Socialised or Calculated Interests? Analysing China's Regional Policy Through Constructivist and Rationalist Perspectives

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Abstract

China's behaviour in the East Asian region has evolved overtime, reflecting an evolution of its interests. The rapid rise in power and influence China has enjoyed in the region lead many observers to view China as a calculated, shrewd, and self-interested actor with an eye to increasing power. Others see processes of socialisation with other states in the region affecting China's identity and interests. This debate reflects the broader theoretical chasm between rationalism and constructivism. This paper argues that the best approach for analysing China's regional policy borrows analytical techniques from across the paradigms depending on the specific issue.

Introduction

The East Asian region has seen progress in regional cooperation over the last decade. Though some of this cooperation was initiated specifically out of suspicion of China held by smaller powers in the region (Johnston, 1999; Narine, 2002; Whiting 1997), China has now become quite the player in cooperative dialogue and has even shown strong signs of a desire to cooperate with other states, especially with regards to security concerns in the region (Kuik, 2005). China's foreign policy intentions have concerned the world in recent years, due in most part to its incredibly rapid rise in economic, cultural and military power. While some scholars present pessimistic forecasts on the future of China's behaviour and ambition (Berger, 2000; Kristof 1998), its recent cooperation and tendencies to multilateralism cannot be ignored. Several scholars are now paying due diligence to the recent facts of China's willingness to cooperate (Ba, 2006; Kuik, 2005; Want, 2003). Others see China's cooperation as calculated maneuvering for strong bargaining positions within regional regimes or forums, as it sees these cooperative bodies or institutions as growing in relevance in the near future (Jones and Smith, 2007; Ba, 2006; Yuzawa, 2006; Narine, 2002; Whiting, 1997).

With these differing views in mind, this paper analyses China's relationship with its regional neighbors, specifically with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)[1], by focusing on its multilateral

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[1] ASEAN member states are: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

security cooperation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)[2]. This paper seeks to determine the more plausible explanations of China's policy shift towards multilateralism and engagement in regional forums by contrasting rationalist and constructivist analyses on the issue. The argument presented is that a holistic analytical approach, employing aspects of rationalism and constructivism, best explains China's shift to increased multilateralism in the region. A pure rationalist analysis would view China's interests as exogenously given, and its behaviour as calculated with a goal of advancing its interests and attaining its preferences in regional politics. A constructivist analysis views the processes specific to East Asian regional forums as capable of altering China's interests, and even its identity in relation to the other states in the region.

The ARF is a proper analytical case for the purpose of this paper because it is a multilateral security forum. Security is the sector of international politics in which rational behaviour in states' interactions is most likely to be observed. Thus, if social processes have the potential to influence state preferences toward an evolution from prior rational calculations of interest, as constructivism expects, it would be quite impressive to observe this influence in a security forum. Indeed, it would be more impressive to see constructivism's anticipations unfold in security issues than, say, health cooperation – the prior being closer to a state's primary concern of survival, as a realist would put it.

The 'ASEAN way'

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[2] ARF member states are: all ASEAN members, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Timor-Leste, United States, and Sri Lanka.

Robert Keohane defines international cooperation as occurring "when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination" (Keohane, 1984: 51). Cooperation in East Asia is not as formal as it has been in other regions. Rather, in East Asia loosely organised consultative bodies have provided forums for dialogue on a range of issues from economic integration to security concerns. ASEAN is one of these consultative bodies and has led the region in what has come to be called the 'ASEAN Way' – a term identifying the model of an informal, non-legalistic regime that simply offers a forum for consultative dialogue as opposed to policy coordination. What is so interesting to scholars about this 'ASEAN Way' is the relative success it has produced, albeit slowly, over four decades. The growth of ASEAN to extended forums like the ARF is indeed a development that produces optimism, especially when considering China's perceived enthusiasm for participating in these forums.[3]

The ARF, as a multilateral security cooperation forum, has a singular focus on the Southeast Asian region, though it includes extra-regional participants like the U.S. and Russia. The objectives of the ARF are modest. The long history in the region witnesses suspicion of multilateralism in many nations, an unusually strong principle of sovereignty and non-intervention (Yuzawa, 2006), and widespread domestic-level variables that are set against any cooperation with old enemies, which all combine to produce a less ambitious cooperation agenda. The ARF's objectives are simply "to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and

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[3] ASEAN hosts a number of other forums, like ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea).

concern; and to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region" (www.aseanregionalforum.org). This statement exemplifies the 'ASEAN Way,' which ASEAN member states are employing in an attempt "to socialise the (East Asian) region with the same norms and values that have proved successful in Southeast Asia" (Jones and Smith, 2007: 149). The early hopes for the ARF were to reduce uncertainty in the Southeast Asian security environment by providing "an effective consultative Asia-Pacific Forum for promoting open dialogue and political security cooperation in the region" (www.aseanregionalforum.org).

The 'ASEAN Way' may not qualify as cooperation under Keohane's definition, but it may be the best model for East Asia to move in the direction of formal cooperation, even if slowly. Instead of an institution for formal policy coordination, Jianwei Wang calls forums like the ARF "multilateral confidence building regimes" (Wang, 2003: 413). On the other hand, the 'ASEAN Way,' as it is played out in forums like the ARF, have been criticised for its informal designs and loose processes in so far as such a method enables stronger powers like China to redirect a regime toward their own self-interests (Jones and Smith, 2007). These concerns are influenced by suspicions of China's true reasons for beginning to engage so much with regimes like the ARF in the first place. Those who hold such concerns see China's actions in the ARF as manipulating the 'ASEAN Way' to jockey a leadership role within the ARF to ensure such a regional body does not take positions confronting China's interests.

Constructivist and rationalist approaches

The theoretical literature reviewed here informs the debate on China's motives for engagement in the ARF. While the constructivist concept of states socialising one another into cooperation is clearly a more optimistic and hoped for reality, the argument here is that a combination of the perspectives offers the best explanations of China's behaviour, in different circumstances. Thomas Berger (2000) ultimately holds a pessimistic outlook for China's future cooperation in the region, but he argues that the best way to explain China's foreign policy is to borrow variables from across paradigms, be they rationalist (domestic-level and structural) or constructivist in nature.

Constructivism concerns itself with the process of the cooperation, or dialogue seen in inter-state interaction, and the effects this process has on a states's willingness or desire to cooperate (Johnston, 1999; Acharya, 2005). Constructivism, thus, focuses on the norms of the leaders being altered as they engage more in dialogue in forums like the ARF. To illustrate, rather than viewing China's engagement with the ARF as calculated with seemingly unmovable positions on certain issues, as would a rationalist scholar, a constructivist would view the shifts in China's positions as resulting from, "discursive and social practices that define the identity of actors and the normative order within which they make their moves (and) the social processes that generate changes in normative beliefs" (Katzenstein, 1999, quoted in Acharya, 2005). One indicator of socialisation in this study, then, is the extent to which China shifts from its

initial weariness of multilateralism and embraces collective identity and interests with ASEAN over time.

Alexander Wendt sums up this socialisation process nicely in one phrase: "through interaction, states might form collective identities and interests" (Wendt, 1994: 384). He also offers a solid framework in which these identities and interests are altered, suggesting that states begin to identify with one another and share interests through structural contexts, systemic processes, and strategic practice. While the structural context of East Asia has not been conducive to collective identity formation, the systemic processes unfolding in the present era seem promising. Systemic processes are simply defined as "dynamics in the external context of state action," and can alter state behaviour as well as identity (Wendt, 1994: 388-89).

Systemic processes can lead to numerous different results in interstate relations, but two are especially conducive to collective identity formation. First, a rising interdependence emerges among states through a "density of interactions" (i.e. trade, immigration or capital flows) or a generally agreed upon common obstacle, challenge, or threat faced by the states (Wendt, 1994: 389). Both developments are argued to generate either 'common interests' or 'common aversions,' and "this reduces the ability to meet corporate needs unilaterally and increases the extent to which actors share a common fate" (Wendt, 1994: 389). Secondly, systemic processes can result in an occurrence of "transnational convergence of domestic values," through the rising interdependence (Wendt,

1994: 390). An example of this could be seen in 'Track 2 Diplomacy's'[4] impact on states' ideas about the world system and the challenges or opportunities it presents (Job, 2003: 241).

Strategic practices of states can also alter states' identities and interests, according to Wendt's model of collective identity formation. Specifically, one state acting cooperatively towards another can alter the latter's perception of the relationship and its identity within it. Wendt suggests that "actors form identities by learning, through interaction, to see themselves as others do" (Wendt, 1994: 390). In other words, if State A engages cooperatively with State B, assuming that State B is a state in which cooperation is expected, then State B's 'intersubjective knowledge' of the relationship and its identity within it will ultimately evolve to a cooperative basis as opposed to a conflictual one. Additionally, by cooperating in the first place and not waiting on another state's behaviour to affect one's own, a state will slowly adjust its own self-perception as cooperative rather than conflictual. "By teaching others and themselves to cooperate, actors are simultaneously learning to *identify* with each other – to see themselves as a 'we' bound by certain norms" (Wendt, 1994: 390).

Alice Ba refers to this as 'social learning,' and posits that ASEAN's 'complex engagement' of China contributes significantly to social learning on both sides of the interactive process. Complex engagement "is characterised by non-coercive, open exchanges at multiple levels and over multiple issue areas; it is the strategic pursuit of cooperative relations based on common

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[4] 'Track 2 Diplomacy' can be characterised by unofficial dialogue among individuals who might be representing their state, yet in an unofficial capacity. Instead of sitting/acting diplomats, these individuals are often academics, military and business leaders, retired politicians, and even celebrities.

understandings, as much (as) interdependence" (Ba, 2006: 160). This form of interaction allows dialogue to escape the traps of non-negotiable issues like territorial disputes by providing a plethora of issues on which dialogue can continue. Its goal is 'reasoned consensus' on issues rather than convincing the other to adopt one's own preferences (Ba, 2006: 162). Lastly, it actively transforms a state's self-perception of its role and position in a relationship (Ba, 2006: 161).

This social learning through complex engagement is most likely to occur in times of uncertainty when states are suspicious of one another and in contexts of very low institutionalisation. It also is likely when there is great power disparity, thus resulting in pre-determined goals and strategies that states bring to the table for initial interaction before the social learning process can begin (Ba, 2006). These conditions usually tend to increase the influence of activist agents who can shape the initial interactions and set the course for social learning (Ba, 2006). Job's study on the influence of 'Track 2 Diplomacy' fits quite well within Ba's framework. Important to note is that this socialisation is not unidirectional; it is interactive. For example, if a group of states were to make an initial move toward engagement with a regional hegemon, with the intent to socialise the hegemon's identity and behaviour, the socialisation process can operate upon the initiator states as well. Useful for the argument made here, this 'two way street' of the social learning process is crucial for furthering one's understanding of the China-ASEAN dynamic (Ba, 2006: 159).

Constructivism does not limit itself to systemic processes however. It concerns itself with commonly held norms and their ability to impact identities and interests. But interestingly, the processes discussed above can alter norms, which in-turn can reshape identities and interests. If the interactive processes and strategic practices discussed by Wendt had no impact on norms, then norms would not be as fruitful to observe. But norms change and, in turn, lead to changes in identities and interests. Thus, if "the moral importance and functional value of norms change over time" (Acharya, 2005: 102), then perhaps norms held across a region can be seen to evolve over time through observing states' interactions in the region.

Alternatively, the rationalist analytical perspective stresses strategic concerns in the context of cooperation. Both neorealism and liberalism are found in the rationalist paradigm. While neorealism observes states behaving rationally out of a positional concern relative to other states in the international system, liberalism views states' preferences as rationally designed, only derived from domestic constituents, be they policy elites, business elites, or political parties. Thus, Alexander Wendt (1994) characterises both liberal and neorealist views as rationalist in contrast to constructivism, which suggests that a state's interest can change in the midst of unfolding processes of cooperation. He explains that a rationalist analysis assumes that a state's interests are exogenous to interaction, while a constructivist analysis grants the interactive process a role in shaping interests.

From this theoretical review, and keeping in mind that a holistic analysis is argued to be most explanatory, several expectations can be derived for the rest of this paper. In observing ASEAN and China's interactions, one would expect to see China's policy preferences align with ASEAN's much more frequently now than before dialogue was so prevalent, namely the early 1990s (Ba, 2006; Job, 2003; Johnston, 1999). On the other hand, it should not surprise one to see China use the ARF in certain circumstances as a tool by which it secures the status-quo on an issue or advances its own interests (Jones and Smith, 2007). Lastly, even if there are circumstances in which this latter expectation materialises, Ba's notion of complex engagement and two-way socialisation should allow for China and ASEAN to avoid an overall deterioration of recent improvements in relations.

Literature review on China's regional policy

Some interesting works have explained reasons for a cooperative direction in China's behaviour. Using Wendt's structural constructivist framework of collective identity and interest formation, China's engagement with the region through the ARF can be analysed through a constructivist lens. Knowing that the regional structural contexts are not conducive to cooperation as compared to other regions in the world, a focus on systemic processes at the East Asian regional level and the strategic practice of China in those processes should prove fruitful in assessing the extent of China's socialisation to identify collectively with other states in the region. A greater emphasis on discursive processes affecting

state interests can be seen in Alistair Iain Johnston's argument that the process of engaging with the ARF has "changed beliefs in China among key actors about interests *vis-à-vis* regional security institutions and issues" (Johnston, 1999: 290). He refers to this as the leaders in charge of ARF policy in China being 'socialised' to the norms of the institution, or regime in this case, and away from the attitudes they brought to the ARF in the first place.

Brian Job observes 'Track 2 Diplomacy,' suggesting that China was 'socialised' into joining the ARF in the first place. He argues that intellectuals, academics, and officials in the region "have served as agents of change and norm entrepreneurs working to alter perceptions of interests, redefinition of identities (both individual and collective), and acceptance of the key principles of open regionalism and cooperative security" (Job, 2003: 241). Jianwei Wang (2003) takes a slightly different view. He acknowledges that the norms and rules of the regime have more of an impact than the instrumental variable of power, but he suggests that China brought such norms with them to the forum, thus downplaying the socialisation or the process of dialogue. Wang argues that China's foreign policy shift toward regional cooperation is driven by domestic considerations, namely the desire held by Chinese leaders and elites for regional stability for the sake of domestic modernisation (Wang, 2003: 398). Additionally, a brief look at the role of norms within constructivism's world view may also help further one's understanding of China and ASEAN's relationship. Regarding international or regional norms evolving over time, a case can be made that the desire to create consultative bodies, such as the ARF, emerged from evolving

norms on regionalism in the first place. For example, since the founding of ASEAN in 1967 "the general improvement and transformation of intra-ASEAN relations generated and strengthened ideas about engagement and regionalism, more generally, as relationship building exercises" (Ba, 2006: 165).

Other scholars suggest that China's engagement with ASEAN is calculated and self-interested with an intention to increase influence in the region rather than a mere desire to cooperate (Berger, 2000; Jones and Smith, 2007; Yuzawa, 2006). For example, China's active participation in the ARF can be seen as an effort to strengthen China's position and "to mitigate U.S. influence in the region, underscoring (that) such links (to the ARF) have strategic, as well as economic, value" (Ba, 2003: 646). Jones and Smith argue that it is exactly the design of ASEAN and the nature of its consultative processes that attract China's interaction, suggesting that China can engage ASEAN to "manipulate ASEAN's shared norms and nonbinding processes for their own strategic advantage" (Jones and Smith, 2007: 184). Countering this analysis, however, is that this same process design - open consultation and non-coercive dialogue aimed at consensus - "may play an important part in persuading China to rethink its ASEAN relations, to look upon ASEAN in a more positive light, and to be more responsive to ASEAN concerns" (Ba, 2006: 160). These scholars view China's actions in the ARF as calculated with a strategic context in mind and always stemming from a rational self-interest.

China's engagement of ASEAN from a constructivist perspective

China's engagement with ASEAN has endured across changing international contexts, and this is due in part to China's evolving identity and interests across those contexts. While China's initial engagement with ASEAN was calculated and self-interested due to uncertainty in the face of U.S. retrenchment immediately upon the end of the Cold War and to a desire for continued economic growth and stability, the engagement has continued even in the present circumstances, which are drastically different and see China in a strong strategic position. China's "continued participation or subsequent changes in its policies and views towards regional multilateralism" are difficult to explain through a rationalist perspective (Ba, 2006:167). China is now in a strong political position, not very constrained by regional actors including ASEAN, and is thriving economically. The change in Chinese policy towards multilateralism could support constructivist hypotheses of social learning through complex engagement and systemic processes.

A particular case of China's cooperation through interactive dialogue in the ASEAN tradition is that of the Asian Senior-level Talks on Proliferation (ASTOP). These talks on controlling the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction include ASEAN, China, South Korea, the United States, and Australia. Tanya Ogilvie-White (2006) observes that ASTOP is conducted in line with the 'ASEAN Way,' and as such "appears to foster a greater degree of trust amongst participants, thus achieving more in terms of consensus and compromise, facilitating agreement on a series of counter-terrorism measures, particularly in relation to WMD" (Ogilvie-White, 2006: 18). Counter-terrorism and WMD

proliferation have been sensitive issues for ASEAN, China, and the United States over the last six years. There has been suspicion of U.S. motives and demands in the region. These issue areas are examples in which reaching consensus among the nations involved seemed quite improbable in the past. Ogilvie-White contends that by engaging "in the type of quiet, non-confrontational, and private dialogue that is consistent with ASEAN diplomatic practices…an emerging consensus in Southeast Asia over the benefits of interdicting WMD and missile-related shipments on an informal, cooperative basis" is now evident (Ogilvie-White, 2006: 19).

It is important to stress here that this discursive process reversed initial ideas and attitudes on security cooperation within these issue-areas. Several conditions from Ba's observations above were in place here. First, the discourse was aimed at reaching consensus as opposed to one side holding fast to its preference. Secondly, the uncertainty resulting from recent terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Bali enabled activist actors to shape identities and direct discourse in ways that could not have been achieved in a more certain circumstance. While this example does involve more states than China and the ASEAN members, it serves as an illustrative case of 'social learning' through systemic process.

Building on the idea of activist actors influencing systemic processes, Brian L. Job's (2003) discussion on cooperative security dialogue emerging in the region from 'Track two Diplomacy' also illustrates the impact of complex engagement upon norms, interests, and identity. Track Two Diplomacy is interactive dialogue between academics, policy elites, intellectuals, and

government officials that is typically unofficial and more open to exploring ideas that could not be approached in state sanctioned negotiations. Job argues that in the post-Cold War environment of East Asia, uncertainty and suspicion characterised relations. But through this track two dialogue, cooperative security "became the conceptual cornerstone of (ASEAN's) post-Cold War efforts at developing a multilateral regional security order" (Job, 2003: 245). Ultimately, the ARF emerged as a security-related forum thanks to the discursive process shaping interests and identities at the track two level. These dialogues on regional security cooperation set as their goal "a mutual understanding of perceived threats and security goals" (Job, 2003: 247). It is arguable that the ARF is a seamless continuation of these early track two dialogues, and that the creation of the ARF was an advancement toward that goal. Here, Wendt's idea of collective identity formation resulting from a density of interactions is supported by Track two Diplomacy serving as the foundation of the ARF.

As stated in the introduction, this is impressive when observed in the realm of security issues. However, a brief snapshot of ASEAN Plus Three shows socialisation working across issue-areas. Though not security oriented, APT is also nothing more than a consultative forum including the ASEAN states, China, Japan, and South Korea. Its focus is on the financial structure and interaction of the Asia-Pacific region. In this forum as well, socialisation of interests can be seen, due in part to the uncertainty in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis. The crisis and the dialogue within APT have produced a common understanding of the need for some level of economic unity in the region, as all participants in

APT have realised that western-dominated financial institutions are inadequate in either their commitment to Asia or their ability to respond to further crises (Narine, 2002). The dominant dialogue in APT concerns the creation of an Asian Monetary Fund. Japan has been the leading voice for such a development. China's stance on the issue has evolved from opposition to endorsement, and in more general terms it is emphasising APT as the vehicle to greater economic unity across the region (Narine, 2002: 178). Thus, we see an example of Wendt's idea that a common challenge can grease the cogs of a systemic process that leads to rising interdependence and, ultimately, collective identity formation.

Alistair Iain Johnston's analysis on the ARF's early formation process and continuing purpose also fits well within the constructivist framework. For starters, he asserts that the ARF formed in a period of uncertainty over the region's security, one of Ba's conditions for socialisation to occur. He continues that the ARF had, from its inception, a very low level of institutionalisation due to an absence of any consensus on what posed a security problem and what was the best solution to that problem (Johnston, 1999: 290). As the years passed, however, the ARF "has influenced (Chinese) beliefs through (its) dialogue process, by socialising those in charge of ARF policy in China" (Johnston, 1999: 291). But Johnston also sees Ba's two way socialisation process in action in the ARF. He posits that there is a "feedback or mutually constitutive relationship between the initial ARF structure, change in China's overall comfort level with this structure, and institutional change in the ARF" (Johnston, 1999: 291). This falls in line with Acharya's changing norms through discursive processes which in

turn lead to changing identities and interests. The uncertainty about the security environment which contributed to the creation of the ARF was, primarily, uncertainty about China (Johnston, 1999: 295). The ARF, characterising Ba's concept of complex engagement, determines its decisions by consensus, not a unanimous adoption of one camp's preferences (Johnston, 1999: 297). Ultimately, however, Johnston moves beyond describing the ARF's characteristics and claims that the ARF's own structure and identity has changed through the evolution of China's comfort level (arguably an aspect of identity) within the ARF.

China's participation in the ARF has been argued not only to alter diplomats' attitudes and norms concerning multilateralism, but also to have even resulted in "changes in domestic bureaucracies and the structure of research institutes" (Foot, 1998: 428). Shifts in the language of Chinese policy elites also support the impact that constructivism claims discursive processes can have. Since the first meeting of the ARF in 1994, China has put together a community of diplomats, scholars (for Track 2 diplomacy), and military officials who "can speak the correct language and understand the conceptual apparatus that is being drawn" in the ARF dialogue (Foot, 1998: 428). This 'language' does not refer to any official spoken-language at the ARF. Rather, it refers to the vision or idea of the ARF, and the choice of words that naturally pairs with such a focus. It can be argued that China has 'learned' the 'language' of the ARF through more than a decade now of the socialisation process. For example, at the first meeting in 1994 China's leader, Qian, spoke vaguely of peaceful settlements of disputes

as the goal of the region. By the second meeting his choice of words seemed to imply an even stronger commitment to peaceful solutions of disputes, "recommending that Asia-Pacific states should replace 'the resort to force and threat to use force with peaceful negotiations, dialogues, and consultations" (quoted in Foot, 1998: 429).

Foot also observes China's engagement with the ARF more broadly. At the time of the first ARF meeting in 1994, China was reserved and was concerned that the U.S. would dominate the dialogue and even turn attention to the contested territorial claims in the South China Sea, or, worse, to Taiwan. Within the first three years of participation in the forum, however, China was hosting an "intersessional support group" meeting on Confidence Building Measures. Moreover, China's leaders praise the ARF in more general terms and appear enthusiastic for future possibilities. Foot points out that China's core values, or at least the world's perception of them, are "a desire to retain independence and autonomy, be self reliant, and protect sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Foot, 1998: 427). But China has learned through the process of participating in the ARF that it can find an acceptable comfort level with the forum thanks to the structure and nature of the processes taking place.

Specifically, China's internal debate on transparency in defense affairs has evolved through ARF processes from questioning the soundness of transparency at all to questioning the level of transparency that is most effective for increased security (Foot, 1998: 430). Additionally, the issue of contested territorial claims over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea has evolved

from China's refusal to even mention the issue - out of fear that it would be perceived as ready to negotiate – to an explicit "acknowledgement that there are indeed overlapping claims that carry within them the danger of disturbing the peace of the region, and that non-claimant states also have a concern about freedom of navigation" (Foot, 1998: 431). Foot's concluding arguments are that these changes in Chinese policy "would have been unlikely in the absence of the ARF," and that a deepening of cooperative norms, a shared sense of the ARF's permanence, and its growing professionalism all reflect a systemic process that is socialising members into holding collective interests (Foot, 1998: 439).

China's engagement with ASEAN from a rationalist perspective

These above examples of the socialisation process China has arguably undergone since the ARF was initiated provide a surface understanding of the denser interactive processes that have been unfolding. Yet, while examples such as this are prevalent, many scholars still argue that China's engagement in the ARF reflects strategic interests. Though Rosemary Foot is generally optimistic about China's changed behaviour through dialogue in the ARF, she also shows concern that China's multilateral security cooperation is viewed within China as nothing more than a political card to be played against the U.S. in the next diplomatic or military stand-off (Foot, 1998: 434). For example, at the 1997 intersessional support group meeting on Confidence Building Measures, China spoke out harshly against bilateral alliances that, it argues, serve to undermine security cooperation in the region. This jab was directed at Japan and the U.S.,

and it was only part of a broader Chinese diplomatic front aimed at criticising U.S. alliances in East Asia. Foot posits that this suggests "that the intrinsic worth of the multilateral security approach has yet to be accepted at the highest levels in Beijing and is primarily valued for its possible contribution to the weakening of U.S. ties with its Asian allies" (Foot, 1998: 435).

Takeshi Yuzawa (2006) illustrates an example that supports the claim of China's engagement in the ARF as self-interested and concerned with strategic position. While the ARF started out with the modest goal of producing confidence building measures, it eventually took on a more ambitious goal of preventive diplomacy. This was said to be initiated and pushed by Japan and the United States. But China's concern with sovereignty and non-interference led it to be reluctant to even discuss preventive diplomacy, let alone agree on a role the ARF could take on in this issue area. Here, the constructivist idea of a socialisation and convergence of ideas was noticeably absent. China was successful in turning the ASEAN states away from an inclination to take on preventive diplomacy, and Japan and the U.S. were left frustrated with the so-called 'ASEAN Way.' Yuzawa (2006) argues that the ASEAN states gave in to China's preference because they are most concerned with keeping China in the ARF. In other words, if confidence building measures are the only results the ARF is capable of producing at this point, then that is satisfactory for the ASEAN states, which, it has been argued, opened the ARF in the first place in an attempt to socialise China towards peaceful and cooperative behaviour (Whiting, 1997; Foot, 1998; Johnston, 1999; Narine, 2002).

Jones and Smith (2007) view the ARF similarly. They analyse the South China Sea dilemma involving territorial disputes between China and ASEAN member states. China's territorial claim on the Spratly Islands confronts ASEAN, as several member states have claims on islands throughout the South China Sea. In 1992 ASEAN signed the Manila Declaration, which announces that territorial disputes will be resolved through peace and cooperation. The declaration also set up workshops deliberately aimed at socialising China on this particular issue, and these workshops on "Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea" also ultimately contributed to the creation of the ARF (Jones and Smith, 2007: 176). But China continued to demand for bilateral negotiations on the disputed islands as opposed to multilateral negotiations, and it physically occupied Mischief Reef in 1995, which is claimed by the Philippines. This signaled to ASEAN that China would, on this issue, take an "uncompromising approach," and that social learning through dialogue would not be strong enough to reshape China's interests regarding what China viewed as "lost territory" (Jones and Smith, 2007: 177).

Ba's concept of complex engagement, which addresses multiple issues and thereby avoids one issue from derailing an entire process of socialisation, is exactly what Jones and Smith suggest enabled China to hold fast to its interests on this issue in the midst of engagement with ASEAN. Since the mid-1990s China has signed numerous declarations and agreements with ASEAN regarding the South China Sea, but all along it "avoided any commitment to a legally binding code" (Jones and Smith, 2007: 179). The territorial dispute remains, and

China continues to call for bilateral negotiations on the issue. Specifically, China was able "to separate its claim to the Spratly Islands from its claim to sovereignty over Taiwan," thus turning down the intensity of the mid-1990s. Again, complex engagement enabling dialogue on multiple issues and the ASEAN norm of conflict avoidance allowed China "to manipulate ASEAN's pliable norms to advance their strategic interests" (Jones and Smith, 2007: 180).

Conclusion

Perceiving China's engagement with ASEAN as calculated and interest-driven, or as cooperative, consensus-oriented and open, reflects one's ontological view of the international relations more broadly. Do rationalist paradigms better explain East Asian international relations? Or, does constructivism's contribution of evolving norms, interests, and identities further an understanding of the discipline? The examples given above of China-ASEAN relations, derived from secondary sources, lend credence to both analytical frameworks. China seems ambivalent in the security cooperation dialogue that is unfolding in the ARF. On the one hand, China is enthusiastically leading the way in cooperative dialogue and its behaviour and language has undeniably evolved through this process. On the other, it has used the forum to maneuver diplomatically against U.S. alliances and continues to evade any real negotiations on military transparency or disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea.

In the face of this ambiguity, it is reasonable to place importance on the 'process' aspect of dialogue, emphasising the chances for a socialisation to take place that might alter both China's and ASEAN's identities and interests, resulting in a deepened collective identity. This indeed takes time, and Alice Ba suggests that analysing the process in phases is helpful. Interests and motivations change through this process, so it makes sense that both China and ASEAN would approach early dialogue on a contested issue with self-interested goals. As the process unfolds, however, the end result could be a consensus on the issue that does not reflect either side's initial interests. Ba explains this well:

> The initial reasons for pursuing an engagement approach/strategy may be partly or largely instrumental, but the process itself may still change an actor's understanding of its interests, relations, and reasons for engagement over time and given the right conditions. Whether actors choose to focus on differences versus similarities also depends in large part on both the context and nature of their interaction (Ba, 2006: 168).

Even if rationalist explanations of the China-ASEAN relationship dominate the discipline, the subject is too complex to assert that one paradigm is sufficient to understand it. Thomas Berger (2000) sees a future of instability and conflict in East Asia, but he argues that any scholar of the region would do well to conduct analyses by borrowing variables from realism, liberalism, and contructivism. He asserts that these three "theoretical paradigms can be employed together to illuminate different aspects of the international environment in East Asia and

arrive at a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of the security situation in the region" (Berger, 2000: 407). Berger is trying to ascertain the likelihood of future conflict in the region. But, given that the past decade has been one of East Asia's most stable in the past half-century, it seems a more optimistic exercise to explain this stability rather than forecast future problems.

That is what this paper intended to accomplish, and hopefully at least a surface explanation was the ultimate result. It is evident that the ARF, and even other forums such as ASEAN Plus Three, has achieved some level of socialisation in the region. And yet while China continues to guard jealously its Spratly Islands claim and resist calls for transparency, the ASEAN member states continue the slow, quiet, patient, private, non-binding, consensus-seeking dialogue with a hope that interests, identities, and norms will coagulate into a collective security identity. The ASEAN Way has proven effective enough at this point to continue holding faith in its socialising potential.

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