

Collaboration part of charm offensive

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In the first years of this decade, China focused on economics and politics in its dealings with Asean. Apart from efforts to stabilise the security situation in the South China Sea and interactions at meetings such as the Asean Regional Forum, defence and security issues were marginalised.

But China now seems eager to correct the imbalance. Some progress is likely to be made in cooperating in these areas but the challenges are not to be underestimated.

In his speeches at the China-Asean Summit in 2006 and 2007, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao highlighted China's willingness to expand defence dialogues and cooperation with Asean. This has been reflected in China's hosting of various bilateral dialogues and meetings with the grouping. The most recent was the second China-Asean Senior Defence Scholars Dialogue. Participants discussed the impact of the present global financial crisis on East Asian security and explored ways to strengthen China-Asean defence relations. Asean participants were briefed by senior analysts from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on China's defence and security policy and visited an armoured division of the Beijing Military Command.

In the past few years, Chinese military analysts have been advocating a larger role for the military in tackling non-traditional security issues in East Asia. Given that China has already reached various agreements with Asean in this area, it should come as no surprise that the PLA is trying to forge cooperation with its Asean counterparts in disaster relief, anti-piracy efforts and search and rescue operations.

China has also made notable inroads at the bilateral level. The Chinese military has now established regular defence consultations with Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Consider Sino-Indonesian defence relations: Due to historical reasons, China and Indonesia had minimal defence relations during much of the post-Cold War era. But the signing of a bilateral agreement to strengthen defence cooperation in 2005 has led to Indonesia buying arms from China, Chinese naval port calls in Indonesia, defence and security consultations, defence technology cooperation and the exchange of military students.

Several factors drive China's deepening defence and security ties with Asean, the most significant being strategic. Chinese analysts often call South-east Asia China's strategic backyard. A decade of China's charm offensive in the region has significantly improved its standing in Asean. Yet Beijing remains concerned about its strategic vulnerability in the region, perhaps with good reason.

China still faces a lot of security challenges from other powers, particularly the United States. Asean's reliance on US security protection or assistance, coupled with a broad sense of uneasiness about a rising China, are constant reminders that the defence and security relationship is a weak link in China-Asean ties. Improving US-Vietnamese security relations in recent years have added to China's sense of urgency.

Beijing's intensifying efforts in strengthening defence and security ties with Asean can be seen as an extension of its charm offensive evident in other areas. Chinese leaders

understand well that the defence relationship is, simultaneously, the least developed part of China- Asean relations as well as the area most likely to contribute to China's influence in South-east Asia.

The progress that Beijing has made hitherto in improving defence ties with Asean should not be dismissed as insignificant, considering that such relations started at a very low level. More could be done in the areas of military transparency, confidence-building, bilateral policy consultation and coordination, military exchange programmes and non-traditional security.

Of course, in the long run, there will be limits to how much China can do, not least because of the apprehension among some Asean countries about its rise. Other powers will also be anxious if China appears successful in strengthening its military ties with the region. Above all, China still has territorial disputes with a few Asean countries in the South China Sea. These disputes will naturally put these Asean countries on their guard.

Despite these limitations, it is likely that China will push for deeper defence and security relations with South-east Asia. This is good news for the region as China's charm offensive in other areas has contributed to regional tranquillity and integration. The medium- and long-term implications of China's defence and security engagement with Asean bear watching.

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