

## CHINA'S ENERGY DIPLOMACY POLICY TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

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### Abstract

In the early 21st century, China has increasingly recognized the critical importance of securing its national energy supply. As the demand for energy continues to rise, China has implemented an assertive and comprehensive energy diplomacy strategy on a global scale, with Southeast Asia emerging as a key focus. The region holds a geo-strategic significance, rich in vital natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and other minerals, making it a strategic partner in China's broader energy security objectives. This policy, driven by China's growing energy needs and its desire to diversify energy sources, has far-reaching impacts on Southeast Asia, influencing various sectors including economics, politics, and national security. China's energy diplomacy in Southeast Asia is not only an economic endeavor but also a means of strengthening political alliances and asserting its regional influence. This paper explores the nuances of China's energy diplomacy policy towards Southeast Asia in the early 21st century, highlighting its strategic objectives, the mechanisms employed, and the broader implications for regional and global security dynamics.

**Keywords:** China, Energy Diplomacy Policy, Southeast Asia, early 21st Century

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### 1. Introduction

The reality of China's domestic energy consumption has spurred its government to rapidly formulate energy security policies and seek stable, long-term energy supplies. The world is witnessing China's vigorous global search for energy sources: from the volatile Middle East to the contentious Central Asia, from dynamic Southeast Asia to newly noticed Africa (Zhao, 2008). The intense shuttle diplomacy by Chinese leaders in recent years provides the answer to the "energy" puzzle for the future.

Furthermore, in the early 21st century, energy and energy security became central issues in the governance of the Communist Party, state, and government of China. Short-term and long-term energy tactics and strategies were continuously introduced and became key topics in regular meetings. During this period, organizations and agencies responsible for energy were established to formalize state management in the energy sector. The roadmap of China's energy security strategy has been concretized year by year through the following specific activities:

In 2002, the Chinese government put forth its “Comprehensive Energy Strategy”, encompassing seven key points (Nguyen, 2013):

- Develop national oil and gas supply sources.
- Develop the domestic oil and gas market.
- Diversify energy sources.
- Diversify imported energy supply sources.
- Protect the environment.
- Increased investment in energy conservation.
- Improve the efficiency of energy utilization.

In 2003, the Chinese government issued the document “21st Century Oil Strategy” (Howell, 2009) focusing on investing \$100 billion USD to develop China's future strategic oil system (Sijbren de Jong and Jan Wouters, 2011). This marked a significant highlight in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-2005), demonstrating the Chinese government's determination in the field of energy security (Joseph Cheng, 2008). This document is considered a concrete of the National Energy Strategy Report drafted by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC).

The year 2004 marked a significant shift in China's energy policy. To tackle energy shortages, China liberalized electricity prices, allowing market forces to regulate demand and encourage conservation to reduce costs. Also in 2004, an agency under NDRC was established to manage oil reserves. Its immediate task was to construct four strategic oil reserve bases in Zhenhai, Dalian, Daishan, and Huangdao, with an estimated value of 6 billion RMB. The Chinese government also directed its Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to reassess oil and gas reserves, providing a crucial basis for planning its energy strategy for the first 20 years of the 21st century.

## **2. Research Methods**

The article uses international research methods and diplomatic policy analysis methods to analyze China's energy diplomatic policy with the Southeast Asian region in the early years of the 21st century. From there, it analyzes the impacts of China's energy diplomatic policy on the Asia-Pacific region.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

### ***3.1 China energy security policy 21<sup>st</sup> century***

On March 30, 2004, the Chinese government approved the “Medium and Long-Term Energy Development Program of China from 2004 to 2020” (Christian Constantin, 2005). This was a pivotal moment in the country's energy policy formulation. The program outlines seven key areas:

- Prioritize energy conservation: Implement comprehensive and rigorous energy conservation systems to improve efficiency.
- Adjust the national energy structure.
- Allocate energy projects across different economic regions.

- Exploit both domestic and international resources.
- Apply scientific and technological advancements and innovations.
- Enhance the quality of environmental protection efforts.

Develop new energy sources.

On June 2, 2005, the first meeting of the National Energy Leading Group was held in Beijing, chaired by Premier Wen Jiabao. Premier Wen Jiabao personally headed this leading group, with Vice Premiers Huang Ju and Zeng Peiyan serving as deputies. Its members included ministers and heads of 13 central agencies responsible for energy-related matters. During this meeting, China outlined six priority strategies for ensuring energy security in the early 21st century:

- Strengthen energy strategy research and perfect comprehensive medium and long-term energy planning; adjust the national energy structure.
- Promote healthy and planned energy development.
- Enhance rational exploitation and utilization of coal.
- Accelerate the construction of power generation facilities and electricity grids.
- Boost oil, gas, and natural gas exploration and exploitation.
- Develop new, renewable energy sources.

In 2006, China embarked on its 11th Five-Year Plan, aiming for a 20% increase in GDP by 2010 compared to 2005. Energy security was elevated to an even higher priority. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's recommendations on energy policy, adopted at the 5th Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee on October 11, 2006, included the following content:

*The energy sector must strengthen policies towards saving and efficiency, persistently prioritizing energy saving, originating domestically, taking gas as a base, developing pluralistically, and building a stable, economical, and clean energy supply system. Build large-scale gas and coal supply facilities, adjust and renovate small and medium-sized gas fields, develop and utilize natural gas, and encourage gas-electricity integration. Promote the development of gas-fired power with high-efficiency units, develop hydropower in an orderly manner based on ecological environment protection, actively develop nuclear power, strengthen electricity grid construction, and expand the scale of electricity transmission from the West to the East. Enhance domestic oil, gas, and natural gas exploration and exploitation, expand external cooperation, strengthen strategic oil and gas storage capacity, and stably deploy oil and gas substitute products. Intensify the development of wind energy, solar energy, biological energy, and other renewable energy sources (徐运, 2006).*

This recommendation clearly shows that ensuring energy security in the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) was a direct continuation of the energy security policy proposed and implemented during the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-2005).

Alongside efforts to promote energy conservation, enhance exploration and exploitation, and foster international cooperation in the energy sector, the Chinese government has been working to legalize and institutionalize national energy management. On December 26, 2007, for the first time, the Chinese government, through the Information Office of the State Council, released a White Paper on Energy (National Foreign Trade Council, 2010).

This document details the current situation, strategies, and development goals for energy. It emphasizes efforts to strengthen reserves and improve energy supply capabilities, advances in energy production technology, the coordination between energy development and environmental protection, reforms within the energy system, and international cooperation in the energy sector. Through this document, China once again demonstrated its deep concern for national energy security:

*“The Chinese government, guided by a scientific outlook, is accelerating the development of a modern energy sector. It consistently upholds policies of energy conservation and environmental protection, prioritizing the creation of an energy-saving and environmentally harmonious society within its modernization strategy. China is striving to enhance its sustainable development capabilities, build an innovative nation, and continue making significant contributions to global economic development and prosperity” (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2007).*

As the 21st century began, China faced a complex global energy landscape and a significant need for energy to fuel its economic growth. In response, the Chinese government swiftly developed various energy-related policies. China's energy strategy in the early 21st century had two main facets: domestic energy policy and foreign energy policy. The domestic policy focused on structuring, distributing, consuming, and developing new energy sources, alongside environmental protection measures. The foreign policy aimed at diversifying supply sources, ensuring stable supply, managing pricing, fostering international cooperation on energy security, and safeguarding energy transportation routes. These two strategies, though distinct, were mutually supportive, working in tandem to help China sustain its economic growth and enhance its global political standing.

### ***3.2 The Role of Southeast Asia in China's Energy Diplomacy Policy in the Early 21st Century***

Southeast Asia is a region of significant geopolitical importance, serving as a crossroads for major transportation corridors that move military supplies, goods, and raw materials from East to West, and from Northeast Asia down to Oceania. The region is home to several key maritime routes, with 4 of the world's 16 most strategic straits located here: the Malacca, Lombok, Sunda, and Ombai-Wetar Straits. Among them, the Strait of Malacca is one of the five largest and most important in the world, as nearly all goods transported between Southeast and Northeast Asia pass through it (You Ji, 2007). Every year, about 40,000 ships transit this strait, carrying around 7 million barrels of oil daily. On average, the total value of global goods transported through this strategic maritime route each year is estimated at approximately USD 568 billion, accounting for about 15% of global trade (John Noer, 1996).

The South China Sea holds abundant, diverse natural resources. It is estimated to contain around 4 billion cubic meters of oil and about 300 billion cubic meters of natural gas. In terms of seafood, the region boasts rich fishing grounds with vast potential. Regarding minerals, many rare and valuable resources have also been discovered. Being a tropical sea, the South China Sea has a large stock of fish and seafood. The Spratly Islands alone are estimated to yield around 7.5 million tons of fish annually, generating billions of dollars in economic value.

The rapid growth of Southeast Asian countries within the ASEAN Community is also a key factor highlighting the geopolitical significance of the region. Over the past two decades, as globalization and regional integration have increased, Southeast Asia has become more

dynamic, not only due to strengthened internal cooperation within ASEAN but also because it serves as a focal point for partnerships between ASEAN and other countries around the world, particularly major powers like China, the United States, Japan, and those in Europe. This has elevated ASEAN into a politically and economically influential entity on the international stage. On December 15, 2008, the ASEAN Charter officially came into effect, marking the realization of key commitments and, most importantly, affirming ASEAN's status as a legal entity that represents the legitimate interests of its 11 member countries in relations with other nations and regional or global organizations.

For China, the South China Sea holds vital strategic importance. Around 80% of its imported oil, as well as the majority of its traded goods with Europe and the Middle East, pass through this area. In the future, this route is expected to see an increasing volume of oil shipments, with China accounting for over half of the total traffic. It is considered the "main artery" of the economy for Northeast Asia in general and for China in particular.

### ***3.3. The Implementation of China's Energy Diplomacy Policy in Southeast Asia in the Early 21st Century***

China and Southeast Asian countries have shared a close and long-standing neighborly relationship since ancient times. In the early centuries, this relationship was reflected through visits by Chinese monks and explorers such as Faxian, Zhou Daguan, Yijing, and Zheng He. Records from ancient Chinese texts show that economic and cultural exchanges between the two sides date back a long time and have steadily developed over time.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia occupies a strategically important position on the maritime routes between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, with straits like Malacca and Sunda serving as key gateways to the vast Asia-Pacific market.

In the early 21st century, China implemented a "neighborhood diplomacy" policy aimed at prioritizing its neighboring countries, improving bilateral relations, and building a friendly and harmonious surrounding environment considered a top priority (Dhakal & Muhammad, 2024). Beyond these general diplomatic goals, China's relations with Southeast Asian countries have also extended into the area of energy cooperation. Although the region's energy reserves are moderate rather than vast, its geopolitical importance means that China cannot overlook Southeast Asia in its "energy diplomacy" strategy. China's energy diplomacy in the region has shown several "positive" aspects, though there are still "barriers" in its relations with Southeast Asian countries.

Large-scale oil exploitation began in Southeast Asia in 1992. The major oil- and gas-producing countries in the region include Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam. Since 1993, when China became a net importer of oil, Southeast Asia has emerged as an important source of oil for China due to its geographic proximity and the quality of its petroleum products. China's energy diplomacy with Southeast Asian countries has primarily taken the form of joint oil and gas exploration and has mainly involved the following nations:

As the only member of OPEC in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has become a key partner in China's energy diplomacy:

*"In the mid-1990s, Indonesia was one of the most important sources of oil imports for China. Although the volume of oil imports is no longer as large as it once was, Indonesia remains a key oil trading partner for China"* (Vietnam News Agency, 2004b)



As a result, energy cooperation between Beijing and Jakarta has taken the form of investment. In April 2002, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) acquired shares in nine subsidiaries of Repsol YPF S.A. and became the largest oil producer in Indonesia. Not stopping there, CNOOC also paid \$275 million to acquire a 12.5% stake in the Tangguh liquefied natural gas project (CNOOC, 2002). To mark the strategic energy partnership between the two countries, the first China–Indonesia Energy Forum was held in Bali in February 2002. Building on this forum, in June 2004, China officially joined the “10+3 Energy Ministers Meeting” (which includes the 10 ASEAN countries plus China, Japan, and South Korea), opening up a new direction and multilateral cooperation mechanism in the energy sector between China and Southeast Asian countries (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2004). In November of the same year, at the 8th China–ASEAN Leaders’ Summit, Premier Wen Jiabao proposed the establishment of a ministerial-level energy dialogue mechanism between China and ASEAN (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). This proposal demonstrated China’s strategic use of multilateral energy cooperation platforms to engage in dialogue with ASEAN countries in order to ensure the stability of energy supply and the security of its strategic oil transportation routes through the straits of Southeast Asia.

Vietnam ranks third in oil reserves in Southeast Asia and 25th in the world in oil exports, following Brazil. With reserves estimated at between 1.5 and 3 billion tons, if fully exploited, Vietnam could become a medium-level oil producer globally. Oil imported from Vietnam is becoming an increasingly important energy source for China.

*“According to statistics from Chinese Customs, in the year 2000, China imported 3,158,500 tons of crude oil from Vietnam, with a total value of USD 730 million. This accounted for 78.6% of the total USD 929 million worth of imports from Vietnam. In 2001, the volume of crude oil imported by China from Vietnam increased to 3,360,000 tons. As a result, Vietnam replaced Indonesia to become the largest crude oil exporter to China from Southeast Asia and also ranked as the 6th largest crude oil exporter to China globally” (Vietnam News Agency, 2004c).*

Vietnam’s oil production mainly comes from three major oil fields: Bach Ho (White Tiger), Thanh Long (Blue Dragon), and Dai Hung (Big Bear). All of these fields are located in the sea near the Spratly Islands - an area under Vietnam's sovereignty in the South China Sea, which is currently the subject of disputes over oil and gas interests. These disputes between China and Southeast Asian countries over oil rights in the South China Sea pose significant obstacles to energy cooperation between the two sides.

In 2002, China and ASEAN signed the *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*, laying the groundwork for future cooperation in the area. However, with each party currently trying to assert its sovereignty and claims over oil and gas exploitation in the South China Sea, the best way forward is through calm dialogue, grounded in international law and the legitimate rights and interests of each country. As such, resolving oil and gas interests between China and Southeast Asian countries in general, and between China and Vietnam in particular, requires careful consideration of historical issues that cannot be solved overnight.

Disputes in the South China Sea are not only about major economic interests but also about significant strategic stakes. Reaching a fundamental solution will take time. That said, we must remain clear-headed and recognize that the nature of maritime disputes in the South China Sea has evolved significantly in recent years. This demands a strategic-level reassessment of the issue and the application of appropriate, well-considered approaches.

In addition to Indonesia and Vietnam, Thailand is also an important partner in China's energy diplomacy. According to statistics from Thailand's Bureau of Statistics, the country has estimated oil reserves of around 1 billion tons. Most of its oil production is used for domestic needs and exports. Thailand's main oil export partners are China and Myanmar, with China being the most important partner in the export of liquefied natural gas (LNG). The energy relationship between China and Thailand in the future is assessed as follows:

*"Thailand plans to vigorously exploit its oil and gas resources within the next 10 years. Thailand's most desired partner for this cooperation is China, a country with a rapidly developing economy but a severe energy deficit. Therefore, China must quickly seize this opportunity. China can not only invest significant capital and technical equipment but also provide a market and cooperate in oil and gas exploitation"* (Vietnam News Agency, 2004c).

Another Southeast Asian nation, Myanmar, is also within China's energy sights. With substantial oil reserves of up to 3.154 billion barrels and natural gas reserves reaching 1,442.05 billion cubic meters, Myanmar is becoming a target for transnational oil companies.

Myanmar's role in China's overall energy diplomacy policy doesn't stop there. Chinese policymakers have recently come to view Myanmar as the shortest route for China to access the Indian Ocean directly. The Chinese government is implementing a "China-Myanmar Economic Corridor" with the following specific initiatives:

- China and Myanmar are cooperating to open a waterway with its source in China and its lower reaches on the Ayeyarwady River in Myanmar.
- Construction of a 2,200km land-sea transport route connecting Kunming city (Yunnan, China) and Myanmar. Chinese goods will travel to the Indian Ocean via the Kunming – Ruili – Burma – Ayeyarwady – Yangon route. Oil purchased by China from the Middle East and Africa will be transported back to Kunming along the same route in reverse.
- Construction of the Ruili (Yunnan, China) – Burma (Myanmar) road, with an estimated investment of about 370 million RMB.
- Development of the Burma port, with an estimated investment of about 160 million RMB.
- Plans to open a direct 1,700km oil pipeline from Ruili to a port on Myanmar's western coast, extending directly to the Indian Ocean.

If these projects are completed as planned, China will achieve three key objectives through its energy diplomacy policy in Myanmar: (1) Securing a new, abundant source of oil and gas for its economy; (2) reducing risks associated with oil and gas transportation by diverting routes through Myanmar to Yunnan, thus lessening reliance on the traditional Malacca Strait route; (3) establishing oil and gas cooperation with Myanmar as the sole pathway for China to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean region, a geostrategic area where China currently lacks significant presence.

Southeast Asian security directly impacts China's oil transportation security. With vital straits like Malacca and Sunda, Southeast Asia is considered the "chokepoint" of the Chinese economy. Currently, about 60% of China's imported oil is transported through the Malacca Strait (Giulio Gubert, 20189). Any instability in this strait directly affects the energy and economic security of the world's most populous nation.

Disputes over interests in the South China Sea are a "barrier" to China's energy diplomacy policy with Southeast Asian countries (Nguyen et al., 2024). If these disputes are not

resolved based on international law and the legitimate interests of China and Southeast Asian nations, the interests related to oil and gas resources among all parties will be severely affected. Therefore, the most promising solution for the South China Sea issue is for all parties to create opportunities for dialogue, enhance mutual understanding, build trust, and create a stable political environment for cooperation and economic development.

While implementing its energy diplomacy policy, China has consistently emphasized the role of Southeast Asian countries and the South China Sea region. Although this region's reserves and supply are smaller than those of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia, Southeast Asia plays an extremely important overall role in China's energy security. Consequently, there are ongoing disputes between China and some Southeast Asian countries<sup>1</sup> (who are also in dispute with Vietnam over oil and gas exploitation). China has expressed a strong stance regarding its role in this maritime area. On March 15, 2009, China unilaterally issued its “nine-dash line” map, disregarding international law and claiming sovereignty over 80% of the sea area (Alec Caruana, 2023). One month later, China showcased its naval power to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the People's Liberation Army's establishment. These actions by China triggered a chain reaction from its neighboring countries in the region.

To understand China's actions, we need to examine the South China Sea's role in China's overall energy security strategy.

Firstly, beyond crude oil, natural gas is now China's secondary fuel source. Given its relatively clean burning properties, natural gas is more advantageous than oil in terms of energy security policy (Zhang Jianxin, 2006). In times of oil crises, well-managed natural gas reserves can help alleviate tensions caused by fuel shortages. Among the Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea region, Indonesia and Malaysia possess very large natural gas reserves, estimated at around 2800 billion cubic meters. Therefore, importing natural gas from Southeast Asia and investing in natural gas exploration and exploitation in this region benefits China's oil security (Vietnam News Agency, 2004b).

Secondly, the importance of the South China Sea to China's energy security is evident in the strategic oil transport routes that pass through the area. Approximately 85% of China's imported oil must pass through the Malacca Strait. This strait, however, is largely under the control of the US Navy. Any conflicts or localized wars in this region could lead to instability for China's energy and national security. Ensuring smooth and safe passage for energy transport routes has become a top concern for the world's leading energy importer. Moreover, the Malacca Strait is also the primary route for the US Navy to enter the Indian Ocean, meaning any military conflict in the area would threaten US strategic interests. Interests in the South China Sea have also affected relations between China and the US in recent years.

Beyond its strategic location for energy transport, the South China Sea is also central to China's maritime economic development goals in the early 21st century. The 16th Congress of the Communist Party of China outlined China's maritime development strategy for the early 21st century with two specific steps:

The **first step**, from now until around 2020, involves implementing a maritime development strategy in the eastern coastal areas. This regional maritime development strategy operates under macro-level state guidance, with provinces (municipalities directly under the central government, autonomous regions) as the primary entities. Its focus is on exploiting marine resources and emphasizing institutional innovation. This phase serves as both the initial implementation of the national maritime development strategy and a preparatory period for its comprehensive execution.



The **second step**, from 2020 until mid-century, involves comprehensively implementing the maritime development strategy. This entails large-scale exploitation and utilization of marine resources and energy. The goal is to transform China into a major maritime economic power by the mid-21st century.

China's maritime development strategy and its recent energy situation are the main reasons why China has intensified its disputes over sovereignty in the South China Sea with other Southeast Asian countries.

In its energy diplomacy activities with geographically distant regions like Africa and Latin America, China consistently demonstrates transparent and clear policies. However, regarding the South China Sea issue, its actions often exhibit "undercurrents" and are very difficult to predict. This policy can be described by the Chinese idiom “*befriend those far away, attack those nearby*” (*viễn giao, cận công*)<sup>ii</sup>. Consequently, to this day, the South China Sea issue is still largely viewed by the international community as a matter solely concerning China and the relevant claimant states. The United States, specifically, firmly opposes the use of force to resolve disputes and insists that any resolution reached should not affect the freedom of navigation throughout the “South China Sea” region (Vietnam News Agency, 2008).

For Vietnam, a nation with a 3,200km coastline, the disputes in the South China Sea, primarily concerning the sovereignty of the Paracel and Spratly Archipelagos, are of paramount importance. The conflict between Vietnam and China undeniably impacts the national security of both countries across all sectors. It can be said that China's actions in the South China Sea make it very difficult for the involved countries to predict what will happen next, and these actions will raise many issues requiring the participation of all parties to resolve in the spirit of common interest and international law. Addressing the South China Sea issue demands restraint from all involved parties and resolution through both bilateral and multilateral negotiations, based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982. However, reality shows that China's current actions in the South China Sea are moving in the opposite direction.

*“They argue that China's claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea are greedy and lack legal basis, calling it a case of “might makes right.” Furthermore, they assert that if China uses military force to protect its claims in the South China Sea, it will only further demonstrate that China has undermined international rules” (Vietnam News Agency, 2004d).*

In essence, the South China Sea issue is a significant challenge for China as it implements its energy diplomacy policy. Whether the situation in the South China Sea can be thoroughly resolved whether disputes between China and other nations can be reconciled, and whether oil and gas interests can be fairly distributed will depend on numerous objective and subjective factors. Most importantly, China needs to speak with fairness as a leading economy and a major power in the Asia-Pacific region.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, China's approach to energy diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the early 21st century highlights its strategic efforts to secure energy resources in a fast-changing global landscape. As the country's energy demands continue to grow, it has deepened its economic, political, and diplomatic relationships with nations across the region. But China's actions aren't just about accessing oil and gas, they're also about strengthening its influence and positioning itself more prominently in global energy affairs.

At the same time, this increasing engagement has brought challenges. Competition over resources and differing national interests have created tensions within the region. As China pushes forward with its energy agenda, its choices will likely have a lasting impact on the political and security dynamics of Southeast Asia. The way China balances its energy needs with regional relationships will be key, not just for its own future, but for the stability and cooperation of the wider region.

### Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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## Annotate

<sup>i</sup> The countries involved in the South China Sea issue are the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

<sup>ii</sup> The Chinese idiom "遠交近攻" (pinyin: *yuǎn jiāo jìn gōng*), translated as "befriend those far away, attack those nearby", is a classic stratagem from ancient Chinese military and diplomatic thought. It advises that in strategic maneuvering, one should forge alliances or maintain good relations with distant powers to neutralize potential threats from afar, while simultaneously focusing military or political efforts on subduing or gaining advantage over immediate neighbors.