CHINA´S NEW CONCEPT OF SECURITY AND THE STRATEGIC MULTILATERAL RELATIONS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Since 1978 Chinese foreign policy has gone through many changes. We understand that the change the affected its behavior the most was the turn to pragmatism that took shape in Mao's final years and developed in the post-Mao era. This new orientation combined with the changes introduced into the international system some years later, with the end of the Cold War, encouraged Beijing to approach regional multilateral initiatives. In this article we aim to analyze, from a realist perspective, China's foreign policy to Southeast Asia in the multilateral strategic sphere. We will examine two cases: the Spratly dispute and the Chinese participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

RESUMO

A política exterior chinesa desde 1978 até a atualidade sofreu numerosas modificações. Considera-se que a mudança que em grande medida afetou o seu comportamento externo foi a virada para o pragmatismo que começou a ser concebida nos últimos anos da era maoísta e passou a ser implementada nos anos posteriores. Esta nova orientação, combinada com as mudanças produzidas anos depois no sistema internacional com o fim da Guerra Fria, favoreceu a aproximação da República Popular da China (RPC) com iniciativas multilaterais da região. Neste artigo tenta-se abordar o realismo das relações internacionais na política exterior chinesa com o Sudeste da Ásia no plano estratégico multilateral. Para isso, vai concentrar-se em dois casos, o conflito pelas Ilhas Spratly e a participação no Fórum Regional da Associação de Nações do Sudeste Asiático – Asean (ARF).

1 INTRODUCTION

Since 1978, the Chinese foreign policy has gone through many changes. We take into consideration that the change which affected its exterior behavior in larger scale is the pragmatism, which took shape in the last years of Mao`s era, and started to develop in the years that succeeded it. By definition, pragmatism is a behavior that is neither guided by a set of values nor by established principles. The pragmatic behavior is simply oriented towards achieving goals, and it is guided by national interests (Suicheng, 200:44)

This turn in the foreign policy was developed in a way corresponding to the process of economic development initiated by Deng Xiaoping, known as the Four

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Modernizations[1]. It became the main goal of the Chinese leaders, who, through a pragmatic vision, estimated that in order to achieve it, the maintenance of a stable regional environment would be needed in order to allow them to concentrate in the development of better commercial relations with the system's great powers, as well as with China's closest neighbors.

Both conditions – pragmatism and the priority given to regional stability – echoed in the relations between the People´s Republic of China (PRC) and Southeast Asia. In its turn, the national significance given to modernization contributed to improve China`s image overseas (Cheng, 1999: 176). The SEA states, which saw the country as a constant threat and as a revolution exporter, embraced the economic model. These countries realized, in this process, Beijing`s intention to distance itself from a communist featured production and political design model towards one which would integrate the elements of political openness and capitalist economic development.

The end of the Cold War marked a new turning point in China's foreign policy towards the SEA. For the Asean, the Soviet withdrawal, which followed the end of the dispute, was seen as a loss of counterweight in Chinese power, and raised the need for a redefinition of security strategies in the region by focusing its attention on the emergence of China as a major actor in the regional area. For Beijing, the end of the dispute and the resulting Soviet withdrawal from the region favored the creation of an empty space of power the United States would not be willing to take over, which would allow it to have its regional image adjusted. China began to deepen the bilateral bonds it had with the Southeast Asian countries, and to restore its broken diplomatic relations. In August 1990, it regularized its relations with Indonesia, and in November 1991, just over a year later, it did the same with Vietnam. As far as Singapore was concerned, a country with which it had not yet maintained formal diplomatic ties, relationships were built in October 1990.

Since then, the combined efforts of the SEA countries – through the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) – which were trying to involve China in the region´s security, and Beijing´s interest in dissipating the feeling of threat it used to inspire in its neighbors, taking into account the priority given to regional stability, favored the country approaching the integration of multilateral initiatives. At the same time, a new definition of the concept of security started to be developed within the Chinese political elite. Formulated to guide relations in Asia, and in the Pacific, this concept has trust, mutual benefits, equality and coordination as its main components. Here we can notice not only Beijing's set priority to regional stability and peace, but also its greater predisposition to adopt multilateral ways of interacting with the region.

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1. A process of economic modernization focused in the areas of agriculture, industry, science and technology and defense.

This gradual behavioral change in terms of Beijing's foreign policy directed towards the Asean, especially at the multilateral level, is the demonstration of an overall attitude of the Asian giant towards multilateral initiatives. Some examples of this include its participation in the block and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) since 1991, its admission in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and its commitment in the so-called *six party talks* to solve the problem in North Korea. The multilateral strategies are part of a wide range of policies that fit their peaceful rise; however, Beijing' practice in this type of initiative is recent and scarce. Hence China, despite having gained comfort in the use of multilateral mechanisms – mainly in the economic field – still prefers bilateralism as a form of relationship with other countries, and their use of multilateralism is selective and subject to the type of problem addressed depending on how much it may affect the interests of the country.

Since tension between bilateralism and multilateralism affects, and will continue to affect, the maneuverability of the Chinese authorities in the foreign policy, we consider it relevant to analyze the country's performance ate the region's multilateral level, and which interests its gradual behavioral change has answered. (Wu, 2004: 64-65).

In this article, we intend to approach the reality of international relations in the Chinese foreign policy directed towards Southeast Asia in the multilateral strategic plan. Besides considering the state as a unitary actor (Sodupe, 2003, p. 81) – premise taken to analyze both the PRC and the Southeast Asian countries – it is assumed that the State's interests are defined *a priori*, that is, previously to the relationship (apud WELDES HOUGHTON, 2007, p. 37). Despite the interest being taken as given, we consider that the behavior can be influenced by the relationship with other actors. This allows us to see how, through interaction, one can produce changes in China's behavior in the region, although its interests remain stable.

In order to conduct such analysis, this study will be focused on two cases, the Spratly Islands dispute and the participation in the Asean Regional Forum (ARF). In the first case, we can see how the behavior of the PRC evolved, in regard to the territorial dispute. We emphasize the way the Asean managed to engage its neighbor in multilateral dialogue, and in how it limited the use of force. In the second, we analyze how the calculation based on cost-benefit led China not only to approach the forum in 1997, but to gradually increase their involvement through the years.

We take these two processes as case studies because they constitute the two main areas of strategic cooperation that have gradually involved China in multilateral negotiations with Southeast Asia. In the Spratly Islands dispute, one can see with greater clarity China's and the Asean's joint efforts to advance the resolution

of the dispute renouncing the use of force and using mechanisms of cooperation, and in this problem is more clearly manifest the extent to which the PRC is willing to submit the treatment and resolution of regional conflicts to multilateral frameworks. In turn, the ARF is the first attempt to award a regional institutional character to multilateral dialogue on security issues in the region, representing a milestone in the strategic multilateralism in Eastern Asia.

2 FIRST APPROACH TO MULTILATERALISM: CHINA´S PARTICIPATION IN THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM

China´s post-Cold war foreign policy emphasizes a "new concept of [regional] security"[2] through what Beijing describes what it considers to be the most appropriate means to organize the current security relations. According to Capie and Evans (2002: 175-177), this concept reflects the Asia-Pacific countries´ efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region. In this conception, we have the need to guide the mutual relations by the five principles of peaceful coexistence, dialogue and the building of trust.

Along with this definition, but gradually, China began to show a bigger interest for multilateral dialogue and cooperation organizations since the 1990s. Its entry into ARF, since 1994, matched this change of perception.

The Asean Regional Forum is a multilateral strategic dialogue structure, which began in July 1993, in Singapore, during the annual meeting of the Asean countries´ ministers of foreign relations (Leifer, 1995:51). The process of configuration of this space started in Singapore with Asean's Declaration of the Fourth Summit of Heads of State, in 1992, whose third article states that:

> Asean could use established forums to promote external dialogues on enhancing security in the region as well as intra-Asean dialogues on Asean security cooperation (…) taking full cognizance of the Declaration of Asean Concord. To enhance this effort, Asean should intensify its external dialogues in political and security matters by using the Asean Post Ministerial Conferences (PMC).[3]

Thus, dialogues with extra-regional States were established on strategic issues through the PMC. China was not among the original[4] partners. However, in May 1993, during the meeting of Asean's high officials and its extra-regional partners, it was agreed to invite the PRC along with Russia, Vietnam, Laos and Papua New Guinea to the Asean Regional Forum.[5] The first meeting of the ARF

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2. In 1996, the country's leaders began to refer to a "new security concept" as a regional initiative, with an emphasis on strengthening trust through dialogue, and promoting security through cooperation. This concept was enshrined in the People's Republic of China (2002).

3. See: Asean (1992b).

4. United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the European Union.

5 . See: Asean (1993).

happened in July 1994, in Bangkok, aiming at promoting agreements to build trust (Leifer, 1995, p. 52).

Currently the Forum includes the ten Asean countries and 17 partners.[6] The body has many features of the Asean, and its structure and functioning differentiated it from security alliances. Its main mechanisms of decision-making respect the "Asean style": they are based on the consensus, on reaching a solution acceptable to all parties, they favor the building of trust through knowledge sharing and transparency, and they facilitate cooperation through successive negotiations which, in turn, feed the learning. The advisory nature of the ARF and its relevance in building spaces for cooperation are reflected in their goals. In them, it is established that the forum will foster dialogue and consultation on political and security issues common to the members, and work on building trust and on preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region (ARF, 1995a).

Besides accepting ARF´s invitation to participate in the ARF, and to attend the 1994 inaugural meeting, the Chinese involvement in the institution was passive and apprehensive. According to Susan Shirk (1994: 7), the country sent representatives to most regional discussions on cooperation in security issues; although it acted as an observer. This was partially due to the lack of a concrete policy on the part of the party and of the government on cooperation concerning security.

In turn, China had serious reservations with regard to the ARF, which were mainly due to the concern that the United States – a member of the ARF – would use it to intervene in the country's internal affairs. Secondly, China feared that the Asean would try to internationalize the Spratly Islands conflict through the forum and take a single stance against the PRC (Kuik, 2005). Accordingly, at the inaugural meeting of the ARF in 1994, the country announced it would not allow the issue of the Spratly Islands territorial dispute to be discussed at the forum. China not only kept the issue off the agenda of the organ, but also received support from Malaysia and the Philippines to thwart Indonesia's proposal of granting a more active role for governments in informal workshops to discuss the conflict. This attitude, which largely explains Beijing's preference for bilateralism, can be seen as a sort of widespread reluctance from China to engage more concretely and substantially in multilateral discussions, due to its fear that its neighbors would use the body against the country (SHIRK, 1994, p. 11th).

A third reservation was due to the fear of placing the Taiwan issue on the agenda of the ARF. Finally, Beijing was worried about the problem of military transparency (KUIK, 2005). The forum encourages its members to introduce levels of transparency concerning their national defense capabilities, in terms of

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6. Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, United States, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and the European Union.

weaponry and technology. Initially, the Chinese government, particularly its defense officials, was reluctant to reveal any information concerning this area. This was mainly related to the conception that the ambiguity and the respect towards the military capabilities of the country, gave it a greater deterrent power. So if others had known about the scarcity and low-technology of its weaponry, the country would be in a position of greater vulnerability (SHIRK, 1994, p. 11).

Despite these fears, Beijing decided to participate in the ARF, which implied an innovation in its strategic foreign policy for the region. This participation was stimulated by two main reasons. On the one hand, more by the need to prevent initiatives that could threaten its national interest (KUIK, 2005) than by a belief in multilateralism. On the other, by the perception that it would be an effective tool to reduce the fears that its fast-growing aroused in neighboring countries (SHIRK, 1994, p. 8).

The perception of threat that China raised among its neighbors was attributed to the emptiness of power left after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and to the reduced North-American presence in the region following the end of the Cold War. To the eyes of the Southeast Asian countries, the resulting emptiness of power could be filled in, initially, by Japan. However, given the steady growth of the Chinese economy, suspicions that the latter could move in Southeast Asia as a regional power arose.

Both RPC's leaders and diplomats tried to disrupt this perception by stating that the Chinese economy and military capability are at low levels of development. Participation in a regional cooperation body on security issues, which concentrates not only the countries of the area, but extra-regional partners, was seen by the leadership as a way to help to build trust in leaders from Southeast Asia about the Chinese intentions.

Thus, the incentives that lead China to implement multilateral strategies were due, mainly, to rational calculations. The Chinese leaders estimated that the trend towards multilateralism in regional security was a process that could not be stopped and that China could not ignore. Not participating in the ARF would imply China's isolation from the area and could give rise to suspicions in Asean countries at a time when the country was trying to get closer to their neighbors. Therefore, the PRC chose to participate in the body, so as to avoid isolation in order to shape, since its conception, the incipient process of cooperation, so that it would not threaten their interests or national security (KUIK, 2005).

The first positive guidance from Beijing toward strategic multilateralism in the region began to emerge in 1992 with the declaration of the deputy foreign minister, Liu Huaqiu in favor of the progressive establishment of mechanisms for dialogue on security in the bilateral, sub-regional and regional levels. Gradually,

during the first half of the 1990s, the Chinese leadership was developing a more favorable position with regard to multilateral dialogue on strategic issues in the region (SHIRK, 1994, p. 7). This was partially due to the change of view regarding the ARF, a result of China's participation in the process. The institutional characteristics of ARF, on the one hand, and the intention of the members of Asean – the main drivers of agency – to maintain equitable relations with the powers on the other, contributed to change China's perception about the organization (KUIK, 2005).

The main institutional resource that, according to Foot (1998), allowed a raise in China's comfort level regarding their participation in the forum is the consensus as a decision-making mechanism. This mechanism, says the author, releases Beijing from the obligation to form coalitions or to invest resources in getting allies for voting (FOOT, 1998, p. 428). A second resource that favored this approach is the ARF's commitment of only advancing at a pace that is acceptable to all members. As stated in section 21 of the ARF's *concept paper*:

> The ARF should also progress at a pace comfortable to all participants. The ARF should not move "too fast for those who want to go slow and not too slow for those who want to go fast" (ARF, 1995a).

This assures the Chinese leadership that decisions will be made gradually, thus respecting the country's preference for gradualism – a preference shared with Southeast Asian countries (SHIRK, 1994, p. 10). In this sense, both parties reject the European model of regional institutionalization of strategic cooperation. Beijing argues that a formal characteristics institution like the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) would not be an appropriate model for Asia, given the countries' diverse political, economic, social and cultural development.

Instead, Beijing argues the mechanism of incremental progress, using dialogue through different channels, and also informally. That is, China – along with the Southeast Asian countries – opposes the structuring of dialogues for permanent working groups (FOOT, 1998, p. 432). However, in the second ministerial meeting of the Forum held in Brunei in 1995, its members agreed to establish inter-governmental meetings and inter-sessional groups, whose maintenance would be discussed in the next meeting.[7] These discussion forums were not established as formal, structured bodies within the ARF, and currently they are also composed of academics and members of research institutions in the region. These characteristics relate to the nature of the ARF and reduce the Chinese concern of becoming involved in a formal body to limit its sovereignty in the future.

One last feature of the ARF, and also a fundamental condition for the participation of China, is that the adopted agreements are voluntary and non-binding,

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7. See: ARF (1995b).

and that the mechanisms of cooperation have emphasis on the building of trust and dialogue as a method of creating such trust. Beijing's initial concerns may be attributed to the fear that the organization was not sensitive to Chinese interests. This perception began to change as the country began to familiarize itself with the organizational style of the ARF (FOOT, 1998, p. 432), and led to a change in its way of participating in the organ (KUIK, 2005) and in the consideration the leadership had about the whole process of regional multilateralization.

These changes start to become evident in 1997, with the more active role that China adopted within the ARF. In March 1997, the country co-organized the meeting of the Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures in Beijing. In the words of the then foreign minister, Qian Qichen, this was the first time China had hosted an official multilateral conference on security issues (FOOT, 1998, p. 426). On the third ministerial meeting, the PRC presented proposals for confidence building measures on issues of defense and security. In that same year, the Spratly problem began to be discussed for the first time within the ARF, despite China's initial reticence (EVANS, 2003, p. 750).

The previous developments were complemented in 2002 and 2004 with the publication and presentation to the ARF of the white papers on defense. In obvious resonance with the traditional stance of the country about the dangers implicit in the introduction of transparency in military affairs of State, Beijing publishes in these documents both the goals of its military policy and its expenditure on weapons (EVANS, 2003, p. 756). Also, regarding sovereignty, the White Paper of 2004 highlights that one of the main goals of the country's defense policy is "To stop separation and promote reunification, guard against and resist aggression, and defend national sovereignty, territorial integrity (...)." (INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2004). In this section, reference is made to the issue of Taiwan and the islands of the South China Sea, making it clear that Beijing is not willing to discuss and resolve, multilaterally, conflicts that may become a threat to its territorial sovereignty or integrity.

In summary, it is clear from the analysis of China's participation in the ARF that the rules of political realism continue to dominate the decision-making of the Chinese leadership regarding foreign policy and security.[8] Pragmatism rather than a belief in multilateralism as a mechanism, has guided China's approach toward the body. This can be noticed on the initial incentives that led Beijing to take part in the forum, and then to more actively participate in it. Nevertheless, it is considered that the role of the Asean in this sense was, and still is, important to foster the integration of China into the body, adapting to the Beijing's demands

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8. See: Foot (1998).

regarding gradualism and informality, and accepting the conditions that China imposes for its participation.

3 THE SPRATLY ISLANDS AND THE COMMITMENT TO REGIONAL DIALOGUE

Located in the South China Sea, the Spratly Islands are an archipelago consisting of approximately 400 islands, reefs and shoals. This territory had been under French colonial rule, and soon some islets were used by Japan as military bases during the Pacific War (LEIFER, 1995, p. 222). Despite these occupations, the islands have never been within the exclusive jurisdiction of any of the surrounding States (LEIFER, 1995, p. 221).

The conflict for sovereignty over the Spratly Islands began just after the Second World War, since the 1951 San Francisco Peace Agreement did not clearly define who would respond for the archipelago. This omission set the bases for the development of successive confrontations for the possession of the islands as well as the neighboring maritime space (ODGAARD, 2001, p.2). Actually, there are six countries involved in this dispute: China, The Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Taiwan. Out of these six countries, only China, Vietnam and Taiwan claim the whole archipelago (ACHARYA, 2001, p. 158).[9]

China bases its claims on the islands on historical grounds, including the Spratly Islands expeditions undertaken by the Han Dynasty in 110 AD and the Ming dynasty between 1403 and 1433. At the same time, Chinese traders and fishermen have worked on the area for a long time; moreover, China uses archaeological evidence to reassert their claims (GLOBAL SECURITY, 2009). The axis around which revolves the conflict is precisely that, in its resolution, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ignores what China sees as its historical rights on the South China Sea, giving control of the resources to coastal states (BUSZYNSKI & SAZLAN, 2007, p. 144). The legal and political vacuum resulting from the San Francisco Conference allowed coastal states to submit justified claims of sovereignty.

The PRC protested against external intrusions on the islands and against the French taking possession of them in 1933, and Japan in 1939, giving legal support to their claims. In 1947, the Nationalist China had occupied some of the Spratly Islands after the Japanese left them vacant, but withdrew when the conflict with the Communist Party for control of the mainland began. The presence of the United States, and then of the Soviet Union, in Southeast Asia prevented the PRC from effectively occupying the Spratly (BUSZYNSKI & SAZLAN, 2007, p. 145). The government appealed to maps to make its complaint public, but the dimensions

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9. The main opinions used to support the arguments in this work were taken from professor Amitav Acharya.

and exact coordinates have never been defined. According to Buszynki & Sazlan (2007, p. 146), the inability to back up their historically based claims through occupation explains China's frustration regarding the subject, and its determination to regain the territories.

We understand that it is relevant to distinguish how China, until the early 1990s, addressed the problem of the Spratly Islands. Since the mid 1970s, complaints about the exploitation of the islands were accompanied by the political will to use force, to propel their counterparts to recognize the rights of the Chinese territory (GALLAGHER, 1994, p. 170). In 1974 came the first Chinese clash with the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). In this first opportunity the Chinese forces moved South Vietnamese vessels that were located in the Paracel Islands (LEIFER, 1995, p. 181). The second confrontation took place in March 1988. This time around, the PRC faced the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, whose ruling elite, after the unification, decided to claim their rights over the archipelago. The origin of the conflict dates back to January that same year, when China began to occupy part of the Spratlys. The country's intention of extending its area of control led it to face Vietnam. The victory over the latter allowed Beijing to occupy six more islands and to continue its expansionist project in the archipelago. This confrontation of small magnitude was revealing as an indicator of China's willingness to support its territorial claims on the islands at the expense of neighboring states, even through the use of force (ODGAARD, 2001, p. 3).

Some alternative ways to extend its presence in the disputed area involved the sending of fishing fleets, oceanographic vessels with civilian and military personnel of high rank, and the construction of aerial and military infrastructure in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The Mischief Reef episode is the most important in this sense. The reef, composed mainly of coral, is located within 200 nautical miles of the coast of the Philippines, and the country has been claiming it since 1962 (ZHA and VALENCIA, 2001, p. 86).

In 1995, China occupied the reef and began to build the infrastructure. This advance was seen by Asean states with growing concern, since it appeared to be a reflection of the Chinese intention to exercise its sovereignty over the islands by force and imposition. This episode happened after the declaration of February 25, 1992, by which the Congress established that the South China Sea was part of Chinese territorial waters (and BUSZYNSKI SAZLAN, 2007, p. 150). Thus, the Mischief Reef incident shows the Asean the Asian giant's predisposition of reasserting its claim over the entire territory of the Spratlys by any means necessary, even if it means disrespecting the principle of non-aggression and peaceful resolution of disputes, which are two of the pillars of the regional organization.

A tendency to resort to unilateral measures – whether violent or nonviolent – can be seen in the Chinese foreign policy over the islands as a way of extending

its sovereignty over them at the beginning of the 1990s. At the same time, the Southeast Asian countries sustaining claims over the area also resorted to mechanisms that, far from establishing bases for resolving the conflict, exacerbated the problems, mainly around complaints by the exploitation of natural resources. Currently, Vietnam occupies 21 islands, Malaysia has control over three, and the country has even built a hotel in one of them, and the Philippines occupies eight islands, arguing that they do not form part of the Spratlys and were unclaimed (GLOBAL SECURITY, 2009).

Despite the unilateral measures the PRC and the involved Southeast Asian countries took over the years, efforts aimed at the cooperation around the conflict have been implemented since 1991. The kickoff to the negotiations between the parties – which consolidated the foundations for further cooperation in the region – was the Declaration on the South China Sea that Asean issued in 1992. In it, the need to settle the sovereignty issues over the islands without resorting to force is emphasized, and the Declaration also decides to study the possibilities of cooperation in the region with regard to navigation, communications, environmental protection, the fight against piracy and theft, and cooperation in the campaign against the traffic of illegal drugs (ASEAN, 1992a).

Some years later, a second document to deal with the dispute begins to be prepared: the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. The original proposal was held at the East Asia Summit in Manila in 1999, where the ASEAN countries agreed upon a draft document, which was not accepted by China. The establishment of a binding regional code of conduct was being proposed. After three years of negotiations, and after numerous objections from the PRC government, the result was a nonbinding statement signed in Cambodia in 2002. It makes no explicit reference to any particular archipelago. This was mainly due to Beijing's insistence of excluding any mention of the Paracel Islands – claimed by Vietnam, but currently occupied by China (ACHARYA, 2003). Moreover, the document refers to the South China Sea leaving enough conceptual scope for the provisions to apply to all the islands contained therein. The statement also urges the parties to:

> exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability including, among others, refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features and to handle their differences in a constructive manner.[10]

Emmers (2002) states that this section lacks the capacity to end the fighting in the area, because the PRC government has opposed to include a commitment to stop the building of infrastructure in the islands.

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10. See: Asean, 2002.

We agree with the authors who emphasize the limited willingness of China to make concessions on the total claim of sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and to be subject to conditions limiting its action in the area. Nevertheless, despite having no binding force, and despite respecting the objections raised by the Beijing government – something the ASEAN countries allowed, to finally reach an agreement that would create the bases for preventing armed conflicts in the area – the declaration represents an important step in the dialogue of the parties to resolve the conflict.

Firstly, we can observe an important change of policy in the PRC because the statement, in its first article, states that "the Parties reaffirm their commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea" (ASEAN, 2002), implying that Beijing would be truly recognizing the principle of occupation – that this convention provides – as the basis of support of claims of sovereignty. This allows the convention to be framed in a convention of the United Nations, and to take the dispute to an international level, a noticeable change on the previous foreign policy of the RPC (ACHARYA, 2001, p. 135).

> Secondly, the 2002 statement makes clear to the eyes of the country's leadership that the Asean states adhere to the recognition of the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate Chinese government, since Taiwan was the only plaintiff that did not sign the document, nor participated in its making.

Parallel to the talks and multilateral negotiations that preceded this document, the PRC continued to strengthen its bilateral ties with the countries that took part in the dispute. Within the Asean, countries keep different postures and perceptions toward China,[11] and these differences allow Beijing to approach parties individually and cause divisions within the organization about the stance against the conflict. The existing differences among the members – such as the overlapping of the territory each party claims and their opinions about the military role of the United States in the region – combined with the offers China presents to some of the states on a bilateral basis – mainly to Vietnam and Malaysia – have contributed to consolidate the rifts within the Asean and to hinder the achievement of a common stance regarding China (ACHARYA, 2001, p. 137; Emmers, 2002). Two clear cases in which one can notice China's bilateral approaches with some Southeast Asian countries are the signing of bilateral codes of conduct with Vietnam and the Philippines, and Beijing's progress towards obtaining the support of Malaysia to solve disputes in bilateral terms.

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11. Malaysia, Singapore, and especially the Philippines fear that China will develop an expansionist approach in its security policy. But while Malaysia and Indonesia used to see China as a long-term threat to regional security during the Cold War – unlike Singapore and Thailand, for whom the main threat was Vietnam – now Malaysia and Thailand appear to have a more benevolent opinion of China than the Philippines, which considers itself as the main "front" against the advance of China in Southeast Asia (ACHARYA, 2003, p. 2).

In 1993, Vietnam and China signed a Code of Conduct by which they pledged to not use force and to refrain from any action that could worsen their relations (ACHARYA, 2001, p. 135). The signing of the Agreement on Delimitation of the Territorial Sea, of the Exclusive Economic Zone and of the Continental Shelf in the Gulf of Tonkin was the first bilateral territorial instrument signed by China and Vietnam, undoubtedly a transcendental breakthrough in solving the problems in the border zone. It came into force in both countries on 30 June 2004.[12]

China also signed a code of conduct with the Philippines in August 1995, after the Mischief Reef incidents, with the intention of avoiding future incidents in the South China Sea and increasing maritime cooperation. During the two rounds of bilateral negotiations that preceded the signing, the parties reached an agreement on confidence-building measures that contributed to improved relations (STOREY, 1999, p. 95). Although it allowed the establishment of the *status quo* on the Kalayaan Islands[13] – the main objective of the Philippines – this agreement failed to constrain China's behavior, and the country continued to build on Mischief Reef in 1996 and in subsequent years (STOREY, 1999, p. 95).

It was with Malaysia that China achieved its greatest advances in terms of bilateral cooperation and negotiation. According to Acharya (2001, p. 136), Malaysia was approaching the Chinese stance regarding the search for solutions to the bilateral dispute. This is attributed mainly to the attitude adopted by Malaysia in the ARF ministerial meeting in 1999. Before this meeting, Malaysia completed the construction of infrastructure on Investigator Shoal, a sandbank claimed by the Philippines, China, Taiwan and Vietnam. This unilateral action had serious implications for ASEAN. Firstly, marked a break in the common posture of members about China. Secondly, violated the Declaration on the South China Sea. Finally, it opened the possibility for the emergence of a new wave of occupations by other parties in the dispute. Later, Malaysia, anticipating the reaction of the other members of Asean, refused to address the issue at its ministerial meeting and joined the Chinese posture, ensuring that the problems of the South China Sea should not be included in the agenda of the ARF. Malaysia also opposed the draft code of conduct by arguing that it was very similar to a treaty – by its binding character – and that each article should be carefully evaluated (VALENCIA, 2001).

Hitherto, we discussed the official negotiations of the issue concerning the territorial dispute for the islands – both multilaterally and bilaterally. Besides these official negotiations, unofficial dialogue initiatives between the parties were held. In this sense, and with support from the Canadian government, informal workshops

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12. For more information, see Vietnam (2004).

13. The name 'Kalayaans Islands' comprehends the archipelago located about 230 nautical miles west of the Palawan Island. This is the name Filipinos use to refer to these islands, which are claimed by the country and are part of the Spratly Islands group (Storey, 1999, p. 95).

were set up in 1990 between academics and government officials about the management of potential conflicts in the South China Sea (ODGAARD, 2002, p. 125).

The main success of this forum has been the working on a common knowledge base, allowing the proposals for cooperation in areas of marine scientific research, navigation safety, transport, and communication to be put on the table. The networks that emerged between the scientific communities of the States through dialogue have established the preconditions for cooperation on common problems. These workshops have attempted to define which areas are open for cooperation and which are not. In the first two meetings in which China participated in 1991 and 1992, the potential for cooperation was identified. In the following rounds, between 1993 and 1996, the areas of possible cooperation have been specified, including the expansion of technical and scientific initiatives (Odgaard, 2001).

One of the main obstacles to achieving concrete goals within the workshops is the preference for autonomy manifested by China. It implies a determination to maintain freedom of action and avoid subjecting the country to obligations it can't be released from in the future. In the context of the conflict through the islands, this posture of Beijing's assumes reservations about the format of the negotiations on the common problems of the South China Sea – demanding informality, the exclusion of sovereignty issues off the agenda, and only allowing international agencies to participate as advisers. Rather, the practice of consultation in the Asean was developed to maintain a constant dialogue that allows the accommodation of divergent interests in foreign policy in the presence of serious threats against the security of the member States. Instead of prioritizing practical cooperation, it has focused on promoting solidarity within the Asean through the process of dialogue. This created confidence that the member States would not pursue their national interests at the expense of stability and peace in the region (Odgaard, 2001).

The proceedings of the workshops represent the Asean attempt to approach the positions between China's practice of autonomy, and the consultation that has developed between the members of the organization. One of the main problems of those meetings was that many issues that could not be solved by dialogue remained pending, and as a consequence the results were not immediate. At the same time, the constraints imposed by China – mainly informality, and especially avoiding dealing with issues of sovereignty – have exempted the States from take binding commitments (Odgaard, 2001). Added to these conditions is Beijing's refusal of executing any negotiations involving Taiwan (ACHARYA, 2001, p. 135).

The process Asean has been facing to commit China to multilateral dialogue on strategic issues – especially concerning the Spratly Islands conflict – is gradual, and sometimes unsuccessful. However, it is considered that, in the light of what has been analyzed, it can be said that in some respects Beijing has been more inclined to participation and dialogue in multilateral frameworks.

It should be taken into account that the problem of the Spratly brings into play the territorial sovereignty and the access to natural resources that China considers essential to its development – just like the other countries in the conflict. These conditions contribute to the fact that, unlike what happened in the ARF, Beijing is not presenting initiatives to advance the multilateral dialogue and is showing a preference for bilateralism. As a result, one can see that – on the contrary of what happens in the economic area – in the areas Beijing finds most sensitive, multilateralism is not often used as a complement to bilateral strategies.

4 FINAL REFLECTIONS

Beijing's conduct in the regional strategic plan clearly falls in the pragmatic logic mentioned at the beginning of the article. Multilateralism is, as this author understands it, a strategy that started to complement bilateralism because in a more and more interdependent world, and with an overwhelming amount of multilateral processes, the state has the ability to interact at both levels.

Nevertheless, one should differentiate the thematic areas to which this strategy can be applied. From a realistic point of view, it is observed that in matters of high politics – such as territorial integrity and safety – the bilateral strategies tend to be more used. This is clear when we look at the Chinese foreign policy, which began to diversify its strategies toward multilateralism in recent years. Whereas in the economic realm one can observe Beijing's active participation, and even initiative, in the Asean Plus Three and in the conformation to the Asean-China Free Trade Area; in the strategic realm one can see more reservations. One example is the refusal to make reference to the sovereignty over the Spratlys within the multilateral dialogues framework of the ARF, discussing the development in parts of the archipelago over which it exercises ownership (Evans, 2003, p. 758) and giving it a formal treatment for the resolution of the dispute.

The approach of the PRC to multilateral agencies in the region is the product of a combination of factors: on the one hand the commitment of the Asean countries to involve the Asian giant in the regional security and stability; on the other hand, the Chinese leaders' evaluation of the need to integrate their country in the regional processes so as not to be excluded from a region where it competes against other powers. Thus one can see a growing excitement on Beijing's part toward multilateral processes – especially in the economic area – although its leaders still feel more comfortable with bilateral strategies (WU, 2004, p. 65).

The gradual approach of the PRC toward the ARF and the commitment to the non-use of force in the conflict over the Spratlys can be considered a small step in a broader calculation, in which the internal economic development remains the main priority. As long as it remains the goal, it is considered that China's conduct

won't deviate from a pacific standard, keeping a responsible leader policy in the region, and a non-aggressive attitude towards extraregional powers – especially the United States – within a security concept based on multipolarity and on the peaceful settlement of disputes.

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