vietnam and China have longstanding maritime disputes in the South China Sea, centred on the Paracel as well as Spratly Islands.

<sup>74</sup> Storey, “Conflict in the South China Sea”, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ralf Emmers, “The Changing Power Distribution in the South China Sea: Implications for Conflict Management and Avoidance”, RSIS Working Paper No. 183, 30 September 2009, p. 13.

patrol boats fired on a Vietnamese fishing boat and China conducted a large naval exercise near the disputed Paracel Islands. China also opposed Vietnam's granting of a concession to a British Petroleum-led (BP) consortium for developing gas fields off the Vietnamese coast. It suspended operations after two months, reportedly as a result of Chinese threats to exclude BP from future energy deals in China<sup>76</sup>—a prime example of the coercive use of China's structural economic power. While none of these involved the Philippines, China's tough stance against Vietnam sent a strong signal to the militarily and economically weaker Filipinos. Beijing further asserted its sovereignty claims by upgrading the status of the administrative centre overseeing its claimed South China Sea territories.

And yet, the apparent Filipino reversal was short-lived and is not an especially strong case of China's power to prevail. Due to the domestic political backlash against President Arroyo's decision when the terms of the JMSU were made public, Manila did not renew the agreement when it expired in 2008. Indeed, the Philippine Senate enacted a law in 2009 that included the Spratlys within Filipino maritime baselines. In May 2009, Vietnam and the Philippines formally submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLOS) their disputed claims in the South China Sea. This led to a serious deterioration in Sino-Philippines and Sino-Vietnamese relations, in spite of continued Chinese economic inducements aimed at ASEAN.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, coercion has increased: the Philippines Baseline Law coincided with the alleged intrusion into China's exclusive economic zone of the *USNS Impeccable*. Beijing despatched naval vessels to confront the American ship, and the United States sent a guided missile destroyer into the region.<sup>78</sup> These maritime confrontations followed the U.S. discovery of a new Chinese naval base on Hainan Island that can be used as a staging post for pursuing its maritime claims in the South China Sea.<sup>79</sup> The Philippines and Taiwan are upgrading military facilities on the Spratlys atolls that they currently occupy, and Vietnam and Malaysia are

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<sup>76</sup> Storey, "Conflict in the South China Sea".

<sup>77</sup> Ian Storey, "China-Vietnam's Year of Friendship Turns Fractious", *The Straits Times*, 26 May 2009; Rodolfo Severino, "Clarifying the New Philippine Baselines Law", ISEAS mimeo, n.d., <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/aseanstudiescentre/ascdcf2c3.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> "Philippines to Seek Help of Allies in Spratlys Case", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 17 March 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Mark Valencia, "The South China Sea Hydra", Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online, 24 July 2009, at <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08057Valencia.html>



modernising their navies and acquiring submarines.<sup>80</sup> Thus, it appears that China has not been especially successful at persuading, inducing or coercing its rivals into changing their claims to the disputed territory. Perhaps as a reflection of this, Beijing has adopted a harder line on these disputes in the last two years.

Southeast Asian officials have complained since 2009 of China's attempts to backtrack on the 2002 multilateral Declaration by reverting to its earlier preference of negotiating bilaterally with individual claimants. At a regional defence ministers' meeting in June 2010, Southeast Asian officials were further disturbed by reports that senior American officials were told by their Chinese counterparts that China now regards the South China Sea as part of its "core national sovereignty interests"—a term which it had previously applied to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>81</sup> Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reminded China that, in the South China Sea, "we do not take sides on any competing sovereignty claims, but we oppose the use of force and action that hinder freedom of navigation".<sup>82</sup> In further response to ASEAN's concerns about China's stance in their territorial disputes, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took the opportunity of a regional security meeting in Hanoi to emphasise U.S. "national interest" in the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, preferably by multilateral agreement.<sup>83</sup> A few days later, the PLA carried out live shelling in the Yellow Sea (ahead of a U.S.-ROK joint exercise) and the PLA Navy conducted a large live-ammunition training exercise in the South China Sea, while Chinese officials reiterated their claims of "core national interest" over these seas.<sup>84</sup> This was shortly followed by the Sino-Japanese standoff during the autumn of 2010, after the Japanese Coast Guard detained a Chinese fishing trawler for allegedly intruding into Japanese waters. This episode was instructive for the speed and firmness with which Japan as well as other Southeast Asian states that share territorial

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<sup>80</sup> Emmers, "The Changing Power Distribution in the South China Sea"; Ian Storey, "China's 'Charm Offensive' Loses Momentum in Southeast Asia", *China Brief* X(9), April 2010, pp. 7–10.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Richardson, "Changing tides to watch in the South China Sea", *The Straits Times* 14 June 2010.

<sup>82</sup> See <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2010/plenary-session-speeches/first-plenary-session/robert-gates/>

<sup>83</sup> John Pomfret, "Clinton wades into South China Sea territorial dispute", *Washington Post* 23 July 2010. On the limitations to Southeast Asian willingness to push the U.S.-China divide too far though, see Barry Wain, "ASEAN caught in a tight spot", *The Straits Times*, 16 September 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Da Wei, "A Clear Signal of 'Core Interests' to the World", *China Daily* 2 August 2010; John Pomfret, "Beijing Claims 'Indisputable Sovereignty' over South China Sea", *Washington Post* 31 July 2010.

disputes with China sought and obtained U.S. involvement and assurances. One direct result of the incident has been the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance, despite the ongoing wrangle about U.S. bases in Japan: President Obama quickly reaffirmed the U.S.-Japan alliance as “one of the cornerstones of world peace and security”, while his Secretaries of State and Defense confirmed that the U.S.-Japan treaty umbrella extends to the Senkaku Islands.<sup>85</sup> At the height of the Sino-Japanese standoff, Obama also reiterated the importance of peaceful dispute resolution, freedom of navigation and respect for international maritime laws, with reference to the South China Sea.<sup>86</sup>

China’s behaviour regarding the South China Sea constitutes a critical test of its intentions, and recent developments may indicate a toughening of Beijing’s stance as its capabilities and confidence increase—much as realists have warned all along. And yet, as these recent episodes suggest, even as Beijing’s attempts at inducing ‘joint development’ with its rival claimants fell prey to domestic politics in Manila, renewed Chinese coercion backfired more seriously in that it led to a closing of ranks across Southeast Asia, Japan and the United States. While it is too early to gauge whether there are more significant impacts on a hardening of a potential ring of strategic alliances and partnerships to encircle and contain China, Beijing’s actions have lent weight to the views of regional pessimists who were not won over by its power to persuade them about its ‘peaceful rise’.<sup>87</sup> While this need not necessarily negate China’s earlier achievements in reassuring and mutually benefitting its neighbours, sustained coercive action in such ‘hard’ cases will help to tip the balance of regional threat perception against China. At the very least, the region is now extra sensitive about the potential use of Chinese military power in the near future; and if this trend continues, Beijing may prompt its neighbours towards the very containment policies that it wishes to avoid.

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<sup>85</sup> “Obama: U.S.-Japan alliance a security ‘cornerstone’”, *Seattle Times* 23 September 2010; “Japan, U.S. affirm cooperation on disputed Senkaku islands”, *Japan Today* 12 October 2010; Aurelia George Mulgan, “U.S.-Japan alliance the big winner from the Senkaku islands dispute”, *East Asia Forum* 26 October 2010.

<sup>86</sup> Christi Parsons & Paul Richter, “Obama and ASEAN leaders call for peaceful resolution of maritime disputes”, *LA Times* 25 September 2010; Bao Daozu, “Sino-U.S. ties falter over South China Sea”, *China Daily* 27 September 2010.

<sup>87</sup> For a helpful review of collective U.S. and regional pressure put on China on this issue in subsequent regional security meetings in 2010, see Carlyle Thayer, “Recent Developments in the South China Sea: Grounds for Optimism?” *RSIS Working Paper* No. 220, 14 December 2010. Observing some movement on the stalled negotiations for a China-ASEAN Code of Conduct on the South China Sea towards the end of the year, Thayer offers the cautiously optimistic conclusion that “China may have calculated that negotiations with ASEAN members were preferable to U.S. intervention in a sensitive issue of national sovereignty” (p. 31).

Having said all this, it is still worth returning to the focus of the analysis here to note that, so far, there are few ‘good’ cases of China managing to cause its weaker neighbours in Southeast Asia to change their behaviour in instances of conflicting extant preferences. Indeed, in the case of the South China Sea, the result thus far has been a hardening of their opposed preferences. Theoretically, the strongest cases would involve strategically important states altering key policies, such as Vietnam relinquishing its territorial claims to China; the Philippines or Singapore significantly downgrading their security relationships with the United States, or Japan changing its stance on territorial disputes with China or moving away from its alliance with the United States, or Taiwan giving up its international status. In spite of Beijing’s successful record of persuasion and inducement so far, it has not chosen to push its neighbours on these most challenging issues. China’s still limited military capacity provides a significant explanation for why this is the case. Even in the case of the South China Sea, the balance of military power does not refer only to the bilateral balances, but rather the larger regional balance. Particularly in the maritime access and security arena, the presence of the United States still serves as a significant deterrent.<sup>88</sup> The U.S. alliance with the Philippines and Washington’s reiteration of its interest in open sea lines of communication in the region are reminders to Beijing that if it chooses to wield coercive military power in the South China Sea, its capabilities relative to that of the United States will determine whether it can prevail. Crudely, the United States currently spends approximately six times more on defence than does China;<sup>89</sup> and even hawkish U.S. assessments of China’s military capabilities are cautious about their potential to close the technological and operational gap.<sup>90</sup>

## **Evaluating China’s Power**

This article began by asking just how powerful China is and to what extent China has managed to convert its growing capabilities into influence over outcomes. Moreover,

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<sup>88</sup> See Jonathan Pollack (Ed.), *Asia Eyes America: U.S. Asia-Pacific Strategy and Its Regional Implications*, Newport, CI: Naval War College, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> The Stockholm Peace Research Institute puts U.S. and Chinese military expenditure at US\$661 billion and US\$100 billion respectively in 2009 – *SIPRI Yearbook 2010*, Stockholm, 2010. Beijing’s officially announced defence budget for 2009 was US\$70 billion – “China’s defence budget to grow 14.9% in 2009”, *China Daily*, 4 March 2009.

<sup>90</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2009 Report to Congress, 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, First Session, November 2009, [http://www.uscc.gov/annual\\_report/2009/annual\\_report\\_full\\_09.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/annual_report/2009/annual_report_full_09.pdf); Department of Defense, *Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2009*, Washington, D.C.: DOD, 2009, <http://www.defense.gov/news/China%20Military%20Power%20Report%202009.pdf>

since power is relational, does China's power not depend upon how other states react? Focusing on the apparently positive story of Sino-Southeast Asian relations, it analysed China's power as a multiplier, power to persuade and power to prevail in cases of varying extant preferences. Paying particular attention to persuasion, inducement and coercion, it found that China does not thus far have a significant record of managing to get its smaller Southeast Asian neighbours to do what they would not otherwise have done. Instead, the most notable elements of China's growing power—its economic strength and integration into the world economy—are manifested in structural, and often unintentional, ways. However, Beijing has successfully harnessed some of this structural power by distributing and multiplying the positive effects of its economic strength in economic regionalism initiatives. China's record of persuasion has been most notable in the case of the debate about nature of its own growing power. Yet, in order to persuade its neighbours to choose one set of beliefs over another, accompanying economic inducement and concrete policy action are vital. In the case of significant territorial conflict, China has used a combination of inducement, persuasion and coercion, but has not managed to cause other states to change their policies or claims. Instead, a mutually semi-coercive impasse has been reached in the South China Sea.

What does this tell us about the nature of Chinese power? Inducement is the constant in Chinese foreign policy behaviour. Beyond that, the Chinese record in Southeast Asia thus far is 'persuasion when we can, coercion when we must'. For those who expect that a rising great power must necessarily wield coercive military power in preference to non-military power, this amounts to an unusual tool kit; hence the appeal of the 'soft power' narrative. But the above analysis highlights more complex questions about the limits of China's power.

First, if power is relational, then it is crucial to understand the preferences, policies, and strategies of other states which are reacting to China's growing role in the international system. Why does China seem to reap so much from sowing relatively little in substantive terms, when, for instance, the economic inducements it offers are clearly accompanied by potentially damaging economic competition? The answers to this lie in expectations—most of its neighbours have harboured strategic trepidations about Chinese intentions, setting a low baseline of expectations vis-à-vis

China compared to the other major powers. At the same time, it is in the interests of some of China's neighbours to emphasise Chinese involvement in their security and political economies, in order to play the 'China card' and to put pressure on other partners like the United States.<sup>91</sup> This then leads to the question, "To what extent is China actively trying to shape others' preferences, beliefs and desires, and to what extent is it merely hitching a ride on their dissatisfactions and opportunism?" It is not easy to find good cases of Beijing trying to shape regional preferences and beliefs about a significant, large strategic issue. On the other hand, there is good evidence of opportunism, such as regional unhappiness with perceived western neglect during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Further, how do we account for the differences in regional receptions of China's power? Can receptions of its persuasive power be correlated to receptions to its inducement or coercive power? Or might we show that in cases of greater convergence between extant preferences and larger disparity in material capability, China's persuasive power is most likely to be effective? In that case, it would leave us with the conclusion that China is most powerful vis-à-vis its weakest neighbours, in situations in which it can most effectively identify commonality of preferences. Readers would be forgiven for thinking that this is hardly an astonishing finding, yet the voluminous literature on China's rising power does not acknowledge this point. One obvious corollary then is that analyses of the Southeast Asian experience may not best indicate the benignity of Chinese power, and need to be complemented by analysis of Chinese power relations with stronger and more conflictual states such as those in Northeast Asia.

Finally, how powerful is China? The foregoing analysis suggests that the answer is mixed. China is not so powerful because it has not been able to get even its relatively weak Southeast Asian neighbours to do what they otherwise would not have done. But the other way to think about it is that perhaps China exerts effective power in the sense that it has been able precisely to prevent serious conflicts of interest arising in the first place by concentrating on the issue areas in which their extant preferences align, and by emphasising its persuasive and inducement power. Clearly

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<sup>91</sup> See Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order", pp. 136–138.

there are limits to China's ability to keep plucking these low-hanging fruit, but the broader point is this: we expect rising powers to generate conflict, but the most successful hegemons are those that work to pre-empt conflict. As Lukes recognised, the most effective power is the "imposition of internal constraints", exercised by "prevent[ing] people... from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial".<sup>92</sup> China is admittedly a long way from being able to exercise such power, but its approach so far may reflect not only current resource limitations but also a longer-term awareness of the most effective ways to exercise great power.

Note : A correction had been made to Page 2, Line 12. Where it previously was "where we are able to find", it now reads "where we ought to be able to find evidence of China."

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<sup>92</sup> Lukes, *Power*, pp. 13, 28.

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