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CHINA AND DEMOCRACY IN THE ASIA PACIFIC¹

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Introduction

This paper examines the prospective impact of the emergence of China as a regional power in the Asia Pacific on the future of the democratization process in the region. Of particular concern here is the effect of a strong and politically assertive China on the prognosis for a nascent democratic community in East Asia. Since 1986, the spread of democracy and the process of democratic consolidation in the region have proceeded steadily but at an uneven pace across a number of countries. Both processes have been marked by difficulties in institution-building, the popular understanding of participation, the acceptance of individual rights and social obligations as inherently equal aspects of democratic rule, and on how political elites have institutionalized representation and accountability. On the whole, democratic norms and structures in these countries remain compromised in some cases, and fragile for the most part – that is, susceptible to the influence or impact of changes in the regional or international order.

The rise of China is easily among the most important developments within the last ten years in the Asia Pacific region. Its probable implications have been strongly debated by policy-makers and academics with some drawing attention to the inevitability of Chinese hegemony over the Asia Pacific region⁴ and others looking forward to a prospective era of greater openness, comfort and cooperation.⁵ At first glance, these perspectives seem to reflect different points of emphasis. China's growing military and economic strength is seen as a cause for concern for the medium- and long-term stability and prosperity of East Asia. At the same time, however, Chinese initiatives on increasing economic cooperation in the region

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² *Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI.* The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.

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⁴ See Stuart-Fox, Martin: "Southeast Asia and China: The Role of History and Culture in Shaping Future Relations," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2004) p. 136.

⁵ This observation was made by Dr. Eric Teo of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs at the 18th ASEAN-ISIS Asia – Pacific Roundtable at Kuala Lumpur in June 2004.



through the ASEAN+3 process as well as through other multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements are a welcome development for countries in the region. These apparently diametrically opposed tendencies are not necessarily mutually exclusive as it is quite possible to look at the increasing “openness, comfort and cooperation” between China and the rest of East Asia as an inevitable course for countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia in the face of the inexorable growth of Chinese power. The emergence of China as a regional power is nonetheless largely seen by East Asian states with elements of increased levels of cooperation and continuing unease.

The questions facing this paper take into consideration the conjunction of two developments – the processes of democratization and democratic consolidation in the East Asian region, and the emergence of a non-democratic China as a regionally dominant power. Is the emergence of China a condition that will hinder or promote democracy in East Asia? How will it affect the currently fragile democratic community in East Asia? A commonly held perception is that the rise of a non-democratic China to political and economic hegemony in the region constitutes a threat to the deepening of the democratization process in the Asia Pacific. An investigation of current trends, however, indicate that China’s policies of political and economic engagement with countries in the region have little bearing on the issue of democracy and that a hegemonic China will not be that much of a factor in whether democratization in the region will intensify or stall.

This paper looks into four main areas. First, it discusses the current state of democratization and the nascent democratic community in East Asia. It is basically argued here that the democratic institutions of countries in the region remain largely weak and, therefore, susceptible to the effects of systemic change. Second, the paper explores the nature of China’s rise. Two areas are given particular attention: the emergence of China as an economic power in the region, and the extent this has translated into a China that has become increasingly politically assertive within the Asia Pacific region. Part of the discussion here takes into consideration the role played by China in advancing greater economic and political cooperation in the region, and how China’s initiatives in these areas have been prompted by its concern with the strategic partnerships that states in region have been building with the United States and, to a lesser extent, Japan. Third, the paper looks at how China’s emergence as an economic power and its emerging role as a political power could impact on democratization and the democratic community in the region. Finally, the paper looks at some strategies and recommendations on how democratization could be further strengthened in the context of an increasingly regionally hegemonic China.

1. Democratization and the Democratic Community in East Asia

While there have been debates over what constitutes a democracy, this paper largely subscribes to the proposition made by Phillip Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl that the defining characteristic of democratic governance is accountability.⁶ Defining democracy this way allows for a broad and more inclusive idea of what constitutes the nascent democratic community in East Asia without falling into the trap of “electoralism” that characterizes minimalist definitions of democracy. Within this broad definition, an East Asian democratic community would include Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore,

⁶ Schmitter, Phillip C. and Lynn Karl, Terry: “What Democracy is . . . and is not,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2 No. 3 (Summer 1991), pp. 75-87.



South Korea, Thailand, and Taiwan. Understandably, this is a debatable list and adding other qualifications to what constitutes a democracy would reduce the number of those in it.

The idea of a democratic community has been referred to very loosely by a number of policy-makers, non-government advocates, as well as academics. Its meaning and usage range from a vague notion of all democratic states within a particular system⁷ to the more stringent definition offered in a statement made by Bernard Aronson, Assistant Secretary for State on Inter-American Affairs, who said that

I think there is no other part of the world where that democratic community is being built more strongly and more clearly than in the Western Hemisphere. It is democratic because we do not accept any other form of government as legitimate in our community, and it is a community because we are bound by bonds of commitment, respect and affection that make us more than just a collection of separate nations.⁸

These two ways of looking at a democratic community at the international level are not mutually exclusive and in fact are mutually reinforcing. Taken together, the idea of being part of a democratic community does not only imply being a democracy among a group of democracies but also means supporting democratization and democracy in the entire system.

Within this context, two factors militate against the idea of a democratic community in East Asia. First is the lack of a common commitment to the idea of democracy and democratic norms as the only legitimate form of government and governance. Illustrative of this is the ongoing debate over human rights in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia. The adoption of a regional human rights mechanism for ASEAN has officially been part of discussions taking place within the ambit of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting since 1996. Concrete proposals for a regional human rights commission have been turned down by government representatives in ASEAN. What is most disturbing is that official support for this proposal came only from Indonesia and the Philippines. Even the liberal democratic regime in Thailand did not give its official support to it. The second factor actually impacts on the first. The lack of common commitment to democracy and its normative requirements is indicative of a lack of mutual support for democratization processes and democratic governments among even the putative members of an East Asian democratic community.

The weak sense of community among democracies in the region is further complicated by the uneven levels of democratization among these countries. Some countries, such as Japan and the Philippines (except for the Marcos administration from 1972 to 1986) have had traditions of formally democratic governance that go back to the post-World War 2 order. Both, however, have undergone crises of confidence wherein political scandals have diminished popular support for the institutions of the system. In the case of the Philippines, the crisis has led to the extra-constitutional overthrow of one president and a strong public outcry for similar action against another. Indonesia is just beginning its transition into democracy and the government is already facing problems over how democratic norms can be sustained in the face of the challenge of terrorism. Malaysia and Singapore have political systems which, despite criticisms from democracy advocates, remain largely stable and

⁷ Kadera, Crescenzi and Shannon make use of the term “democratic community” to refer to democracies within a particular international system as opposed to non-democracies which they refer to collectively as the “autocratic community.” See Kadera, Kelly, Crescenzi, Mark J. C. and L. Shannon, Megan: “Democratic Survival, Peace, and War in the International System,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (April 2003), pp. 234-247.

⁸ Aronson, Bernard W.: “OAS Support for Haiti,” remarks made before the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of American States in Washington, D.C. on 8 October 1991.



legitimate in the eyes of their polities. There are some questions, however, about their commitment to civil rights and their support for democratization processes in other countries in the region. Overall, the observation of Hilton Root remains relevant

East Asia's democratic governments face a large task of institution building before they can hope to implement national development policies with the effectiveness that once flowed from the top-down models of the past. They need institutions that will increase the costs to individuals of engaging in corruption. . . Citizens must be assured that public accounts will be subject to independent, systematic, and regular reviews.⁹

Root noted that these went not only for government institutions but for civil institutions, including a responsible media and civil society, as well. The key point he raises, however, is the need for "region-wide standards of governance" that can help domestic reform.¹⁰ Enshrining a region-wide commitment to accountability and transparency, however, is going to be difficult among democracies whose governments have different levels of commitment to supporting democratization beyond their own borders. The absence of such a regional commitment makes for a weak democratic community in the region, one that is susceptible to vagaries of sudden changes in the international system.

2. A Cautious Engagement: The Rise of China and its implications for East Asia¹¹

One of the most notable developments in the last ten years is the emergence of an economically and politically confident China that seeks to improve and strengthen its relationship with East Asia. Exchanges of visits and the signing of substantive agreements, including trade and even security cooperation, are clearly geared towards a political outcome intended to reassure its neighbors of its peaceful and non-threatening intentions.¹² The American preoccupation with the war on terror and Japan's long economic recession gave China the opportunity to improve relations with its neighbors. It has taken the initiative on economic cooperation while at the same time pushing policies directed at refuting the long-standing notion of a "China threat." This is particularly evident in its relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member-states.

In 2001, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji proposed a free trade agreement between China and ASEAN that was endorsed by the ASEAN leaders at their meeting in Brunei that same year. The proposal intended to push China and the ASEAN states towards a free trade area within a five-year period. Due to structural asymmetries between China and ASEAN, and among the ASEAN states themselves, this was modified to a timetable of ten years. John Ravenhill described the result of the initiative as a diplomatic coup that placed other countries

⁹ Root, Hilton L.: "What Democracy can do for East Asia," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 2002), p. 125.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 126.

¹¹ The discussion in this section is adapted from the discussion in a chapter written by the author in Saw Swee Hock, Sheng Lijun and Chin Kin Wah, eds. (2005): *ASEAN-China Relations: Realities and Prospects*. Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 90-109.

¹² Yang, Jian: "Sino-Japanese Relations: implications for Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (August 2003), p. 314; and Cheng Joseph Y. S.: "Sino-ASEAN relations in the early twenty-first century," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (December 2001), pp. 422-424.



in the region, especially Japan, “on the defensive.”¹³ At the same time, it points to the growing importance of ASEAN in China’s strategic perspective. This is also shown by the strong support that China has given to the ASEAN+3 process, and its involvement in a number of development projects in the Mekong River basin area. Successful bilateral partnerships have been encouraged to continue. At a meeting with Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Vice-Premier Huang Ju suggested that the successful Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) project should be replicated in the development of China’s western region.¹⁴ Not only would this help narrow the development gap between China’s western provinces and its coastal region, but it would also further bilateral relations between China and Singapore. There is, however, a perception that China’s initiatives on the economic front are driven more by political than purely economic calculations. One analyst noted that these developments may be the reaction of a Chinese leadership concerned with the possible re-emergence of a U.S.-led Asian security alliance in the context of a “global war against terror.”¹⁵ China needs ASEAN support or at least neutrality in a region subject to the power of American global hegemony.

China’s policy of reassurance is even more palpable in the realm of security. On 21 March 2003, China acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TACSEA), a few months ahead of Japan. This was a very clear signal of the heightened importance that China accorded to ASEAN and, again, of the policy of reassurance that China was pursuing. Accession to the TACSEA underscored its willingness to subject its behavior to standards the institutionalization of which it was not a party to. At the Sixth ASEAN Plus Three Summit held in Phnom Penh on 4 November 2002, it was China which suggested that the process be expanded to include regional political and security issues such as the terrorism and transnational crime which resulted in the institutionalization of the ASEAN Plus Three Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime which first met in Bangkok on 10 January 2004. In the aftermath of that meeting, ASEAN and China signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate in non-traditional security issues. This MoU laid out the intention of all the parties to cooperate over the medium- and long-term on information exchange, personnel exchange and training, law-enforcement cooperation and joint research. Some results have already emerged from this as joint operations between the Malaysian and Chinese police led to the crippling of a major drug ring that was shifting its operations to Malaysia from China.¹⁶ An indication of the seriousness of China’s push towards acceptance by ASEAN as a partner can be seen in this MoU’s financial arrangement, which states that:

Expenses of workshops and training courses organized by China in accordance with this Memorandum of Understanding shall be covered by the Chinese side, including meals, accommodation and local transportation for the participants sent by ASEAN Member Countries during their stay in China and fees for inviting experts, while the expenses of international travel shall be covered by the sending Countries, except when it is agreed otherwise.¹⁷

¹³ Ravenhill, John: “A three bloc world? The new East Asian regionalism,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* Vol. 2 (2002), p. 182. Kavin Cai is more explicit when he pointed out that the ASEAN-China FTA announcement in November 2001 “came as a major shock to the region and beyond.” See Cai, Kevin G.: “The ASEAN-China free trade agreement and East Asian regional grouping,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (December 2003), p. 388.

¹⁴ *The Straits Times* (Interactive), 16 June 2004.

¹⁵ Cheng, *op. cit.*, 426-430.

¹⁶ *Bernama*, 28 April 2004.

¹⁷ See Article 4, Section 1 of the “Memorandum of Understanding Between The Governments of the Member Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Government of the People’s Republic



China's effort at reassurance is perhaps most clearly seen in the case of the South China Sea. China has had a past history of having resorted to force to settle its differences with other claimants. One analyst described the issue as a "litmus test" for ASEAN on the realities behind a "China threat."¹⁸ This reflected the continuing thorn that the disputed Spratly Islands archipelago represents in ASEAN-China relations. Again, the Chinese have been using diplomacy to try to reduce ASEAN concerns over this. In November 2002, China and the ASEAN states signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea at the 8th ASEAN Summit at Phnom Penh. This document was a compromise that took into consideration the demands of those states that were most in favor of pinning China down to a standard of behavior over the disputed territory over the South China Sea. Vietnam had wanted to include the Paracel Islands to the area covered by the document but it was limited only to the immediate area around the Spratlys archipelago. The Philippines, another claimant that had had encounters with the Chinese short of military confrontation over the area, had wanted a document which was to be couched as a formal treaty and which committed the parties involved to refrain from occupying new islands, reefs, or shoals. The final document committed the parties to refraining from "action of inhabiting uninhabited (sic) islands, reefs, shoals."¹⁹ It was the first time that China had agreed to a multilateral declaration over the South China Sea. It also worked in China's favor since the document limited the risk of conflict arising in the area and thereby ensuring that it would not provoke the involvement of the United States in the dispute.²⁰ The document has become important in imposing a behavior of self-restraint not only on China but also on the other claimant states. In May 2004, China referred to this document in condemning a decision on the part of Vietnam to renovate an old airstrip on Spratly Island.²¹ China pointed out that this action violated the Declaration on a Code of Conduct. Vietnam was also criticized by the Philippines for allowing a tour group to operate in the area.²²

The establishment of all these new institutions and activities indicates that ASEAN and China relations are undergoing some form of institutional consolidation, with most of the initiative recently coming from the Chinese side. These help to provide a fulcrum for the relationship, building confidence, and eventually becoming bulwarks of an effective regional architecture. It is, nonetheless, still too early to claim any substantive achievement for any of them.²³ One thing that is clear, however, is the evident acceptance of these overtures by its neighboring states (particularly the ASEAN states), a trend that perhaps signals the kind of pragmatic calculations taking place among foreign policy elites in the region. It may even be that the interest exhibited by the ASEAN states towards the Chinese proposal for a free trade area suggests "a willingness to contemplate bandwagoning with a rising power."²⁴

The acceptance, however, of China's role in the region is not wholehearted. The economic initiatives of China cannot erase the fact that it is the competitor of most of the ASEAN states in the export market – a situation that has made more difficult any projected

of China On Cooperation in the Field of Non-traditional Security Issues," signed in Bangkok, Thailand, on 10 January 2004.

¹⁸ Cheng, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

¹⁹ Quoted in Leszek Buszynski, "ASEAN, the declaration on conduct, and the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 25, no 3 (December 2003), p. 357.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *ABC News*, 19 May 2004.

²² *ABC News*, 20 May 2004.

²³ Beeson wrote similarly of the ASEAN Plus Three process. See Mark Beeson, "ASEAN Plus Three and the rise of reactionary regionalism," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 25, no. 2 (August 2003), p. 264.

²⁴ Ravenhill, John, *op. cit.*, p. 176



intensification of the process of economic integration between the two parties.²⁵ Then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia was quoted as warning the ASEAN states that they “must make sure the influx [of Chinese goods] will not cause our industries to shut down.”²⁶ Much has also been said about the dramatic change in power distribution in the region, which the rapid economic growth of China has created,²⁷ as well as China’s success in capturing the lion’s share of foreign direct investment flows into the region.²⁸

Nonetheless, the uneasiness felt by regional states regarding the perceived hegemonic aspirations of China in the region is more muted now than it was a decade ago. Overall, China’s efforts at mollifying perceptions of a Chinese threat have advanced ASEAN-Chinese relations further than was expected a decade ago. The modernization of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, an issue that caused a number of East Asian states to look into the idea of strengthening defense ties both within the region and with other external powers in the early 1990s, no longer attracts as much attention. The launching, for example, of the first of two modified *Sovremenny*-class destroyers in April 2004 and the importation of what is projected to be more than US\$2 billion worth of arms from Russia by the end of 2004 have not gained that much attention from the region.²⁹ The unease, however, remains. Interestingly, a significant part of it has less to do with how China deals with East Asia as it does with China’s relationship with other powers. China’s competition with Japan over economic leadership in the region and, even more, its strategic rivalry with the United States has placed the governments of East Asian states in very awkward situations.

3. The Implications for Democracy and Democratization of a Rising China

The discussion in the previous two sections presents two conditions. First is the existence of a weak and fragile democratic community in East Asia. Second is the emergence of China as an economic and political power willing to engage its neighbors in the region in cooperative endeavors. How do these two conditions coincide? What is the effect of a rising China to democracy and the nascent democratic community in East Asia? There are two aspects to the rise of China that can be separately analyzed in terms of their effect on democratization in the region. The first involves its rise as an economic power, and the second has to do with how this economic power translates into increased military capability and political assertiveness.

²⁵ John Wong and Sarah Chan note that the degree of integration and interdependence between ASEAN and China have not increased proportionally to the growth of the two parties total trade because of the naturally competitive structures of their economy. See Wong, John and Chan, Sarah: “China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. XLIII, No. 3 (May/June 2003), pp. 516-517.

²⁶ *BBC News Online*, 6 November 2001.

²⁷ China’s tremendous economic growth has been sustained over a fairly long period of time. The expansion of the economy by 9.7% in the first quarter of 2004 was the third consecutive quarter of at least 9% growth. See *Japan Today*, 16 April 2004.

²⁸ See Stuart-Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 132; and Wong and Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 523. Jian Yang and Joseph Cheng, however, contend that the threat to ASEAN of China’s ability to attract FDI may be exaggerated. See Jian, *op. cit.*, p. 315; and Cheng, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

²⁹ See *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 12 May 2004; and *Moscow Times*, 16 April 2004. A study released by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission pointed out that China’s military was being modernized with the help of Russia and Israel. This would make it more difficult to defeat an invasion of Taiwan. The release of the report and other reports indicating that China was enhancing its mobilization capability hardly caused a ripple in Southeast Asia. See *The Straits Times* (Interactive), 16 June 2004 and 21 June 2004.



Democracy in East Asia and China as an Economic Power. The rise of China is most commonly expressed in terms of its attainment of high levels of economic performance in different macroeconomic categories sustained over a number of years. In 2003, it was able to attract \$53 billion in global investments, a figure which is second only in the world to the United States. According to Walden Bello

China's 8-10 percent growth rate was probably the principal stimulus of what little growth occurred in the world economy. In the case of Japan, for instance, a decade-long stagnation was broken in 2003 by the country's first sustained recovery, fueled by exports to slake China's thirst for capital and technology-intensive goods; the exports shot up by a record 44 percent, or \$60 billion. Indeed, China displaced Japan as the main destination for Asia's exports, accounting for 31 percent while recession-plague Japan's share dropped from 20 percent to 10 percent.³⁰

He further noted that China had become the primary factor in the export growth of the Philippines and Taiwan, and the majority buyer of products not only from Japan but also from Australia, Malaysia, and South Korea. As a trading partner, China is within the top three of most countries in the region.

Bello, however, notes a dark side to the effects of China's growth. He notes that it has become an important contributor to the crisis of global overcapacity. Investment in China was not just the obverse of disinvestment elsewhere, although the shutting down of facilities and sloughing off of labor was significant not only in Japan and the United States but in the countries on China's periphery, like the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. China itself was beefing up its capacity, at the same time that the ability of the Chinese market to absorb the output was limited.³¹

Any sudden downtrend in China's growth resulting from overcapacity would hurt not only China but also its neighboring countries which are increasingly dependent on China as an "engine of growth" in the region.

The clear effect of China on pushing economic growth in the region should be considered as a factor in favor of strengthening democracy in the region. The democracy and development literature has not really come out with any definitive findings on whether democracy brings about economic development or whether economic development leads to democracy.³² Where there is clear convergence, however, is in the proposition that economic development helps strengthen existing democracies.³³ In this context, China's emerging status as the "engine of growth" for East Asia, to the extent that it helps enhance the economic performance of its neighbors (including democracies), can only be a positive factor for strengthening popular support for democratic regimes. Since the same effect is true for non-

³⁰ Walden Bello, Tom (2005): *Dilemmas of Domination: The Unmaking of the American Empire*. New York, Metropolitan Books, 94-95.

³¹ Bello, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

³² For a quick description of this literature, see Colaresi, Michael R. and Thompson, William R.: "The Economic Development -- Democratization Relationship: Does the outside world matter?" *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 367, No. 4 (May 2003), pp. 383-388; and Quinn, Dennis P. and Woolley, John T.: "Democracy and National Economic Performance: The Preference for Stability," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (July 2001), pp. 635-636.

³³ Colaresi and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 387. See also Finkel, Steven E., Humphries, Stan and Opp, Karl-Dieter: "Socialist Values and the Development of Democratic Support in the Former East Germany," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2001), pp. 349-351.



democratic regimes, however, this does not tell us anything about the prospect for expanding the democratic community in the region.

Bello's warning about the crisis of overcapacity raises questions about the possible impact on democracies of any sudden downtrends in China's economic performance. Dennis P. Quinn and John T. Woolley have pointed out that poor economic performance, i.e. a downtrend in economic growth rates, in and of itself does not really diminish popular support for democracy (as opposed to popular support for incumbent governments or administrations).³⁴ Indeed the case of the Suharto regime in 1997 suggests that non-democratic governments are much more vulnerable in this context. Volatility or lack of economic stability, however, could cause popular support for democracy to downslide. Any sudden downtrends in the course of China's economic performance would bode ill for all countries in the region, particularly those with weak democratic institutions.

Democracy and China's military capability and political assertiveness. The impact of China as an engine of economic growth for the region, however, raises questions about its political intentions. As noted above, the Chinese government has been very active in trying to engage its neighbors in peaceful and cooperative endeavors. The strategy of "assurance diplomacy" has to a large extent worked well in easing fears of a "China threat" and increasing the levels of engagement between China and its neighbors beyond economic relations. The strategy may be self-serving – China's economic strategy requires a peaceful and stable international environment. This coincides with the idea that democracies, especially fragile ones, need a stable environment to develop their institutions more fully. A China engaged in establishing cooperative mechanisms with its neighbors with the political objective of increasing stability and peace in the region also benefits the further development of democratic polities in the region. Studies show that external threats and a conflict-ridden international setting significantly affect the survivability of democracies.³⁵ Insofar as China's behavior towards its neighbors indicates little interest in creating conflict in the region bodes well for the continued development of democracies in the region.

There is one area, however, where China's behavior has strained and can potentially create strain on peace in the regional order, and directly affects the interest of the democratic community in East Asia. This has to do primarily with the case of Taiwan. China has threatened to go to war in the event that Taiwan declares its independence. The existence of Taiwan as an autonomous state, independent except in the context of the one-China policy, is principally guaranteed by China on the condition that it continues to adhere to the idea of one-China – that, in effect, it continues to accept its status as being no more than a province of China, albeit with a different system. In this context, China has actually used its economic and political muscle to influence elections in Taiwan, i.e. trying to weaken popular support for pro-independence parties and politicians in Taiwan.³⁶ The threat of war and the heightening of tensions involve not only the survivability of democracy in Taiwan, but also concern their effects on the other democracies in the region. It also raises questions whether such a conflict will have ideological underpinnings at least as far as these democracies are concerned. Will they support a democratic Taiwan in a conflict against non-democratic China?

The involvement of the United States in this issue has also been instrumental in the process of maintaining peace in the region. The continuing support for Taiwan which the

³⁴ Quinn and Woolley, *op. cit.*

³⁵ See, for example Kadera, Crescenzi and Shannon, *op. cit.*, p. 240; and Colaresi and Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

³⁶ For an account of how cross-strait relations affect domestic politics in Taiwan, see Yu-Shan Wu, "Taiwan's Domestic Politics and Cross-Straits Relations," *The China Journal*, No. 53 (2005), p. 35.



United States government has more openly advocated with the accession to power of the current administration has colored much of the relationship between the two major powers. It has also affected how Taiwan relates to China. Taiwan has become bolder in its desire to move towards independence and China has been consistent in its warning that this is unacceptable. Although the United States has been discouraging the Taiwanese government from proceeding along lines that would only increase tensions with China, they have nonetheless done little to support this. They continue to work with Taiwan in enhancing its military capability.³⁷ At the same time, China has also been engaged in upgrading its military capability. They have purchased military technology from Russia and Israel in an effort to intensify their military modernization, and increase their war preparation.³⁸ Despite claims that these policies are indicative of the expansionist and great power ambitions of China,³⁹ there are few indications that its military modernization is largely related to considerations other than Taiwan. There is, however, little challenge to the idea that on the issue of Taiwan, China will not back out of a possible conflict (even in its current inferior military state) with the United States.⁴⁰

As noted above, the conditions created by an international environment that is threatened by conflict is not conducive to the strengthening of democratic institutions, particularly among those democracies which are still in the process of consolidation and remain fragile. Their survivability amidst the international shocks resulting from war would be uncertain.

4. Some Observations, Strategies and Recommendations

Any analysis of the effects of an emergent China on democratization in East Asia and the strengthening of the democratic community in the region must contend with a fundamentally fragile democracies and a weak sense of community among democracies in the region. Kadera, Crescenzi and Shannon set three hypotheses which relate to the impact of system dynamics on democratization.⁴¹ The first contends that the survival of democracies in a system is directly related to the strength of the democratic community. The second is that the survival of democracies becomes less certain in conditions of increasing systemic conflict. Third is that the effect of conflict on the survival of democracies is reduced or eliminated in conditions where the democratic community is strong. From these three hypotheses, the most obvious issue striking democracies in the East Asian region is the weakness of the democratic community. There is an evident need to increase interaction among democracies in the region, including setting up common targets and standards relating to the strengthening of the commitment to democracy and democratization in the region. Strengthening the democratic community enhances the ability of democracies to develop, introduce reforms (especially on economic restructuring), and mobilize popular support for these reforms.

China by itself has shown that it is interested in keeping the region peaceful and prosperous. Its diplomatic initiatives point to the absence of any intention to push power

³⁷ See *The Straits Times* (Interactive), 16 June 2004.

³⁸ *The Straits Times* (Interactive), 16 June 2004 and 21 June 2004.

³⁹ See, for example, Lee Jae-Hyung, "China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (December 2002), pp. 549-568.

⁴⁰ For an extensive discussion of the factors affecting any decision on the part of China regarding conflict with the United States, see Christensen, Thomas J.: "Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Problems for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 14-16.

⁴¹ Kadera, Crescenzi and Shannon, *op. cit.*, p. 240.



dynamics to the fore and create conditions where tensions may escalate into conflict situations. This peaceful façade, however, belies a determination to keep the status quo on the Taiwan issue. While the Chinese government may have no interest in creating conflict in the region, it has no qualms about initiating it over Taiwan. Thus, while the economic factors which have been the core of China's rise may have over the medium-term beneficial effects that will help strengthen popular support for democratic governments, conflict situations and war will threaten the survivability of these governments. What is needed then to ensure that any changes over the status quo on Taiwan Strait relations will proceed only under politically settled conditions. In a situation where the democratic community in East Asia remains weak, and many of the democracies constituting that weak democratic community are fragile, the most important consideration is the maintenance of peaceful relations and a stable regional order.