China’s Approach Towards Regional Processes in Asia:

A Case Study of ASEAN+3

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Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, China has adopted a more regionally-focused foreign policy based on “good neighbourliness” (Mulin Youhao) to break out of diplomatic isolation after the events in 1989.\textsuperscript{1} On one hand, China managed to normalize relations with all Asian countries. On the other hand, China joined a series of emergent regional institutions, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1991, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 and ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN+3) in 1997. China’s participation in these regional institutions has been increasingly active, manifesting its ‘new diplomacy’.\textsuperscript{2}

Nonetheless, China’s active participation in a regional institution does not necessarily translate into support for institutionalization. It has adopted different approaches to institutionalizing different regional institutions. For example, China has been a driving force in institutionalizing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), broadening the organization’s agenda and building up its capacity.\textsuperscript{3} In stark contrast, China has reservations to institutionalize the ARF. It has been hesitant to move the organization forward to the stage of preventive diplomacy and opposed proposals to build up the organization’s capacity to manage regional security issues.\textsuperscript{4} What is China’s approach to the institutionalization of each regional institution that it joined? What are the major causes for variation in its approaches to institutionalizing these regional institutions?

\textsuperscript{1} Under the “good neighbourliness” policy, China strives to improve ties with neighbouring countries and secure a peaceful peripheral environment. Dao Jiong Zha and Wei Xing Hu, Building a Neighborly Community: Post-Cold War China, Japan and Southeast Asia (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 56 & 60; Xiao Ren, ”Between Adapting and Shaping: China's Role in Asian Regional Cooperation “ Journal of Contemporary China 18, no. 59 (2009): 306-07.


\textsuperscript{4} Chien-peng Chung, China's Multilateral Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific: Institutionalizing Beijing's "Good Neighbor Policy" (New York: Routledge, 2010), 48-52.
Some scholars have noted the emergence of regional institutions in Asia. Most of the writings are on the development of Asian regionalism (e.g. East Asian regionalism)\(^5\) and specific regional institutions (e.g. ARF),\(^6\) and fewer studies are on how individual states approach these institutions. Available studies tend to focus on China’s approach to some of the frameworks or multilateralism in general, and they are largely descriptive. In other words, China’s participation in some regional institutions is understudied, and variation in China’s approaches to such institutions has not been given much attention. A critical analysis of the abovementioned questions can therefore contribute to the existing literature on China’s participation in regional institutions.

This paper is part of an empirical study that endeavours to examine and explain China’s approach to institutionalizing regional institutions in Asia. Its objectives are twofold: (1) to propose an explanation to explain variation in China’s approaches to institutionalizing regional institutions in Asia; and (2) to examine the plausibility of the explanation via the case study of ASEAN+3. The paper is comprised of three parts. Firstly, it describes the proposed explanation which includes two main causes to account for variation in China’s approaches to institutionalize regional institutions. They are the convergence of interests between China and the major members of a regional institution, as well as China’s relative influence there. Secondly, it examines the plausibility of the proposed explanation through the case study of China’s participation in ASEAN+3. Thirdly, it briefly examines the plausibility of an alternative explanation on balancing. Lastly, it will sum up the major arguments of this paper and discuss the implications for future research.

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