

China and Thailand: A Pacific Affair, or is China Leading ASEAN down the Garden Path with Rose-tinted Spectacles?

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Abstract

China has the motive and capability to control the Southeast Asian region by controlling the routes in and around the Spratly Islands, the Paracels and other smaller rocks. By using a military strategy of granulated encroachment, China is slowly building up military and naval capabilities in Southeast Asia in order to control the various shipping and air passages. The Chinese President had recently warned the Philippines not to infringe on its traditional claims which China states dates back to the 11th and 12th centuries. In late October 2015, an American warship sailed through the South China Sea near the Spratly Islands indicating the American presence and its ability to activate the Pacific-based Seventh Fleet if necessary. This paper examines and analyses on-going Chinese interests and reveals how they intend to take over and influence economics and politics in Southeast Asia. It also considers Thailand's special relationship with China that dates back at least seven centuries.

Keywords: China; Thailand; Pacific affair; ASEAN; Garden path; Rose-tinted; Spectacles

Introduction

China and Thailand have a long standing relationship. Their separate destinies date back to the 13th century and to the time of the Sukhothai kings. A large proportion of Thai people today have Chinese ancestry. My survey research also shows that there are more Thai prime ministers with Chinese ancestry than there are not. The early Siamese began as migrants from Southern China as early as the 3rd century due to push factors such as famine, civil war and drought [1]. While China has a politically warm relationship with Thailand today, it does not seem to have the same relationship with other ASEAN states. Or does it?

China is not unfamiliar with Southeast Asia. At least 68% of all Southeast Asian people can claim at least one Chinese ancestor. Even the Malay people in the Philippines and Malaysia say that their ancestors are from southern China. The famous 15th century Ming Emperor was an imperial strategist who knew how to conduct global diplomacy between China and Southeast Asian states. For example, he instructed that Hang Li Po, a minor Chinese princess, to be betrothed to Sultan Mansor Shah, the reigning sultan of Malacca. During the time of the powerful Ming Dynasty, the commander of the Chinese fleet, Admiral Zheng He, made seven sea voyages between 1405 and 1433 across the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, up the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa. That was the first escarpment of China's sphere of influence, anticipating European levels of civilisations by centuries [2].

In the 1970s, observers believed that Chinese interests in Southeast Asia were pure fiction¹. In less than four years, China occupied the Paracels². The South China Sea is a hot flashpoint where battles between China, Vietnam, the Philippines and other interested parties may erupt since its illegal occupation of the Paracels in 1974 and the Spratly Islands in 1988. In 1962, Indonesia invaded Papua New Guinea and in 1975, Suharto's Indonesia annexed East Timor, which makes up half of

the giant island of Papua. China protested but no one seemed to listen [3]. The ASEAN states remained silent because they had all signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation which is a treaty of non-interference into the domestic politics of any member even if the member is an authoritarian state, a state that sponsors terrorism, a socialist state, a state that provides training areas for terrorists or a state that is a pawn for hegemonic, extra-regional powers³. China itself had annexed Tibet in 1950 and the Paracels and Spratlys some two to three decades later. This makes 2020 the year or decade of increasing Chinese muscling into Southeast Asian territorial waters. Chinese intentions are clear. They desire the South China Sea deposits of minerals, rare fossil fuel and gas deposits as well as other off-shore mining potentialities that were discovered by foreign corporations like Brunei Shell and Exxon Singapore in the early 1960s. As Lisalotte Odgaard argued in 2001 in a paper on deterrence and cooperation in the South China Sea, the Spratlys and Paracels represent the first line of defence for the littoral states of Southeast Asia. But more than that, these states are fully aware that those islands remain the only line of defence and if China occupies the entire chain of islands within the so-called South China Sea, then the entire group of ASEAN states are under direct threat.

So far, ASEAN has shown itself to be no more than a paper tiger in a very real Chinese jungle. China's policy towards Myanmar and Indonesia for example had revealed their secret desires for minerals and other ores and fossil fuels⁴. Aggressive Chinese behaviour since post-Mao era demonstrates that the Chinese are becoming increasingly intractable and are likely to remain politically belligerent over the next

³Eric Hyer, 1995. "The South China Sea Disputes: Implications of China's Earlier Territorial Settlements" *Pacific Affairs* 68, 1:34-54.

⁴Wayne Bert, 1985. "Chinese Policy toward Burma and Indonesia: A Post-Mao Perspective" *Asian Survey* 25, 9:963-980.

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¹Lajpat Rai, 1972. "Vietnam and the 'Third Communist Front'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, 39.

²Michael G. Gallagher, 1994. "China's Illusory Threat to the South China Sea" *International Security* 19, :169-194; see also, Samuel S. G. Wu and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, 1994. "Assessing the Dispute in the South China Sea: A Model of China's Security Decision Making" *International Studies Quarterly* 38, 3:379-403.

two decades. Their actions ignore the friendly warnings and indirect requests from the Philippines as well as Vietnam⁵. In historical times, Annam and Champa, the predecessor states to the Nam Viet were always at war with various Chinese dynastic attempts to infiltrate into mainland Southeast Asia.

However, it was also part of a love-hate relationship that saw trade and markets bloom and expand over time. Nevertheless, the colonization of Vietnam by the French and the eventual formation of North Vietnam with Chinese Communist help did not render the East Red, as Mao had proclaimed. Rather, the first generation of Chinese and Vietnamese leaders had deep bonds and personal ties; but these ties died with the first guard, the original generation of Communists. China was also unable to prove it was sufficiently powerful to confront the United States on its own and the Nixon Doctrine was able to stand the test of time with the gradual softening of ties and eventual *rapprochement* between the two states. This made Chinese scholars like Xiaoming Zhang work exceptional but entirely supercilious and irrelevant to international strategic studies and irreverent to Americans who died in the war⁶. With the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, Vietnam had in fact demonstrated that it had not only the most experienced land army in Southeast Asia but had effectively defeated the French colonists, the American democrats and the Vietnamese democrats in succession.

Then the Vietnamese trounced the Chinese in their border wars that lasted from 1979 to 1990 and even extended into the Johnson South Reef of the South China Sea in 1988. All these border wars and territorial claims were initiated by China. And the Chinese had lost almost all of them with significant injuries to PLA personnel with the exception of the Johnson Reef skirmishes. This is why Vietnam is now not merely the traditional enemy of China but the enemy of China [4].

During the period of Sino-Vietnamese tension, Vietnam 'sputniked' into Soviet orbit and had been receiving Soviet military aid after the Vietnam War. Thereafter, Russia CIS and the Russian Federation provided large amounts of economic and military aid that would shore up their defence strategy against China and make the world's largest Communist state the centrepiece of an ideological sandwich between Vietnam and the Russian Federation. Russia had always intended Vietnam to be its fulcrum into Asia⁷.

Russian academic experts who have investigated the history of the region are in agreement with other international experts in that Chinese traditional claims are based on myth and false claims. This is because there are no South Asian, Chinese or Arab records of the Chinese having ventured farther south than Hainan Island. While the giant Chinese economy may appear to be rising and the Chinese are seeing their individual earnings appreciate in value, the economic bubble will not last. The Chinese have also been soaking up US bonds and treasury certificates but all the US Senate has to do is to freeze all Chinese assets: that would forestall the Chinese naval and military build-up since 1991[5].

A second consequence of China's new strategy is that it serves to damage China's reputation, or at least whatever is left of the opinions of Chinese. China's false claims and illegal occupation of the Paracels and Spratly and construction of military buildings only serve to damage China's long-term interests in the region as well as weaken ties with its

formerly strong supporters such as Thailand and Singapore. China's potential confrontation with the United States is a third consequence that neither the Superpower nor China desires to materialize. China has also begun opening up a new front by showing interest in Indonesia's Natuna Islands which will marginalize its most significant trading partner in maritime Southeast Asia⁸. Indonesia is not a rich country because of Sukarno and Suharto and their families had squandered the wealth and hidden much of it in other countries' banks [6]. However, Indonesia is fully aware that it needs to gain greater credibility with the lame duck presidency of Barrack Obama before his term finally ends. Indonesia is also seeking American funds to re-build its half-sunk and rusty navy. Since the 1990s, the number of open water confrontations, stand-offs, and collisions have increased in Southeast Asian waters. All Southeast Asian states have begun re-examining their maritime security protocols, weapons systems and treaty arrangements. Therefore an escalation of potential hostilities is more likely to occur than not in the upcoming months and years. This is why Chinese apologists are misleading Southeast Asia (and hence ASEAN) down the garden path with rose spectacles⁹.

Southeast Asia: Backyard of China?

Has Southeast Asia become China's 'Laundromat'? The high level of taxes and corruption in China is causing the wealthiest Chinese to hide and clean their dirty money in places where there are significant numbers of Chinese and Chinese-speaking people in the population such as Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) has attempted to control the influx of Chinese money from Hong Kong or through Thailand and Indonesia into Singapore. But the overwhelming amounts of Chinese money make it difficult for many people in the region to say no.

In 2012, a Chinese general who commands the PRC Special Forces presented a paper at a Special Forces Conference in Singapore. A brutal man with a sharp mind, he appeared full of vigour as he spoke of China's 15 long years of experience fighting pirates in the East Coast of Africa. Chinese Special Force Operators in Africa tells us more than their global interest. China has been investing secretly in Afghanistan for decades since the Taliban lost power. They work well with both Kabul and rural tribes' people. Special Forces are very expensive and their relative combat power to regular forces has been a huge part of the debate by military budget and financial officers. The Chinese Special Forces units are now globally deployable. While they do not possess the technological wherewithal of the Americans and the Soviets, the Chinese are just a few steps behind and more than make up for the lack of software with the presence of combat-ready forces [7].

Civilized and literate Southeast Asians are aware that Cambodia remains on China's payroll. The Chinese also own several hundred million dollars' worth of expensive real estate in Singapore, Indonesia, Australia and Thailand. China's trade with Southeast Asian countries has reached an annual turnover of at least 10 billion dollars. China has invested over US\$800 billion in Southeast Asia and ASEAN states have invested over 1 trillion US dollars in China. At least 30% of all that money has gone into greasing the palms of corrupt politicians. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (2014) ranks China at 100th most corrupt country out of 175 countries and ahead of Singapore (7/175), Brunei (unranked, probably between 8 and 53), Malaysia (52/175), Thailand (85/175) and the Philippines

⁵King C. Chen, 1969. *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* Princeton University Press.

⁶Xiaoming Zhang, 1995. "The Vietnam War, 1964-1969: A Chinese Perspective" *Journal of Military History* 60, 4:731-762.

⁷Andrew C. Kuchins, 2014. "Russia and the CIS in 2013: Russia's Pivot to Asia" *Asian Survey* 54, 1:129-137.

⁸Lowell Dittmer, Mikael Weissmann 2015 China's Maritime Embroidments Asian Survey, Vol. 55 No. 3, May/June; (pp. 447-454).

⁹Chong-Pin Lin. 2015 "Behind Rising East Asian Maritime Tensions with China Struggle without Breaking" *Asian Survey* 55 3:478-501.

(also at 85/175), but behind Indonesia (107/175), Vietnam (119/175) and Cambodia (156/175). Corruption begets corruption and when it is done at the state and regional level, that is when the stakes become very high and we are talking about some real money that has now attracted American companies and the Russian mafia [8].

China continues walking into Southeast Asia like the region is their backyard. This is because there is no power in the region that can effectively thwart Chinese interests in the South China Sea. China and the Philippines have been, as of December 2013, at loggerheads with one another over the Spratly islands. By December 2015, their diplomatic rows had escalated into Southeast Asia as a result of an overlapping series of artefacts and partially digested fragments gleaned from historical archives and perhaps ravaged by the subjectivity of Western and Chinese reports between 1949 and 2015. China's special interest in Southeast Asia is neither ancient nor modern. It rests somewhere in between. And that interest began over 600 years ago. Over six hundred years ago, it would not be a wise move to challenge the authority of the emperor. In all absolutist states, the word of the autocrat was final. And his word was backed by an entire hierarchy of autocrats-minor who would unquestioningly implement imperial policies.

In late modernity, most Chinese military strategists believe that China intends to win any war that occurs in its immediate zone of influence. The PRC learnt its lesson in the Straits Crisis of 1996 when it cowed against the power of the US 7th Fleet and the largest US naval flotilla in the Pacific including two of the US's largest Aircraft Carrier Fleets and proven long-range strike capability. The PRC intends to win any hot war by deploying carrier-destroyer drones, invisible subs, satellite and 3C jamming equipment, as well as digital warfare against foreign (i.e., American) threat. China will strike to inflict what a famous American general used against Iraq: "Shock and Awe". In other words, China will strike at American hardware and software long before the Americans can finish their coffee, hearty breakfast cereal and waffles. Meanwhile Thailand sits uncomfortably on the sidelines for fear of losing any more Chinese investments or businesses.

It is however unlikely that China will be able to maintain a long-drawn out global war against the US military. Given its global reach, not even the Russians dare challenge American supremacy outside Georgia, the Ukraine and other former Warsaw bloc satellite states.

Yet there are increasingly worrying signs of China's disenchantment within the Far East: its long history of antagonism and hatred towards Japan, given the history of Japanese militarism since their defeat of the Russian Fleet in 1905: that made Japan the first modern Asian state to defeat a European global power. Apart from Japan, China is morally obliged to aid or at least come to the rescue of its erstwhile, right-wing Korean ideological partner; and the perennial problem of the *One China, Two-Systems* policy. Taiwan will remain democratic as long as the democratic generation survives and the memories of the Kuomintang are not disrupted by their chequered history.

There is also a surge of increasing interest in Southeast Asian energy and especially oil reserves in the so-called South China Sea and the number of foreign Chinese agents identified in Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines since 1989 (end of the Cold War). Recall that the Japanese sent many tourists to capture photographs of Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s before Japanese Imperial intelligence units sunk their analytical teeth into their useful returns. This was why Japanese could precisely pinpoint valuable strategic and tactical targets before attacking Pearl City and Pearl Harbor.

As long as China remains at the negotiating table with its ASEAN friends and stops bankrolling Cambodia and some prominent Thai families overseas, a potentially violent situation can be prevented from exploding. For the time being, China's plans remain on course: a Chinese ambassador to the former Soviet Union once told his Singapore counterpart that China's conceives of its traditional sphere of influence in an area that includes the entire Pacific from Micronesia and Guam to Fiji, Vanuatu, Australia, and through Southeast Asia all the way to India's Hindu Kush.

Chinese Special Forces have to be very well trained and equipped to operate in Xinjiang Province against the Chinese Muslim Uyghur (Uighar) let alone off the Cape of Storms and the Cape of Good Hope as well as around the Horn of Africa. And China now has the wealth to go further. Should the Chinese economy falter, they might do what the Americans have been doing for decades since the 1900s. In any case, hot wars are always a good way to jump-start any military industrial complex [9].

The 2015 protests in Hong Kong are not about human rights or the political will of the people or the political nerve of the state. The protests in Hong Kong are about testing the boundaries of Chinese sovereignty. No autocrat in his right mind would allow the Balkanization of China. Beginning with Hong Kong, Macao would be the next to fall, then the individual Special Economic Zones and eventually the centre. The Chinese world is watching while Hong Kong university students protest against Beijing and a loss of face on either side will have significant ramifications. While it is clear that Beijing will emerge the victor, and to the victor go the spoils, it is not known what will happen to the protest leaders and the spies who betrayed them. No Chinese official wants to see China democratize at the expense of its own political sovereignty.

Any threat to Southeast Asian political sovereignty will not be met with great regional unity given the 2011 failure of the China Communiqué and Cambodia dreadful handling of the ASEAN Summit. Indeed, the ASEAN overhaul has been long overdue and its value at this point in late modernity is of no use against potential Chinese threats. Strategists who think that India's blue-water fleet can run the gauntlet against the Chinese arsenal would be ignorant of the fact that India does not want a repeat of the Sino-Indian War that ended in 1962. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's most valuable strategic thinker was right when he said, as former University of Singapore political scientist Lau Teik Soon liked to remind his students in the early 1980s: Singapore needs to have an American presence as a countervailing force against potential aggressors. Southeast Asian modernity lies in its cultural and political diversity. Contained within that milieu are the seeds of its own destruction.

Today, many civil rights groups in Southeast Asia continue to protest against American military presence because of the social problems that large numbers of American troops have had on local Asian women and their societies inasmuch as many local Malays and Chinese had embraced while others rejected the Portuguese blood infusion in Malacca a century after Admiral Zheng He's famous voyages through Southeast Asia. Ironically, the same American's whose grandfathers' were killed during the Vietnam War are now warmly welcomed in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and other Vietnamese cities. Those groups have discovered their own brotherhood in the citizens of Hong Kong and the protestors who have converged to oust their Chief Executive who has recently been accused of corruptly accepting money from Australia and some say, from Beijing. But there is no clear evidence at this point in writing and perhaps the people of Hong Kong

wish to politically move him out of the way as a stumbling block to Hong Kong's democratic transition. If Admiral Zheng He were alive he might balk at the idea of Chinese questioning any imperial edit, let alone the one from the capital.

Admiral Zheng left an indelible mark on Southeast Asian modernity based on the various archaeological discoveries in modern Malaysia and Singapore. Yet the most significant testament to Chinese interests in Southeast Asia is a grave reminder of the past: the largest cemetery of the Chinese Diaspora in the world located at Bukit China in Malacca, Malaysia, where the Chinese Princess Hang Li-Po is buried near her spring water well. Admiral Zheng He bequeathed to modern Southeast Asians in general and the Chinese Diaspora in particular, the largest Chinese cemetery outside China at Bukit China in Malacca, Malaysia. So rather than worry about the eventual and predictable outcome of the Hong Kong protests, we should look back in wonder at the gaze of Chinese medieval history as it sheds more light on Southeast Asia's future. In his speech in 2015 to university students and staff, Singapore's Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh reminded one and all that the Chinese had in effect made to significant recent forays into Southeast Asia and therefore affected Southeast Asian 'unity'. More recently he wrote, "China should therefore reconsider its position in order to conform to the best Asian and international practice"¹⁰. The first was in 2013 and the second time in 2014. In 2016 Chinese naval vessels and fishing boats made contact with Indonesian ones prompting the Indonesian Ministries of Fisheries and Ministry of Foreign Affairs

¹⁰Tommy Koh, 2015. "The Asian way to settle disputes" *Straits Times* June 10.

to take diplomatic action. Is this the sign of times to come between China and ASEAN?

Conclusion

If we add all these diplomatic, ideological and historical territorial claims, maritime skirmishes, and border clashes with ASEAN states, China has not only walked into Southeast Asian garden and left its footprints, it has also started building permanent fixtures in the regional garden and soon may show signs of moving in for good.

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