

Whither East Asian Regionalism? China's Pragmatism and Community Building Rhetoric

TUNG-CHIEH TSAI

*Graduate Institute of International Politics, National Chung Hsing University
tctasi@dragon.nchu.edu.tw*

TONY TAI-TING LIU

*Graduate Institute of International Politics, National Chung Hsing University
stangoftibia1984@yahoo.com.tw*

Abstract

Despite numerous published writings on China's regional role, the world still knows very little about Beijing's perception and strategy. This article seeks to make an intellectual contribution in understanding China's foreign policy and its efforts to participate in East Asian integration. This article argues that under the rhetoric of peaceful development and community building, China's foreign policy is pragmatic and changes with the tide of events in international relations. China's participation in regional integration serves as a good case for examining changes in Beijing's strategy. In the past two decades, China has moved from a reluctant participant of regional affairs to an active participant and potential future leader. China's adjusting role is a consequence of Beijing's pragmatism in policy and its growing economic confidence. Pragmatism has led China to 'hide its light under a bushel' and wait for the proper timing to step onto the world stage.

Introduction

East Asia's growing economic prosperity in the new century has shifted the attention of political leaders as well as business and academic communities around the world towards the East. Much of the attention is centered on China's high economic growth, a phenomenon that has generated discussions on China's potential development into a superpower. For many observers and analysts, the twenty-first century can indeed be called 'the China Century' (Brahm, 2001; Fishman, 2004; Rees-Mogg, 2005; Jacques, 2009). Whether China will continue to grow is an open-ended question, but it is clear that East Asia has made a good recovery from financial shocks in the last century and is economically vibrant compared to the US and Europe. An

abundance of free trade agreements (FTAs) and on-going negotiations for free trade summarize East Asia's dazzling economic performance in recent years.

Interestingly, China's rise coincided with the commencement of regional cooperation in East Asia, both taking off at the end of the Cold War. China's development in comprehensive power as a result of growing economic capability has not only generated concerns about the possible implications for regional order but also questions over China's role in the process of regional integration. While many observers (Medeiros and Fravel, 2003; Deng and Moore, 2004; Kuik, 2005; Li and Chen, 2010; Kang, 2010; Chung, 2010; Olson and Prestowitz, 2011) agree that ascension in power has made China more willing to participate in both multilateral and regional institutions, there is little to agree upon regarding Beijing's motives and strategy. Perhaps due to China's rather late entry into the international community, a great amount of literature emphasizes Beijing's economic rationale for entry while mentioning the political and strategic reasons in fleeting. Regardless of the risk of limited discovery, a brief survey of the literature on China's strategy is warranted here.

With China's economic development in recent years, many studies by Chinese scholars revolve around the theme of 'China rise' and seek to explain China's rationale for regional integration based on grand strategic objectives (Wang, Sanders and Chen, 2005; Men, 2007; Barfield, 2007; Hoadley and Yang, 2008; Gao, 2008; Yang, 2010; Chin and Stubbs, 2010; Zhao, 2011). Repeatedly proclaimed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership in the recent decade, China's intention to create an environment that is favorable both for its international image and economic development is a widely acknowledged fact. As Henry Gao (2008) points out, while the establishment of regional trade agreements yields economic benefits, such as trade liberalization and the import of raw materials that are critical for further development, the same action also contributes to the benign image of China, especially among states that remain anxious over China's potential threat and future development. However, besides agreeing on the interests and potential direction of China's behavior, most studies do not go further into identifying a strategic path that China is undertaking and its connection with the country's foreign policy tradition.

Only in recent years has the academia begun to look into Chinese culture and history and ponder its linkage with regional integration in East Asia. In Emilian Kavalski's edited volume on China and regional integration (2009), several authors attempt to establish the link between China's foreign policy and its past. After an examination of China in the post-Cold War period, Sheng Ding (2009) concludes that China's adoption of regionalism is a new strategy without historical roots. However, an investigation by Enyu Zhang (2009) into China's strategic culture finds no easy way to delink its foreign policy from history; explanations lie in a closer look at China's relationship with the changing international system. In a way supporting Zhang's search into history, Feng Zhang (2009) and other observers (e.g. Yu and Chang, 2011) propose the connection between China's integration strategy and traditional concepts such as the view of 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*) and the tributary system (*chaogong tixi*).

By neglecting the political and emphasizing the economic, existent discussions generate the impression that economic gain is the main priority of China's participation in regional integration.¹ While sustainable economic growth is a vital interest of China, Beijing's desire for a more dominant position in East Asia should not be dismissed. By focusing on China's behavior and economic interests and deeming the empirical as 'strategy', it is easy to neglect a much more comprehensive (and perhaps more subtle) strategy at work and Beijing's use of political rhetoric in shaping a regional community. The Chinese capture the potential danger well – one sees the tree but misses the forest (*jian shu bujian lin*).

This article is an attempt at understanding the driving force behind China's effort to participate in regional integration and its foreign policy in the new century. The authors argue that under the rhetoric of peaceful development and community building, China's foreign policy is pragmatic and changes with the tide of events. Pragmatism has led China to 'hide under the bushel' and wait for the proper timing to step onto the world stage. In terms of East Asian integration, one observes China's gradual entry into regional institutions and its changing role from a passive receiver of policy to an active agenda setter over time. China's adjusting role is a consequence of Beijing's pragmatism in policy and its growing economic confidence.

The authors discuss East Asian integration and China's strategy in five parts. Part one reviews the development of regional integration in East Asia in the post Cold War period; part two addresses key proposals for the advancement of regionalism in East Asia; part three examines the development of China's pragmatic foreign policy tradition and its implication for community building; part four addresses China's regional strategy; and part five looks at the transformation of China's role in the post Cold War period. The authors conclude with some thoughts on the future of East Asian integration and China's growing status.

Reviewing East Asian regionalism

Although 'regionalism' traditionally refers to 'cooperative (economic) relations carried out among neighboring states', political and security concerns remain the main reasons for cooperation (Riggins, 1992). However, the current wave of regionalism may be the result of semi-peripheral pressure from economic globalization. Walter Mattli (1999) and others remind us that the role of business leaders in the integration process is no less significant than politicians. In the new century, business led proliferation of regional trade agreements (RTAs) is the driving force behind the widespread phenomenon of 'new regionalism'. Surprisingly, in East Asia (and perhaps only in this region), for a long time, states have been relatively passive and reluctant in turning economic progress into momentum for regionalism (Kurlantzick, 2001: 21). ASEAN's

¹ See Wong (2010), Ravenhill and Jiang (2009), Wei (2009), Xing and Shengjun (2009), Zhang and Sun (2008).

(Association of Southeast Asian Nations) breakthrough in subregional integration remains the only exception thus far.

In terms of regional integration in East Asia, despite the abundance of proposals raised in the post Cold War period, many remain in the research stage or as verbal proposals and few are carried out (see table 1). Besides US influence in the region and different levels of development among states in the region, East Asia's lack of general consensus towards integration is a major reason for the region's slow pace in cooperation (Carpenter, 1998: 294). While proposals such as Neo-Asianism, Pacific Way and Asian View float about (Mahbubani, 1995; Low, 1995), aside from strategic calculations among the major powers, different ideas on the framework for integration and common identity has led to the impasse on deepening the level of integration in East Asia (Sum, 1996).²

Thanks to an increasing degree of regionalization in foreign direct investment and trade activities, North America and Western Europe have come to deepen their respective levels of economic cooperation. For East Asia, the first major turning point in the development of regionalism came in 1989 with the introduction of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (Stubbs, 1998: 68–69). In terms of regional integration, APEC left an indelible mark in East Asia by achieving progress such as the introduction of the 'openness, equality and evolution' principle in 1991, proposal for the establishment of economic community in 1993, and suggestions for the establishment of comprehensive trade liberalization by 2020 (1994) and elimination or reduction of tariffs on information products by 2000 (1996) (Lin, 1999: 13–16).

Around the same time, Malaysia put forward the idea of 'East Asian Economic Community' (Awanohara, 1990: 24–25), a proposal that was eventually shelved due to

² An example of the difficulty in realizing regional integration can be drawn from the discussions over subregional cooperation in Northeast Asia near the end of the Cold War. Following Japanese scholar Fukushima Masamitsu's earlier proposal for the establishment of the Japanese Sea Rim Economic Circle for common resource development and industrial development in the region, Nishikawa Jun further developed the concept in the early 1990s. On the other hand, scholars Ogawa Yuhei and Kim Young Ho proposed the Yellow Sea Economic Circle in 1988, which also generated some attention. In 1990, Chinese specialist Ding Shicheng proposed the idea of a 'golden triangle' region in the Tumen River delta, announcing for the first time the theory for the development of the big and small golden triangles of the Tumen River. The 'golden triangle' concept consist of plans to exploit the complementary economic characters among China's Northeast, the Russian Far East, and North Korea (DPRK), to jointly develop the border region of the three states and to strengthen infrastructure and revitalize regional economies. The 'big triangle' refers to the broad region formed by Vladivostok (Russia), Chongjin (DPRK), and Yanji (China), while the 'small triangle', an economic area comprised within the former, is comprised by Jingxin (China), Portshire (Russia), and Rajin (DPRK). High expectations were placed on the plan to develop the Tumen River area into an economic hub in Northeast Asia comparable to Rotterdam and Hong Kong. The Tumen River Area Development Plan (TRADP) was initiated in 1992 and later changed its name to the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI) in 2005. However, limited progress in subregional integration has cut short earlier hopes for the Tumen initiative and other proposals to finally bring about region-wide cooperation in Northeast Asia. Besides chronic historic and political tensions in the region, a more pragmatic reason may be the overlapping in aims and geographic scope between the respective proposals, which ironically coincides with the current trend of regional integration or regionalism in East Asia. See Zhichun and Zhou (2004), Haitao and Xiaojun (2007), Qing (1996).

Table 1. *Major regional integration proposals in East Asia*

Year	Proposer	Main content
1961	United Nations	Proposed the concept of Organization of Asia Economic Cooperation (OAEC)
1965	Japan	Proposed the Pacific Free Trade Area (PFTA)
1967	Australia, New Zealand, Japan	Proposed and established the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC)
1975	United States	Proposed the concept of Neo-Pacifism
1977	Japan	Proposed the concept of Pacifism
1979	United State	Issued the Report on the Establishment of Economic Cooperation Organization in the Asia Pacific Region
1980	Japan	Issued the Report on Pacific Rim Cooperation and proposed the Pacific Rim Economic Circle
1980	United States, Australia, Japan	Proposed and established the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC)
1981	ASEAN	Issued the report on ASEAN and Pacific Community
1988	Japan	Proposed the East Asia Economic Rim (EAER)
1989	United States	Proposed the Pacific Economic Community (PEC)
1989	Australia, New Zealand, Japan	Proposed and established Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)
1990	Malaysia	Proposed the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG)
1991	Malaysia	Changed EAEG to East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC)
1991	United States	Proposed the Pacific Community (PC)
1993	United States	Proposed the New (Asia) Pacific Community (NPC)
1997	Japan	Proposed the establishment of the Asia Monetary Fund (AMF)
1997	ASEAN	Initiated ASEAN plus Three (APT) unofficial summit
2000	South Korea	Proposed the establishment of the East Asia Community (EAC)
2000	ASEAN + 3	Established the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI)
2001	East Asian Vision Group	Proposed the East Asia Community (EAC)
2001	Philippine, Australia, Japan, China	Promoted and established the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA)
2002	East Asian Study Group	Proposed the East Asia Free Trade Area, East Asia Investment Area and East Asia Summit
2002	Japan	Proposed the ten plus five concept
2003	Japan, ASEAN	Signed the Tokyo Declaration and affirmed the goal of moving towards East Asia Community
2004	ASEAN + 3	Suggested and agreed to open the first annual East Asia Summit in 2005
2005	ASEAN + 6	Initiated the first East Asia Summit
2005	Malaysia	Proposed the Asia Union (AU)
2006	Japan	Proposes Asia Free Trade Area consisting of sixteen countries
2006	United States	Proposed Free Trade Area of Asia Pacific (FTAAP)
2008	Australia	Proposed Asia Pacific Community (APC)
2008	United States	Proposed the Trans-pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP)
2009	Japan	Proposed East Asia Community (EAC) again
2012	ASEAN	Proposed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

US concerns and backlash against the underlying intent to exclude the US (Berger, 1999). Compared with APEC, the EAEC fostered the characteristic of ‘open regionalism’, which includes openness towards non-members (in other words, non-member states can also enjoy the benefits of liberalization), accommodation of subregional blocs (North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and ASEAN), acceptance of unilateral actions by member states, and the establishment of volition as the foundation of negotiations (Zhang, 2001).

It is easy to see APEC as a representative of US interests, a fact that has encouraged East Asia’s own pursuit for regional integration. In the ASEAN plus Three (APT) summit meeting in 2000, South Korean president Kim Dae Jung first proposed the idea of an ‘East Asian Community’. The 2001 East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) (2001) report subsequently made the suggestion to include the East Asian Community as a priority for integration.³ In 2002, the EAVG further proposed the establishment of a free trade area, investment zone, and regional summit meeting in East Asia as intermediate and long-range targets. At the same time, the East Asian Study Group (EASG) (2002) submitted a final report to the APT meeting that listed 26 areas for cooperation. In 2005, East Asian states made the important decision to initiate the East Asia Summit (EAS). Despite problems of leadership and membership, the EAS was successfully held in 2005 and participating states recognized ASEAN as the main driving force for integration at that stage.

The fact that East Asian states decided to pass the helm of integration to a group of middle and small states (ASEAN) instead of major powers (China and Japan) reflects the deadlock in Sino-Japanese competition over regional leadership. The outcome of the EAS also suggests a strategy of blurring out regional identity in exchange for collective security at work, as both ASEAN and Japan sought to include the participation of non-East Asian states such as India, Australia, and New Zealand in future summit meetings. By excluding the US, East Asia demonstrated a sense of regional consciousness; Russia’s exclusion from the EAS was an unfortunate consequence of the decision to keep the US out.⁴

However, the reality of ‘small’ leadership eventually undermined further progress of the East Asian Community. In response to moves to trap China in an internal balance, China devoted further efforts towards the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) in order to consolidate its regional influence. On the other hand, Japan moved away from stagnant trade negotiations and concerns for the US, and invited ASEAN to conduct joint research on the establishment of economic partnership agreements (EPAs) involving 16 Asian economies (ASEAN plus Six). The move was an indication of Japan’s intent to play a more active role in regional agenda setting.

³ East Asian Vision Group (2001).

⁴ Compared with India, Australia, and New Zealand, Russian territory in the Far East makes the country more qualified as an East Asian country.

Competing paths towards community

Similar to the Asian financial crisis, the global financial crisis in 2008 had the effect of facilitating developments towards regional integration in East Asia. Besides Australia's proposal to establish an Asia Pacific Community – a proposal made several months before the financial downturns – many changes, which would come to have a profound impact on the process of community building in East Asia, commenced after the Asian financial crisis. However, whether proposals and initiatives towards regionalism in East Asia moved states onto the path of harmony and cooperation remains a debatable issue. In many ways, new proposals not only complicate the picture of East Asian regional integration and add another stroke to the 'noodle bowl' phenomenon (Baldwin, 2006, 2008), many also reflect the strategic interest of states and the formulation of checks and balances against other powers. Before turning to China, it is important to look at other proposals for community building in order to understand the context of East Asian regionalism.

East Asian community

Japan has long played an important role in the process of regional integration in East Asia. Building on the improvement in Sino-Japanese relations established by high level exchanges before the onset of financial crisis in 2008,⁵ Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda (2008) echoed Koizumi Junichiro's thoughts on East Asian Community and proposed the transformation of the Pacific Ocean into an 'inland sea'. The New Fukuda Doctrine pledged to 'emphatically support ASEAN's efforts to realize a Community'. It was clear that the APT remained at the center of Japan's regional community strategy. Succeeding Fukuda's call, in 2009, Hatoyama (2009) endorsed the concept of fraternity (*yuai*), an idea that Hatoyama believed could serve as the foundation for greater regional integration among Japan, China, Korea, and ASEAN.

Nevertheless, Japan's intention to strengthen cooperation and dialogue in East Asia often fell short of realization as a result of instability in domestic politics and regional security. Since 2008, Japan has undergone five leadership changes, which creates immense challenges for the realization of foreign policy. Even though Japan continues to commit to the process of regional integration in East Asia, domestic politics often constrained the Japanese leadership from taking the initiative and making actual progress towards regional cooperation. For many observers, Japan's proposals were usually 'exceedingly vague in its specifics', which made them seem more rhetorical than otherwise (Searight, 2010: 6).

⁵ In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo travelled to Beijing and undertook the 'ice breaking' journey to re-engage China after a cool period in bilateral relations under the preceding Koizumi administration. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao returned Abe's good will by conducting a formal visit to Japan in the same year, realizing the journey to 'melt the ice'. The China–Japan Joint Press Communiqué was issued on Wen's return visit. The communiqué reaffirmed friendship and cooperation between the two states.

Asia Pacific Community

In response to a rising China and Australia's exclusion from the integration process in East Asia, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd proposed the establishment of an 'Asia Pacific Community' (APC) a few months before the outbreak of the 2008 global financial crisis. Regarding the APC, Rudd made a particular effort to stress that the proposal will not be a challenge to APEC, the EAS, and other regional bodies. Rather, the aim of the APC is to bring about a potentially new architecture for regional integration that builds on existing institutions or develops as a separate institution of its own (Frost, 2009). With most of the current institutions excluding either one or more states with a vital interest in East Asia, the APC seeks to stimulate more discussion and cooperation by bringing together all regional members into a single forum (Frost, 2009).

Despite the APC's intention to mitigate the effect of 'forum shopping' and contradictions among an array of overlapping regional institutions and put progress towards regional integration back on track again in East Asia, the initiative has not enjoyed wide support. Besides the advancement of more dialogue in the region, it is unclear what the APC seeks to achieve in the end. By emphasizing the US role in the region, the APC concept resembles APEC and merely adds to the growing competition between East Asianism and Asian Pacificism. On the other hand, the focus of the APC is unclear, as its proposed scope includes political and economic cooperation and security cooperation including non-traditional issues such as terrorism, natural disaster, disease, food, and energy.

ASEAN has remained cool to the APC proposal. Singapore has been a vocal critic of the idea, complaining that Australia failed to consult with the states of Southeast Asia and to give adequate recognition to ASEAN's central role in regional integration (He, 2011: 271; Tan, 2011: 59; Liou, 2010: 17). China has dismissed the proposal as well, saying that 'conditions are not ripe' to pursue the APC (He, 2012: 68).

Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership

In November 2009, at the annual APEC summit, the US Trade Representative (USTR) announced the participation of the US in the 'Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership' (TPP). The announcement brought instant global attention to the previously low profiled 'P-4' agreement. In the face of China's rise and Asia's economic prosperity, the Obama administration sought to assuage America's economic decline by improving relations with East Asia. In the Suntory Hall speech in Tokyo, US President Barack Obama (2009) expressed that '[the US] have a stake in the future of this region, because what happens here has a direct effect on our lives at home'. Building on the statement, Obama (2009) added that 'as an Asia Pacific nation, the United States expects to be involved in the discussions that shape the future of this region, and to participate fully in appropriate organizations as they are established and evolve'.

In a certain sense, the TPP may be regarded as an extension of APEC or the US hub-and-spoke strategy in Asia. As Amy Searight (2010: 8) puts concisely, 'TPP is very much a child of APEC.' In terms of community building, the TPP is significant in

that realization of the agreement would reconsolidate America's role in East Asia, a status that has been unsettled in recent years due to US exclusion from the ASEAN Plus process and the failure of APEC to achieve breakthroughs. By referring to the US as an 'Asia Pacific nation' and himself as 'America's first Pacific President', Obama essentially reiterated Washington's claim to influence in the Asia Pacific while hinting at a Pacific order or community that includes the US and centers on its leadership (Hung and Liu, 2012). Regardless of whether the US can steer the development of regionalism in East Asia in the near future, TPP negotiations thus far have greatly altered the regional atmosphere for integration by encouraging Asia to hedge its support (Goh, 2005; Chase, 2011). As the US recommits itself to East Asia, ASEAN is no longer regarded as the best, or the only, route for regionalism.

ASEAN plus

Since the establishment of the APT in 1997, ASEAN has come to be recognized by the international community as a stabilizing force that plays an important mediating role among great powers. Despite the outgrowth of the EAVG and the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) from the APT,⁶ great power competition in Southeast Asia has diverted ASEAN's attention away from community building towards institutional balancing and hedging among the powers. Over the years, the APT expanded twice, from plus three (China, Japan, Korea) to plus six (APT plus India, Australia, New Zealand) to plus eight (ASEAN plus Six plus the US and Russia). Unfortunately, for many observers, expansion of the ASEAN forum reinforces the argument for institutional balancing rather than progress towards regional integration. Sino-US competition in Southeast Asia is a good example of where ASEAN put a balancing strategy to work. Considering China's rise in recent years, by bringing the US into ASEAN forums, ASEAN essentially checks China's rise through US involvement in the region while maintaining strong economic relations with both countries.

Regarding ASEAN, many observers expressed anxiety over the organization's ability to continue in the driver's seat for regional integration in East Asia, especially under the pressure of growing competition between the major powers (Beeson, 2009). On the other hand, criticisms have been raised regarding the 'ASEAN Way' as a principle that leads to 'process rather than progress' (Narine, 2009). Seng Tan (2011) further suggests that ASEAN-led regionalism is undermined by the challenges of 'regionalism-lite, regionalism-elite and regionalism-polite', which points to ASEAN's over emphasis in autonomous identity and form rather than advancements towards integration.

⁶ The CMI was established at the APT meeting in Thailand in 2000. Based on the Bilateral Swap Arrangement, the CMI seeks to advance currency cooperation in East Asia and reduce the risk of another financial crisis. The swap agreements enable ASEAN member states to acquire relief funds in crisis. Currently, real usable funds amount to \$50 million to \$60 million and depend on the specific BSAs in place between ASEAN states and the three main creditor states of Japan, China, and South Korea. See Sussangkarn (2011), Henning (2009).

The US return to Asia put ASEAN in an awkward position, as Southeast Asia needs to react to Washington's call through the TPP while maintaining its relations with Beijing. Besides the possible impact of TPP on ASEAN–China relations, if a number of Southeast Asian states choose to enter the TPP, the tide of regionalism in East Asia may be changed in favor of Asia-Pacificism. Caught in great power competition, the future of ASEAN's role in regional integration could only diminish, a thought that has renewed the debate among Southeast Asian countries on the formation of an ASEAN community that could strengthen their identity.

China's pragmatism and community building rhetoric

With the concept of 'community' in flux in East Asia, China's rise and its increased participation in regional affairs adds another important variable to the debate over regional integration. Despite the cliché 'China rising', it is true that China underwent many changes since its embrace of open reforms in 1979. China's change is most notably observed in its economic performance: growth in GDP, increased trade figures, and poverty reduction. Adjusted for purchasing power, in 2010, China stood as the second largest economy in the world after the US with US\$9.872 trillion in GDP (2010).⁷ In the span of five years, China's total export expanded from 1,400 million US\$ in 2005 to over 1,500 million US\$ in 2010. In terms of trade, China has accumulated over 100 million US\$ in trade surplus, which makes the country the top holder of foreign reserve in the world today.

It is not surprising that China's rise caught international attention and generated discussions over China's intentions and possible development in the future. In the past two decades, the main concern surrounding China's rise is whether the country will become a revisionist threat to international order or a peaceful power that attaches itself to the status quo.⁸ As debates continue, 'conengagement' or 'containment and engagement at the same time' is suggested as the dominant foreign policy strategy of many countries towards China today.⁹

Yet what concerns this paper is China's strategy and response towards revisionist claims or conengagement. Despite a lack of grand strategic visions towards the regional environment in the last century (He, 2004: 116), in terms of foreign policy, China has long displayed a pragmatic approach that adjusts according to changes in the external environment. Most part of history past shows China's foreign policy as reactionary rather than voluntary. China's pragmatic foreign policy tradition can be traced to Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping's rule before the 1990s. Both Mao and Deng's legacies

⁷ CIA, *The World Factbook* (China). Available at: <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>.

⁸ Regarding the debate on China's potential revisionism, many scholars hold the view of an emerging China threat. See Mearsheimer (2006, 2010), Ross (2005). For counter arguments against the China threat theory, see Kang (2005), Johnston (2003).

⁹ The term is a joint-term referring to the ambiguous situation of containment and engagement at the same time. See Khalizad *et al.* (1999).

continue to have a profound impact on China's foreign policy today and help to shape Beijing's community building rhetoric.

Chinese pragmatism in historical perspective

As far back as Mao Zedong's Long March in 1934, pragmatism defined the foreign policy tradition of China. In the face of a much stronger Kuomintang (KMT) army at the time, Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) retreated to hinterlands of the mainland to regroup and wait for another opportunity to retaliate. Mao's low posture was eventually rewarded in 1949 when the CCP claimed the sovereignty of Mainland China and the KMT was forced to retreat to Taiwan. Besides good fortune and the twist of fate, what may be deduced from the Long March is Mao's willingness to maintain a low posture and rebuild the strength of the CCP before sallying forth again. In hindsight, history rewarded Mao's pragmatism handsomely.

Entailing more than just military strategy, lessons from the Long March carried over to Mao's strategic thinking and international outlook. In an attempt to remove China from the Cold War system dominated by the US and Soviet Union, Mao Zedong proposed the 'middle ground' theory that emphasized independent policy making. As Tung-Chieh Tsai (2011: 22) points out, regardless of the usage of various titles to describe Mao's political rhetoric, the chairman's message was clear – China should become an independent and self-determining state within or without the bipolar system. By designating China as part of the Third World, Mao made China a part of the non-aligned group of developing states, a position that proved to be useful in the Deng Xiaoping era.

By achieving an independent position between the superpowers, China under Mao gained the policy flexibility to switch its support depending on the international atmosphere. Beijing's change in support from a common ideological front with Moscow in the post-war period to reconciliation with Washington in the 1970s is a good example of pragmatism at work. In retrospect, we can conclude that thanks to the influence of Mao, pragmatism became a deeply rooted tradition in Chinese foreign policy. However, as a fine line separated pragmatism and revolutionism, the irony is not lost if the chairman's revolutionary sentiments prevailed in Chinese foreign policy in the end. China might be a different country today.

Following the trail of Mao's policy, Deng Xiaoping introduced 'independent' (*duli*) and 'autonomous' (*zizhu*) as the guiding principles of Chinese foreign policy (Tsai, 2011: 22). In 1984, Deng established the direction of China's foreign policy as 'independence, autonomy and no alliance' (*duli zizhu qie zhenzheng de bujiemeng*). China's new policy direction was to be realized through the principle of 'four not, one comprehensive' (*sibuyiquan*): no alliance making, no isolation, no confrontation, no targeting of third countries, and the pursuit of foreign policy activities on all fronts (Tsai, 2011: 22).

Compared to Mao's strategy of playing off the superpowers to achieve China's policy space, Deng adopted a strategy that sought to keep both the US and Russia within arms length. In the 1980s, Deng made efforts towards the normalization of relations with

both Washington and Moscow. Against the backdrop of détente between the US and Soviet Union, Deng's move reflected Beijing's recognition of a semi-permanent bipolar international structure that would be jointly managed by Washington and Moscow. Once again, China adjusted its policy in response to changes in the international environment. Yet Deng misjudged the situation, as the bipolar structure collapsed in 1989 and pushed China onto the world stage as the next rising star.

Chinese pragmatism and the shaping of regional community

Perhaps the strongest support for China's pragmatism in the new century is Beijing's treatment of Sino-US relations and the China threat theory. Despite arguments to the contrary, besides minor glitches in the relationship between China and the US, bilateral relations generally moved towards stability. Since the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995–96, Beijing and Washington have settled for a period of time without meeting at the brink of war. Sino-US relations began to change again after Washington's announcement to pivot towards Asia in 2009.¹⁰

A widely accepted explanation for the temporary peace in Sino-US relations since the mid-1990s is that China has come to see sustained economic development as a national priority. In the new century, China's leadership repeatedly made open statements about the importance of 'strategic opportunities' for the development of China.¹¹ With many domestic problems at its heels, China needs a peaceful surrounding environment that allows it to deal with the challenges. In other words, China needs an environment that does not give rise to external challenges that would exacerbate existing problems (Zhao, 2011).

In response to the general anxiety over China's potential threat, Beijing introduced the concepts of peaceful rise, harmonious worldview (*hexie shijieguan*), and good neighbor policy (*mulin waijiao*).¹² A closer examination of these concepts reveals a pragmatic strategy at work.

Regardless of whether China's promotion of peaceful intentions created adverse effects to the contrary, by openly addressing the issue of motivations behind its increasing power, China is essentially confronting the skeptics while rallying for international support. Conversely, an alternative strategy to respond to doubts through

¹⁰ For a discussion of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, see Ross (2000).

¹¹ See Bijian (2005).

¹² The harmonious worldview and good neighbor policy are adopted with the goal of neutralizing the effects of the China threat theory. The harmonious worldview has three basic points: (1) China would maintain multilateralism and realize common security; (2) China would maintain mutual benefit and cooperation and realize common prosperity; and (3) China would maintain the spirit of accommodation and jointly construct a harmonious world. On the other hand, China's good neighbor policy is made up of four key points: (1) negotiate peacefully to resolve border conflicts and improve relations with neighboring countries; (2) establish companion and cooperative relationships and advance cooperation in bilateral dialogue; (3) participate in multilateral diplomatic mechanisms and promote joint resolution of conflicts; and (4) strengthen economic and trade cooperation. For further discussions on China's harmonious strategy, see Chih-Chia (2007), Tsai *et al.* (2011).

denial or a rigid stance may cast China into the plot of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the making by confirming the skeptics.

China's pragmatism can be gleaned from the harmonious image it seeks to project. Despite economic growth, China continues to follow Deng Xiaoping's strategy of 'bidding one's time and hiding one's light under a bushel' (*taoguangyanghui*). If China's rise to great power status is only a matter of time, for Beijing, it is only logical that China hides its ambition and protects its development in the meantime. By using the imagery of harmony and calling forth the Chinese saying of 'treasuring harmony' (*yiheweigui*) through its various proposals, China succeeded in dismissing some qualms over its revisionism (Tsai *et al.*, 2011).

China has taken actions to support its ideas as something more than mere rhetoric. By entering into regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and ASEAN, Beijing has demonstrated itself as more willing to partake in multilateral negotiations.¹³ As gestures of good will, Beijing has also exported large amounts of cultural products and foreign aid abroad.¹⁴ In terms of community building, participation in regional cooperation and the export of cultural products and aid reinforce China's proposal for a harmonious world.

However, the concept of an harmonious worldview may be interpreted differently depending on the perception towards China. A benevolent perception of China may lead to the conclusion that Beijing is en route to the path towards the establishment of community, as 'harmony' is a collective concept that can only be realized by the group. On the other hand, a more critical perception of China may find linkage between the façade of harmony and a revisionist's real ambitions towards hegemony. History is rife with examples of political rhetoric and stories of the Trojan Horse. At the intersection of both interpretations lays China's pragmatism. By leaving space for alternative interpretations on China's foreign policy, Beijing achieves the flexibility to adjust its strategy depending on the changing environment while keeping the international community in a state of speculation.

China's strategy in East Asia: position and policy towards regional integration

Whether in terms of historic memory, landmass, population, or rising economic power, China cannot be dismissed from the process of integration in East Asia. For China, East Asia is also the key to whether it can continue to push forward its development (Mori, 2006). Yet as some observers point out, only after the mid-1990s did China begin to accept the concept of 'region' and display its interest in the integration

¹³ For discussions on China's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, see Cheng (2011), Ming-Te and Hsin-Chi (2011), Sheives (2006).

¹⁴ For discussions on China's soft power, see Kurlantzick (2007), Nam and Ho (2008), Paradise (2009), Glaser and Murphy (2009), Tsai and Ming-Te (2009), Ming-Te and Chih-Wei (2009).

movement in East Asia (Foot, 1997: 239). As late as 1999, Beijing did not expose any systematic views towards the Asian economy and regional security (Pang, 2001).

After the Asian financial crisis transformed relations between China and East Asian countries, China proclaimed its aspiration to become a 'responsible power in the international community' while putting forth the 'new security concept'. Based on the aphorism 'mutual trust, mutual benefits, equality and cooperation' (*huxin, huli, pingdeng, xiezuo*), China's new policy emphasizes the resolution of conflicts through dialogue and cooperation (Li and Xu, 2006: 53). China's actions not only enabled the country to move out of isolation, it also received the opportunity to initiate institutional cooperation (Yahuda, 2005: 347). China's position and policy towards East Asian integration consists of the following aspects.

Short-term strategy: caution and conservatism

Although China's foreign policy seems to be moving away from Deng Xiaoping's (1993) 'bide our time and hide our light under a bushel' (*taoguangyanghui*) strategy towards 'accomplishment and making a difference' (*yousuozuowei*), its regional policy continues to be relatively conservative. As China's Premier Wen Jiabao stated, 'even though China's comprehensive capability has made sizeable increase and its international status continues to rise, China is still a developing country and a equal member of the big Asia family ... with the greatest sincerity, determination and confidence, together with countries of East Asia, China will make relentless efforts towards the realization of common development, continued development and harmonious development'.¹⁵ Regarding regional integration, China continues to support an 'ASEAN centered' approach. At the ASEAN summit meeting in 1997, China openly proclaimed its support for ASEAN's leading role in regional integration.

Mid-term strategy: strengthen subregional cooperation

In the mid-term, China's goal is to strengthen subregional cooperation. In Northeast Asia, China took advantage of the political détente at the turn of the century and agreed on the 'progress report of trilateral cooperation' and 'action plan for trilateral cooperation' with Japan and Korea in 2004.¹⁶ Beijing hoped cooperation with Tokyo and Seoul could serve as a stepping stone towards the development of a regional consensus (Yang, 2005: 128). In Southeast Asia, following the initiation of free trade negotiations in 2002 and the adoption of an early harvest plan and agreements on trade in goods

¹⁵ 'Wenjiabao chuxi disijie dongyafenghui' (Wen Jiabao Attends Fourth Annual East Asia Summit). Available at: <http://big5.fmprc.gov.cn/gate/big5/www1.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/ziliao/zt/dnzt/wenjiabaodongyahuiyi/t622430.htm>.

¹⁶ Progress towards the relaxing of tensions include: China–Japan Joint Declaration (1998); Moscow Declaration on Establishing a Creative Partnership between Japan and the Russian Federation (1998); North–South (Korea) Joint Declaration (2000); Ulaanbaatar Declaration between Russia and Mongolia (2000); Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship (2001); Moscow Declaration between Russia and North Korea (2001); Russia–DPRK Treaty of Friendship (2002); Japan–Russia Action Plan (2002).

and services afterwards, China's relations with the region reached a new level with the realization of the ACFTA in 2010.¹⁷ Beijing currently holds ambitions to further integrate Asia through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

*Long-term strategy: soft power*¹⁸

In the long term, China seemed to be keen on harnessing its soft power towards the realization of regional integration (Yang and Guo, 2008; Tsai and Hung, 2008; Lu and Teng, 2008). Particularly in the case of East Asia, in terms of cooperation, improving policy transparency and establishing related conflict management mechanisms have become important considerations to take into account for policy makers (Dosch, 2003: 45). Traditional realpolitik strategies based on coercion have become poor policy choices for regional integration. The change in thinking towards international relations provides the reason for China's adoption of a good neighbor policy and a three neighbors (*sanlin*) policy of 'be harmonious, pacify and enrich thy neighbor' (*mulin, anlin, fulin*).

China's increasing soft power can be gauged from the cultural and language learning fever known as 'zhongguore' and the continued expansion of Confucius Institutes across the world. According to the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*hanban*), the official department in charge of the promotion of Chinese studies abroad, by 2010 China had established 322 Confucius Institutes and 369 Confucius Classrooms spanning 87 countries.¹⁹ The use of soft power reinforces China's proposal for a harmonious world.

Sino-Japanese relations remain the main challenge

As East Asia's strongest economies, differences in strategic goals cannot dismiss the importance of China and Japan's role in regional integration (Ma and Liu, 2004; Zhang, 2006; Ding, 2006). Particularly in terms of the development of 'Asianism' or the basis of communal thought, from Sun Yat-sen's pan-Asianism to Yoshida Shoin, Okakura Tenshin and the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, it is clear that both China and Japan played important intellectual roles in the past (Xu, 2007). After the Democratic Party of Japan (*minshu to*) entered office in 2009, Sino-Japanese relations seemed to turn towards reconciliation, as Tokyo subsequently adopted a more friendly China policy and changed its previous policy of 'pro America, exit Asia' to 'pro America, enter Asia'. However, the implications of China and Japan's leadership change in 2012 for

¹⁷ The ACFTA has yet to be fully initiated for Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam (CMLV).

¹⁸ Despite clear examples of China's soft power at work in recent years, readers should also note that contrary examples demonstrating China's challenge to regional security exist as well. This point brings out the debate between China's peaceful rise and challenge to international order. The authors make reference to the debate in the section on Chinese pragmatism in the article. See note 8 for further elaborations.

¹⁹ Hanban, 'Guanyu kongzixueyuan ketang' (About Confucius Institute and Classroom) Available at: http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node_10961.htm.

bilateral relations remain to be observed. Shinzo Abe, the newly elected prime minister of Japan, has already expressed the country's will to regain its economic and political status in East Asia. China remains vigilant towards Japan.

China's changing role in East Asian integration

In terms of regional integration, a state usually has four main policy options or roles to choose from: status quo, agenda setting, balancing, and revisionism. China's experience in regional integration since the 1990s demonstrates a progression through the four roles. In the aftermath of the Cold War, China kept to the regional status quo and supported an integration model centered on ASEAN. China did not begin to seek a stronger agenda setting and balancing role until the 2000s and beyond. This section reviews China's changing role in regional integration over the past two decades and seeks to provide insights to China's potential role in the near future.

Gradual participation under status quo (1991–1997)

In the post Cold War period, China took the initiative to normalize relations with East Asia and re-establish interactions with both Northeast and Southeast Asia (Qiao, 2006; Qin and Wei, 2008). In the process, China accepted the ASEAN model and its principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs. On the other hand, China also participated in both track one and track two institutions of APEC and ARF and supported APEC and ASEAN's role as agenda setters. Beijing's gradual re-entry into East Asia generated the base for further interactions between China and ASEAN. In 1995, China and ASEAN commenced the first round of senior official meetings and, in 1996, ASEAN upgraded China's negotiating status from 'partner' to 'comprehensive dialogue partner'. In Northeast Asia, despite Japan's participation in the ranks of criticism against China after the Tiananmen Square incident, exchange visits by high level military officials in 1995 reopened the gate of exchange between China and Japan.²⁰ Keeping to the status quo helped to increase the confidence of East Asian states towards Beijing.

Active participation under status quo (1997–2002)

Regardless of debates, the 1997 Asian financial crisis greatly influenced the distribution of power in Asia and served as a critical turning point for the development of China–ASEAN relations (Chen, 2001: 55–58). As a result of China's decision to uphold its currency during the crisis, Southeast Asian countries avoided further economic downturns. China–ASEAN relations moved forward in huge strides after the Asian financial crisis. As former ASEAN Secretary Rodolfo Severino points out,

²⁰ Japan's Minister of Defense first visited China in 1987 and initiated bilateral military exchange. Exchange stopped due to the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 and was not revived until Joint Chief of Staff to Japan's Self Defense Force visited China in 1995. China and Japan realized official military exchange in 1998.

'China is emerging because of this kind of good will' (Kurlantzick, 2006: 7). In contrast, Southeast Asia began to inch away from the US Washington's unilateralist foreign policy style under the Bush administration, and financial conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) contributed in no small part to Southeast Asia's adjustment (Tsai, 2011: 86; Sutter, 2008). Washington's missteps provided Beijing with a window of opportunity to actively push forward relations with Southeast Asia.

Beginning in 1999, China and Southeast Asia made a number of agreements concerning a range of issues. In 2000, China suggested the 'ten plus one' proposal after ASEAN made the 'ten plus three' proposal. In 2002, following China and ASEAN's agreement to establish a free trade area, both parties signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. In 2003, China became the first major power outside Southeast Asia to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. However, while China's relationship with Southeast Asia warmed, Japan sought better relations with its neighbors as well. The Koizumi administration's active approach towards East Asia increased the level of competition and antagonism between China and Japan (Li, 2005: 236–238). Sino-Japanese competition gave ASEAN the opportunity to continue to play the unique role of manning the steering wheel of regional integration (Liu, 2007).

Seeking the role of agenda setter (2003–2009)

Although many Chinese scholars do not entertain the idea of China increasing its interest in regional integration in a short period of time (Shao, 2008), since 2003 not only has China increased the level of participation in regional cooperation, developments also suggest that China is moving towards the role of an agenda setter. Beijing had a clear goal: gradually integrate East Asia into an economic community structured around the mainland. An economic community centered on China could in turn serve as the foundation for endeavors towards regional leadership or global hegemony. The Boao Forum for Asia is a good example of China's changing role.

At the 2004 Boao Forum, China's President Hu Jintao (2004) proposed five points for cooperation and development with Asian states: advance friendship, trust and good neighborliness; expand and deepen bilateral economic cooperation; increase the speed of regional economic integration; promote cultural interaction and personnel exchange; and facilitate security dialogue and military-to-military exchange.²¹ At the 2007 Boao Forum, Wu Bangguo, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, further proposed the concept of 'New Asia' (*xinxing yazhou*) grounded on 'efforts to expand regional integration, protect the environment, encourage technical innovation and build a harmonious continent'.²²

²¹ See Jintao (2004).

²² 'Zhongguo tichu xinxing yazhou yinqi gongmin' (China's Proposal of New Asia Gains Resonance). Available at: http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2007-04/22/content_6012384.htm.

On the other hand, in Southeast Asia, Beijing also demonstrated a stronger interest in agenda setting. Besides raising a number of proposals at the APT meeting in 2003, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao followed up in 2004 with several additional proposals for the establishment of a free trade area in East Asia. In 2005, China's Ministry of Commerce repeated China's desire for the establishment of a free trade area in East Asia.

Towards a balancer or potential candidate for regional hegemony (2010 –)

It is apparent from the previous description that increased economic power provided China with the energy and confidence to participate in the international community. The Asian financial crisis provided an opportunity for China to reshape regional order in East Asia and strengthen its own role in regional integration. Many observers have come to recognize China's development towards great power status as an inevitable phenomenon (Wang *et al.*, 2009; Men, 2009). Conclusion of numerous agreements for cooperation between China and ASEAN stimulated a wave of free trade negotiations from Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India, many of which sensed the danger of being left out of the race. Realization of the ACFTA in 2010 hints at the possibility for structural change in East Asia. The key lies in whether China passively exploits the opportunity by playing a balancing role among the US, Japan, and ASEAN, or actively pursues a strong leadership role in the region.

Conclusion: China's potential influence and the prospect for East Asian integration

In the past two decades, East Asia has made much progress in regional integration to become one of the most exciting regions for research on the topic. Up to this day, unofficial character, joint understanding, and open regionalism continue to define East Asian integration (Solingen, 2005: 32–38). While economic globalization provides the driving force for continued integration in East Asia, political and historical disputes continue to push the interest of states apart and leave the region in a situation of uncertainty (Kim, 2004). As Bowles and Gintis (2002) point out, the formation of community is difficult when the conflict of interest between states is severe and much easier when the conflict of interest is limited.

Regarding the future of East Asian integration, we may draw several insights from the forgoing discussion. In the short term, regardless of Sino-Japanese competition for regional influence, ASEAN may remain as the center of regional integration in East Asia. ASEAN may continue to provide guidance for integration in the region. In the middle term, China may compete with Japan over leadership in regional integration. As the leading bird of the flying geese model and the force calling for regional integration since the 1980s, Japan retains an unquestionable role in the future of East Asia. However, in recent years, China seems to have overshadowed Japan's status due to its economic rise. Sino-Japanese relations remains a key variable in East Asian integration. In the long term, the multilayered integration network of East Asia may offer states more policy

choices while supranational and non-governmental networks continue to reshape the identity base of East Asia. The formation of a community in East Asia is hinged upon the continuing wave of globalization and regionalization and Northeast Asia's achievement of some sort of balance of power.

In terms of China's future development, there are two aspects worth noting. First, we should make note of China's growing regional discourse and leadership role in East Asia. In the face of China's rise, not only did the US begin to adopt policy change near the end of the George W. Bush administration,²³ after Koizumi's departure from office in 2006, Japan also began to redefine its relationship with China through summits to 'break the ice' (*po bing*) and 'melt the ice' (*rong bing*). As the US–Japan alliance has long been the main obstacle in China's search for influence in East Asia, both Washington and Tokyo's change in attitude may provide Beijing an opportunity to adjust the status quo.

Second, following from the first point, we should consider the possibility of China reshaping the East Asia system. As China's influence begins to permeate East Asia, it may be worthy for us to ponder over Beijing's potential to establish a 'regional system with Chinese characteristics'. As China traditionally served as the center of East Asia and projected its influence through the tributary system and a rich cultural tradition, whether China is inclined towards adopting policies that are based on different assumptions from the West remains an important question to be observed.

About the authors

Dr. Tsai Tung-Chieh is Professor and Chair at the Graduate Institute of International Politics, National Chung Hsing University. He is also Director of the Center for Contemporary China Studies at NCHU. His areas of specialization include Chinese foreign policy, Japanese foreign policy, East Asian political economy and the history of international relations. He is the author of several books on Chinese foreign policy (in Chinese) and more than one hundred journal articles and book chapters on East Asia international relations. His most recent publications include: *Dilemma of Choice: China's Response to Climate Change* (co-author, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*) and *China's Relations with Latin America* (co-author, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Chinese Foreign Policy*).

Tony Tai-Ting Liu is a Doctoral Candidate at the Graduate Institute of International Politics, National Chung Hsing University. He has a M.A. from the same institute and received his B.A. in international relations from the University of British Columbia. He was a visiting fellow at the European Research Center on Contemporary Taiwan, University of Tübingen. He is currently Adjunct Lecturer in international relations at Chaoyang University of Technology. His research interests include Chinese foreign policy, Japanese foreign policy and East Asia political economy.

²³ See 'Zoellick, 'Stakeholder' Concept Offers New Direction for US–China Relations'. Available at: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200601/25/eng20060125_238050.html.

He has contributed to journals and volumes including *The Ashgate Research Companion to Chinese Foreign Policy*, *USAK Yearbook of International Politics and Law*, *Journal of Central Asia and Caucasian Studies* and *Review of Global Politics*.

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