

*China–Southeast Asian Nontraditional Security Engagement: A Soft Power Mode in Beijing’s Regional Diplomacy?**

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This special issue seeks to provide a comprehensive and in-depth study on nontraditional security (NTS) issues in China–Southeast Asia relations, which has so far remained an understudied topic in Asian regional affairs. Through this specific angle, the project engages the debate on how China uses its expanding power resources to shape international and regional agendas, co-opt other countries, and induce cooperative behaviors. Specifically, it contributes to a better understanding of China’s current interactions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its ten member states on NTS issues amid increasing salience of NTS threats and heightened tensions arising from traditional security challenges such as territorial disputes and great power rivalry.

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While focusing on different NTS problems, the articles in this special issue converge on analyzing the factors that shape the processes and outcomes of NTS cooperation between China and Southeast Asia. This introduction sets the stage for discussion by providing a definition of NTS, an overview of China-ASEAN NTS cooperation, and the common research questions.

1. NTS in China–Southeast Asia Relations: An Overview

Security essentially means survival of the referent object from an existential threat.¹ In the traditional security paradigm, the state is usually regarded as the main and even the only referent object of security, and security primarily means national defense. This traditional approach lost its explanatory power for emerging security challenges in the 1980s and 1990s when issues such as climate change, infectious diseases, and migration began to pose more severe threats.² The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 serves as a timely reminder to the international community that a nonmilitary problem can pose an existential threat to both state and human security. By November 2021, the pandemic has killed over five million people and caused significant disruptions to socioeconomic activities across the globe.³ The immense scale and transnational nature of the outbreak demonstrate that solutions to NTS threats are often beyond the capacity of an individual state and that cooperation is necessary. As suggested by Dr Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the World Health Organization, “solidarity” was crucial for effectively containing the spread of COVID-19.⁴ NTS represents a shift from the traditional security paradigm in several ways. As an approach to security studies, NTS focuses on security threats caused by nonmilitary factors, the implications for the state and its population, and the actors and processes that are involved in dealing with these challenges.⁵ Conceptually, it is a generic term for nonmilitary challenges such as infectious diseases, natural hazards, climate change, water scarcity, energy shortage, and transnational crimes. For the purpose of this special issue, we use NTS as a concept to understand interstate interactions.

NTS gained greater attention in China and Southeast Asia in the early 2000s after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003 rattled the region. The economic and sociopolitical ramifications of both events led to the recognition that nonmilitary problems could threaten the security of the state

and well-being of its people.⁶ The two crises created opportunities for Beijing to court the friendship of Southeast Asia through cooperation. China's decision not to depreciate its currency in 1997 was perceived positively in Southeast Asia.⁷ During the initial phase of the SARS outbreak, the Chinese government was heavily criticized for its handling of the epidemic. The convening of the Special ASEAN-China Leaders' Meeting on SARS in April 2003 provided a platform for the Chinese government to demonstrate its commitment to regional cooperation and to generate goodwill in its neighboring region.⁸ Joint responses to the two crises improved mutual trust between China and Southeast Asia and laid the foundation for cooperation in NTS in subsequent years.

In addition, compared with the concept of human security, which was then viewed largely as a Western concept and associated with human rights and humanitarian intervention,⁹ China and Southeast Asian countries preferred to cooperate in the name of NTS. Many people believed that cooperation in NTS could build initial confidence for China and Southeast Asian countries to manage more contentious issues, due to the low sensitivity of NTS relative to traditional security.¹⁰ To affirm their political will to cooperate, the two sides signed several agreements, some of which included the Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues in 2002 and the Memorandum of Understanding on NTS cooperation in 2004.¹¹ Through engagement in disaster relief, infectious disease control, and combat against transnational crimes, China and ASEAN managed to achieve confidence building to a good extent in the 2000s, a period described as the "honeymoon" of the two-way relations.¹²

2. NTS Cooperation amid Changing Security Environment: Issues and Questions

The regional security environment in Southeast Asia has undergone notable changes in the 2010s. Apart from the evolving features of NTS challenges, the new geopolitical dynamics have three implications for China–Southeast Asia cooperation in NTS.¹³ First, with growing power resources, the incumbent Chinese leadership has demonstrated stronger interests in elevating China's regional and international standing, improving its image, and building soft power. NTS provides a convenient channel for China to achieve these purposes through more active diplomacy. Second, while welcoming the benefits and opportunities created by

China's greater commitment, Southeast Asian countries are increasingly aware of the new trend in regional security and many Southeast Asian elites are more concerned about the expansion of China's influence in the region on all fronts.¹⁴ The conflicts and tensions in the South China Sea have also contributed to many regional states' apprehensions toward China. Their reservations over cooperation with China can lead to slow progress or mixed results in NTS cooperation. Third, one should also consider the dynamics beyond the China-Southeast context. The United States, for instance, has a long history of funding NTS-related projects of ASEAN as well as its member states.¹⁵ Japan has been a strong supporter of ASEAN for issues such as pandemic/epidemic response and disaster management. The activities of these countries are testing China's diplomacy: How can the Chinese initiatives complement, if not compete with, ASEAN's existing partnerships?

Against this background, this special issue answers important questions about China–Southeast Asia relations in NTS and in general. How has China–Southeast Asian cooperation in NTS evolved? How does China convert its growing power into resources for NTS cooperation? How effective is the conversion? What are the new features of China's diplomacy in the selected areas? Which factors have facilitated or constrained the success of China's diplomacy? How and why do Southeast Asian countries perceive and respond to China's greater activism in NTS cooperation differently? What are the potentials, challenges, and future trajectories for China-ASEAN cooperation? How does NTS intersect with other issues in the context of China-ASEAN relations? How do ASEAN's relations with other partners such as the United States and Japan affect cooperation between ASEAN and China?

This project takes an issue-specific approach and presents the latest development in China–Southeast Asia interactions in five selected areas, namely maritime NTS issues, water security, disaster management, energy cooperation, and counterterrorism. While approaching the central theme from different issues, the five articles converge on examining how China has used its growing power resources to engage Southeast Asia, assessing how Southeast Asia has perceived and responded to China's efforts, and analyzing the internal and external factors that have shaped the outcomes of China–Southeast Asia interactions on NTS. The findings in this special issue point to a few common patterns in the two-way engagement across different areas, some of which challenge the existing observations of China–Southeast Asia relations. Amid growing concerns

over its hardening regional strategy,¹⁶ China has taken a soft turn in its engagement with Southeast Asia on some NTS issues. Instead of merely scaling up financial and technical support for ASEAN and its member states, Beijing began to invest more on institutional building in relation to NTS governance, with the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation as a recent example of this move. The growing role of Chinese nonstate actors, such as enterprises, think tanks, and nongovernmental organizations, in the two-way engagement contributes to softening China's image amid increasing controversies over its assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea. Some articles in this special issue therefore link China's diplomatic endeavors in the respective NTS area with its pursuit of strengthening soft power regionally and globally.

Second, however, greater interest and commitment of China do not necessarily translate to strengthened NTS cooperation with Southeast Asia as the outcomes of its diplomatic endeavors are subject to the influence of a variety of factors and dynamics. Under President Xi Jinping, China's diplomacy has undergone a notable transformation, evident in the domestic debate on whether China should shift away from the long-held strategy of keeping a long profile.¹⁷ Apart from strong financial and material bases, Beijing needs compatible capacity and institutions to support its more proactive engagement with Southeast Asia on NTS issues. A common observation in this special issue is that the Chinese initiatives have achieved mixed results in Southeast Asia. With regard to slow progress and even setbacks in NTS cooperation, apart from the conventional explanations such as historical distrust, tensions arising from traditional issues,¹⁸ and competition from other major powers, some articles in this special issue point to China's own limitations in experience, capacity and institution as barriers to further NTS cooperation.

3. Structure of the Special Issue

We open the special issue with a discussion on NTS in the maritime space. The literature on maritime security in the China–Southeast Asian context has been dominated by the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The disputes have posed a grave challenge to China's relations with the Southeast Asian claimants (Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) and ASEAN to some extent. Moreover, tensions and distrust caused by the disputes have spillover effects on NTS cooperation, as demonstrated in other articles of this issue.

The article of Lee and Chan contributes to the studies on the maritime relations in Southeast Asia by focusing on China's engagement with the regional organization of ASEAN on issues such as piracy, transnational crimes at sea, marine environmental degradation, and search and rescue at sea. It goes beyond the territorial disputes and examines how China builds its soft power in the region by NTS cooperation. Lee and Chan find that NTS cooperation helps advance Chinese soft power in certain ways. For instance, cooperative activities in ASEAN-led institutions enhance China's image as a positive contributor to regional maritime commons and demonstrate China's acceptance and willingness to act in accordance with regional norms. However, the continuous growth of China's hard-power resources and the complex intersection of traditional and nontraditional security issues in the maritime space continue to fuel ASEAN member states' distrust and suspicion toward China.

Water security in the Mekong subregion is another point of contention between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors. Water security and maritime NTS are similar in a way that their competitive dimension is more prominent than other NTS challenges because of the limited nature of water and marine resources. The article of Zhang and Zhang adopts the lens of soft power to investigate how China's new policies and practices toward water issues in the Mekong River consolidate China's dual role as hydro-hegemon and regional power in the Mekong River basin. This article suggests that China use water diplomacy in the context of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation to enhance its soft power resources, which include the persuasive and ideational powers in hydropolitics, the attraction of China's economic development model, and a sense of common identity in the subregion. The article concludes that China's inroad has triggered counterefforts from both the Mekong countries and other major powers, though water diplomacy has boosted its geopolitical clout in the Mekong to some degree.

Compared with maritime NTS and water security, disaster management does not intersect with traditional security as much and is thus a low-hanging fruit for cooperation. Southeast Asia is highly vulnerable to natural hazards. Disaster management therefore is a key avenue for extra-regional partners to engage with ASEAN and its member states. Gong's article discusses China's evolving interactions with ASEAN and its member states on disaster management. The article points to three issues that can influence the outcome of disaster diplomacy, which include mobilization, coordination, and acceptance. The argument is

that China's state-centric approach has mixed impacts on the mobilization, coordination, and acceptance of its disaster diplomacy in Southeast Asia. State-centricity enables rapid mobilization and deployment of resources and personnel through official channels for overseas disaster relief missions. Nevertheless, capacity limitations restrict the scope and modality of China's involvement, and institutional constraints affect its communication with the recipient country/organization. Moreover, the dominance of state actors makes China's overseas disaster-related activities susceptible to geopolitics, which adversely impact its acceptance by the recipients.

Energy supply is the lifeline of socioeconomic development of a state. Southeast Asia takes a critical position on the shipping route of China's energy imports. Besides, Chinese companies are major investors of the energy sector of Southeast Asia. Gong and Balazs examine China's shift to energy security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and assess the impact of the adjustment. China has traditionally relied on energy trade to enhance its energy security, but has added a soft approach to enhance its image as a provider of public goods. The soft turn has enhanced support toward environmental protection and climate adaptation by pioneering energy governance institutions and involving nonstate actors in its outreach. Nevertheless, this soft approach is still nascent, and its effects are constrained by geopolitical dynamics, such as the disputes in the South China Sea and the controversy over the Mekong water resource management.

Terrorism poses a serious threat to both China and Southeast Asian countries, evident in a number of terrorist attacks in Southeast Asian countries in recent years and in China's prioritization of counterterrorism in its border regions. Cooperation in this area has received increasing attention since the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 as terrorist groups operating in China and Southeast Asia have linkages with each other. Banlaoi examines the current status of counterterrorism cooperation at bilateral and regional levels and presents their achievements in this field. He also dissects the nature of counterterrorism cooperation by examining the existing mechanisms and current efforts. Although the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 prompted China and Southeast Asian countries to seek closer cooperation, Banlaoi argues that differences in threat perceptions, ideological and legal systems, as well as institutional arrangements have limited their level of cooperation in this area.

The analyses in this special issue reveal the complexity of China–Southeast Asian interactions on NTS issues and add nuances to the existing discussions, which have been dominated by the rhetoric of cooperation. The five articles demonstrate similar patterns in China’s NTS-related engagement in the region under President Xi. Examples include substantial increases in financial support, commitment to institutionalization, multiplicity of actors, and greater emphasis on governance. Such examples illustrate a new trend in how China now engages in NTS cooperation. In addition, this collection shows that China’s growing economic and military power does not necessarily translate to better results in NTS cooperation as several Chinese initiatives have achieved limited success, as demonstrated by the articles in this special issue. While geopolitical issues heavily influence the cooperative processes, China’s own capacity and approach also shape the outcomes. Given that China–Southeast Asia NTS cooperation is a two-way interaction, distinctive national and regional dynamics in Southeast Asia, such as local needs and preferences and the attitudes of national governments, are another set of factors that can influence the outcome of China’s NTS-related diplomacy in the region. While this special issue focuses more on the perspective of China, future studies can explore the theme from the Southeast Asian perspectives to further enrich the understanding of China–Southeast Asia relations in the NTS context. As the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to draw increasing attention to NTS and to China’s involvement in regional and global cooperation, we hope this special issue can provide the groundwork and inspiration for future studies on the relationship between governance of NTS challenges in Southeast Asia and China’s foreign policy.

Notes

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