China Eyes ASEAN: Evolving Multilateralism

Gerald Chan

Abstract
What are the Chinese views on Asian multilateralism? To answer this question, this article uses a fresh perspective—social evolution—to look at China’s engagement with ASEAN. It aims to identify the mechanisms of change that trigger the major shifts in the bilateral relationship between China and ASEAN. It examines the nature of these mechanisms of change, traces their origins and assesses their impact. The article argues in favour of adopting a social evolutionary approach to study the China–ASEAN relationship along with the existing theoretical approaches of realism, liberalism and constructivism. Hopefully the article helps to shed some light on the puzzling dilemma of multilateralism versus bilateralism that China faces in dealing with ASEAN over trade and investments, political balancing and territorial disputes.

Keywords
China, ASEAN, multilateralism, good-neighbourly policy, social evolution

Dealing with neighbouring countries ‘should have a three-dimensional, multi-element perspective, beyond time and space’.

Xi Jinping, 25 October 2013

Introduction
How does China see multilateralism, as a process and as a policy? As a process of global development, China is a late comer to multilateralism. It was only after the country had adopted its reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s that it began to engage actively with the outside world, in terms of participation in the
activities of international organizations and in terms of signing and ratifying international treaties. China’s involvement in this process is ongoing, with increasing intensity and velocity as China rises in power, economically, politically and militarily. In such involvement, China is seen to be offering opportunities to other countries to help them with their development, while at the same time posing challenges and threats to them. This is more so in the Asia-Pacific region, where China looms large as a regional power in comparison with its position in other parts of the world. It has, however, emphasized the importance of forging a good-neighbourly policy in dealing with its neighbours (ibid.; also see China Daily, 2013).

As a policy to guide the conduct of its foreign policy, China is concerned with finding a rightful place for itself in the world, a place where it can feel comfortable for extending its international activities. It is eager to be seen as a power on a peaceful rise and development, posing no threats to others. It wants to be seen as a responsible member of the world community. It wants to develop and modernise itself in order to catch up with the rich countries of the world, having lost its opportunity and its ability to do so as a result of the so-called One Hundred Years of National Humiliation (from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s) when China came under a kind of semi-colonialism and imperialism at the hands of Western countries and Japan, and then as a consequence of civil wars fought between the nationalists and the communists and of nationwide revolutions such as the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. China’s good-neighbourly policy aims to reassure Asian countries of its peaceful intentions. However, its increasingly confident and assertive behaviour, especially when dealing with its disputes with neighbouring countries over the sovereignty of some islands in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, has tarnished its peaceful image before the eyes of its neighbours. These Asian neighbours want to maintain good trade and investment relations with China, on the one hand, but, on the other, they harbour serious doubts and reservations about China’s military intentions and behaviour in the region. How to unravel the complex multilateral relationships between China and the ASEAN countries, the latter as a group or as individual countries, has become a serious problem for decision-makers on all sides involved and beyond. Added to this complexity is the so-called pivot or rebalancing of American interests and presence to Asia. To understand these relationships, this article proposes to use a social evolutionary approach to capture their essence.

The article proceeds with an overview of the theoretical approaches that have been commonly employed by analysts to study China–ASEAN relations. These include realism, liberalism and constructivism. It then suggests the use of social evolution as a means to thrash out the complex relationships between China and ASEAN. The word ‘China’ is often used here as a shorthand term to refer to the Chinese government, although non-state actors based in China, including prominent individuals, groups and networks, are sometimes at work in shaping the relationships as well. Here they are assumed to be falling under the strong influence of the state. These non-state actors will only be identified when they make a significant impact on the relationships.
Competing Approaches: In Search of Greater Explanatory Power

For several decades since the end of the Second World War, politics in Asia in general and China’s relations with Southeast Asia in particular have been seen mainly from the angle of realism, with power politics as the central focus, with the balance of power among states as the analytical framework, and with the struggle for state building as the national preoccupation. This is so, especially immediately after the War when countries in the region struggled for independence in the phase of decolonization. The process of state-building has been ongoing ever since. With the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, international politics in Asia has partly gravitated from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia; ASEAN has become the centrepiece of Asian international relations and organization. Scholars have begun to make greater use of liberalism and liberal institutionalism to explain the integration of Asia based on the pulling forces of ASEAN, including the process of membership expansion of the organization and its regional and international outreach. Other countries such as China, Japan, South Korea and even India, Australia and the US are now being partially pulled towards ASEAN in the process of Asian regionalism. In the case of China, it is an active participant of ASEAN + 3, the East Asian Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and other organizations (see Figure 1). Asian liberalism and integration have been compared to the idea and practice of liberalism and later on neoliberalism in the West. The integration in Europe provides a shining example for ASEAN to emulate. The growth of Asian values, following closely on the heels of Asia’s economic rise, in particular the hyper-growth performance of the so-called flying geese formation led by Japan and the four emerging economies of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, has been highlighted since the 1980s; and Asian institutionalism has been seen as a more consensual outcome than a legalistic or institutionalized one. Constructivism, finding its way as a rising academic discourse in the US to spread its influence to Southeast Asia, helped by large research grants from the Asian Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation, has generated a substantive amount of research outputs by scholars in Singapore and then in other Southeast Asian countries.2 These theoretical approaches, especially realism, have laid the foundation for further efforts made to exert their influences on the academic discussions of international relations of Asia, both within Asia and outside. Constructivism seems to have waned somewhat these days in the study of the international relations of Southeast Asia, but realism and liberalism have become quite embedded and strong.

My take of social evolution as a complementary approach or even an alternative approach to study China’s relations with ASEAN tries to generate something different, something new to our understanding of multilateralism at work in this region. My starting point is Charles Darwin’s theory of biological evolution, which postulates that biological changes occur over a long period of time in which the strong survives over the weak in a continuous process of natural adaptation,
Applying this theory to the study of social change, the global social world could then be seen as a huge social laboratory in which actors evolve through incremental changes over a long period of time in a process of adaptation, selection and elimination. In international relations (IR), scholars have, from time to time, used evolutionary biology to explain changes in war and conflict (Lebow, 2013; also see Thompson, 2001, p. 13, note 1). In 2004 Bradley Thayer argues in his book, entitled *Darwin and International Relations* (Thayer, 2004), that “humans wage war for reasons predicted by evolutionary theory—to gain and protect vital resources” (ibid., front flap). More recently, Professor Tang Shiping of Fudan University, Shanghai, has revived the search of a grand theory of IR by spearheading an effort to pick the wisdom of the theory of social evolution in order to offer a powerful explanation of the systemic transformation of international politics, side-lining existing theories of realism, liberalism and constructivism (Tang, 2013). He argues that these three theories only offer partial explanations
and that the so-called debates between realism and liberalism are shadowy as these
two theories seek to explain social phenomena in different transitional periods. He
explains how the nasty and brutish Hobbesian world or offensive realism has self-
transformed to become a world of defensive realism from 1648 (the Treaty of
Westphalia) to 1945 (the end of the Second World War), and how some regions of
the world have turned to a more peaceful and rule-based system after 1945.
Likewise, other scholars who are not so happy with the existing efforts to theorise
IR also try to do something different. Daniel Levine, for example, endeavours to
extricate himself as an analyst from the present quagmire of IR theorizing to posi-
tion himself in another space, imaginary or otherwise, and then look at the world
not from a position in this world that we are accustomed to and familiar with, but
from that particular space that he has chosen to position himself, thus challenging
all existing IR theories from a detached and different angle never tried before, in
the hope of, in his own words, ‘recovering IR’ (Levine, 2012).

In 1998, William R. Thompson of Indiana University organized a conference
to take stock of the evolutionary approach to world politics. His effort led to the
Thompson and his colleague, George Modelski of the University of Washington,
highlight several major characteristics of this approach. These include, first of
all, the feature that the approach is highly flexible, involving multiple actors
working at multiple levels. Second, the approach embraces increasing complex-
ity in social relations and international relations, interdependence and co-
evoluting subsystems. Third, the approach is marked by modesty in forecasting
international events. Fourth, it is based on a human–species approach. Finally,
it is based on time and change (Thompson, 2001, pp. 2, 17–18). Modelski further
says that the approach, by necessity, adopts evolutionary concepts such as
mechanisms of change and social-selection mechanisms. These mechanisms
include cooperation, reinforcement, mutation/innovation and social-learning
processes. To him, political evolutionary process needs to relate to other evolu-
tionary processes, be they biological or social, in order to achieve greater
explanatory power. So far, the application of social evolution to international
relations has been relatively rare.3 Thompson and his colleagues, however, have
made some preliminary attempts to apply such an approach to the study of
selective cases of inter-state rivalries such as the Sino-Soviet split and the con-
lict between Israel and the Palestinian state and also to the study of some
specific cases of financial crisis in international political economy. In his book
on Darwin and International Relations (Thayer, 2004), Thayer applies in a
meticulous way biological evolution to explain causes of war and conflict.
He sums up evolutionary theory in four essential features: (a) animal behaviour
is the result of its genes and its environment; (b) neither genes nor environment
is fixed over time; (c) a species is the sum of adaptations to survive; and
(d) humans are animals (Thayer, 2004, pp. x–xi).

I borrow the idea of social evolution mainly from Thayer, Thompson and Tang,
and try to use it to evaluate the sources, formation and change of China’s relations
with ASEAN, juxtaposing such evaluation with similar evaluations made by
realism, liberalism and constructivism. The result is shown in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Realism</th>
<th>Liberalism</th>
<th>Constructivism</th>
<th>Social Evolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Shared interests</td>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature</strong></td>
<td>Struggle for power</td>
<td>Collective action</td>
<td>Perceptions of power</td>
<td>Mechanisms of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal</strong></td>
<td>Maximization of national interests</td>
<td>Mutual benefits</td>
<td>Perceived goals, shared or divergent</td>
<td>Actor survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit of analysis</strong></td>
<td>States</td>
<td>States and non-state actors, including international organizations and individuals</td>
<td>States and non-state actors (as perceived)</td>
<td>Multiple actors in the political, economic, and social worlds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of analysis</strong></td>
<td>Inter-state</td>
<td>Formal and informal; multiple; cross-level</td>
<td>Self vs others</td>
<td>Multiple; cross-level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drivers of international actions</strong></td>
<td>(Near) absolute material gains</td>
<td>Relative material and non-material gains</td>
<td>Status, identity and learning</td>
<td>Adaptation, selection and elimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relations between China and ASEAN</strong></td>
<td>ASEAN as ten individual states or in smaller groups of states, interacting with China based on national interests</td>
<td>ASEAN as a collective regime, working with China to promote public goods and tackle common problems</td>
<td>Perception matters in the convergence or divergence of norms</td>
<td>Transformation through social experimentation*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Author’s own.

**Note:** *The idea of China experimenting with multilateralism, especially involving developing countries, has been aptly examined by Sohn, 2012. This experimentation can be likened to adaptation in practice, as admonished by Deng Xiaoping, China’s former top leader, in his famous analogies of ‘the white cat, the black cat’ (白猫黑猫) and of ‘crossing the river by feeling the stones’ (摸着石头过河). Deng was well known for his experimentation with the setting up of special economic zones in southern China during the 1980s under the reform and opening-up policy.*
While evolution biologists can use relevant excavated fossils to serve as evidence to affirm or refute their theories, in social and political science, however, it would often be very difficult for researchers to come up with ‘hard’ evidence from human and state behaviour to test their hypotheses. A lot of theorising in international relations has been done by circumstantial evidence through induction or deduction, based on logics and reasoning. Professor Shu-Yun Ma of the Chinese University of Hong Kong has questioned the seriousness of transferring the methodological approach of evolution from natural science to social science. He examines four types of correspondence between the two branches of science, in descending order of their degree of intensity of correspondence from high to low: identity, homology, analogy and metaphor. He suggests that the knowledge transfer of evolution from natural science to social science is done at best at the metaphorical level. However, he is of the opinion that even at this very low level of correspondence, there is still scientific value embedded in the use of metaphors that warrants such academic pursuit (Shu-Yun Ma, 2014). Professor Ma tries to push the frontier of knowledge by pointing out that, in natural (biological) science, the mutation of genes exists as a scientific evidence to support biological evolution; however, he questions what the gene for historical institutionalism would be. He suggests that the constitution or the charter of international institutions could be taken as the ‘gene’ of institutions. The revision or modification of the constitution or charter of institutions can then be seen as a process of social evolution, likened to the mutation of genes in natural evolution, adaptation and selection in biology. To widen the search for the ‘genes’ of institutions, one could also consider the rules and norms that help to shape the behaviour of states and institutions.

In comparison with realist, liberalist and constructivist approaches to the study of international relations, social evolution offers an alternative path that is more holistic and comprehensive in explaining changes and trends of development over a long period of time. This holistic approach tends to have a higher probability of avoiding the understanding of social phenomena through piecemeal observations under different circumstances in different and largely segregated periods of time. These piecemeal observations often lead to partial images of reality, similar to the situation depicted by the famous Indian parable of the five blind men touching different parts of an elephant, eventually leading them to conclude what the mammal looks like through their individual touch and imagination. At the sake of oversimplification: while realism emphasizes the importance of the struggle among nations for power and interests within an anarchical environment in explaining state behaviour, liberalism highlights the importance of mutual help and the creation of public goods in bringing countries to work together, and constructivism stresses the significance of perception and the social construction of realism; social evolution, on the other hand, captures well the making and changing of identities over a long period of time. In international studies, social evolution pitches at a level of abstraction and generalization that is much higher than the other three theories. Hence, social evolution tends to possess greater explanatory power covering a wider range of issues over a longer period of time. The down-side of social evolution, however, is that it would be much more difficult to
falsify its theoretical arguments, thus decreasing its scientific values in a Popperean sense. The other three theories themselves have, of course, their differences in terms of levels of abstraction and degrees of falsifiability, which have been well discussed and documented by scholars within the discipline of international relations, especially in the area of theorization.5

Engaging ASEAN: China’s Steep Learning Curve in Multilateralism

To China, Southeast Asia presents a challenging case for its foreign relations. Southeast Asia is a region of diverse cultures and traditions close to China in geography and history. China’s relations with the region predate the foundation of the modern state under the Westphalia system in the seventeenth-century Europe and the foundation some two centuries ago of the USA, the current sole superpower of the world. The system of rules and norms that governed China’s relations with Southeast Asia in traditional times carries lingering legacies that sometimes go beyond the confines of the principles of the modern inter-state system, principles such as state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. As the longest-surviving civilization on earth, how China adjusts its way of viewing Southeast Asia and behaving towards ASEAN—a relatively young organization, about 50 years old—has not been a simple, straightforward task.

The reform and opening up of China in 1978 ushered in a new era of China’s practice of multilateralism, which has impacted immensely on China’s relations with ASEAN. Since then China has started to increase its participation substantially in global affairs by signing and ratifying a large number of international treaties. This is in stark contrast to the situation under Chairman Mao Zedong before his death in 1976. The record from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that from 1949 to 2006, the country had signed or ratified 278 treaties,6 the majority of which were done in 1979 and after (the number of treaties in this regard is 241, representing 87 per cent of the total number of treaties acceded to by China from 1949 to 2006), while only 37 treaties were signed or ratified from 1949 to 1978, representing only 13 per cent of the total up to 2006.

The majority of China’s memberships of international organizations can be found in the Asia-Pacific region, with a strong concentration in Southeast Asia. China’s interactions with the ASEAN group of countries form the basis of China’s Asian-wide relations, so much so ASEAN has been regarded by some keen observers as the driving force of Asian international relations7 (Figure 1 shows a clear ASEAN focus of Asian regionalism). This situation poses a stark contrast to Northeast Asia where regional integration has been moving slowly and has come in fits and starts because of the long and deep political rivalries among China, Japan and Korea, both North and South. The Yearbook of International Organizations, 2013–14 (Union of International Associations, 2013) shows that as of 2012 China is a member of 1956 ‘major’ international organizations,8 of which 53 are intergovernmental organizations and 1903 are international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Of these 1956 major organizations, 881 are
regionally based, most of which are INGOs found in Asia. Of course, the number of membership of organizations tells only one, small side of the story, the kind of membership and the quality of activities (or the frequency and intensity with which China interacts with other members of the organizations in terms of monetary, personnel and policy contributions) count a lot more when assessing the substance of relationship. In this way, China’s increasing amount and improving quality of interactions with the ASEAN group of countries represent the core multilateral interactions in the Asian region.

China has good reasons to get close to ASEAN, for reasons of geographical proximity, historical ties, and for reasons of its drive to secure natural resources from the region and to develop trade with it. In fact, before China reached out to the outside world beyond its immediate neighbourhood, it had strong links with Southeast Asia through trade, fishing activities and human migration. The so-called maritime silk-road through this region formed a hub of intense business activities and cultural interchanges well before the arrival of Western colonialism and imperialism that has since changed the fabric of regional development. State-building in Asia, including gaining independence shortly after the Second World War, has continued up to this day, the process of which has generated problems of sovereignty protection and disputes over territorial possessions, a process resulting from a transition from a tributary relationship between China and many of its neighbouring countries in traditional times to the equality among states defined by sovereignty and territorial boundaries in the modern era. In some cases, the way decolonization was handled or mishandled has sowed the seeds for many disputes over sovereignty and territories in the region today. The process has also produced opportunities for cooperation among states to produce common goods in the region as well. The formation of ASEAN consisting of the five founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) in 1967 came about out of their own awareness and initiatives to protect their relatively young statehood against the encroachment of communism from China through Indochina, including Vietnam. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the changing political landscape in Asia eventually led to the expansion of ASEAN to its current membership of ten (the founding five plus Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) by 1999. The strategic focus of the group has changed from its original goal of a collective defence against communism to the now comprehensive security concerns based relatively much more on economics and trade than on defence and political alignment. This evolution of an ASEAN focus on defence to one on the promotion of regional public goods has occurred in the 1970s and 1980s when China and the US embarked on a process of rapprochement.

Two major forces continue to drive the development of Sino-ASEAN relations. One is politico-strategic in nature and the other is economic in nature. In terms of economics, both China and ASEAN have been rising fast, individually and in addition to the strengthening of their bilateral as well as multilateral trading and investment ties. China is at present the largest trade partner for ASEAN, while ASEAN is the third-largest trade partner for China after the EU and the US. From 2002 to 2012, China–ASEAN trade climbed 23.6 per cent annually to US$400 billion, and mutual investments reached over $100 billion by the end of 2012.
People’s Daily Online). The two sides set a target for increasing two-way trade to one trillion US dollars by 2020 (ibid.). Both China and the ASEAN countries have benefited from this economic relationship, even in the face of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and the global financial crisis of 2008–2009. Interestingly, in 2013, foreign direct investments (FDI) to the ASEAN countries surpassed that to China for the first time. The FDI to the ASEAN five (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) grew five-fold from 2001 to US$128.4 billion; in comparison, China attracted only US$117.6 billion after peaking at $124 billion in 2011.

The importance of the politico-strategic dimension has been highlighted in part by the increasing economic and strategic relevance of Southeast Asia to China. Robert Kaplan’s recently-published book entitled Asia’s Cauldron pointed out that some 60,000 vessels a year pass through the Straits of Malacca, including tankers holding 13 billion barrels of petroleum. According to Kaplan, the South China Sea’s fish stocks may account for as much as 10 per cent of global landed catch, in addition to potential oil and gas reserves (ibid.; Kaplan, 2014, p. 10). The dispute over the sovereignty of some small groups of islands in the South China Sea represents the primary politico-strategic concern of the bilateral relationship between China and ASEAN—the second driving force. While China has professed its peaceful intentions and its preference for using dialogues to discuss joint development of resources to resolve the dispute, it has repeatedly stated its claim over the sovereignty of these islands and stressed its determination to defend such claim. China’s increasing naval presence in the region and its declared Air Defence Identification Zone in late 2013 do little to allay the fears of China among its neighbours. The tacit open welcome by Southeast Asian countries to the US pivot or rebalance to Asia is no coincidence. During President Barak Obama’s visit to four Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines) in April 2014, a Malaysia analyst said it well: ‘Malaysia can [side] with China economically but with the US on security.’ Most other countries in the Asia-Pacific region face a similar dilemma, to a greater or lesser extent. In a way, the US serves as a useful and effective balancer to China in the region, maintaining regional stability. Depending on different domestic conditions and international requirements, ASEAN countries, individually or collectively, adopt a policy towards China that contains a subtle mix of balancing (containment), bandwagoning (engagement) and hedging, either active hedging or hesitant hedging. This policy mix varies from one country to another and evolves in different ways over time (Jae Ho Chung, 2014). China has certainly a major problem on its hands in winning the trust, and the hearts and minds of its neighbours and in learning how to deal with the changing situations in Asia. While its Asian neighbours face the dilemma of striking a proper balance between trade and economic interests with China, on the one hand, and politico-strategic interests with the US, on the other, China too faces its own problem as to how to entice its neighbours while maintaining its hold on a rather rigid principle to settle territorial disputes. Overshadowing China’s intentions and behaviour towards ASEAN are the fundamental asymmetries between them in terms of physical size and power capability, which continue to pose a serious challenge to ASEAN–China relations (Kausikan, 2014).
China’s bilateral approach towards individual member states of the ASEAN group was born not only out of its general preference for dealing with foreign countries bilaterally but also out of its traditional approach towards solving problems with its neighbours that predates the development of the modern inter-state system. It has learned to deal with ASEAN in a more multilateral way only when ASEAN brings their members increasingly working together in a common course of action in conducting business of strategic importance with China. China realized the need to deal with ASEAN in a collective way rather than purely on an individual basis after the Tiananmen incidence in 1989, when it was subsequently isolated by the West because of its human rights suppression in the country.

According to Cheng-Chwee Kuik, a scholar based in Malaysia, China started to deal with ASEAN multilaterally in the 1990s. The approach has been driven by both the set-up of the international structure as well as by domestic regime legitimacy and survival, two forces that he refers to as *aussenpolitik* and *innenpolitik* (Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 2008), with some possible overlaps between the two. Such a binary take is naturally open to dispute, as there are different levels and aspects of these two forces at play as well as additional factors such as the role of perceptions and the dynamics of decision-making. Kuik, however, has rightly pointed out that China’s regional multilateralism towards ASEAN is part and parcel or an extension of its global multilateralism. Many of the rationales for taking a multilateral approach, such as the protection of its core values of regime survival, sovereign protection, territorial integrity and economic development, apply globally as well as regionally in the Asia-Pacific.

China’s former ambassador to ASEAN, Tong Xiaoling, has singled out three high points in China’s multilateral relations with the organization. These high points can be regarded as the major mechanisms of change in the social evolution of the relationship between China and ASEAN, as they mark some significant changes and improvements in the relations. As suggested by Professor Shu-Yun Ma, this kind of comparison between biological science and social science can be made metaphorically and it possesses some serious academic value (Shu-Yun Ma, 2014). The changes in the relationship between China and ASEAN as a result of these three high points can be compared, at least metaphorically, to the changes in the mutation of genes which alter the characteristics and behaviours of species.

The first high point is the visit in 1991 by Qian Qichen, the then Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister, to attend the opening session of the 24th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Kuala Lumpur. The visit marked the start of China’s dialogue with ASEAN. The second high point occurred in 1997 when China decided not to devalue its currency, the renminbi or yuan, at a time when ASEAN was facing financial crises and liquidity shortfalls, thus allowing the ASEAN group to recover economically more quickly than otherwise would be the case. On the strategic policy front, China developed in 1997 its ‘new security concept’ which embraced areas of high politics (defence and deterrence) as well as low politics (economic and social) from a comprehensive, flexible and multilateral perspective. This concept has laid the foundation stone for China to take multilateralism more seriously from then onwards, both at the global and regional level. The third high point was the establishment in 2003 of a strategic partnership for
peace and security between China and ASEAN, counting towards the twenty-first century. This event has since deepened cooperation between the two parties in many areas. China was not only the first country to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN, but also the first country outside of ASEAN to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2003 and the first to express unequivocal support to and recognition of the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty shortly after the treaty was announced by ASEAN in 1995. This recognition was accorded in subsequent years by the United States, France, Russia and the United Kingdom. China—ASEAN cooperation has now branched out to cover more than twenty areas including the economy and trade, agriculture and information. Table 2 summarizes the multilateral mechanisms involved in the cooperation between China and ASEAN.

China’s relations with ASEAN form part of China’s overall good-neighbourly relations with countries in Asia, including those in Northeast Asia, Central Asia and South Asia. How to link up China–ASEAN relations with other regional groups in which China plays an active part—groups such as the Boao Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, and the recently proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—would define China’s regional system-building in Asia. Professor Pang Zhongying of the Guangzhou-based Sun Yat-sen University (previously he was at Renmin University in Beijing) has hinted the formation of a concert of powers in Asia which would involve the US and other major powers in Asia to form a system which might maintain stability and peace in the region (Pang Zhongying, 2014). This concert of powers would assume some sort of

Table 2. Major Multilateral Mechanisms Joined by China and ASEAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mechanisms</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Year Est.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics and security</td>
<td>Declaration on the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea</td>
<td>China, ASEAN</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joint Declaration of ASEAN and China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues</td>
<td>China, ASEAN</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joint Declaration on the ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity</td>
<td>China, ASEAN</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ASEAN Regional Forum</td>
<td>27 countries, including China</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>East Asia Summit</td>
<td>18 countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, ASEAN, US</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Code of Conduct for Unplanned Sea Encounters

- **Countries**: 21 countries, including China, Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Japan, US
- **Year**: 2014

## Environmental protection

### Great Mekong River Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation
- **Countries**: China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam
- **Year**: 1992

### East Asian Seas Congress
- **Countries**: China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, East Timor (now Timor-Leste), ASEAN
- **Year**: 2003

### South China Sea Project
- **Countries**: China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia
- **Year**: 2002

## Disease and health

### ASEAN-China Public Health Cooperation
- **Countries**: China, ASEAN
- **Year**: 2003

### ASEAN+3 Health Ministers Conference
- **Countries**: China, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN
- **Year**: 2004

## Cross-border crimes

### ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3
- **Countries**: China, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN
- **Year**: Late 1990s

### ASEAN and China Cooperative Operations in Response to Dangerous Drugs
- **Countries**: China, ASEAN
- **Year**: 2000

### East Asia Sub-Regional Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control
- **Countries**: China, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam
- **Year**: 1993

## Economy

### China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
- **Countries**: China, ASEAN
- **Year**: 2002

### Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation
- **Countries**: ASEAN+3
- **Year**: 2010

### Boao Forum for Asia
- **Countries**: 28 countries, including China
- **Year**: 2001

### Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
- **Countries**: 21 countries, including China
- **Year**: 1989

### Greater Mekong River Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation
- **Countries**: China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam
- **Year**: 1992

### Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
- **Countries**: China, ASEAN 10 (minus Indonesia), and others
- **Year**: 2014

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**Source:** Modified and updated from Kun-Shuan Chiu (2011).

**Note:** *Years of establishment are sourced from the Internet.*
reconciliation between the US pivot or rebalance to Asia, which might potentially constrains a rising but unruly China, and China’s ‘new power diplomacy’, which might serve to counter possible US encirclement. A concert of powers would then provide a kind of stable balance of power, which Professor Pang indicates would draw some parallels from the 100 years of peace from 1815 to 1914 in Europe (from the Vienna Congress to the outbreak of the First World War).

A recent opinion poll conducted in 2014 by Pew Research, a US think tank, reveals some interesting results showing the attitudes of the people of some Asian countries towards China (Stokes, 2014). The results link closely with the situation of whether or not countries in Asia have territorial disputes with China, providing quite a wide range of views on Beijing. Of the nearly 15,000 people in eleven Asian nations surveyed, there are few fans of Beijing in either Japan (7 per cent favourable view of China) or Vietnam (6 per cent). The Philippines too have few admirers of China. However, more than seven in ten Pakistanis (78 per cent), Bangladeshis (77 per cent), Malaysians (74 per cent) and Thais (72 per cent) have expressed a positive view of China. In a 2013 Pew Research poll, large majorities in the Philippines (90 per cent), Japan (82 per cent), South Korea (77 per cent) and Indonesia (62 per cent) said that the territorial disputes with China were a huge problem for their countries. Such worries of territorial disputes spilling over to possible military confrontation were also shared by many Chinese (roughly six in ten, or 62 per cent). Chinese have anti-Japanese views; just 8 per cent of them have voiced their support for Japan. The survey results show a rough divide between those Asian countries that have and those which do not have territorial disputes with China. All are more or less concerned to very concerned about a possible military outbreak as a result of the disputes.

Conclusion

China’s multilateral approach towards ASEAN started in the 1990s, occasioned and affected by the growth and development of its new security concept, the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis, and the consequences of the Tiananmen incident. These events have moved China to adopt a more flexible and comprehensive approach towards reaching out to its neighbours. In addition, the continuing consolidation of ASEAN as a cohesive group of states in forging a collective response to common problems confronting them has pushed China to turn its strong bilateral approach to a more multilateral one towards dealing with countries in Southeast Asia. Increasing trade and investment have brought China and ASEAN closer together, especially during periods of economic hard times experienced by the West and beyond. However, the inability of the countries involved in settling the territorial disputes over the islands in the South China Sea has driven China and some Southeast Asia countries apart, fuelling a mini-arms race in the region and a rebalancing of security relationships with the US. This dilemma in Sino-ASEAN relations is likely to persist in the foreseeable future, posing significant challenges to many stakeholders in the region and beyond.
Realism has served as a useful tool to analyze China’s relations with ASEAN shortly after the Second World War, during the Cold War era and at times of heightened tensions between the two parties over the spread of communist ideologies and over territorial disputes. Liberalism, on the other hand, has been instrumental in bringing about an enhanced interaction and cooperation between the two sides since the 1990s. And perceptions or misperceptions of each other’s intentions, preferences and behaviours have continued to influence how states in Asia have socially constructed the image of others. Social evolution, however, seems to offer a suitable complementary approach over a long stretch of time to track and understand the ups and downs of China–ASEAN relations and the intricate shifts in these relations, taking into consideration multiple issues-areas at multiple levels of analysis involving multiple actors, both states and non-state actors, both within Asia and beyond. It offers a useful macro-perspective on the complex developments in the Asia-Pacific region in a more comprehensive and inclusive way.

**Acknowledgement**

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**Notes**

1. In October 2013 Chinese President Xin Jinping convened in Beijing a conference among Chinese leaders on diplomatic work to lay down a new guideline to develop good-neighbouring relations in a mutually beneficial way. All members of the standing committee of the Politburo attended the conference. The three dimensions mentioned in this quote apparently refer to politics, economics and society, as Xi said: ‘We must strive to make our neighbors more friendly in politics, economically more closely tied to us, and we must have deeper security cooperation and closer people-to-people ties.’ See Xinhuanet (2013).

2. A notable example is the work done by scholars associated with the development of non-traditional security issues in the 1990s at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, in the now S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in the university.

3. Gerald Chan has recently applied the social evolution approach to study China’s international identity, see Chan (2014).

4. Conversation with Professor Shun-Yun Ma at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 11 July 2014.

5. For example, see works on systems theory in international relations, such as, Albert, Cederman and Wendt (2010).
6. The data comes from Su Changhe (2013), Figure 3.1 China’s accession to international treaties, p. 73. The PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website also shows that China has acceded to two treaties in 2011 and nine in 2012, but figures from 2007 to 2011 were not found in the website. See http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/ziliao_611306/tytj_611312/tyfg_611314/t947271.shtml (accessed 17 April 2014).

7. The understanding that ASEAN provides the main force driving Asian international relations has come under close scrutiny recently as China has begun taking initiatives to forge international cooperation in such regional organisations as the Boao Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and most recently the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as well as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. See South China Morning Post (2014).

8. Major international organization are defined by the Yearbook as those in sections A (federations of international organizations), B (universal membership organizations), C (intercontinental membership organizations) and D (limited- or regionally defined membership organizations).


10. Reasons cited by Professor Odd Arne Westad of the London School of Economics and Political Science, in his open lecture on ‘Southeast Asian and China’s worldview’ delivered at Hong Kong University on 16 April 2014.

11. Noted Southeast Asian security specialist Muthiah Alagappa opines that the main security concern of Asian countries is state-building, which should form the focus of the study of international relations (IR) of the Asia-Pacific region, despite the valuable contributions made by Western IR theories towards understanding this region. In Alagappa’s interview by Chris Lidlaw on Radio New Zealand, 5 December 2011.


13. A rough estimation on tacit or open welcome: For example, of the ASEAN founding five, the Philippines openly welcomes openly the US pivot, followed by Thailand. Indonesia and Malaysia would extend a tacit welcome, while Singapore would be somewhere in between these two groups.


15. Data in this paragraph are found in Stokes (2014).

References


