

China's 'frown diplomacy' in Southeast Asia
By Donald K Emmerson

Donald K Emmerson (emmerson@stanford.edu) heads the Southeast Asia Forum at Stanford University. A somewhat longer version originally appeared in Asia Times Online.

"Smart Power, Chinese Style" is the title of a 2008 article by a renowned Singaporean analyst, Kishore Mahbubani. Kishore praised China for the "competence" of its diplomacy, contrasted China's "deft geopolitical instincts" with American "incompetence" and "arrogance," and noted admiringly Beijing's fealty to ancient principles of Chinese statecraft: to observe and analyze calmly, deal with changes patiently, and avoid the limelight. Unlike the self-absorbed Americans, the Chinese had "developed a remarkable capacity to understand the voices of others around the globe" and evinced superior "geopolitical acumen and better professional diplomacy."

2008 was then; 2010 is now. The sheer muscularity of recent Chinese diplomacy has made Kishore's assessment seem, in retrospect, wishfully Sinophilic. The "smile diplomacy" in Southeast Asia that China watchers used to describe has been reversed by Beijing - into a frown; China has come close to deleting the first letter in its heralded "charm offensive."

I heard variations on this critique in recent weeks traveling in East Asia. Japanese concern focused on Beijing's hardball response to Tokyo's detention of the Chinese fishing boat captain arrested in a confrontation over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. Many Southeast Asians were upset by China's behavior before, during, and after the July 2010 meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi.

China sticks out its tongue. On a Chinese map a line nine dashes long snakes southward, hugging the Philippine coast before turning west past Malaysian Sabah, Brunei, and Malaysian Sarawak. It bottoms out near Indonesia's Great Natuna island before turning northward along the coast of Vietnam, finally coming to an end near Hainan; a giant lapping tongue that demarcates its apparent claim to virtually the entire surface of, and the seabed and subsoil beneath, the South China Sea (SCS).

On my recent trip a Chinese colleague said it was normal for inter-state rivalries to wax and wane. In the SCS since 2007, however, they have mostly waxed. Unilateral actions, some by Hanoi but most by Beijing, including a Chinese ban on fishing in "its" waters, have triggered a sequence of maritime confrontations. Alarm bells rang still louder in March 2010 when Chinese officials reportedly told senior US officials that the SCS was a "core interest" of Beijing, as if that claim were no less absolute and no more negotiable than Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan or Tibet.

Having so prominently stuck out its maritime tongue at Southeast Asia, China knew that it might face a backlash in

July when the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) met in Hanoi. Instead of moderating its position, Beijing reportedly contacted ASEAN member governments and strongly urged them not to broach the subject of the SCS.

It failed. At the ARF meeting on 23 July, nearly half - 12 - of the heads of the 27 delegations present mentioned the SCS, including several Southeast Asian foreign ministers and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's reaction was still very much on the minds of the Southeast Asians I met on my travels nearly two months later.

Based on accounts by individuals who were in the room, Yang was angry. Clinton was the foremost target of his wrath, but he lashed out as well at the Southeast Asians who had been so bold as to mention the SCS, reminding them their countries' economic ties to China, as if those links could be broken at any time. My informants took his remarks to be a clear warning not to challenge Beijing.

Hillary in Hanoi. At a "press availability" afterwards, Secretary Clinton made no mention of Yang's outburst. Instead she said that "like every nation," the US too had "a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea." (Her reference to a US "national interest" could be construed as a riposte to China's apparent "core interest.") While noting that the US "does not take sides" in the "territorial disputes over land features in the South China Sea" Clinton described the US position as:

- (1) opposed to "the use or threat of force by any claimant";
- (2) favoring a collaborative process for resolving these disputes in accord with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (despite the failure of the US to ratify it, an omission she said her administration hoped to correct);
- (3) supporting the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" (DOC) that China and the ASEAN states co-signed in 2002, encouraging the parties to agree on "a full [i.e., binding] code of conduct," and offering to "facilitate initiatives and confidence building measures"; and
- (4) believing that, consistent with customary international law, "claims to maritime space in the South China Sea should be derived solely from legitimate claims to land features."

It is tempting to dismiss Yang's outburst as much ado about nothing. Clinton did not explicitly oppose China's claim. Nor did she back any rival claim. Yet arguably each of her points, if not actually aimed at Beijing, could be said to challenge its position. (Admittedly, the opacity of China's stand makes it hard to know just what would constitute a challenge.)

Reviewing Clinton's four points in the light of China's behavior, one could conclude that, on the first score, Beijing has already used force - against Vietnamese fisherman, for

example. As for observing the Law of the Sea, although China did sign on, its endorsement was conditioned with reservations that make that ratification almost meaningless. Clinton's third point, in support of the DOC, could be taken as criticism of China's unwillingness to upgrade the Declaration into a binding code of conduct. Last but not least, Clinton's case for deriving claims to sea space "solely from legitimate claims to land features" seems to contradict the sheer amplitude of Beijing's nine-dash tongue.

But China is not the sole claimant. So are Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. It would be wrong to blame China alone for a legal limbo that owes much to the unwillingness of the implicated ASEAN states to sort out their own differences. When I asked Southeast Asians why they couldn't settle their own disagreements first, before approaching Beijing, they assured me that such an outcome, however desirable, was impossible. So long as that remains the case, one ought not rush to a wholly anti-Chinese judgment.

Who said what. Now fast-forward two months, from July 23 in Hanoi to Sept. 24 in Manhattan, site of the Second US-ASEAN Leaders Meeting. ASEAN-watchers were eager to learn what Obama and his counterparts – eight heads of government plus Indonesia's vice-president and Myanmar's foreign minister – could agree to say about the SCS.

In their Joint Statement, the US and ASEAN leaders were on the same page. But its text did not quite match the White House's summary recollection.

In their Statement the leaders reaffirmed the importance of "regional peace and stability, maritime security, unimpeded commerce, and freedom of navigation" in keeping with international law and the Law of the Sea, "and the peaceful settlement of disputes."

In contrast, the White House "Read-out" said the leaders agreed on the importance of "peaceful resolution of disputes, freedom of navigation, regional stability, and respect for international law, including in the South China Sea." It was surely not lost on Chinese observers that whereas the White House had put peaceful dispute-settlement first, as if to remind Beijing to calm down and play by the rules, the leaders had put it last, as if not to annoy Beijing. More telling was the mention of the SCS in the Read-out but not in the Joint Statement.

If it is true that the Chinese heavily lobbied the Southeast Asians to keep the Statement SCS-free, they must have been pleased at the result. But Beijing may also have opposed any reference to "maritime security, unimpeded commerce, and freedom of navigation." If so, on that second front, they lost.

Sino-ASEAN relations are not a zero-sum game. Neither are Sino-US affairs. One side's views of the other have not (yet) congealed. ASEAN leaders diverge both among themselves and from their American colleagues in how they look at China. Across ASEAN a spectrum of attitudes runs from those most willing to give China the benefit of the doubt to those most doubtful of China's benefit to them. Asian informants cited Cambodia and Laos as the most pro-Beijing members of

ASEAN, despite their historical debts to Vietnam and Vietnam's evident dislike of China's newly robust profile.

As for the divergence of ASEAN and American perspectives on China, suffice it to recall this remark by a high-ranking ASEAN official: "Remember, for us in Asia, the US is geopolitical, but China is geographical." Faraway friends are welcome and helpful, but the local landscape is a permanent fact. One has to adapt to it – and to the seascape – to survive.

But proximity is not destiny. The Obama administration's remarkable effort to reach across the Pacific is neither deluded nor doomed. At least it may enhance the ability of Southeast Asians to hedge against overdependence on China. At best it should facilitate free SCS transit and stable relations.

What next? Based on events so far, it would be wildly premature to predict either a Sino-American cold war or malign Chinese hegemony over the region. Nor will Southeast Asia passively succumb to either scenario. ASEAN under Indonesian leadership in 2011 may try to revive the languishing effort to nudge the DOC toward something less aspirational and more enforceable.

Each player in this ongoing drama would do well to reconsider and readjust its role. China could gain credibility by rethinking the contradiction between its support for a multilaterally driven regional community spanning Southeast and Northeast Asia on the one hand, and its insistence on hub-and-spokes bilateralism regarding the SCS on the other. By several accounts, Beijing has even informed ASEAN states that they must not caucus among themselves to achieve a common position. If correct, this illustrates something other than "smart power, Chinese style."

ASEAN could refurbish its own credibility, along with its centrality as a keeper of regional peace, by incentivizing the four claimants – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam – to cease being part of the problem and to become part of the solution. The fortuitous combination of renewed American interest in Southeast Asia and Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2011 offers, at least in principle, a window of diplomatic opportunity for harmonization and conciliation. Because maritime peace and access are in the interest of all, ASEAN should do more than wait for its four implicated members to resolve their contending claims on their own.

Finally, in Washington, it is a time neither for *Schadenfreude* at the spectacle of "dumb power, Chinese style," nor for self-congratulation. It is instead time for the Obama administration to broaden and deepen its renewed engagement. Priorities should include a more vigorous pursuit of trade and investment, so that ASEAN thinks of Americans as more than specialized dispensers of regional security alone, and an effort to ratify the Law of the Sea, so that American insistence on Chinese conformity does not seem hypocritical.

Ultimately, the question for all concerned with the SCS – China other claimant states, and the US – is this: Will you ignore the rules? Or will you uphold them to the benefit of peace and prosperity in this vital part of the world?