Assessing China’s Influence on Southeast Asia: The Taiwan Issue

Yeikyoung Kim and Jongpil Chung*

Department of Political Science, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

It is widely known that China’s influence on Southeast Asia has been growing rapidly since the Asian financial crisis of 1997. However, determining the true dimensions of China’s influence in this region is still controversial. It seems quite conspicuous that the growing economic relations between China and the region give China more bargaining power, due to the expanding role of the bilateral trade and China’s foreign aid in promoting the regional economic growth. However, this does not give us a clear picture of how China has been able to exercise its influence on the behavior of the states in the region for its own interests. Therefore, this paper tries to assess China’s influence on Southeast Asia by analyzing the specific case of Taiwan. Recently, China’s rising influence has significantly affected Southeast Asia’s relations with Taiwan. Southeast Asian states are paying more attention to the cross-Strait relations when considering attempting to improve relations with Taiwan. This research defines “influence” as the capability of state A to affect the behavior of state B, either directly or indirectly, to comply with state A’s policy interests. If the diplomatic behavior of state B changes accordingly due to the action, then it can be said that state A has illustrated its influence over state B. By studying the Taiwan issue, this paper reveals that China has been quite successful in exercising its influence on Southeast Asian states to comply with China’s policy toward Taiwan.

Introduction

Beijing is publicly emphasizing the importance of China’s role in overcoming the recent global economic crisis. China shaped its image as a responsible state in the international community during the Asian financial crisis of 1997 by refraining from devaluing its own currency, and now it is being praised as a great international power seeking to further expand its influence. Particularly, China is seeking to expand its sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. China has adopted a charm offensive toward Southeast Asia by using non-military means of soft power, which is considered to have succeeded in alleviating concerns of Southeast Asian states that tend to view China as an economic and military threat. In addition, as the FTA between China and Southeast Asia officially came into effect on January 1, 2010, it is predicted that

*Corresponding author. Email: jongpil@khu.ac.kr
This work was supported by a grant from the Kyung Hee University in 2009 (KHU-20100145).
China’s influence over the Southeast Asian region will be augmented substantially. 4

Then, how successful is China’s influence over the Southeast Asian region? On this question, scholars have different evaluations based on diverse values and standards. David Kang argues that Southeast Asian states are bandwagoning with China. He explains that Southeast Asian states do not consider the rise of China as a threat to the stability and prosperity of Asia. Amitav Acharya, on the other hand, contends that a careful and long-term evaluation is necessary to measure the success of China’s charm offensive in the Southeast Asian region because the tense relationship between China and Southeast Asian states has yet to be completely resolved. 5

Comparing different opinions of scholars can shed light on estimating China’s influence over Southeast Asia. However, such comparison is insufficient to assess the true dimensions of China’s influence in Southeast Asia. Then, how can its influence be measured appropriately? More specific questions should be addressed in order to examine the vague expressions such as “China’s influence on Southeast Asia is increasing.” If China is indeed influential, how could it be assessed, and what could be a proper measuring method? In general, when exercising influence on Southeast Asia, China has used non-military means such as public diplomacy, aid and trade. Statistical figures such as amount of aid and volume of trade are data that are visible, tangible and often used to measure influence. However, one cannot measure the degree of influence that a state exerts over another through such data alone. Nevertheless, it is not easy to find an indicator that can be applied to analyze overall influence. That is because individual states are geographically, politically, economically and culturally diverse, and even when influence is exerted, there is the possibility that it will be perceived differently by each state. 6

It is necessary to analyze the expansion of Chinese influence on Southeast Asia based on a more concrete case study rather than a vague approach. For such purpose this research defines influence as “capability of state A to directly or indirectly affect the actions of state B in order to conform to state A’s policy interests.” Accordingly, when China exerts influence on Southeast Asia for specific diplomatic goals, influence can be evaluated as successful when there is a consistent shift in the behavior of the group or individual state. 7

Southeast Asia is an important region for China, since the latter can acquire natural resources and trading routes. Furthermore, the following two aspects are viewed to be most crucial. First, China is concerned about the United States forging an alliance with Southeast Asian states and seeking the containment of China. Therefore, China needs to increase its influence over Southeast Asia in order to reduce such a possibility and check American influence. Second, Southeast Asia has a high strategic value for Taiwan to achieve its political, economic and security objectives. As a matter of fact, Southeast Asia provides an important stage for Taiwan to expand its position as a real sovereign state. Therefore, it is crucial for China’s strategy to check Taiwan’s intentions and isolate it from Southeast Asian states. 8

There has been significant progress in the research on the competition between U.S. and Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. Some scholars still argue that the United States is the sole power that maintains the balance of power in Southeast Asia. 9 However, according to William Keller and David Kang, China’s influence has expanded into sectors such as the economy, technology, diplomacy and politics, and with the relative decline of American influence, China and the United States have formed a balance of influence in Southeast Asia. 10 Evelyn Goh considers that it will be