

## The Role of Energy Security in China's Neighbourhood Diplomacy toward Southeast Asia

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### ABSTRACT

Energy security has increasingly become one of China's most important strategic interests amid rapidly growing energy demand and a rising dependence on external sources of supply. This article examines the role of energy security in the formulation and implementation of China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia. Drawing upon a neoclassical realist approach, combined with document analysis and process-tracing methods, the study elucidates the relationship between energy security imperatives and the adjustment of Beijing's foreign policy toward its neighbouring region. The findings indicate that Southeast Asia occupies a particularly significant position in China's energy security strategy due to its role in international maritime routes, especially the Strait of Malacca, as well as its potential for energy cooperation and regional connectivity. Challenges related to the security of energy supply and transportation have prompted China to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN, expand energy investments, develop connectivity corridors with Myanmar, and increase its presence in strategic spaces such as the South China Sea. The study concludes that energy security constitutes one of the key drivers shaping China's neighbourhood diplomacy and helps explain Beijing's growing influence in Southeast Asia during the first decades of the twenty-first century.

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### Introduction

During the first decades of the twenty-first century, China's rapid economic growth led to a dramatic increase in energy demand, making the country one of the world's largest energy consumers and importers. In this context, energy security has evolved beyond a purely economic concern to become an integral component of China's national security and long-term development strategy (Constantin, 2005; Cheng, 2008; Howell, 2009). Existing studies indicate that China's growing dependence on imported oil and natural gas has heightened Beijing's concerns regarding the stability of energy supplies, the security of maritime transportation routes, and geopolitical risks within an increasingly volatile international environment (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2007; Zhao, 2008; Huang, 2008).

In seeking solutions to ensure energy security, Southeast Asia has emerged as a region of particular strategic significance for China. The region is not only an important market and partner for economic cooperation but also a geopolitical space linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, encompassing critical maritime routes essential to China's trade and energy

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transportation activities (Noer, 1996; You, 2007). At the same time, the promotion of relations with ASEAN through multilateral cooperation mechanisms and regional connectivity initiatives has become an important component of Beijing's foreign policy agenda (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004; ASEAN Secretariat, 2012).

Moreover, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, "neighbourhood diplomacy" has been increasingly emphasised as a policy instrument for fostering a stable regional environment, facilitating economic development, and safeguarding China's strategic interests (Dhakal & Muhammad, 2024; Wang, 2011). A growing body of scholarship has examined China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia and the region's role in strategic competition among major powers (Goh, 2016; Shambaugh, 2020). Nevertheless, the relationship between energy security and China's neighbourhood diplomacy has not yet been comprehensively explored.

Against this backdrop, this article analyses the role of energy security in shaping China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia. By examining energy security challenges, the "Malacca Dilemma," regional energy cooperation mechanisms, and China's relations with Southeast Asian countries, the study seeks to clarify how energy interests have influenced the formulation and implementation of Beijing's foreign policy in the region.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyse the role of energy security in China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia. A qualitative approach is adopted because the objective of the study is not to measure the impact of variables through statistical data, but rather to explain the relationship between energy security interests and China's foreign policy behaviour within a specific geopolitical context.

From a theoretical perspective, the study applies the framework of neoclassical realism to explain the relationship between national strategic interests and foreign policy. According to this approach, changes in the international strategic environment and the requirements of national security can influence foreign policy formulation through the perceptions and calculations of political leaders. In the case of China, the need to ensure a stable energy supply is regarded as a critical strategic interest that affects the formulation of policies toward neighbouring regions (Wang, 2011; Fravel, 2019). At the same time, the study draws upon analyses of China's growing influence in Asia and Southeast Asia in order to situate energy security within the broader context of regional strategy and power competition (Goh, 2016; Shambaugh, 2020).

To examine the process of policy formation and implementation, the article employs the process-tracing method. This method enables the identification of the causal chain linking China's increasing energy demand, the challenges to its energy security—particularly the "Malacca Dilemma"—and Beijing's adjustments in foreign policy toward Southeast Asia (Noer, 1996; You, 2007; Gubert, 2019). By tracing key policy developments, the study clarifies how energy security objectives have been translated into initiatives for economic cooperation, energy collaboration, and regional connectivity.

The study draws upon both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official documents issued by the Chinese government and regional organizations, such as China's Energy Conditions and Policies (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2007), joint statements on ASEAN+3 energy cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004), documents concerning the ASEAN–China strategic partnership (ASEAN

Secretariat, 2012), and corporate materials reflecting Chinese energy investment activities in Southeast Asia (CNOOC Limited, 2002). These sources provide insights into the official positions, strategic objectives, and cooperative orientations of the relevant actors.

In addition, the study employs document analysis of scholarly works on energy security, Chinese foreign policy, neighbourhood diplomacy, and China–Southeast Asia relations. The works of Constantin (2005), Cheng (2008), Zhao (2008), Dhakal and Muhammad (2024), among others, are utilised to compare, supplement, and interpret the evidence collected. The combination of the neoclassical realist framework, process-tracing methodology, and document analysis enables the study to elucidate the role of energy security as a strategic driver of China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia.

## **Results**

### ***Energy Security in China's Development Strategy and National Security***

Energy security has become one of the most important strategic concerns for China since the country entered a period of rapid economic growth following the reform and opening-up era. The accelerated processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, and modernisation have significantly increased energy demand, particularly for oil and natural gas. In this context, ensuring a stable, continuous, and adequate energy supply capable of supporting long-term development has been regarded as an essential prerequisite for sustaining economic growth, maintaining social stability, and enhancing China's national power (Constantin, 2005; Cheng, 2008).

According to many Chinese scholars, energy security is understood not only as the ability to access energy resources at reasonable costs but also as the capacity to protect transportation routes, diversify sources of supply, and minimise geopolitical risks that may affect national development (Huang, 2008; Xia, 2009). Constantin (2005) argues that China's perception of energy security underwent a significant transformation in the late 1990s as the country gradually became a major energy importer. From a strategic perspective, energy issues have become increasingly intertwined with China's national development objectives, economic security, and international standing.

Official Chinese policy documents likewise emphasise the close relationship between energy security and national development. The White Paper China's Energy Conditions and Policies highlights that energy constitutes the material foundation of economic growth while also serving as a crucial factor in ensuring national security and social stability (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2007). The document demonstrates Beijing's awareness of the challenges arising from the growing imbalance between rising energy consumption and domestic energy production capacity. Consequently, the formulation of a comprehensive energy strategy has become a major priority in national policymaking.

China's increasing dependence on imported energy is one of the principal reasons why energy security has evolved into a strategic issue. Cheng (2008) argues that the rapid growth in oil demand has compelled China to expand its efforts to explore and secure energy resources abroad. This process is not merely associated with economic objectives but also reflects the country's long-term national security concerns. Howell (2009) contends that, for Chinese policymakers, energy is inseparable from comprehensive national power; therefore, ensuring a

stable energy supply is regarded as a prerequisite for sustaining economic growth and enhancing the country's international position.

Against this backdrop, China has implemented a variety of measures to mitigate risks to its energy security. On the one hand, Beijing has promoted the diversification of energy sources by expanding cooperation with energy-producing countries in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia (Zhao, 2008). On the other hand, China has actively invested in energy companies, transportation infrastructure, and overseas extraction projects to secure long-term access to strategic resources (Zhang, 2006). According to Zhao (2008), the global search for energy resources has become a defining feature of China's foreign policy since the beginning of the twenty-first century, reflecting the increasingly close linkage between economic development objectives and foreign policy strategy.

Beyond concerns over energy supply, China's conception of energy security has expanded to encompass issues related to the international environment and climate change. The report by de Jong and Wouters (2011) suggests that states are increasingly required to balance the demands of energy security, sustainable development, and environmental security simultaneously. For China, this necessitates the formulation of long-term energy strategies that not only meet development requirements but also adapt to evolving structures of global energy and climate governance.

Overall, existing studies agree that energy security has moved beyond the realm of a purely economic issue to become an integral component of China's development strategy and national security framework (Constantin, 2005; Cheng, 2008; Huang, 2008; Xia, 2009). The need to ensure a stable, diversified, and secure energy supply not only shapes China's national energy policy but also exerts a profound influence on Beijing's foreign policymaking. It is within this context that China has expanded its presence in regions of strategic importance for energy supply and transportation, with Southeast Asia emerging as a particularly significant geopolitical space for China's energy interests and developmental objectives.

### ***Southeast Asia in China's Energy Security Strategy***

In China's search for solutions to ensure energy security, Southeast Asia occupies a particularly important position in its strategic thinking. The significance of the region derives not only from its relatively abundant energy resources but also from its geostrategic location along the maritime routes connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. For a country that is increasingly dependent on imported energy, such as China, the ability to access and secure energy transportation routes is no less important than ensuring direct access to energy supplies themselves (Zhao, 2008).

According to Noer (1996), Southeast Asia contains several critical maritime "chokepoints" that are vital to international trade. Among them, the Strait of Malacca is of particular importance because it is one of the busiest sea lanes in the world, linking energy supplies from the Middle East and Africa to the economies of East Asia. For China, the majority of its seaborne oil imports pass through this maritime corridor before reaching ports along its eastern coast. Consequently, the security of this transportation route has become an inseparable component of China's national energy security.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese policymakers have become increasingly concerned with what has been termed the "Malacca Dilemma." According to You (2007), this concept reflects Beijing's concern that excessive dependence on a single

transportation route may create strategic vulnerabilities in the event of political crises, military conflicts, or maritime blockades. From a national security perspective, ensuring the uninterrupted flow of energy through the Strait of Malacca has become a critical strategic imperative for China. This perception has encouraged Beijing to seek solutions aimed at diversifying energy sources, diversifying transportation routes, and expanding cooperative relations with Southeast Asian countries.

Beyond its role as an energy transit corridor, Southeast Asia is also viewed by China as a region capable of helping mitigate the risks associated with the “Malacca Dilemma.” One important approach has been the development of cross-border economic and energy corridors. Myanmar represents a prominent example. According to Gubert (2019), efforts to promote connectivity projects between China and Myanmar under the Belt and Road Initiative are intended not only to expand economic cooperation but also to provide China with direct access to the Indian Ocean without complete reliance on transportation routes through the Strait of Malacca. From a strategic perspective, this contributes to enhancing the resilience of China’s energy supply system against fluctuations in the international environment.

In addition to bilateral initiatives, China has actively promoted energy cooperation at the regional level. Relations between China and ASEAN have expanded through a variety of cooperative mechanisms, with energy emerging as one of the priority areas. The Joint Ministerial Statement of the ASEAN+3 Energy Ministers Meeting in 2004 emphasised the importance of strengthening energy cooperation to support economic growth and regional stability amid rising energy demand (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004). China’s active participation in these mechanisms demonstrates that Beijing regards regional cooperation as an important instrument for reducing risks associated with energy supply and transportation.

The strategic partnership between China and ASEAN continued to deepen in subsequent years. The ASEAN–China Summit Declaration on Deepening the Strategic Partnership reaffirmed the commitment of both sides to strengthening cooperation in the fields of economic development, infrastructure connectivity, and sustainable development (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). As energy security has increasingly become a transnational issue, the establishment of a stable cooperative environment with Southeast Asian countries has generated significant economic and strategic benefits for China.

In sum, its strategic geographical location, the importance of its major maritime routes, and its potential for economic cooperation have made Southeast Asia a crucial component of China’s energy security strategy. From addressing the “Malacca Dilemma” to promoting energy cooperation and regional connectivity, Beijing’s policies demonstrate that Southeast Asia is not merely a neighbouring region but also a strategic space of particular significance for ensuring energy supplies and sustaining China’s long-term development.

### ***Energy Security and the Formation of China’s Neighbourhood Diplomacy***

As China has risen to become one of the world’s leading economic and political powers, it has increasingly recognised the relationship between a stable regional environment and the protection of its national strategic interests. Among these interests, energy security has emerged as a critical factor influencing the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. China’s growing dependence on imported energy has not only compelled the country to seek new sources of supply but has also encouraged Beijing to cultivate a favourable external

environment in order to minimise risks to its energy supply chains. In this context, neighbourhood diplomacy has gradually become an important instrument for safeguarding and advancing China's strategic interests in its surrounding region.

According to Wang (2011), as China's national power has expanded, the country has increasingly pursued a grand strategy aimed at simultaneously achieving economic development, political stability, and enhanced international standing. One of the core components of this strategy is the maintenance of a peaceful and stable international environment, particularly in neighbouring regions. For China, neighbouring countries are significant not only from the perspective of traditional security but also in terms of trade, investment, infrastructure connectivity, and the security of energy supplies. Consequently, fostering cooperative relations with neighbouring states has been regarded as a necessary condition for achieving long-term development objectives.

In recent years, the concept of "neighbourhood diplomacy" has become an important element of China's foreign policy discourse. Dhakal and Muhammad (2024) argue that this approach emphasises confidence-building, mutually beneficial cooperation, and the development of a shared future with surrounding countries. From a constructivist perspective, neighbourhood diplomacy reflects not only material interests but also China's efforts to project the image of a responsible development partner. However, beyond its normative dimensions, this policy is also closely linked to specific strategic interests, including the imperative of ensuring energy security.

The relationship between energy security and neighbourhood diplomacy is particularly evident in China's approach toward Southeast Asia. According to Shambaugh (2020), Southeast Asia is among the most important regions in China's foreign policy strategy because it represents the intersection of Beijing's economic, security, and geopolitical interests. In the context of intensifying competition among major powers, maintaining stable relations with Southeast Asian countries enables China to safeguard strategic trade routes, expand economic connectivity, and reduce risks that could disrupt energy transportation activities. This demonstrates that neighbourhood diplomacy serves not only the purpose of enhancing China's international image but also functions as an instrument supporting its broader energy security strategy.

From a regional perspective, Goh (2016) argues that China's growing influence in Asia has largely been driven by the need to create a favourable environment for national modernisation. In the case of Southeast Asia, Beijing has combined a variety of instruments—including economic cooperation, infrastructure investment, regional connectivity, and energy collaboration—to strengthen relations with neighbouring countries. These initiatives not only generate economic benefits but also help create favourable conditions for accessing resources, protecting transportation routes, and diversifying mechanisms for ensuring energy security.

From a strategic standpoint, Fravel (2019) contends that Chinese policymakers consistently prioritise the protection of core national interests within a changing security environment. Although his study focuses primarily on military strategy, its analysis of China's security thinking highlights the importance of maintaining stability in the country's periphery for national development. As China's economic and energy interests increasingly extend beyond its borders, the need to sustain stable relations with neighbouring countries has become ever more pressing. This helps explain why neighbourhood diplomacy has emerged as one of the central pillars of China's foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

Overall, the formation and evolution of China's neighbourhood diplomacy cannot be separated from its broader strategic needs, among which energy security occupies a particularly significant position. Ensuring a stable, secure, and long-term energy supply requires Beijing not only to seek new energy resources but also to cultivate a favourable regional environment capable of protecting its economic and strategic interests. Through the promotion of cooperation, enhanced connectivity, and strengthened relations with neighbouring states, China has utilised neighbourhood diplomacy as an important instrument for reducing risks to energy security and supporting its long-term national development objectives.

### ***Manifestations of Neighbourhood Diplomacy in China–Southeast Asia Relations***

The development of China's neighbourhood diplomacy is reflected not only in official discourse and strategic orientations but also in a wide range of concrete cooperative activities with Southeast Asian countries. Among these, energy cooperation, infrastructure investment, economic connectivity, and the expansion of China's presence in strategic spaces constitute prominent manifestations of the linkage between Beijing's energy security objectives and its foreign policy toward the region.

One of the clearest manifestations is the promotion of energy cooperation between China and ASEAN. Since the early 2000s, China has actively participated in regional energy cooperation mechanisms aimed at strengthening dialogue, facilitating technological exchange, and enhancing collective energy security. The Joint Ministerial Statement of the ASEAN+3 Energy Ministers Meeting in 2004 emphasised the need to strengthen cooperation in areas such as energy development, supply security, and energy efficiency in support of economic growth among member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004). China's deep engagement in these mechanisms demonstrates that Beijing seeks not only to benefit from the region's energy resources but also to foster a stable cooperative environment capable of reducing risks to its national energy security.

The strategic partnership between China and ASEAN continued to expand in subsequent years. The Declaration on Deepening the ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership highlighted objectives related to enhancing economic connectivity, development cooperation, and mutual trust-building among the parties (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). From an energy security perspective, these cooperative mechanisms enable China to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian countries while facilitating access to markets, resources, and critical transportation routes within the region.

Beyond multilateral cooperation frameworks, China has also pursued a variety of bilateral energy-related initiatives. Indonesia provides a notable example. In 2002, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) invested in a natural gas joint venture in Indonesia, marking a significant expansion of Chinese energy enterprises into the Southeast Asian market (CNOOC Limited, 2002). Such investments not only provide China with direct access to overseas energy resources but also contribute to strengthening economic ties with countries in the region. From a strategic standpoint, these initiatives form part of China's broader effort to diversify energy supplies and reduce dependence on traditional source regions.

Myanmar likewise occupies a special place in China's neighbourhood diplomacy strategy. According to Gubert (2019), the development of connectivity projects under the Belt and Road Initiative has enhanced Myanmar's role as a strategic gateway linking China to the

Indian Ocean. Cross-border economic corridors and infrastructure projects carry significance not only for economic development but also for reducing China's reliance on transportation routes through the Strait of Malacca. This demonstrates how neighbourhood diplomacy has been employed as an instrument to advance energy security objectives through development cooperation and regional connectivity.

In addition to economic and energy cooperation, the South China Sea represents a strategic arena that clearly illustrates the intersection of China's energy interests and foreign policy objectives. Nguyen (2013) argues that sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea are linked, to a certain extent, to China's energy and security interests. Meanwhile, Caruana (2023) points out that the "nine-dash line" claim continues to be a significant factor in debates concerning control over maritime space and resources in the region. From a strategic perspective, maintaining influence in the South China Sea is associated not only with issues of sovereignty but also with the objective of safeguarding maritime routes that are vital to energy transportation.

Recent studies further suggest that the South China Sea has increasingly become one of the focal points of regional strategic competition. Southerland (2016) argues that China's island-building activities and expanding presence in the South China Sea have generated substantial environmental, legal, and security implications for the region. According to Storey and Lin (2017), the South China Sea dispute reflects the intersection of geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests among multiple actors. Li (2017) contends that debates within China regarding the South China Sea indicate that policymakers increasingly regard the area as an important component of the country's national development and security strategy. From the perspective of international relations theory, Nguyen et al. (2024) similarly argue that the growth of China's power and influence in the South China Sea can be explained through dynamics of power accumulation and long-term strategic interests.

Overall, China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia has been implemented through a variety of channels, ranging from energy cooperation, economic investment, and infrastructure connectivity to the expansion of its presence in strategic spaces. These activities demonstrate that energy security is not merely an economic objective but also an important driver of China's increasingly extensive engagement in regional affairs. By combining cooperation with the expansion of influence, Beijing has utilised neighbourhood diplomacy as an instrument for safeguarding its energy interests while simultaneously consolidating its strategic position in Southeast Asia.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that energy security is not merely an area of economic policy but also one of the key strategic drivers shaping China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia. This finding is consistent with the arguments of numerous scholars who contend that, alongside China's growing national power and increasing dependence on imported energy, energy-related interests have become progressively embedded within Beijing's foreign and security strategies (Constantin, 2005; Cheng, 2008; Zhao, 2008). From the perspective of neoclassical realism, the need to ensure a stable energy supply can be understood as a strategic pressure originating from the international environment, which subsequently influences foreign policy formulation through the perceptions and calculations of Chinese policymakers (Wang, 2011; Fravel, 2019).

A notable finding of the study is that Southeast Asia is perceived by China not merely as a neighbouring geographical region but also as a strategic space that directly serves the objective of ensuring energy security. The region's location along major international maritime routes, particularly the Strait of Malacca, makes Southeast Asia a critical link in China's energy supply chain (Noer, 1996; You, 2007). Consequently, maintaining stable relations with Southeast Asian countries not only contributes to the creation of a favourable environment for development but also helps reduce risks associated with energy transportation. This helps explain why Beijing has increasingly emphasised regional cooperation mechanisms and promoted economic connectivity initiatives with ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004; ASEAN Secretariat, 2012).

From a foreign policy perspective, the study demonstrates that China has employed neighbourhood diplomacy as an instrument for reconciling economic development objectives with the protection of strategic interests. According to Dhakal and Muhammad (2024), China's neighbourhood diplomacy emphasises confidence-building, mutually beneficial cooperation, and the cultivation of stable relations with surrounding countries. However, the findings of this study suggest that, beyond its normative dimensions, this policy also serves pragmatic objectives, including the protection of energy security. This interpretation is consistent with the analyses of Shambaugh (2020) and Goh (2016), who argue that China's growing presence in Southeast Asia reflects a combination of economic interests, security imperatives, and ambitions to expand regional influence.

Specific case studies further demonstrate that the relationship between energy security and neighbourhood diplomacy is manifested through a variety of policy instruments. Investments in energy projects in Indonesia (CNOOC Limited, 2002), the promotion of connectivity corridors with Myanmar (Gubert, 2019), and the enhancement of energy cooperation with ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004) all reflect China's efforts to diversify both energy sources and transportation routes. This finding is consistent with Zhao's (2008) argument that China's pursuit of energy security has expanded from a primarily domestic concern to a regional and global strategy, thereby necessitating corresponding adjustments in its foreign policy.

However, the study also indicates that China's neighbourhood diplomacy does not generate exclusively positive effects for the region. While economic and energy cooperation has created significant development opportunities for Southeast Asian countries, China's expanding strategic presence has also raised concerns regarding the regional balance of power and security dynamics. The South China Sea represents a clear illustration of this dual character. On the one hand, the region is of critical importance to China's energy transportation routes and broader strategic interests (Nguyen, M. M., 2013). On the other hand, disputes related to sovereignty claims, island-building activities, and the expansion of China's maritime presence have heightened tensions between China and several Southeast Asian states (Southerland, 2016; Storey & Lin, 2017; Caruana, 2023). According to Li (2017), debates within China concerning the South China Sea also reflect the intersection of security objectives, sovereignty concerns, and long-term strategic interests.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between energy security and foreign policy in the Chinese case. The findings suggest that energy security should be understood not merely as an economic variable but also

as an important factor in the formation of regional strategies and foreign policy orientations. This perspective enriches the literature on neighbourhood diplomacy by highlighting the role of material interests and developmental imperatives in shaping the external behaviour of rising powers. At the same time, the study underscores the importance of adopting a multidimensional approach to China–Southeast Asia relations, recognising the close interconnections among energy, economic, security, and geopolitical considerations.

Overall, the evidence examined in this study demonstrates that energy security constitutes one of the key drivers behind China's increasing emphasis on neighbourhood diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Through cooperative mechanisms, energy investments, infrastructure connectivity initiatives, and the expansion of its strategic presence, Beijing has sought both to safeguard its energy interests and to consolidate its position within a rapidly evolving regional order.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the role of energy security in the formulation and implementation of China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia within the context of the evolving regional and international environment in the early twenty-first century. The findings indicate that energy security has evolved beyond a purely economic issue to become an integral component of China's national development strategy and security framework. The rapid growth in energy demand, coupled with China's increasing dependence on external sources of supply, has encouraged Beijing to pursue comprehensive measures aimed at ensuring a stable energy supply, diversifying energy partners, and mitigating risks arising from the international environment.

The study also confirms that Southeast Asia occupies a particularly important position in China's energy security strategy. Beyond being a neighbouring region with close economic ties to China, Southeast Asia serves as a geostrategic space linking critical energy transportation routes between the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia. Concerns associated with the "Malacca Dilemma" have prompted China to deepen cooperation with countries in the region, expand investments in the energy sector, develop infrastructure connectivity projects, and strengthen participation in ASEAN-led multilateral cooperation mechanisms. These developments demonstrate that energy security constitutes one of the key drivers shaping China's neighbourhood diplomacy toward Southeast Asia.

Through the examination of cases involving energy cooperation with ASEAN, energy investments in Indonesia, strategic connectivity initiatives with Myanmar, and activities related to the South China Sea, the article demonstrates that China has utilised neighbourhood diplomacy as an instrument for integrating economic development objectives, energy security concerns, and efforts to expand regional influence. Nevertheless, while this policy has generated opportunities for cooperation in trade, investment, and infrastructure development, it has also intensified concerns regarding strategic competition, regional power balances, and maritime disputes within the region.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the literature on Chinese foreign policy by clarifying the relationship between energy security and neighbourhood diplomacy. The findings suggest that analyses of China's external behaviour should be situated within the broader interaction among developmental needs, security interests, and long-term strategic calculations. At the same time, the study points to several promising directions for future

research, including the implications of the energy transition, green energy security, the next generation of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the impact of strategic competition among major powers in the Indo-Pacific on the evolution of China's foreign policy in the coming decades.

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