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**China and Asian Regionalism:
Pragmatism Hinders Leadership**

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ABSTRACT

China has made notable progress in consolidating its international foothold in Asia in the past decade. China's success in its diplomacy in the region, to a large extent, originated from its active participation in various multilateral processes and mechanisms since the late 1990s. Many observers are increasingly worried that China's role in Asian regionalism is weakening U.S. influence in the region. Is this concern based on the reality of China's international relations in Asia? Does China have a coherent approach to Asian regionalism? And, ultimately, is China emerging as the primary leader in regional multilateralism? This paper attempts to answer these questions by utilizing various Chinese sources and interviews. I examine the track record of China's participation in regional multilateral processes and compare the differences in its role in three sub-regions: Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and Central Asia. I conclude that China has not yet developed a grand vision for regional multilateralism and regional integration. China's behavior in Asian regionalism has largely been driven by pragmatism – a pursuit for short-term national interests in accordance with changes in regional political and economic circumstances. This pragmatism is revealed in China's super-activism in economic multilateralism, enthusiasm in non-traditional security cooperation, and differentiated approaches to conflict prevention in East Asia and Central Asia. China's pragmatic approach is likely to be a barrier for the further growth of its influence and quest for a regional leadership position.

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China and Asian Regionalism: Pragmatism Hinders Leadership

China started to take an active stance toward multilateralism in Asia in the mid-1990s and now regards multilateral diplomacy as an integral and important part in its foreign policy.¹ China not only is a participant in almost all official track-two institutions and forums, it also has played a leading role in creating one of the most influential regional organizations – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In recent years, China has become involved in multilateral processes in East Asia and actively participates in issues of regional concern. Beijing has lately even shown some signs of confidence in participating in multilateral security activities, such as joint military exercises in the Asia-Pacific region.

China's participation in various multilateral institutions in Asia has no doubt significantly increased Beijing's role in its contiguous sub-regions. Some scholars believe that China is “repositioning itself both as a (and some believe *the*) central actor in the region,”² which may have dire consequences for the international order in Asia.³ Others depict China's regional policy as an intentional attempt to challenge U.S. supremacy in Asia⁴ or are simply suspicious of China's long-term regional ambitions.⁵ In general, China's participation in various multilateral mechanisms in East Asia has raised the ire of many decision-makers and analysts in Washington. They are increasingly worried that intra-regional cooperative mechanisms in East Asia are weakening U.S. influence in the region.

¹ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Multilateralism in China’s ASEAN Policy: Its Evolution, Characteristics, and Aspiration,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (2005): 102–22.

² David Shambaugh, ed., *Power Shift: China and Asia’s New Dynamics* (California: University of California Press 2005), p.2.

³ Steven W. Mosher, *Hegemon: China’s Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (Encounter Books, 2001).

⁴ Wayne Bert, *The United States, China and Southeast Asian Security: A Changing of the Guard?* (University of British Columbia, 2005); Randall Doyle, *America and China: Asia-Pacific Rim Hegemony in the 21st Century* (Lexington Books, 2007).

⁵ Robert G. Sutter, *China’s Rise in Asia: Promises and Perils* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

A particular concern for the U.S. is the growing clout of China in East Asian regionalization.⁶ Is this concern based on the reality of China's international relations in Asia? Does China have a coherent approach to Asian regionalism? Are there any patterns in China's approach to regional multilateral institutions? And, ultimately, is China emerging as the primary leader in regional multilateralism? This paper attempts to answer these questions by utilizing various Chinese sources and interviews. I will examine the track record of China's participation in regional multilateral processes and compare the differences in its role in three sub-regions: Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and Central Asia. I conclude that China has not yet developed a grand vision for regional multilateralism and regional integration. China's behavior in Asian multilateralism has largely been driven by pragmatism – a pursuit for short-term national interests in accordance with changes in regional political and economic circumstances. This pragmatism is revealed in China's super-activism in economic multilateralism, enthusiasm in non-traditional security cooperation, and differentiated approaches to conflict prevention in East Asia and Central Asia. China's pragmatic approach is likely to be a barrier for the further growth of its influence and quest for a regional leadership position.

China Assesses the Prospect of East Asian Regional Integration

It goes without saying that China attaches great importance to its relations with adjoining countries. In fact, Chinese analysts propose that as part of China's strategy to ensure its rise, it should regard East Asia as its strategic backyard and

⁶ Joshua Kurlantzick, "Pax Asia-Pacific? East Asian Integration and Its Implications for the United States," *The Washington Quarterly*, 30:3 Summer 2007 pp. 67–77.

actively participate in regional institution-building as a fundamental policy.⁷ The Chinese Communist Party's 16th Congress report in 2002, for the first time, juxtaposed regional multilateral cooperation with bilateral relations, a clear indication that Beijing began to attach greater importance to multilateralism.⁸ Five years later, Chinese leaders reaffirmed this position at the 17th Party Congress. In recent years, China has regarded good relations with contiguous areas and multilateralism as two of its four basic foreign policy guidelines.⁹

Even though China has willingly accepted multilateralism as an approach to its international relations in Asia, it is not clear what it regards as the ultimate goal or what kind of regional community that all these multilateral mechanisms should eventually lead to. In 1999, at the landmark third 10+3 (the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus China, Japan, and South Korea) summit, leaders of the 13 countries agreed on the principles, direction, and key areas of East Asian cooperation. At the sixth 10+3 summit, China approved the report drafted by the East Asian Vision Group in 2002. The report proposed an East Asian Free Trade Area (FTA) and an East Asian community. Despite clear support for an East Asian FTA, Beijing has offered no clear blueprint for its own version of an East Asian community.

In fact, there is profound skepticism among Chinese decision-makers and analysts with regard to the prospect of East Asian regionalism. In the Chinese view, many challenges remain with regard to the further development of regionalism in East Asia. One of the challenges is the nebulous boundary and apparently unnecessary geographical expansion of the region; e.g., the East Asian Summit (EAS or 10+6),

⁷ Hu Angang and Men Honghua, "Yanjiu zhongguo dongya yitihuā zhanlue de zhongyao yiji" [the significance of studying China's East Asian integration strategy], *guoji guancha* [international observation], issue 3, 2005, pp. 26-35.

⁸ Men Honghua, "Zhongguo jueqi yu dongya anquan zhixu de biange" [China's rise and the evolution of East Asian security order], *guoji guancha* [international observation], issue 2, 2008, pp.16-25.

⁹ The four guidelines include: major powers are the key, neighboring regions should receive more attention, the developing world is the foundation, and multilateralism serves as the stage.

which includes India, Australia, and New Zealand. Many Chinese analysts regard the EAS as a setback, or at least a new barrier, to the growth of East Asian regionalization. They believe that this is so because such expansion has made forming a common geographical identity (and thus a cultural identity with common values), an essential element in any regionalism, more difficult, if not totally impossible.¹⁰ Chinese analysts also take note of the fact that ASEAN, currently the driver of East Asian multilateralism, has no consensus on the geographical boundary of regional multilateral processes. For instance, two of the three conditions required by ASEAN for other states to become EAS-ASEAN dialogue partners – signing ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and substantive interactions with ASEAN – have no specific geographic limitation. According to Chinese analysts, this vision of a borderless regional community would only compound the growth of multilateralism in the region given the fact that even within the 10+3 framework, differences in cultural identities and values are already a huge challenge.¹¹

Perhaps a much more important factor in China’s assessment of Asian multilateralism is the role of the United States. Many analysts in China simply do not believe that the U.S. would play a constructive role in promoting East Asian integration. Many of them believe that U.S. supremacy in East Asia is not good for regional integration. They argue that since many East Asian countries still depend on the U.S. for political, economic, and security support, they have little incentive to further enhance multilateral cooperation within the region. Regional states still have to pay respect to U.S. preferences when it comes to regional multilateralism. For example, during the Asian financial crisis, Japan proposed to set up an Asian

¹⁰ Lu Jianren, “Cong dongmeng yitihua jincheng kan dongya yitihua fangxiang” [direction of East Asian integration seen from ASEAN integration process], *dangdai yatai* [contemporary Asia-Pacific], vol. 1, 2008, pp. 21-35.

¹¹ Author’s interviews with Beijing-based Chinese scholars and officials at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, July 2008.

monetary fund to cope with future financial problems in the region. But Japan had to drop the idea when the U.S. strongly opposed it.¹²

Beijing also believes that the traditional U.S. “hub and spokes” security arrangement is not conducive to the growth of new, more cooperative security modes in East Asia. The popular expectation among regional states of U.S. security protection does not provide any incentive to push for new security arrangements. Given the fact that U.S. predominance and its bilateral security ties with various regional states are perceived as essential and effective in maintaining regional security, a cooperative security in East Asia is not likely to take shape in the foreseeable future.¹³

The Chinese believe that the United States can live with an East Asian regionalism that is open, inclusive, and capable of solving all problems, including security issues, but Washington is opposed to a stronger Chinese role in any regional grouping. Washington once favored Japan as the leader in spearheading East Asian multilateralism, but in recent years, it has realized that there are many restraining factors for Japan: Japan’s relations with neighboring countries and Japan’s declining economic importance as China’s economy continues to grow. Yet the U.S. is not ready to accept any Chinese leadership role in pushing for East Asian regionalism, fearing that the rise of Chinese influence might diminish American clout in the region. By default, Washington continues to support ASEAN in the driver’s seat. Chinese analysts believe that Washington is also concerned about the function of a future East Asian Community, fearing that it might marginalize the Asia-Pacific Economic

¹² Liu Hongsong, “Dongya jingji yitihua de yueshu tiaojian yu dangqian moshi xuanze” [restraining factors in East Asian economic integration and current choice of a model], *yatai jingji* [Asia-Pacific economic review], issue 3, 2006, pp. 10-13.

¹³ Wang Fan, “Dong ya anquan moshi: gongcun, bingxing haishi zhihuan” [East Asian security modes: coexistence, juxtaposition or replacement], *shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [world economics and politics], issue 11, 2005, pp. 16-21.

Cooperation (APEC) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), two institutions that Washington has a lot of complaints about yet still regards as useful tools to advance its interests in East Asia.¹⁴

In addition to these factors, Beijing takes note of the conflicting policy pronouncements from Washington and believes that American policy towards East Asian multilateralism is uncertain. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell commented in 2004 that the U.S. regards the East Asian Community as unnecessary and warned that any effort towards such a community should not be carried out at the expense of Washington's good and stable relations with its Asian friends.¹⁵ In early 2006, U.S. APEC senior official Michael Michalak commented that the U.S. does not think the ASEAN+3 or EAS would harm American interests but at the same time he unequivocally reiterated the importance of cross-Pacific institutions and organizations.¹⁶ In May 2006, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill stated that America understands Asian countries' desire for a regional architecture, which is largely a reflection of the economic and financial integration among these nations. He said that the U.S. welcomes this effort.¹⁷ Due to these slightly different policy pronouncements by American officials, China is not convinced that the U.S. has a clear policy on East Asian regional integration.¹⁸

Other Chinese scholars believe that the uncertainty in American policy is reflected in its conditional support of, and selective participation in, East Asian

¹⁴ Wu Xinbo, "Meiguo yu dongya yitihua" [US and East Asian integration], *guoji wenti yanjiu* [international studies], issue 5, 2007, pp. 47-53.

¹⁵ Colin L. Powell, "Roundtable with Japanese Journalists," Washington, DC August 12, 2004. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/35204.htm>.

¹⁶ Michael Michalak, U.S. Senior Official for APEC, "Remarks at International Institute of Monetary Affairs," Tokyo, Japan, January 25, 2006. <Http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/60355.htm>.

¹⁷ Christopher Hill, "The U.S. and Southeast Asia," Remarks to the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore, May 22, 2006. <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/66646.htm>.

¹⁸ Other observers have also made the argument that the US is not seriously committed to multilateral diplomacy in East Asia. See for instance Evelyn Goh, "The ASEAN Regional Forum in United States East Asian strategy," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 17 No. 1 March 2004: 47–69

multilateralism. They argue that the U.S. should further adjust its policy to become a constructive force in East Asian integration.¹⁹ Despite a profound suspicion of U.S. intentions, there has been growing awareness that Beijing will ultimately have to recognize U.S. preponderance in the region even in the long run and accommodate U.S. interests in any future East Asian multilateral mechanisms. Lin Limin, a strategic analyst at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) argues that the United States is a “special” external power in East Asia due to all its political, economic, historical and emotional ties with many countries in the region. He argues that U.S. policy towards East Asian regionalism is at a crossroads. The U.S. should support and participate in the process of East Asian integration and be a responsible member of the grouping. East Asia, in return, should adopt a “grand” scheme of East Asian integration that incorporates the U.S.²⁰

The role of the U.S. is not the only factor that has generated Chinese pessimism. From China’s perspective, Japan’s policy on regional multilateralism has also been inconsistent. This is largely a result of Japan’s uncertain strategic orientation: whether it should identify itself as one of the Western powers or root itself in East Asia.²¹ Chinese analysts detect an oscillation in Japanese strategy between strengthening its alliance with the U.S. as its key international strategy and pushing for a leadership role in regional integration.²² They believe that Japan does

¹⁹ Ma Rongsheng, “Meiguo zai dongya yitihua zhong de juese banyan” [the role the US plays in East Asian integration], *guoji luntan* [international forum], vol. 9, no. 3, 2007, pp. 20-25.

²⁰ Lin Limin, “Meiguo yu dongya yitihua de guanxi xilun” [an analysis of the US and East Asian integration], *xiandai guoji guanxi* [contemporary international relations], issue 11, 2007, pp. 1-6.

²¹ Yeo Lay Hwee, “Japan, ASEAN, and the Construction of an East Asian Community,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 28, No. 2 (2006), pp. 259–75.

²² According to one study, the mainstream Japanese thinking on East Asian regionalism is “watchful waiting” to insure that any proposal by another party remain compatible with the United States–Japan alliance and with Japanese defined values and policy frameworks; See Gregory W. Noble, “Japanese and American Perspectives on East Asian Regionalism,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 8 (2008) 247–262.

not currently have a coherent regional integration plan, which does not bode well for a Japanese leadership role in furthering regional multilateralism.²³

Many Chinese analysts believe that Japan nevertheless intends to strive for a leadership role and forestall China's dominance in East Asia, which is likely to work against a smooth development of multilateral cooperation in the region.²⁴ They point to many instances in Japan's policy moves in Southeast Asia to demonstrate Japan's intention of trying to outrun China. For instance, in 2002, when former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi proposed the idea of an "expanded East Asian community," he had in mind a leading role for Japan, with support from ASEAN and including extra-regional states such as Australia. China believes that Koizumi's plan was an obvious initiative to check Chinese growing influence in East Asia.²⁵ Another example that is frequently mentioned is Japan's reaction to China's signing of the TAC. Two months after China acceded to the ASEAN TAC, Japan decided to sign the treaty as well, a clear response to China's proactive engagement in Southeast Asia. Beijing maintains that Japan's insistence of incorporating India, Australia, and New Zealand in the East Asian Summit was simply another step to restrain Chinese influence in East Asia.²⁶

More recently, in 2006, Japan proposed an East Asian Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) among ASEAN countries, Japan, China, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand.²⁷ The EPA proposal would far surpass a regional FTA

²³ Sun Shichun, "Riben de FTA zhanlue yu dongya jingji yitihua" [Japan's FTA strategy and East Asian economic integration], *riben yanjiu* [Japanese studies], issue 4, 2007, pp. 36-42.

²⁴ Cao Hongling, "Dongya jingji yitihua de guoji guanxi lilun jiedu" [An analysis of East Asian economic integration from IR theories], *guoji guancha* [international observation], vol. 6, 2006, pp. 70-77.

²⁵ Men Honghua, "Zhongguo jueqi yu dongya anquan zhixu de biange" [China's rise and the evolution of East Asian security order], *guoji guancha* [international observation], issue 2, 2008, pp. 16-25.

²⁶ Qin Zhilai, "Jiexi shou jie dongya fenghui de kaifang xing 'diqu zhuyi'" [explaining the open 'regionalism' of the first East Asian summit], *xueyi yuekan* [study monthly], vol. 259, issue 2, 2006, pp. 36-37.

²⁷ Liu Junhong, "Riben jiyu dajian dongya gongtongti," *shijie xinwen bao* [world news], April 6, 2006.

and include arrangements for investment, services, and human resources. Chinese reports claim that the Japanese proposal was intended to put Japan at the leadership position in East Asian regionalism and to restrain the rise of China.²⁸ Since the second half of 2006, China and Japan have made many efforts to improve their strategic trust, but in the eyes of many Chinese analysts, Japan's intention to constrain China on political and security issues in the region has not dwindled at all.²⁹ The Sino-Japanese competition over leadership in East Asian multilateralism, in particular the Chinese perception of an assertive Japan, is another factor that has contributed to China's lack of confidence in a bright future for regional integration.

In addition to the U.S. and Japan, China is also not sure how ASEAN is going to readjust its policy on East Asian regionalism. China has taken note of ASEAN's volatile positions on the geographic boundary of regional integration. The Chairman's statement of the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007 insists that the 10+3 should be the main approach to an East Asian community, but in the Chairman's statement of the 13th ASEAN summit, there was no mention of using 10+3 as the main channel. Instead, the document emphasized the complementarities of 10+3 and EAS. At the third East Asia Summit, ASEAN Secretary-General Ong Keng Yong noted that "ASEAN has reached a consensus regarding Japan's proposal for including Australia, New Zealand, and India into the East Asian community."³⁰ Beijing closely watches these subtle changes in ASEAN's positions and is likely to regard ASEAN's vacillation as another piece of evidence that further substantive growth of multilateralism in Asia is still unlikely. In the long run, China may not have any

²⁸ China News Service, "Riben ni tuidong 'dongya jingji huoban xieding' yi qianzhi zhongguo jueqi" [Japan intends to promote "East Asia economic partnership agreement" to check China's rise], <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/1029/42354/4271464.html> (accessed August 7, 2008)

²⁹ Men Honghua, "Zhongguo jueqi yu dongya anquan zhixu de biange" [China's rise and the evolution of East Asian security order], *guoji guancha* [international observation], issue 2, 2008, pp.16-25.

³⁰ Central News Agency, "Dongya gongtongti huo jiena xin ao yin" [East Asia community to accept New Zealand, Australia, and India], November 20, 2007.

confidence in ASEAN's ability to forge a multilateral consensus in East Asia. According to one Chinese observer, if multilateralism in this region is going to lead to further regional integration at all, the leadership role will have to be exercised by a three-power consortium: China, U.S., and Japan.³¹ But given the evidence of the strained relations among the three powers, such a consortium may not be feasible in the foreseeable future.

In response to all these challenges, China steadfastly insists on relying on the 10+3 as the main framework for regional economic cooperation, supports ASEAN's leadership role, and maintains a gradualist approach to East Asian regional multilateralism. China believes that the 10+6 should not replace the 10+3 and that conditions for a FTA among the 10+6 countries are not mature yet.³² In order not to appear obstructionist, China has tried to downplay the importance of the EAS instead of refusing to be part of it, arguing that the EAS should more properly serve as a strategic platform for the exchange of ideas and the facilitation of cooperation.³³ In practice, Beijing still values the 10+3 and 10+1 (ASEAN plus China) mechanisms for substantive cooperation.

In sum, in spite of active participation in all regional institutions and an emphasis on 10+3 and 10+1, China believes that the prospect that various regional multilateral processes will lead to a discernable East Asian community is not good in the near future. Many factors are restraining the growth of such community, including regional states' reluctance to relinquish their sovereignty, cultural differences,

³¹ Tang Xiaosong, “San qiang gong zhi: dongya quyu yitihua de biran xuanze” [three-power consortium: the inevitable choice for East Asian regional integration], *xiandai guoji guanxi* [contemporary international relations], issue 2, 2008, pp. 10-15.

³² Lu Jianren, “Cong dongmeng yitihua jincheng kan dongya yitihua fangxiang” [direction of East Asian integration seen from ASEAN integration process], *dangdai yatai* [contemporary Asia-Pacific], vol. 1, 2008, pp. 21-35.

³³ *Xinhua News Agency*, “Premier Wen Jiabao’s speech at the second EAS,” January 15, 2007.

historical problems, and the still dominating position of the United States.³⁴ Because of U.S. hegemonic presence and the rivalry between China and Japan in East Asia, East Asia can develop only limited regionalism and an incomplete regional security architecture and security community.³⁵ Due to these factors, China has not clearly defined its role in the East Asian community.³⁶ In the meantime, China doesn't seem to be bothered by the pessimistic estimation of the prospect of East Asian multilateralism. What it intends to focus on now is pragmatic cooperation in areas of Chinese concerns. Former Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Yi once noted that China pursues an open regionalism to carry out practical cooperation with regional states and at the same time does not exclude the U.S. and other external powers.³⁷

China's Activism in Regional Economic Integration

Despite the fact that China is not exceptionally sanguine about the prospect of East Asian integration, it has taken a proactive stance on bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation.³⁸ China has worked hard to push for bilateral FTAs with

³⁴ Liu Hongsong, “Dongya jingji yitihua de yueshu tiaojian yu dangqian moshi xuanze” [restraining factors in East Asian economic integration and current choice of a model], *yatai jingji* [Asia-Pacific economic review], issue 3, 2006, pp. 10-13.

³⁵ Pan Zhongqi, “Baquan gashe,daguo duikang yu dongya diqu anquan de goujian” [hegemonic intervention, major powers’ rivalry and East Asia regional security building], *shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [world economics and politics], issue 6, 2006, pp. 38-44.

³⁶ Yu Xintian, “Zhongguo peiyu dongya rentong de sikao” [thoughts on China’s role in East Asian identity formation], *dangdai yatai* [Journal of contemporary Asia-Pacific studies], issue 3, 2008, pp. 21-35.

³⁷ Wang Yi, “Quan qiu hua jincheng zhong de yazhou quyu hezuo” [Asian regional cooperation in the process of globalization], *People’s Daily*, April 30, 2004.

³⁸ Others have suggested that the regional economic integration now increasingly center on China is largely market driven. See for instance, Byung-Joon Ahn, “The Rise of China and the Future of East Asian Integration,” *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2004, pp. 18-35.

various East Asian states, such as South Korea and Japan, and at the same time has strenuously pushed for economic collaborations at the multilateral level.³⁹

China's interest in economic multilateralism had its origin in political considerations. When former Malaysian leader Mahathir proposed setting up an East Asian Economic Group in December 1990 during a visit to Beijing, then Chinese Premier Li Peng immediately responded positively, indicating that China's consent was largely a political decision instead of a decision made after careful deliberation of economic costs and benefits. Former Chinese Presidents Yang Shangkun and Jiang Zemin expressed China's support to such idea on various occasions from 1992 to 1994, showing China's enthusiasm for such a regional economic grouping.⁴⁰ China's early interest in economic multilateralism was partly related to Beijing's desire to break off its diplomatic isolation in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident.

Over the years, China's growing interest in multilateral economic regimes has been a reflection of economic and political interests. In 2001, Beijing proposed the FTA with ASEAN, together with some flexible measures such as the early harvest scheme. This move was widely believed to be partially driven by the political goal of reassuring ASEAN countries of China's benevolence and further defusing the "China threat" rhetoric in the region. There are of course other multilateral projects in Southeast Asia in which China plays an active role: e.g., the Greater Mekong River sub-region project and the emerging pan-Tonkin Gulf regional economic zone. The Kunming Initiative, although supported by China, has not made much progress largely due to the lack of India's interest in the project. China's Yunnan Province is

³⁹ For a comprehensive study of China's FTA initiatives, see Stephen Hoadley and Jian Yang, "China's Cross-Regional FTA Initiatives: Towards Comprehensive National Power," *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 80, No. 2 – Summer 2007, pp.327-348

⁴⁰ Lu Jianren, "Cong dongmeng yitihua jincheng kan dongya yitihua fangxiang" [direction of East Asian integration seen from ASEAN integration process], *dangdai yatai* [contemporary Asia-Pacific], vol. 1, 2008, pp. 21-35.

currently taking a leading role in connecting southwest China to South Asia through Myanmar.⁴¹ Likewise, in Central Asia, China has also exhibited much interest in multilateral economic cooperation. At the 2003 SCO summit, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao proposed to set up a free-trade area among member states of the organization. China's active involvement in Central Asia has largely stemmed from its need for secure and diversified energy supplies to safeguard its rapidly developing economy.⁴² All these economic initiatives have prompted China to facilitate the construction of modern transportation networks that connect China's vast west with its peripheral sub-regions on the land. These new lines of transportation will increase China's role in Central, Southwest, and South Asia.⁴³

In Northeast Asia, China is also engaged in a number of multilateral economic projects. The largest example of multilateral economic cooperation in Northeast Asia is the regional development of the Tumen River initiated by the UNDP in 1991. This project covers a wide range of areas, including investment, trade, transportation, environmental protection, tourism, human resources, communications and energy. Japan has not fully participated but instead has joined as an observer only.⁴⁴ Chinese scholars have also been advocating the Bohai economic circle in order to further develop the economy in North China and to revitalize the industrial base in Northeast China. This sub-regional economic zone would require the participation of South Korea and Japan.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Author's interviews with Yunnan Provincial government officials in the past two years.

⁴² Philip Andrews-Speed and Sergei Vinogradov, "China's Involvement in Central Asian Petroleum: Convergent or Divergent Interests?" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 40 No. 2 (March–April, 2000).

⁴³ John W. Garver, "Development of China's Overland Transportation Links with Central, South-west and South Asia," *The China Quarterly*, 2006.

⁴⁴ Wang Guoping, "Dongmeng yu dongya xin diqu zhuyi" [ASEAN and East Asian new regionalism], *dangdai yatai* [contemporary Asia-Pacific], vol. 7, 2007, pp. 18-23.

⁴⁵ Zhou Ziheng, "Zhongguo jingji fazhan de diyuan zhanlue yu dongya jingji yitihu" [the geopolitical strategy of China's economic development and East Asian economic integration], *shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [world economics and politics], issue 2, 2004, pp. 67-71.

China is also enthusiastic about a trilateral FTA among China, South Korea, and Japan in Northeast Asia. In 2002, China informally made such a FTA proposal. A joint research group completed a feasibility study in 2003, concluding that such a trilateral FTA would be very beneficial to the three economies. At an informal meeting at Bali, Indonesia in 2003, leaders of the three countries signed a joint statement on the promotion of trilateral cooperation on trade and investment facilitation. Since then, the three parties have made some progress in adopting measures in customs, networking of ports, communications, and environmental protection. However, other studies have shown that despite growing economic integration in Northeast Asia, with China playing a more important role, economic interdependence in the region is still largely market-driven.⁴⁶

Chinese plans call for an eventual FTA among the 10+3 countries. A Chinese study concludes that a 10+3 FTA would contribute 1.96% and 0.34% of economic growth to China and Japan, respectively.⁴⁷ At the 2004 ASEAN-China summit, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao called for a FTA in East Asia and an East Asian community based on such a FTA. This clearly shows China's strong desire to push for broader economic multilateralism in East Asia. The incentive for such a preference is increasingly derived from the inherent needs of China's domestic economic growth. China is increasingly becoming the trading and production center in East Asia. According to some estimates, the volume of China's foreign trade is likely to overtake that of Japan and be close to that of the United States by 2020. By then, over half of China's imports will come from other East Asian countries. In the coming 20 years,

⁴⁶ T.J. Pempel, "Northeast Asian Economic Integration: A Region in Flux," *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2007, pp. 45-61; Sarah Chan and Chun-Chien Kuo, "Trilateral Trade Relations among China, Japan and South Korea: Challenges and Prospects of Regional Economic Integration," *EAST ASIA*, Spring 2005, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 33-50.

⁴⁷ Jia Lijun, "Dongya jingji yitihua jincheng zhong de zhong ri boyi fenyi" [A game theory analysis between China and Japan in East Asian economic integration], *riben yanjiu* [Japanese Studies], vol. 2, 2007, pp. 24-29.

China is likely to maintain a notable surplus in its trade with the U.S. and Europe and a large-scale deficit with other East Asian countries. On the basis of this expected economic interdependence, Chinese analysts recommend that a future East Asian FTA could be formed on the basis of China-ASEAN, South Korea-ASEAN, and Japan-ASEAN FTAs.⁴⁸

China's Enthusiasm in NTS Cooperation

In the past decade, China has demonstrated an enthusiastic attitude towards non-traditional security (NTS) cooperation in Asia. Chinese analysts believe that cooperation on NTS helps enhance mutual understanding and trust among regional states, cultivates the growth of a regional identity, and deepens and broadens regional cooperation mechanisms. All these are helpful for the gradual integration of the region.⁴⁹ As an example of China's positive posture on NTS cooperation, in recent years many Chinese analysts have been proposing a larger role for the military in multilateral cooperation on NTS issues in East Asia.⁵⁰

China has cooperated extensively on non-traditional security issues with other countries in Asia. In 2000, China signed a bilateral action plan with ASEAN on countering drug trafficking. In 2000, China participated in the Chiang Mai Initiative for East Asian cooperation on financial security. In 2001, China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand held ministerial-level meetings on fighting drug trafficking and publicized the Beijing Declaration. In 2002, China and ASEAN signed a joint declaration on

⁴⁸ Zhang Yunling, “Zhongguo tong dongya de jingji yitihua yu hezuo” [China and East Asian economic integration and cooperation], *dangdai yatai* [contemporary Asia-Pacific], vol. 1, 2006, pp. 3-12.

⁴⁹ Ma Shengrong, “Tiaozhan yu jiyu: dongya yitihua shijiao zhong de fei chuantong anquan hezuo” [challenge and opportunity: cooperation in non-traditional security in the perspective of East Asian integration], *dong bei ya luntan* [northeast Asia forum], vol. 17, no. 2, 2008, pp. 44-48.

⁵⁰ Author's interviews with various Chinese analysts in the past two years.

cooperation in non-traditional security, which measures to cooperate on fighting drug trafficking, human trafficking, piracy, terrorism, arms trafficking, money laundering, other international economic crimes, and crimes through the Internet. In the DOC that China and ASEAN signed in 2002, China pledged to cooperate with various parties on marine environmental protection, search and rescue, and anti-piracy. In 2003, China and ASEAN held a special summit meeting to tackle SARS and initiated a cooperative mechanism on public health. In 2004, China signed a MOU with ASEAN on NTS cooperation, which further emphasized the need for Sino-ASEAN cooperation on NTS matters.

In Northeast Asia, China, South Korea, and Japan have also taken steps to strengthen their cooperation on NTS issues. These measures mainly include environmental protection, earthquake relief, and transnational crimes. Starting in 1999, the three countries conducted a ministerial-level meeting on the environment, and various concrete proposals on sandstorms and marine environmental protection have been carried out. In 2004, the authorities monitoring earthquakes in the three countries agreed to share seismic information and technology. The immigration authorities of the three countries have also held workshops on countering terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking in Northeast Asia.

In the larger context of East Asia, China's posture towards NTS has also been quite positive. In 2004, ASEAN+3 held its first ministerial-level meeting on fighting transnational crimes. In 2005, ASEAN+3 signed an agreement on cooperation among their capital police agencies to jointly fight various NTS challenges. China also has no problem working on NTS issues within ARF. China did not lodge any complaints about the 2002 ARF joint statement calling for enhanced cooperation to fight drug trafficking, illegal immigration, money laundering, and piracy on the sea. The 2005

ARF joint declaration stressed regional coordination and cooperation on disaster relief and other emergencies response measures.

In APEC, where China has quite vehemently opposed any inclusion of discussions on security matters, it has not blocked multilateral efforts on NTS issues. The APEC summits in 2001 and 2002 publicized two statements on counter-terrorism. The 2003 and 2004 declarations further emphasized multilateral cooperation to fight terrorism and other transnational crimes. China also agreed to the APEC initiative to jointly deal with various transnational epidemics, such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, and bird flu.

In the East Asian region, China has actively participated in various programs of maritime cooperation. Bilaterally, China has been engaging Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand on marine environmental protection, oceanic resources management, and oceanic science and surveys. Multilaterally, China intends to engage ASEAN countries in disaster reduction and relief, seminars on oceanic studies, and eco-monitoring training programs in the South China Sea area to implement the follow-up actions of the DOC.⁵¹ A notable example of this multilateralism is the trilateral seismic exploration initiative among China, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the South China Sea in the past few years.

At the broader international level, China participates in the UNEP's Global Meeting of Regional Seas and Global Program of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities. In the East Asian Seas Action Plan, China has participated in the project to curb environmental degradation in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, helped draft the report on trans-regional diagnosis and analysis, submitted the country report on the environmental situation

⁵¹ Xu Heyun, “Wo guo yu dongya guojia de haiyang hezuo buduan jiaqiang” [China continues to strengthen maritime cooperation with East Asian countries], *Zhongguo haiyang bao* [China ocean newspaper], 12 December 2006.

and strategic action plan in the South China Sea, and participated in coral monitoring and data collection. China hosted the second East Asia Seas Congress and the ministerial meeting in December 2006 in Hainan Province. Sun Zhihui, chief of China's Oceanic Administration, noted that China intends to deal with maritime issues in the region to promote peace and stability so that China can concentrate on economic development in the next 20 years – an “important period of strategic opportunity.” In the Partnership in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia (PEMSEA), China participated by implementing relevant policies in the Xiamen and Bohai coastal areas as two of the demonstration sites in the program.⁵² In the Northwest Pacific Action Plan, China participated in six projects focused on information sharing and marine environmental protection.⁵³

China joined the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum (NPCGF) in 2004, four years after its inception. The forum provides a platform for international Coast Guard leaders to interact regularly and also initiates at-sea combined exercises. Specific goals of the NPCGF include curbing oceanic pollution, enhancing maritime safety, promoting sustainable and equitable extraction of resources, and providing security from threats at sea and in harbors. China now actively participates in its six areas of cooperation: fighting drug trafficking, joint actions, countering illegal immigration, maritime security, information exchange, and law enforcement on the sea. In 2006, China hosted the seventh experts’ meeting of the NPCGF.⁵⁴

In the wake of 9/11, the U.S. proposed the Container Security Initiative (CSI). In July 2003, the customs administrations of China and the U.S. agreed in principle to

⁵² Yu Jianbin, “Rang ‘dongya hai jiayuan’ geng meihao” [making the East Asian Seas region a more beautiful home], *People’s Daily*, 12 December 2006.

⁵³ Zhang Peiyi, “Wo guo haiyang huanjing baohu guoji hezuo chengxiao xianzhu” [China makes notable achievements in international cooperation in marine environmental protection], *zhongguo qiyebao* [China enterprise newspaper], 7 June 2004.

⁵⁴ Xu Wenjun, “Jiaqiang haiyang zhifa guoji hezuo” [enhancing cooperation in maritime law enforcement], *renmin gong'an bao* [people’s public security newspaper], 31 March 2006.

cooperate on this issue. In March 2005, the two sides reached an agreement on specific procedures to implement the CSI. Now this cooperation has been carried out at two Chinese ports, Shanghai and Shenzhen.

In Central Asia, there has been an impressive record of China and other SCO members working together in meeting various NTS challenges, primarily the so-called “three evil forces” of separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism. The SCO has set up various institutions and signed many legal documents in dealing with all sorts of NTS threats.

China’s Different Approaches to Preventive Measures on Security

China’s policy stance on traditional security issues is in sharp contrast to its attitude on economic and NTS cooperation. Overall, China is still reluctant to work multilaterally on sources of potential interstate military conflicts.⁵⁵ In particular, China has been strongly opposed any preventive measure that would impinge on domestic issues. However, there are still some notable differences in China’s stance across regions.⁵⁶ In Southeast Asia, China has been quite adamant in opposing the further institutionalization of preventive measures on traditional security issues. In Northeast Asia, China has taken an active role in helping solve the North Korean nuclear crisis. China is also open to the discussion of a security framework in Northeast Asia.⁵⁷ In Central Asia, China has been more willing to engage member

⁵⁵ This is partly due to the persistent influence of nationalism in China. See Christopher R. Hughes, “Nationalism and multilateralism in Chinese foreign policy: implications for Southeast Asia,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 18 No. 1 March 2005: 119–135.

⁵⁶ Allen Carlson notes some of the overall slight changes in China’s posture on international intervention; see his article, “China’s Recent Stance on Sovereignty and Multilateral Intervention,” *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 77, No. 1 – Spring 2004, pp. 9-27.

⁵⁷ Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang’s remarks at a press briefing on May 27, 2008. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/xwfw/fyrth/t440969.htm> (accessed September 3, 2008)

states of the SCO on preventive measures to deal with traditional and non-traditional security issues.

Overall, China's reluctance to agree to more substantive multilateral preventive measures is a reflection of its concerns about U.S. predominance and a perceived U.S. hostile security policy towards China in East Asia. The most alarming assessment of American intentions in East Asia is that Washington intends to establish and consolidate a strategic encirclement against China from East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and to Central Asia. China believes that various military exercises that the U.S. conducts with China's neighboring states are intended to put pressure on China and provide more leverage to its neighboring states.⁵⁸ For many years, China did not participate in the Shangri-la security dialogue, the primary reason being the Chinese belief that the dialogue was too excessively influenced by Washington behind the scenes. The forum was perceived as a mechanism to constrain China strategically.⁵⁹

In the first years of China's participation in ARF, China was very afraid that the ARF would be used by the U.S. and its allies as a tool to harm China's security interests. Beijing understood that one of the original goals of setting up ARF was to restrain and socialize China. At the second ARF meeting in 1995, China expressed its reservations with regard to the norms and principles of regional security proposed by other participating countries. At the 1996 ARF meeting, former Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen elaborated China's "new security concept," which urged states to solve security problems through dialogue and consultation. The promotion of the

⁵⁸ Jiang Deqi, "Meiguo yatai anquan zhanlue tiaozheng de zhongguo bianliang" [the China factor in US readjustment in security strategy in Asia-Pacific], *dangdai shijie* [contemporary world], issue 1, 2006.

⁵⁹ Author's interviews with Chinese Foreign Ministry officials, July 2008; Yang Danzhi, "Shang ge li la duihua: yuanqi, tezheng ji qi yatai anquan de yingxiang" [Shangri-la dialogue: origin, characteristics, and its impact on Asia-Pacific security], *xiandai guoji guanxi* [contemporary international relations], issue 2, 2007, pp.8-13.

new security concept centered on “cooperative security” reflected Beijing’s utilitarian purpose of reassuring neighboring states about China’s rise and dissuading them from participating in any encirclement scheme targeted at China.⁶⁰ Gradually, China realized that the ARF could be a good forum to fight the “Cold War mentality” of some external powers.⁶¹ All these demonstrate China’s pragmatism in security cooperation.

For China, participation in the ARF has been both an opportunity and a challenge. China can utilize the forum to explain China’s policy stances so as to reduce misunderstandings and influence the perceptions of other states toward China. But participation also means that China would have to face up to the collective pressures of ASEAN and other countries. Chinese analysts list China’s concessions on the South China Sea issue as examples of the negative consequence of China’s participation. Some of the major concessions include agreeing to multilateralism as a means to deal with the dispute instead of the previous bilateral approach, China’s agreement to use international law as a basis for solving the problem, and the signing of the Declaration of Parties on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.⁶²

In 1997, China sent a delegation to various Asian countries to lobby for the abrogation of bilateral and multilateral security alliances. The focus was of course to persuade various countries in East Asia to forgo their bilateral security ties with the United States. But that effort was not successful. ASEAN members indicated their disapproval of the Chinese suggestion. China, in return, better understood the concerns of ASEAN members and has never raised the proposal again. It was a

⁶⁰ Michael Yahuda, “Chinese dilemmas in thinking about regional security architecture,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 16 No. 2 2003: 189–206.

⁶¹ Ma Yanbing, “Dongmeng diqu luntan de chuangjian, fazhan ji qianjing” [ARF: creation, development, and prospect], *heping yu fazhan* [peace and development], issue 4, 2000, pp. 8-15.

⁶² Yu Changsen, “Dongmeng diqu luntan de mubiao yu daguo de lichang” [ARF’s goals and the positions of major powers], *dong nan ya yanjiu* [Southeast Asian Studies], issue 4, 2000, pp. 22-26.

turning point for China to at least implicitly accept the U.S. military presence as a balancing force in East Asia.⁶³

Still, the biggest challenge for China is how to cope with the security environment in East Asia. On the one hand, there is the reality of the U.S.-centered bilateral security arrangements that still serve as the backbone for security in the region. On the other hand, the bilateral arrangements seem to be expanding at the expense of Chinese security interests. For instance, in the past few years, there has been growing interest among neoconservative thinkers in Washington in constructing an Asian version of NATO. In March 2007, Japan and Australia signed a joint declaration on security cooperation in which the two countries pledged to enhance cooperation and consultation on issues of common strategic interests, including regularly holding “2+2” defense and foreign ministers talks. In the past few years, efforts have also been made to bring in India to form some sort of quadrilateral security mechanism in East Asia. Although leadership changes in Japan and Australia have made the possibility of forming a quadrilateral security mechanism less likely, all these efforts have reinforced the perception among Chinese decision-makers that other regional powers have the intention, no matter how volatile, to gang up on China.

These perceptions explain why China, together with ASEAN, belongs to the “reluctant” group of countries that have not been enthusiastic about preventive diplomacy. China’s unwillingness to move towards preventive diplomacy in the ARF is a reflection of its concern that any occurrence in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait would allow international interference.⁶⁴ Beijing maintains that currently there is still a lot of work that needs to be done to enhance confidence-building measures in

⁶³ Xue Xiaopeng, “Zhongguo dui dongya diqu zhuyi guannian de zhuanbian” [changes in Chinese perceptions of East Asian regionalism], *Foreign Affairs Review* (Chinese), vol. 89, June, 2006, pp. 28-33.

⁶⁴ Takeshi Yuzawa, “The Evolution of Preventive Diplomacy in the ASEAN Regional Forum,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, Issue 5, pp. 785-804.

the region. According to China, such measures are at their most primitive stage in East Asia. Pushing to enter a stage of preventive diplomacy would not be good for the development of the ARF.⁶⁵

The lack of strategic trust that hinders China's participation in maritime cooperation is evident in its negative view of Washington's Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). In the official position, China states that it supports the objectives of the PSI, but argues that it includes the possibility of taking interdiction measures on the sea beyond the permission of existing international laws. Chinese analysts believe that the PSI, apparently an effort to strive for international security and strengthen international cooperation for this goal, is dominated by the U.S. It is a fairly aggressive and coercive collective mechanism, and is a by-product of Bush's "preemptive strategy" deeply embedded in American unilateralism.⁶⁶ In light of these considerations, China decided not to participate in the PSI and advised caution in the implementation of the PSI.⁶⁷

Another case is China's response to the U.S. proposal for a Global Maritime Partnership (GMP or Thousand-Ship Navy). Washington hoped that China would join this grand scheme to deal with maritime problems at the global level. It had been argued that the GMP initiative would be a perfect arrangement for further Sino-U.S. maritime cooperation.⁶⁸ The U.S. Navy has twice requested China's participation in the plan. In response to the proposal, Li Jie, analyst at the PLA Naval Research Institute, noted that the plan actually indicates the United States' intention to set up a global naval regime in order to continue to dominate maritime affairs at the global

⁶⁵ Ding Kuisong, "Dongmeng diqu luntan yu yatai anquan hezuo" [ARF and Asia-Pacific security cooperation], *xiandai guoji guanxi* [contemporary international relations], issue 7, 1998, pp. 7-12.

⁶⁶ Gu Guoliang, "Meiguo 'fang kuosan anquan changyi' pingxi" [An analysis of American "proliferation security initiative"], *meiguo yanjiu* [American studies], no. 3, 2004, pp. 30-44.

⁶⁷ http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2005-09/01/content_342911.htm

⁶⁸ Eric McVadon, "China and the United States on the High Seas," *China Security*, Vol. 3 No. 4 Autumn 2007, pp. 3 – 28

level. It is part of U.S. strategy to constrain China and Russia.⁶⁹ Another analyst suggests that although the plan may be good for joint efforts to deal with maritime threats, it is more about counter-terrorism and disaster relief. It is the intention of the U.S. to use this plan to gain access to foreign ports, military bases, and logistical support to serve U.S. global maritime interests.⁷⁰

China realizes that the Asia-Pacific is an area where the major powers have significant interests. The primary goal of China's security strategy in the region is to maintain at least normal and functioning relations with all other major powers so that China is not isolated. China's second goal is to try its best to maintain friendly relations with other regional states in order to forestall the possibility of any containment alliance supported by other major powers. China increasingly realizes that economic interdependence creates common interests and is conducive to the prevention of conflicts. Beijing believes that the best strategy is to become the provider of markets, investment, and technology for regional states and thus transform China into the engine for regional economic growth.⁷¹

One area that China has been trying to play a role is its proposal of a “new security concept.” Official rhetoric in Beijing constantly emphasizes “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and coordination” as the principles to practice a “new security” mode. According to Chinese interpretation, the gist of this new concept is to pursue cooperative security. China’s preference for cooperative security is perhaps more a necessity than a choice. In today’s East Asia, there are mainly three primary modes of security arrangements: U.S. hegemony, traditional balance of power, and

⁶⁹ Li’s interview with a Chinese media outlet, available at http://www.cnr.cn/military/dj/200712/t20071228_504666766.html, accessed 4 November 2008.

⁷⁰ Du Chaoping, “Meiguo ‘qian jian haijun’ jihua yu zhongguo de xuanze,” [US “thousand-ship navy” plan and Chinese choices], *Jian zai wuqi* [shipborne weapons], December 2007, pp. 23-28.

⁷¹ Tang Shiping and Zhang Yunling, “Zhongguo de diqu zhanlue” [China’s regional strategy], *shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [world economics and politics], issue 6, 2004, pp.8-13.

various loose multilateral security forums. China strongly pushes for cooperative security simply because the first two security modes work against China's security interests. First, it helps alleviate the so-called "China threat." Second, it conforms to China's interest in maintaining a stable regional environment. Third, it serves as a check to the first two security modes, thus improving China's strategic security position in East Asia. The challenge in the future is for China to come up with concrete proposals to make cooperative security really work in East Asia.

China's security policy and practice in Central Asia are notably different from those in East Asia. China demonstrates much more confidence in dealing with security issues in Central Asia, as shown in the high-level of institutionalization of the SCO and willingness to embrace preventive measures.

According to Chinese analysts, China's security policy in the SCO is intended as a contrast to U.S. security policy in East Asia, which is underpinned by bilateral alliances and "forward deployment." Chinese analysts argue that in the SCO, China and Russia have been working on cooperation and dialogue as the main means for security building, and reducing military presence in the border areas.⁷² Confidence-building measures have been, and continue to be, a key area for the SCO, as evidenced in the two treaties regarding border security signed in 1996 and 1997, and the recently signed treaty among the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Good-Neighborly Relations, Friendship and Cooperation.

But the SCO has gradually taken on the concept of preventive diplomacy. Currently, preventive diplomacy in the SCO is essentially carried out in areas of non-traditional security by a wide range of agencies, including the military. However, there are signs that the SCO is increasingly moving towards the more substantive

⁷² Ding Kuisong, "Dongmeng diqu luntan yu yatai anquan hezuo" [ARF and Asia-Pacific security cooperation], *xiandai guoji guanxi* [contemporary international relations], issue 7, 1998, pp. 7-12.

practice of preventive diplomacy. The SCO is likely to meaningfully discuss preventive diplomacy in tackling traditional security issues, including domestic crises.

A few recent official documents of the SCO clearly refer to this possible development. The *Declaration on the Fifth Anniversary of Shanghai Cooperation Organization* mentions that the SCO has the potential to play an independent role in safeguarding stability and security in this region. The document points out that in the case of emergencies that threaten regional peace, stability and security, SCO member states will immediately consult on how to effectively respond in order to fully protect the interests of both the SCO and its member states. The paper calls for member states to study the possibility of establishing a regional conflict-prevention mechanism within the SCO framework. The 2007 *Joint Communiqué of the Meeting of the Council of Heads of SCO Member States* proclaims that it is vitally important to implement preventive measures against the phenomena causing instability in the SCO territory. The document calls for creating a mechanism of joint response to situations threatening peace, stability and security in the region. In the recently concluded SCO summit in Dushanbe, the member states once again proclaimed that the SCO is going to conduct preventive diplomacy to safeguard peace and security in the region.⁷³

A few scholars at various Chinese government-sponsored institutions have conducted studies on the need for formal preventive diplomacy measures in the SCO. They justify the establishment of such formal mechanisms on the ground that the SCO would not be able to grow further without preventive diplomacy. This is due to the fact that the Euro-Asian region is so culturally, ethnically, and geostrategically complex, with many potential conflicts among Central Asian states in terms of territorial borders, water and other resources, as well as the internal socio-political

⁷³ SCO Summit Dushanbe Declaration, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2008-08/28/content_9731209.htm, accessed September 5, 2008.

instability in the smaller members of the SCO. They conclude that all these factors have the potential to not only hamper the further progress of the SCO but also to derail the entire process.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Notable growth in multilateral institutions notwithstanding, East Asia is still a region where traditional interstate relations prevail.⁷⁵ China's participation in Asian multilateralism attests to this observation. China's approach to the institutionalization of regional multilateralism, for instance, has been shaped by its power status and concrete national interests in those various institutions, not by any grand visions.⁷⁶ China's policy towards Asian multilateralism pretty much reflects the overall "low profile" (*tao guang yang hui*) foreign policy line that was set by the late leader Deng Xiaoping. Deng, back in the early 1990s, advised that China should not aggressively act as a leader in international politics in order to avoid too much international attention while its economy was growing. At the same time, he admonished other leaders that China has to play a role (*you suo zuo wei*), particularly in areas of Chinese concern. Deng's foreign policy line was deeply rooted in pragmatism. Chinese policy on various multilateral processes reflects that pragmatic consideration.

In addition to the perceived attitudes of other major players, part of the reason why China lacks a grand vision of regional multilateralism has to do with the Chinese fear that any effort to lay out a blueprint for regional integration would only invite

⁷⁴ Xu Tao, "Shang he zhuzhi jianli yufang diqu chongtu jizhi de shijian yiyi" [the practical implications of establishing regional conflict-prevention mechanisms in the SCO], *xiandai guoji guanxi* [contemporary international relations], issue 12, 2006, pp. 12-22.

⁷⁵ David Martin Jones and Michael L. R. Smith, "Constructing communities: the curious case of East Asian regionalism," *Review of International Studies* (2007), 33, 165–186.

⁷⁶ Chien-Peng Chung, "China's Approaches to the Institutionalization of Regional Multilateralism," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2008), 17(57), November, 747–764.

suspicion from other major powers, thus further complicating China's strategic position in East Asia and the world. China has not openly and strongly opposed matters that it does not favor unless they are clearly harmful to Chinese interests. Instead, Beijing has registered its reservations and subtly worked to reduce the negative impact on its interests. This was clearly the case with regard to the EAS: Chinese officials now recognize that it is unwise for China to openly obstruct the EAS. Instead, they maintain that China may go along with any policy proposal that works to the benefit of all participants.⁷⁷

Emphasizing multilateral cooperation on economic and non-traditional security issues is also a clear demonstration of Chinese pragmatism in practice. It helps build a better image for China in the region – one of a more benign and cooperative China. It helps create a friendlier environment for China's rise in the long run. Economic multilateralism is also necessary for the sustained growth of the Chinese economy. Cooperating on NTS issues is highly desirable simply because all these non-traditional challenges have their transnational roots and impacts. China stands to benefit from these multilateral mechanisms dealing with NTS threats.

Beijing's different positions on preventive measures in East Asia and Central Asia also have to do with its pragmatic response to the different regional political and strategic contexts. In East Asia, the strategic rivalry is much more intense and China's position has to be largely defensive. In contrast, China enjoys much stronger political power and less strategic competition in Central Asia. As long as China can accommodate Russia's core interests, Beijing will find much room to be flexible in embracing preventive measures.

⁷⁷ Author's interviews with Chinese Foreign Ministry officials in July 2008.

China's pragmatic approach to Asian multilateralism is also derived from its traditional sense of sovereignty. For various reasons, Beijing is still reluctant to substantially yield in areas concerning state sovereignty, which makes it almost unimaginable for China to put forth any visionary plan for Asian regionalism. The traditional approach to sovereignty is further complicated by geostrategic realities in Asia. The strategic suspicion of the other major powers renders China's international strategy in East Asia largely defensive in nature. Beijing is afraid that any grand proposal on regional multilateralism would be perceived by other major players as a quest for regional leadership at the expense of their interests. The increase of China's profile and influence in Asia is largely due to China's active participation in regional multilateral processes in the past decade or so. There is no doubt that China will continue to seek a greater role in Asian regionalism, but given its pragmatic approach, it is unlikely that China will rise to any substantive leadership position in the foreseeable future.

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