

***Ensuring Interests: Dynamics of China-Taiwan Relations and Southeast Asia.* Edited by Ho Khai Leong and Hou Kok Chung. Kuala Lumpur: Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, 2006. Softcover: 305pp.**

The Taiwan Strait confrontation and the nuclear-weapon programme of North Korea have been the two most significant potential crises in the Asia-Pacific region. Besides the major powers, Southeast Asian states have important interests at stake in developments in the Taiwan Strait. While they all recognize the “one China” principle, they are very concerned about the potential impact of conflicts in the Taiwan Strait on the political and economic development in the region. They certainly want to avoid having to make a strategic choice should military conflicts occur in the Taiwan Strait. Meanwhile, they maintain substantial informal relations with Taiwan, and try to persuade the United States to continue to engage in the Asia-Pacific region.

A critical analysis of the changing interests and dynamics of the triangular relations among China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia from the latter’s perspective is an important contribution regarding a neglected topic. The Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, offers this volume of 14 chapters by scholars from China, Taiwan, and states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as it believes that “dialogue may be used to bridge the gulf between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, Republic of China (ROC), as well as improve Sino-ASEAN relations”; and that “in the long run, China, Taiwan, and ASEAN can build up a system where all players are subject to a prudential consultation process that ensures the interests of stakeholders in a stable security environment” (p. xiv).

The first two chapters give overviews of the Taiwan Strait tensions and Southeast Asia. Ho Khai Leong argues for an institutional structure, perhaps through a reinforcement of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to enable Beijing and Taipei to engage in direct dialogue with ASEAN. But Chinese leaders strongly object to allowing Taipei equal international status to participate in international forums alongside Beijing (pp. 3–17). Ho does not seem to have an innovative arrangement to offer.

Rodolfo Severino, former Secretary-General of ASEAN, suggests that ASEAN’s interest in the Taiwan question lies in the maintenance of the status quo; and he thinks that ASEAN states need to collectively discourage Taipei from moving towards independence (pp. 40–41). Chinese leaders will welcome such efforts, as they no longer perceive them as interferences in China’s domestic affairs. But Severino also

advocates for the testing of the limits of ASEAN's understandings with Beijing on the meaning of "one China", including, for example, the involvement of Taiwan in the Chiang Mai Initiative (p. 41). This move may well provoke protests from Beijing and raise tensions in Sino-ASEAN relations. It is a pity that the authors do not elaborate on these important proposals, and instead spend too much efforts on giving overviews which do not appeal much to the experts.

The second section contains only one chapter by Peter Yu Kien Hong from Taiwan. Professor Yu discusses a few dialectical models on politics in China, and suggests that political parties on both sides of the Taiwan Strait apply Marxist dialectics in analysing their future policy decisions. These philosophical similarities would allow Beijing and Taipei to negotiate and ultimately reach an agreement on the future of China (pp. 45–74). It is difficult to appreciate Yu's optimism to the extent that Taipei can request to form a coalition government. It is obvious that the Chinese leadership does not allow democracy in China and the Communist Party of China cannot accept the erosion of its monopoly of political power.

The third section deals with Washington-Beijing-Taipei relations. Since much has been written on the subject, the authors do not have much to offer in terms of new source materials and arguments. Mike Lan considers that there has been a new US de-commitment to the defence of Taiwan, in line with the pursuit of "great-power co-operation" between the United States and China (p. 94). These observations may require some qualifications. Pan Yining presents the Chinese view; and she analyses the differences in the perceptions of Beijing and Washington, as well as their misconceptions of each other's capabilities and intentions (pp. 99–115). She believes that these different perceptions have in turn aggravated their respective security dilemmas (pp. 113–14). Raymond Wu, on the other hand, tends to be "cautiously optimistic", as he considers that all concerned parties desire the maintenance of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait (p. 130).

The following two chapters by Hou Kok Chung and Yow Cheun Hoe are more interesting. They demonstrate that the Chinese communities outside China still maintain their cultural roots and political interests in China. Hou's study of the Malaysian Association for the Promotion of One China is an important case study of Beijing's united front strategy in overseas Chinese communities (pp. 135–55), though Hou may like to have his analytical framework more clearly defined. Yow's chapter, from a different perspective, discusses how contemporary Chinese diasporic communities are spatially and

historically torn on the issues of China's reunification and Taiwan independence (pp. 156–73).

The final section examines individual Southeast Asian countries' perspectives of cross-strait relations. While the standards of the six chapters vary, they represent pioneering work offering interesting and important observations. Alan Chong argues that the "normalization" of the Singapore-Taiwan relationship can only occur without Beijing's veto under the pretext of reunification (pp. 177–200). Mohd Kamarulnizam observes that Malaysia adopts a two-pronged policy recognizing both the political rights of Beijing and the retention of economic relations with Taiwan (p. 203). Malaysia considers a stable and prosperous cross-strait relationship vital for its security and economic interests (pp. 201–17). It appears that most ASEAN states basically follow Malaysia's example. Edgardo E. Dagdag carefully analyses how the Philippines has politically and economically benefited more from China than Taiwan (pp. 218–40). Again, most ASEAN states accept this conclusion — that is why they welcome better relations with China and respect its vital interests.

The Indonesian position is similar to that of Malaysia, as argued by Andi Irawan (pp. 241–61). Indonesia participates in building a solid foundation for the strategic partnership between ASEAN and China in the ARF (p. 257). Danny Wong's study of the Vietnamese position offers almost identical observations (pp. 262–75); and he is doubtful whether Vietnam's special relationship with China will significantly change the importance of Taiwan in Vietnam's economic development (p. 273). Finally, Chulacheeb Chinwanno sees that the ARF would be a good venue to discuss cross-strait issues, though the ARF at present is not sufficiently equipped for its role in preventive diplomacy (p. 290). Chinwanno further suggests that future ASEAN efforts should concentrate on developing the ARF so as to enable it to act as a referee and diplomat between China and Taiwan (p. 290).

In sum, this is a valuable volume for those interested in the ASEAN states' positions and interests in cross-strait relations.

JOSEPH Y.S. CHENG is currently Professor of Political Science and Coordinator of the Contemporary China Research Project at the City University of Hong Kong.