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## China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia\*

It's a time of hype in China-Southeast Asian relations. During the past year, the prime ministers of Malaysia and Thailand have vigorously denied that a rising China was or would be a threat to Asian stability and prosperity. David Kang argues in the journal *International Security* that Southeast Asian states may even be bandwagoning with China.

Since the summits of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, known as ASEAN, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation last month, newspapers have been full of references to China's charm offensive in the region. And visits to Southeast Asia by President George W. Bush and China's Prime Minister Wen Jiabao have led analysts to contrast Beijing's sensitive approach with America's more heavy-handed one.

China's role in Southeast Asia, however, requires a more careful and long-term assessment.

The changing perception of this role is fed by a number of developments since 1997. These include China's pledge not to devalue the yuan during the Asian economic crisis, its offer of a free trade agreement to ASEAN, a joint declaration on

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a code of conduct in the South China Sea, cooperation with ASEAN to combat the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in early 2003 and Beijing's decision to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.

These developments should be judged, however, against the background of three larger realities.

First, China's recent gains are not necessarily at America's expense. There is little chance of Southeast Asia being subjected to a Chinese Monroe Doctrine in which Beijing would deny the region to outside powers like the United States.

Resentment of the Bush administration's unilateralism might put Beijing in a better light as a diplomatic partner. But ASEAN countries like the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand have considerably enhanced their security cooperation with the United States. Manila and Bangkok now enjoy "major non-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) ally status" with Washington, and Malaysia is quietly cooperating quietly with the United States on defense. And in coping with the most pressing security challenge, terrorism, ASEAN remains dependent on Washington's help.

Second, further progress in China's relations with Southeast Asia and its security role in the region are subject to several constraints. These include China-ASEAN economic tensions, the uncertain gains of a free trade agreement between China and ASEAN and the continuing misgivings in Southeast Asia about China's military buildup.

Generally, ASEAN is hedging against the rise of Chinese power. Some ASEAN states are still pursuing balancing strategies, both through national means and with the help of the United States and India. Depending on how China behaves, ASEAN may either turn in the direction of trying to balance

China or toward deeper engagement with it but not toward a hegemonic Chinese suzerainty.

Third, the increasing acceptance of China's diplomatic role in the region has much to do with Beijing's decision to work within ASEAN-led processes. Any further progress in China's relations with ASEAN will remain contingent on this approach. Even on the issue of North Korea, China is working within the multilateral frame favoured by Washington.

If China continues to work within the evolving multilateral framework in East Asia, it will make a significant contribution to the prospects for stability in Asia. Encouraging this trend is in Washington's long-term interests as well. Instead of being alarmed by China's diplomatic drive in Southeast Asia and viewing it in zero-sum terms, Washington should see this as a positive development that could help enmesh China in a framework of regional restraint.