



IDSS COMMENTARIES (85/2006)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

The ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) & the French *Exception*

Eric Teo*

17 August 2006

In the world of strategic thinking and diplomacy, the French have an uncanny ability to surprise and astound. In strategic calculations, it could be considered a case of “thinking outside the box” in the name of *interet d’Etat* (or “interest of the State”).

France recently showed its diplomatic mettle once again when it led efforts to pilot through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 by leading Continental Europe to “balance” Washington and London. France’s diplomatic prowess and clout are undoubtedly larger than the country itself.

In yet another example, France officially announced its intention to sign the ASEAN TAC at the recently-held ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Kuala Lumpur (KL), Malaysia. But it had to postpone the signing ceremony at the last minute, as Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy was heavily occupied with the Middle East, especially with Lebanon (as a former French protectorate) constituting a crucial factor in France’s Middle East policy and domestic politics.

But nevertheless, France’s intention to sign the TAC was an *exception diplomatique*, just as one would remember French *exception* during the last GATT talks in the 1990s, when France adamantly professed its *exception culturelle* in opposing American Hollywood films from dominating the world. Undoubtedly, France’s signaled intention to sign the TAC with ASEAN would again constitute another “exception”, as Paris would have been the first Western power (and a Western permanent UNSC member too) to do so.

So far the TAC has been signed by Asia-Pacific countries – ranging from China and Japan to Australia, New Zealand and India – but France would have been the first EU nation to sign the TAC, a diplomatic breakthrough for ASEAN. Moreover, only by signing the TAC could a country hope to accede to the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit (EAS), which met for the first time in KL last December, and would meet again this December in Cebu, Philippines. No doubt, France, and probably the EU, would wish to partake one day in the EAS, although Australia (which was one of the sixteen countries at the inaugural EAS) had advised during the latest AMM to temporarily close the EAS membership.

Is France a trail-blazer again in diplomacy or is it simply breaking ranks with the United States and leading Europeans away from the Western “dogma” on TAC? Indeed, EU Diplomatic Chief Javier Solana surprisingly announced in KL that the EU would also like to

sign the TAC, probably thanks to France's imminent lead.

French motives for signing the TAC

As far back as late 2005, Paris had seriously considered signing the TAC, after studying implications for France should they sign it. A very senior French diplomat had already argued cogently to his European counterparts at internal EU meetings in Brussels the benefits of signing, what the *Quai d'Orsay* (French Foreign Ministry) had considered more of a political document than a truly security-related one.

This "political argument" was central to the *Quai's* thinking and was "diffused" progressively to other members of the EU. Back in April, at an informal lunch at the *Quai*, I was privately informed by this senior French diplomat that some other EU members, especially from southern Europe, could follow Paris' lead in posing their signatures on the TAC. The fact that Solana is Spanish is probably not a coincidence, when he announced the EU's intention recently: Italy, under Romano Prodi, would seem *a priori* amenable to this diplomatic act too. UK and Germany would thus be central in shifting the entire EU position, if the Union collectively signs on, especially with London being the other European UNSC permanent member and the new German Chancellor Angela Merkel finding her diplomatic feet within the EU.

Moreover, France had argued strongly that Europe must show more interest in ASEAN, given its strategic position within the Asia-Pacific; Paris is actively seeking to consolidate its own trade and investment, as well as political and security links with Asia. Acceding to the TAC would certainly help stabilize EU-ASEAN relations, which have hit a diplomatic snag over the thorny "Myanmar issue"; at this year's Asia-Europe Meeting or ASEM in Helsinki, Finland in September, Myanmar again could pose a controversial quagmire for both Asians and Europeans, if mishandled.

But Paris could perhaps take heart that the latest AMM in KL had also created some controversy and dissensions within ASEAN ranks over Myanmar; hence the signing of the TAC would certainly seal France's own political ties with the rest of ASEAN, with whom France maintains excellent relations. The TAC is therefore perceived by Paris as a means of further reaching out to ASEAN as a whole, beyond the thorny "Myanmar issue", as confided by this senior French diplomat in Paris last April. This is undoubtedly where such a bold French strategic calculation would eventually pay off in Asia.

But strategically, this is also France's *exception diplomatique* vis-à-vis the United States, where Paris could again mark its own diplomatic prowess within the Western camp, especially in leading its European partners to such a "diplomatic coup". French diplomacy has proven generally to be innovative and daring and at times, even defying *realpolitik* logic; the *interet d'Etat* logically primes in Paris' strategic thinking and calculations, a pillar in Gaullien diplomacy and always attuned to the sole goal of promoting the *grandeur de la France*.

Rumours had it too that Beijing had been preliminarily informed of the French decision to sign the TAC, which the Chinese would have naturally and logically applauded; Beijing would certainly have warmly welcomed another UNSC permanent member signing the TAC, after itself and Russia. From the strategic international relations angle, Paris' decision thus carries international significance for Asia generally and ASEAN specifically, especially when

France was dismayed several years back with ASEAN's rebuff of its bid to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (in its own name as a UNSC permanent member, and not as a member of the EU).

It is in this geo-strategic game and context that France's intention to sign the TAC must be viewed and analyzed. France would certainly stand to gain heftily from its own consolidation of relations with ASEAN and Asia, especially in portraying this signature as a symbolic indication of its current "middle power" status in Asian regional affairs. Paris has always staked its claims as a Pacific power too, as it controls territories in the Pacific Ocean, such as New Caledonia and French Polynesia; the South Pacific, ASEAN's and Asia's southern-eastern flank, is thus equally vital to French strategic interests too.

With its diplomatic standing and clout in Asia better sealed, Paris could then hope to further consolidate its economic and financial ties with the prospering and "rising" East Asia; the TAC is thus a useful key and a strategic vehicle for France's further advancement into the Southeast Asian region.

However, if the EU is to sign the TAC, ASEAN would need to amend the TAC in order to accommodate the accession to the Treaty by entities, and not countries alone.

* Dr Eric Teo Chu Cheow, a business consultant and strategist, is Adjunct Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, NTU and Council Member of the Singapore Institute for International Affairs (SIIA).