

Joanna Dobkowska

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University of Warsaw

Hedging China? The Meaning of the ASEAN Member States' Interests in Forging their Policies Towards China¹

Introduction

The presence of China in the immediate neighbourhood of the South-east Asian region has always been a crucial factor in the policy-making of states there. Even the process of regional integration, although successful in its aim to diminish the unwanted influence of neighbouring countries, did not manage to exclude it completely. Since its establishment in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, also referred to as the Association within this article) had to adopt a strategy towards China, which varied within the space of years from hostility through alliance to partnership. The change of the international dynamic in the whole of East Asia that occurred after the end of the Cold War has increased the importance of the Chinese factor in Southeast Asia even more, yet the growing potential of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is now one of the main features of the emerging new order. As a consequence of this rise it was believed that ASEAN would be forced to adopt one of two strategies: balancing the Chinese threat or bandwagoning with Beijing as the stronger ally (Roy 2005). Recently, however, the idea of hedging seems to be gaining popularity and the Southeast Asian countries are considered to be 'hedgers' against the growing Chinese assertiveness (Lee 2012).

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This approach seems not to reflect the fact that, despite dynamic integration processes, ASEAN is not a unitary actor. While the multidimensional diversity of its member countries is often emphasised as a negative factor in the regional integration processes (Pimoljinda 2013), it seems to be neglected in regards to foreign relations, which tend to be treated as deeply coordinated among the member states and representing their interests in a comparable degree on the one hand, and deeply dependant on the external pushes on the other (Hsiao and Yang 2008; Severino 2009). This appears to be a simplification leading to the misinterpretation of the relations between ASEAN and the PRC as *de facto* bilateral ones, while in fact the ASEAN member countries adopt their own strategies and attitudes towards the PRC. It is their independent expected goals and challenges associated with China that motivate their stances rather than any commonly agreed, ASEAN-wide strategy. These interests shape the Association's policy, and not the other way round.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the main interests of the ASEAN countries that influence their approach to China, classify them into pull and push factors and determine their significance for particular member states, which should allow to reflect the power play among the states and thus the prevailing interests as well. In this way the main pivots of the ASEAN policy towards China can be established and the main trends predicted. Then, using the proposed typology into push and pull factors, the example of the South China Sea, a push factor, will be analysed to show how the same issue can affect the policies of states differently, depending on the power play of other factors.

Determining the Shaping Factors of Foreign Policy

Foreign policy can be perceived as a spectrum of means, which a state can devise to champion its interests. Hence the national interests form the core of all foreign activities and as such should be considered the baseline of a foreign policy analysis (Jackson and Sørensen 2003, 100). The same rule should govern the study of more complex subjects, like ASEAN; in such cases, however, the identification of the main interests of the whole entity poses a greater challenge, since it requires prior examination of the potential benefits or losses of member countries, as well as

the internal hierarchy of the described grouping. The following chapter is an attempt to perform such an analysis on ASEAN and its member countries in their relation towards China.

Typology of interests: push factors versus pull factors

Traditionally, the national interests are divided by their subject area into politics, security, economics and a broad category of cultural and social relations. Acknowledging this typology it is generally assumed that, while following its interests of the first two categories, the governments are more likely to use the “zero-sum game” approach and pursue the policy of conflict rather than cooperation (Maersheimer 2001, 25–26). On the contrary, the economic interests are often perceived as a basis of any cooperation since they generate gains for all the participating countries (Waltz 2001, 99). The last category is often neglected as it is believed to have only a minor impact on the formation of foreign policy.

A closer look at the situation between China and ASEAN (and its member countries) shows, however, that these assumptions are oversimplified. Firstly, due to the growing engagement of China in Southeast Asia and the institutional network of the regional integration, conflict or cooperation are manifested more in the form of mitigating or inviting Chinese presence in the integration framework than in their ‘traditional’ forms (though the latter are by no means excluded). Therefore it seems appropriate that the national interests should be perceived as well as factors which either encourage the ASEAN member countries to or discourage them from keeping China engaged in the region, that is, in various forms of the regional cooperation. For the purposes of this article the interests generating cooperative approach will be described as *pull factors* (since they are ‘pulling’ China into the regional cooperation), while the ones leading to conflict policies will be named *push factors* (‘pushing’ China out and moderating its presence in the region). Secondly, the assumption that the economic interests are by their nature the ‘pulling’ ones, while the political and security matters usually cause dissonances not always proves to be true in case of China – ASEAN relations. Push and pull factors are present among both groups and vary throughout the member states; the same action of the Beijing government can be appealing for one

state and appalling for another, depending on its own national interests. Table 1 illustrates this typology in form of a matrix, in which the chosen interests are divided into categories and presented in a hierarchical order within them.

Table 1. Typology of interests into push and pull factors

Push factors	Political and security interests		Pull factors
	Territorial disputes (SCS dispute) Maritime security China's regional dominance China – U.S.A rivalry	Cooperation in regional bodies Common security interests and threats Similar ideology and common identity Military cooperation	
	Negative trade expectations Competitive export Growing vulnerability and dependence Expected decrease of FDI	Positive trade expectations Expected inflow of FDI Developmental aid Technology import	
	Economic interests		

Source: own elaboration.

Interests of the member states: engaging or discouraging China

Taking political and security push factors as a starting point it is clear that the territorial issues, and especially the dispute over islands in the South China Sea (SCS), have a great significance for the relations between the ASEAN member countries and China (Zhong 2010). Beijing’s activities in this area, considered aggressive, are perceived as an important security threat to many ASEAN countries, which is only deepened by their historical experiences of Chinese dominance. The level of threat perception depends, however, on the engagement of a given state into pursuing its claims, as well as on the actual sovereignty over the islands. Thus, for Vietnam and the Philippines the SCS dispute is a strong push factor and a prominent threat to national security. Whereas in Malaysia it is perceived as a push factor since it generates regional tensions, while it does not seem to be of great importance for Brunei (Bangkok Post 2013). Due to the lack of direct interest, the so-called ‘continental’ ASEAN states, that is Thailand, Myanmar and Laos, this issue does not discourage them from closer relations with China. The territorial clashes can, however, be

considered a push factor for Indonesia and Singapore as well; even though these two countries do not voice any claims to the disputed islands, they perceive the growing tension in the maritime area of Southeast Asia as a significant threat to their security.

Another reason for some ASEAN countries to limit Chinese presence in the region is the ambiguity of the long-term strategy of Beijing towards the region. What the Southeast Asian states fear is the Chinese dominance taking form of a regional hegemony. These states are interested in maintaining the balance of power in the region and keeping the United States involved (Hamilton-Hart 2012, 336–337). Thus, the disagreements between the U.S. and China, as well as the gradual power shift between these states, seem to form a push factor as well, especially for Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and recently Myanmar.

The significance of the pull factors in the subject of politics and security should not, however, be overlooked. The rise of the new security challenges and threats, such as piracy, pandemics, environmental issues and natural catastrophes, common for China and the majority of the ASEAN member states, inspires the latter to engage Beijing even more closely into regional cooperation forums. Moreover, the participation of China in various regional bodies is a trust-building factor, as it serves for greater transparency Chinese policy and helps in managing crises and tensions. Thus, the Chinese presence in the regional bodies is a pulling factor for deepening the already existing connections. What additionally helps to enhance the closeness between the ASEAN member countries and China is their shared identity as Asian states, appealing to similar values and ideologies.

Even though the growing economic relations between ASEAN and China should be an important incentive for the ASEAN member countries to tighten their relations with Beijing, the fact is that the gains and costs of this development are not distributed equally. While some of the ASEAN countries, especially the richer and more prominent ones that include the likes of Singapore or Malaysia, have positive expectations and experiences from ASEAN, such as the China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), the smaller ones, which include the Philippines, Laos or Vietnam, are more likely to bear the burdens (Gradziuk 2010). Another important push factor is the question of competitive export; in Indonesia and Thailand specifically, producers of labour-intensive or unrefined goods voice their fears of cheap Chinese products flooding their national markets and their

external markets (Ginting 2011, Hukum Online 2010). This issue does not, however, have the quality of a push factor for these countries whose production is rather complementary to that of the PRC, such as Malaysia or Singapore (Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins 2009).

Tightening economic connections between China and the Association have their effects on other spheres as well. Among the member countries contradictory expectations can be observed regarding the future inflow of FDI, with some of them believing that China will attract potential investors and the levels of the capital located in Southeast Asian countries will decrease (Ravenhill 2006). Even though the gathered data denies this assumption, proving that the FDI in China and the ASEAN member countries grow simultaneously, some countries express their fears of a deepening vulnerability to the status of the Chinese economy. They want to avoid greater economic dependence, in which they see a source of potential crisis and conflict, and thus limit the economic presence of Beijing in the region (Ng 2007). On the other hand, the less developed countries, such as Myanmar or Cambodia, profit from the Chinese engagement in the Southeast Asia as beneficiaries of developmental aid from Beijing. Keeping China engaged in various regional developmental bodies is their vital interest, since thanks to the Chinese presence they receive significant help in, for example, infrastructure or technology development.

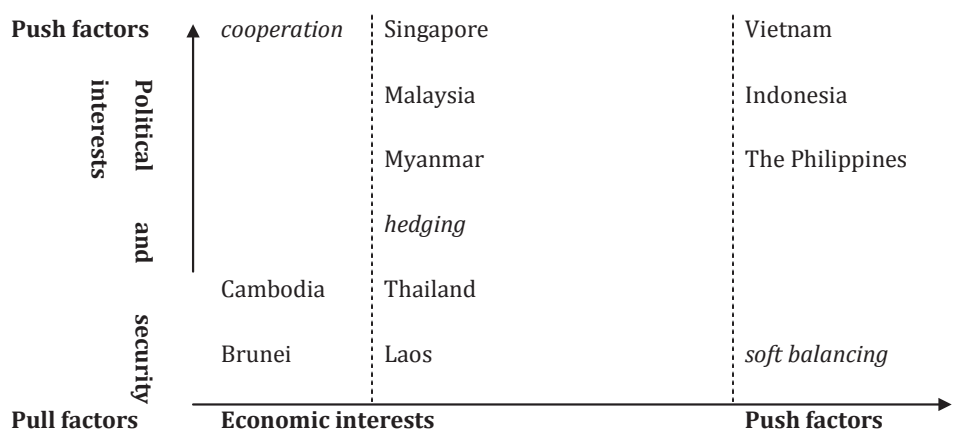
This short presentation of the choice of ASEAN member countries regarding their interests towards China exemplifies how complex in fact the Sino-ASEAN relations are. Each country has its own reasons to either invite Beijing to join closer regional cooperation or to contain its influence in a given subject area. Thus, as a form of conclusion, a division can be drawn between the ASEAN member countries. While it would be best for the interests of Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines to mitigate the Chinese presence in Southeast Asia, Cambodia and Brunei are greatly interested in strengthening it. However, the situation is not so unambiguous for Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, whose relation to China is more complicated, since the Chinese presence is beneficial for them in some aspects, however, disadvantageous on the other. Knowing their particular interests and their relative power within the Association, it can be analysed more accurately which policies the ASEAN member countries will adopt towards China and how it will affect the policy of ASEAN as a whole.

Establishing the Foreign Policy of ASEAN Towards China

In the face of the rising regional power that China has recently become, the relatively small states forming ASEAN are believed to have three options: (1) bandwagoning, that is, cooperating closely for benefits from good relation with the regional power; (2) soft balancing by tightening relations with another significant power, the United States, in order to counterbalance the Chinese influences in the region; (3) hedging, which is the policy of avoiding a close alliance with one power at the expense of the other, or 'keeping the equal distance' from each of the powers present in the region (Kuik 2008). Khong (2004) argues that hedging, with elements of soft balancing, will be the main course of ASEAN foreign policy towards China. However, it appears that recently the Association is shifting its stance more towards balancing. The analysis of the particular interests of the member states presented above helps to understand the reasons of this shift.

Picking the right policy: soft balancing, cooperating, and hedging

According to the recent analysis of Chen and Yang (2013), the three visions of foreign policy, bandwagoning, soft balancing and hedging, are present among the attitudes of ASEAN member countries towards China. They claim that the states enjoying both good economic and security relations with Beijing follow the strategy of bandwagoning, while the states harbouring negative trade expectations and perceiving China as a threat for their security pursue the balancing policy. The remaining states, having satisfactory relations in one sphere and disappointing in the other, hedge against the PRC. While the proposed model is useful in showing both the complexity of the Sino-ASEAN relations and their changeability in time, it does not reflect the internal hierarchy within the Association and hence does not allow to predict which strategy prevails. Thus, while it can be agreed that the countries in which the push factors dominate over the pull ones are more prone to balance China than the countries in which push and pull factors have comparable impact (see Graph 1), in order to determine the direction of the ASEAN common policy towards Beijing it is necessary to establish the internal order within the organisation.



Graph 1. Strategies of the ASEAN member states towards China according to their interests

Source: own elaboration, based on Chen and Yang 2013

According to the foreign policy patterns presented in Graph no 1, the strategy chosen most frequently among the ASEAN member states is hedging, followed closely by soft balancing, which would confirm the theses of Khong (2004) and Goh (2005, 2007). As mentioned in the previous section, the foreign policy choices result from the interests that are of vital importance to the member states, namely their territorial sovereignty and maritime security (compromised by Chinese claims to the SCS islands), uneven distribution of burdens and benefits of closer economic relations with China and the fear of Chinese hegemony in the region. Another factor which pulls China closer and is fulfilled in the form of hedging is Beijing's engagement in the regional cooperation forums, which helps to moderate the Chinese influence and keep an equal distance to all powers participating in the multilateral bodies. It should be closely examined, however, which member states pursue the interests affecting the policy of the Association to the greatest extent. Basing on the analysis from the previous section it can be determined that these interests are of importance mainly for the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and, to lesser extent, Thailand. Hence it can be assumed that any shifts in policy towards China will be resulting from a tug-of-war between these states, though the recent changes observed in Myanmar are not without their significance.

Building upon the reasoning presented above, it could be assumed that hedging (with elements of soft balancing) can be expected to become

the long-term strategy of ASEAN. However, the recent events seem to show a gradual growth of the role of soft balancing, with the policy of hedging still present and important. This shift can be ascribed to several reasons, with the aggravation of the territorial dispute and tightening of Chinese stance in Southeast Asia being the most prominent among them. The next chapter elaborates on this change, using the examples of Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia to illustrate how the push factor of Chinese assertiveness in the SCS dispute influences their attitudes towards Beijing.

One policy, different executions: Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia

Indonesia

The gradual change from hedging to soft balancing results to a great extent from the changing interests of Jakarta and its regained influence on the whole Association. Promoting the regional stability and autonomy from any non-ASEAN superpowers has always been among the most vital interests of Indonesia; not only national, but more regional as well, considering its aspiration to be in the leading role of ASEAN. That is why the growing assertiveness of China in the region, especially Beijing's plans to ensure its dominance over virtually the whole SCS, would upset the balance of power ensuring the stability in Southeast Asia, contribute to the shift in the Indonesian foreign policy (Murphy 2013).

While Indonesia does not officially advocate the policy of containing Chinese engagement and interests in the Southeast Asia, its recent rapprochement with the United States seems to be on contrary to these declarations. Although it could be argued that the Sino-Indonesian ties are dynamically developing as well, they still seem to be of pragmatic rather than strategic nature. It seems that Jakarta is still missing a long-term strategy towards China, as if the Indonesian government was still unsure what role China should play in the region (Tjhin 2012). The United States on the other hand, always perceived as a stabilising factor in the regional policy, seems to have an important place in Indonesian long-term policy. The development of their mutual relations started to progress dynamically in 2008, when the agreement on strategic partnership was

signed; since then, the United States and Indonesia has been strengthening their ties in all areas, through both the multilateral bodies and bilateral relations. The U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the President Barack Obama visited Jakarta in 2009 and 2010 respectively; in 2011 Barack Obama was also the first U.S. President to attend the 19th East Asian Summit, which took place on Bali (Bush 2011). The special spot in the U.S.-Indonesian relations are the security issues as the two countries enjoy a tightening military cooperation, mostly in the forms of a growing defence trade, common training operations and financial funds received from Washington. The most prominent example of the arms trade might be the contract for Boeing aircraft (attack helicopters) worth 21.7 billion USD, signed in November 2011; it is worth mentioning that this was the largest commercial contract ever signed by the Boeing company (Babb 2011). The military ties are strengthened not only by occasional events, like the joint Counterterrorism Exercise in September 2013 in Sentul, West Java (Siboro 2013), but also by the regular meetings of the Joint Commission, which is responsible, among others, for information exchange and the sharing of good practices for organizing the defence sector (Hiebert, Osius, and Poling 2013). Thus, the United States has emerged as a vital partner who helps to enhance the role of Indonesia within ASEAN (Hiebert and Magpile 2012).

Such close relations with the United States, in light of the perception of the U.S.A. as the sole superpower and thus the only state able to balance the influence of Beijing in Southeast Asia, evokes the all too known anti-Chinese connotations. While some believe that a developing regional power such as Indonesia cannot allow itself to choose a security alliance with the United States over the economic gains from growing trade with China (Bodirsky 2012), the compromised security interests of Indonesia in the SCS, combined with the competitive characters of Indonesian and Chinese exports, seem to counter this thesis. Thus it appears that while Jakarta is still willing to maintain its positive relations to Beijing and keep it engaged, mostly via multilateral forums, its rapprochement with the United States bears marks of balancing China rather than hedging it. It is worth noting, however, that the Chinese leaders are actively countering the rapprochement between the U.S. and Indonesia. A vivid example of that was the quick reaction to the news of Barack Obama cancelling his Barack Obama visit to the ASEAN countries in October 2013. Chinese President Xi Jinping, during his visit in October 2013, offered a strengthening of trade relations with Indonesia and signalled his determination

to enhance cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries. Even though Indonesia is still wary of Chinese ambitions, the cancelled visit casted doubts on the true intentions and commitment of the U.S. in the region (Perlez 2013; Demick 2013).

Vietnam

A similar deepening of mutual cooperation, unofficially aimed at mitigating the Chinese influence in the region, can be observed between the United States and Vietnam. In this case, however, it is not a recent occurrence. The Vietnamese policymakers have sought out the American engagement as a balancing power already in 2007 when the SCS dispute, which is believed to be the most significant obstacle for developing positive Sino-Vietnamese relations (Le 2013), was again aggravated. What Hanoi wanted from the United States at first was not a balancing engagement as such, but rather a form of diplomatic support; that is, stressing the necessity of adhering to the idea of freedom of navigation, as well as sticking to the agreed common principles (Manyin 2013, 8). With the course of time, however, the American presence in the region and the security cooperation developing between these two countries seem to set Vietnam to an even more confrontational policy. Hanoi, unwilling to back down from its exploitation of natural resources in the disputed areas, perceives its deepening ties with the United States as a means of strengthening their stance against Beijing, and thus as the most important balancing power (Glaser 2012). The Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defence Cooperation of 2011, which is being implemented by both countries, serves this purpose and is positively assessed by the participating parties (The White House 2013). A crucial impact of the Memorandum is the establishment of a functional framework for consultation, the exchange of experiences and meetings of high-ranking officials. Since 2011, Vietnam has been visited by the Commanders of the 7th Fleet and the Pacific Fleet (2012), hosted naval trainings (2012 and 2013) and hosted the 3rd Defence Policy Dialogue (2013). Moreover, the exchange of experiences took place on both the official and academic level. For example, in June 2013 Vietnamese Minister of Defence and Chief of Staff, General Do Ba Ty, visited the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff; and in 2011 and 2012 delegations of defence academy students visited the United States and Vietnam respectively (Thayer 2013).

While it could be beneficial for all interested parties to handle the SCS dispute multilaterally, China is reluctant to this solution. It has also proved unsuccessful, since even though ASEAN managed to contain the dispute, it appears unable to shape a united stance, let alone solve the dispute (Thayer 2012, Storey 2011). Hence, in the face of disheartening results of a hedging policy, Vietnam is even more interested in tightening its security ties with the United States in order to balance China. As expressed during the visit of Vietnamese President Sang to Washington in July 2013, the long-term goal of Vietnam in its relations with the United States is to build a strong strategic partnership (BBC News 2013).

An important step in deepening the military cooperation between Hanoi and Washington, which is also a means to counterbalance the Chinese influence in the region, is the possibility of wider usage of the naval base in Cam Ranh Bay by the U.S. Navy; currently, only non-combat U.S. ships can be maintained there. The Defence Secretary Leon Panetta expressed eagerness during his visit in June 2012 to develop cooperation in maritime issues in this direction (Ratnam 2012). The promises of assistance made by Panetta in implementing a code of conduct in the SCS area have been enhanced by the Secretary of State John Kerry. During his visit to Vietnam in December 2013 he announced that the United States will dedicate 32.5 million dollars to “maritime law enforcement in Southeast Asian states”, of which approximately 18 million is dedicated to Vietnam. Even though Kerry stressed that his declaration is not related to the regional tensions, it remains a clear example of counterbalancing Chinese influence in the SCS (Tiezzi 2013).

Thus, even in the light of gradual improvements in Sino-Vietnamese relations, Beijing is still perceived as a challenge that needs to be mitigated by a closer alliance with the United States. However, as presented above, in the case of Vietnam it is not a recent shift in policy, rather a result of the long-term security interests of Hanoi in the SCS area.

Malaysia

Even for the countries that due to their history of good relations with China in general, and particularly their recent beneficial economic ties with Beijing, are more prone to use hedging instead of balancing, there are reasons beckoning them to shift their stance. For Malaysia, economically more developed as it is than some other Southeast Asian countries and

enjoying long-term positive relations with China, the security stability in the region remains its key interest, being the *sine qua non* for further growth and for successful regional integration. Hence, the strengthening assertiveness of China in maritime areas and the resulting tensions, which are perceived to have an armed conflict potential, motivate Kuala Lumpur to implement more balancing to its policies.

Even though rapprochement with the United States is not as evident as in the case of Indonesia, the American strategy of "pivot movement" to Southeast Asia, as announced by Hillary Clinton (2011), has enjoyed a positive response in Malaysia. Even if it still prefers the policy of engaging China into a multilateral network, which is a typical example of the hedging policy, the presence of the United States in the Southeast Asian area is perceived as a balancer, also in terms of military security in the SCS (Hamilton-Hart 2012, 337). The Malaysian policymakers though are acutely aware that the regional stability cannot be achieved simply by allowing a greater presence of the U.S. military in the region to balance the growing numbers of the People's Liberation Army; on the contrary, they fully understand the risk of antagonising China and the United States further by doing so. Thus, their balancing actions are more limited by the necessity of sustaining the fragile equilibrium of power (Tang 2012, 23–26). An example of this could be the calm reception of the Chinese naval exercises conducted in March 2013 near the coast of Malaysia. There has been no official comment or protest about that event by the Malaysian government, which can be read as a demonstration of "quiet diplomacy" towards Beijing, executed in order to prevent straining their mutual relations. Shariman Lockman argues that this policy allows Kuala Lumpur to enjoy a relatively higher level of safety in the SCS area (in comparison to the Philippines and Vietnam), which could not be afforded by engaging the United States to greater extent (Shariman 2013).

Therefore, what is interesting in the Malaysian form of balancing is its indirectness and low intensity. While some actions of the government in Kuala Lumpur could be understood as balancing against China, for example the full-fledged participation in the Cobra Gold U.S. military exercise, they are never clearly aimed against Beijing. Contrary to the examples given when considering Indonesia and Vietnam, in the case of Malaysia it is not the diplomatic but the military-to-military ties that are becoming the core of the security cooperation, and they are not limited to the immediate region. During his visit to Kuala Lumpur in 2012, Leon

Panetta expressed his thanks for the medical personnel of the Malaysian Armed Forces for their commitment in Afghanistan (New Strait Times 2012), and the SCS dispute and its implications were not emphasised. The Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, when meeting with the Malaysian Minister of Defence Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein in Kuala Lumpur 2013, also stressed the importance of the regular exchange of military representatives and joint military exercises as a means of building the bilateral relationship (Pellerin 2013). As Kuik (2013) observes, there is no clear link between the deepening ties with the United States and the rising Chinese potential, as can be seen in the case of Vietnam for example. The issue of the SCS dispute is approached indirectly. A good example of this indirectness is the first visit of Minister Hishammuddin to the United States in January 2014. The Minister addressed the issue as "actions taken by certain countries which could create regional instability" during his meeting with the Deputy Secretary of State, and not with the Secretary of Defence (The Malay Mail 2014). Thus, if Malaysia engages in a balancing policy, it can be described as indirect balancing, and as such can be perceived as a more restricted form of a hedging policy rather than a 'pure' balancing strategy.

As the three examples of Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam illustrate, even the same idea of soft balancing is interpreted differently in each ASEAN member state, in accordance with its particular interests. It serves as another proof for the complexity of the Sino-ASEAN relations and its close dependence on the recent interests of particular states. To determine the foreign policy pattern of the Association as a whole, however, further studies are necessary in order to determine not only the precise interests of each member country, but their influence within ASEAN as well.

Conclusion

An important question that arises after the presented analysis is whether describing the policies of the ASEAN member countries as (soft) balancing is not an exaggeration. It could be argued as well that the given country has positive and beneficial relations with China in at least one sphere, and rarely are there cases of open enmity between the ASEAN member countries and Beijing. Finally, the policy of soft balancing could be associated with strong alliances with another country leading to con-

flict. Thus, it could be claimed that, all in all, the policy of the ASEAN member countries, and therefore of the whole Association as well, takes the form of hedging.

This reasoning is helpful by emphasising the complexity in regards to the interests of the ASEAN member countries towards China and by showing that, apart from security and trade, there are other factors crucial in forming foreign policy. Furthermore, hedging, as described by Kuik, encompasses a spectrum of policies varying from indirect balancing to limited bandwagoning, and hence it can become a label for various political activities (Kuik 2013). However, in accordance with the thesis stated at the beginning of this article, it is not the long-term strategy which should be searched for and examined. The focus should be rather drawn to the recent empirical activities of the ASEAN member countries and, as described above, they seem to be prone to adapting more soft balancing to their strategies, due to the recently tightening stance of China. Of course, the internal pushing and pulling factors are not the only features influencing the shape of the policy towards China, a key problem, not discussed within this article, is the Chinese attitude towards the Association and its spectrum of political instruments used to prevent ASEAN from forming a united stance. Beijing must be cautious though not to provoke the fear of 'the Chinese threat', which could justify the policy of soft balancing in the eyes of the public opinion. The external factors shaping the foreign policy of ASEAN towards China have been, however, the subject of interesting studies (Ba 2008).

While the topic of the process of forming the ASEAN attitude towards China has not been fully examined yet, the closer look on this issue proves that the foreign policy of ASEAN is flexible and changeable over the course of time due to the changes in individual interests and receptions of the Chinese presence of the particular member states. Thus, for predicting the future trends in the Sino-ASEAN relation, a close study of the internal interests should be treated as the base point for any further analysis.

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