

Diplomacy by Default? New Zealand and Track II Diplomacy in Asia

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The term 'Track II diplomacy' was coined in 1982 to refer to the methods of diplomacy that were outside the formal government system, that is between non-governmental, informal and unofficial contacts, private citizens and other non-state actors. Specifically, Track II diplomacy may involve academics, journalists, and occasionally politicians, diplomats and military personnel acting in their "private capacity".² Track II diplomacy may also act as a source of advice to governments, be a laboratory to test ideas, provide an alternative diplomatic route when official routes become blocked or stalled, broker between governments and NGOs and academics, and provide a range of 'socialising' functions, where potential adversaries get to meet and know each other where otherwise they may not be able to.³ Track I diplomacy, by contrast, "represents the official government channel for political and security dialogue in the region" and those who participate in it are officially representing their state.⁴

There is also Track 1.5 diplomacy, a term coined by Australian Paul Dibb, which can be non-official meetings attended by officials in their "private capacities" and which focus on specific issues of interest to Track I. In other words, both the content of the meeting and the background of the participants are closer to Track I than might be usually found in a strict understanding and practice of Track II diplomacy, at which no officials attend.⁵ The distinction between Track 1.5 and Track II "may only be a question of emphasis"⁶ but, nevertheless, resolves some definitional

¹ An earlier version of this comment was presented to Presentation to Political Science and International Relations programme seminar series, Victoria University of Wellington, 16 October 2012. I am grateful for the comments at the seminar and subsequently.

² D. Capie, 'When Does Track Two Matter? Structure, Agency and Asian Regionalism', *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2010), p. 294.

³ B. Taylor, A. Milner and D. Ball, *Track 2 Diplomacy in Asia: Australian and New Zealand Engagement*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, No. 164 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, 2006), pp. 10-2.

⁴ D. Capie and P. Evans, *The Asia Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), p. 209.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

disputes around Track II⁷ and brings together benefits of Track II (informality, ability to raise new issues) with the particular needs of Track I.⁸

Globally, there are tectonic shifts in the regional balance of power in broad terms from the North Atlantic to East Asia. In short-hand we may consider them in various descriptive (and somewhat simplistic) binaries such as the rise of China and the decline of the United States; the economic crisis in Europe and the United States and the economic growth in Asia. Or we might consider it via various crises: the South China Sea, the Korean peninsula, Sino-Japanese tensions.⁹ Or we may list a litany of problems facing the world in the 21st century: resource scarcity, climate change and ecological damage, spread of dangerous weapons, crime, piracy, illegal immigration, mounting unemployment and the mismatch between financial and institutional integration and the liberalisation of markets.¹⁰ However we may choose to divide up the Asian region and its issues, both the region and its issues are globally important.

Closer to home New Zealand also has its own tectonic shifts in the way its official diplomacy is resourced. As with much else of the public service in New Zealand and in other Western democracies, cost-cutting measures—cutting the cloth to fit economically strained times—have seen “efficiencies” made and, in the case of New Zealand’s foreign service, probably the most radical restructuring in its history.

“Modernising” New Zealand’s Foreign Service

On 23 February 2012, New Zealand’s Secretary of Foreign Affairs John Allen proposed changes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) that would likely amount to a 21 per cent reduction of total staff, both on-shore and off-shore, the outsourcing of a number of administrative operations and the establishment of a free-call 0800 number for global consular operations.¹¹ These changes, “modernising” New Zealand’s foreign

⁷ D. Ball, A. Milner and B. Taylor, *Mapping Track 2 Institutions in New Zealand, Australia and the Asian Region* (Wellington, Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2005), p. 9.

⁸ D. Capie, “A Glass Half Full? Track 2, Policy Networks and Socialization in East Asia”, paper presented at the 49th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, California, 26-29 March 2008, p. 7.

⁹ New Zealand Ministry of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2010* (Wellington: Ministry of Defence, 2010), <www.defence.govt.nz/pdfs/defence-review-2009-defence-white-paper-final.pdf> [Accessed 18 July 2013], p. 11.

¹⁰ T. O’Brien, ‘Facing Harsh Truths and Finding a Way’, *New Zealand International Review*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2012), p. 12.

¹¹ R. Grant, ‘New Zealand Shrinks its Diplomatic Service’, *The Interpreter: The weblog of the Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 28 February 2012, <www.loyyinterpreter.org/post/2012/02/28/New-Zealand-shrinks-its-diplomatic-service.aspx> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; M. Williams, ‘Proposed Changes to MFAT’, 23 February 2012, <www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL1202/S00200/proposed-changes-to-mfat.htm> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; M. McCully, ‘Vision 2025: Delivering Foreign Policy in Challenging Times’, *New Zealand International Review*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2011), pp. 2-5.

ministry, have been controversial.¹² In the face of vocal opposition, both by diplomats and those outside the foreign service,¹³ some of the more extensive proposed changes have since been wound-back. But there will not be a return to the days of when the then-Foreign Minister Winston Peters promoted a step-change (up) in the Ministry's resources, of \$500 million over five years,¹⁴ which he announced just only a few months out from the 2008 General Election at which he and the Labour Party-led government were voted out of office. Nevertheless, for all its critics, the changes to MFAT are designed to "make [MFAT] more flexible and effective"¹⁵ and to reform diplomatic careers so that those from outside the foreign service can more easily join the diplomatic corps and so that diplomats can more easily gain experience outside MFAT and then return. It is too early to say whether these aims have been met.

MFAT is not alone. In the context of reducing government expenditure and providing "better public services", several New Zealand government agencies have faced major expenditure cuts and restructuring. These "better public services" are explained as

increasing expectations for better public services in the context of prolonged financial constraints compounded by the global financial crisis ... The key to doing more with less lies in productivity, innovation, and increased agility to provide services. Agencies need to change, develop new business models, work more closely with others and harness new technologies in order to meet emerging challenges.¹⁶

To meet these expectations, the New Zealand Government has set a target of reducing net core Crown debt to no more than 20 per cent of GDP by

¹² J. Martin, 'Better Public Services: The Advisory Group Report', *Policy Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2012), p. 31.

¹³ T. O'Brien, 'Culture of MFAT under Threat', *The Dominion Post*, 2 April 2012, <www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/comment/6676663/Culture-of-MFAT-under-threat> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; R. Ayson, 'Our Diplomats Are Facing a Brave New World', *The Dominion Post*, 25 February 2012, <www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/comment/6476199/Our-diplomats-are-facing-a-brave-new-world> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; G. McGhie, 'A Simplistic Reduction of Mfat Will Solve Nothing', *The New Zealand Herald*, 10 April 2012, <www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10797691> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; P. Goff, 'Mfat Cuts Will Damage our International Reputation', Press statement, 2 May 2012, <www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA1205/S00045/mfat-cuts-will-damage-our-international-reputation.htm> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; V. Small, 'Ambassadors Told Not To Cable Cutback Criticisms', *Fairfax New Zealand*, 9 March 2012, <www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/6547231/Ambassadors-told-not-to-cable-cutback-criticisms-Goff> [Accessed 18 July 2013].

¹⁴ Small, 'Ambassadors Told Not to Cable Back Criticisms'; McCully, 'Vision 2025'; Editorial, 'Changes for Mfat', *Waikato Times*, 14 January 2012, <www.stuff.co.nz/waikato-times/opinion/editorials/6257278/Editorial-Changes-for-MFAT> [Accessed 18 July 2013].

¹⁵ M. McCully, 'Foreword from our Minister', in Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Statement of Intent, 2012-2015* (Wellington: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2012), p. 3.

¹⁶ "Better public services" is the official name for the programme of activity led by New Zealand's lead state sector agency, the State Services Commission. See <www.ssc.govt.nz/better-public-services> [Accessed 24 July 2013].

2020/21,¹⁷ and reducing core Crown expenses to below 31 per cent of GDP in 2014/15—down from 35 per cent of GDP just two years earlier—and to remain well under that level.¹⁸

Diplomacy as Trade: “We Produce the Food They Want”

Part of delivering on these “better public services” is through a “joined-up” public service under the nomenclature “New Zealand Inc”. The New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said in his foreword in his government’s *Opening Doors to China* strategy document, published by New Zealand’s economic development agency NZTE, that:

The New Zealand Inc China strategy articulates the vision of a relationship with China that stimulates New Zealand’s *innovation, learning and economic growth*. It is for us to work together to turn that vision into a reality.¹⁹

New Zealand Secretary of Foreign Affairs John Allen has written:

Is it any wonder that New Zealanders have this sense that their future is assured and they can be confident of that future because we are close to Asia. Why? Because there are 3.5 billion people in Asia and they are all as hungry as hell and we produce the food they want.²⁰

Opening doors to China is one of several “NZ Inc” strategies. Other strategies focus on India, China, the United States, Australia, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the Gulf Cooperation Council and Europe. As described,

[t]he[se] strategies are plans of action for strengthening New Zealand’s economic, political and security relationships with key international partners ... The strategies are about growing our trade and investment relationships. The government also wants strong political relationships with these countries and regions, and to improve security, in the Asia Pacific and beyond ... An overarching objective for the NZ Inc strategies is to achieve better alignment and coordination among these agencies, so they are more effective and efficient, including in the support services they provide to business.²¹

These strategies involve a range of agencies, both in their writing and in their delivery. MFAT may be the lead agency but it is not the only agency

¹⁷ B. English, Speech to the Trans-Tasman business council, 10 July 2013, <www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/speech-trans-tasman-business-circle-3> [Accessed 25 July 2013].

¹⁸ B. English, Finance Minister: Budget speech, 16 May 2013, <www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/finance-minister-budget-speech> [Accessed 24 July 2013].

¹⁹ New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Opening Doors to China: New Zealand’s 2015 vision*, 2012, <www.mfat.govt.nz/downloads/NZinc/NZInc-%20Strategy%20-%20China.pdf> [Accessed 18 July 2013], p. 2, my emphasis.

²⁰ J. Allen, ‘Engaging with the World’, *New Zealand International Review*, vol. 35, no. 6 (2010), p. 24

²¹ ‘What are NZ Inc strategies?’, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <<http://www.mfat.govt.nz/NZ-Inc/1-About/index.php>> [Accessed 21 August 2013].

involved. In other words, diplomacy, is not just about what MFAT does. To deliver on these strategies, other agencies, government and non-government, as well as other publicly funded institutions such as universities, have to have an outward focus. Often, sometimes explicitly, that outward focus takes a mercantile form. Trade and diplomacy have often gone hand-in-hand: a strong export-led economy relies on a stable region through which trade passes.

The 2010 New Zealand *Defence White Paper* illustrates the diplomatic challenges:

[o]ur interests are best served by a region in which all countries and especially the major powers agree on the importance of stability and prosperity, and share a common understanding of how these goals should be secured ... We must be prepared to recognise and understand the interests and perspectives of partners and friends both old and new. We must be prepared to contribute to the protection and advancement of shared objectives. And we must do these things in ways which reflect the values and long-term interests of New Zealand.²²

Regardless of how and where New Zealand's trade and diplomacy reflect its values and interests,²³ the various regional and global shifts seemingly happening at once gives pause for thought and raises a number of salient questions. Is New Zealand equipped to deal with the myriad of predictable and, more importantly, *unpredictable* events that these regional and global shifts will present? Is New Zealand able to navigate the difficult terrain of regional power shifts, large-scale and complex trade deals, and the increasing demands on its consular services by its citizens abroad?²⁴ Is New Zealand able to look beyond the goals of increasing trade with China, being elected to the United Nations Security Council, concluding the Trans Pacific Partnership and, indeed, the limits of its own short three-year electoral cycle, to consider the long-term implications of an Asia Pacific region in which both the United States and China are significant regional players?

These regional shifts in the Asia Pacific are going to become more, not less, difficult for New Zealand. They will require both New Zealand's attention and its response. The attention and response it gives to these various changes is not just the responsibility of New Zealand's foreign service. Officials

²² New Zealand Ministry of Defence, *Defence White Paper*, p. 19.

²³ R. Ayson, 'Interests, Values and New Zealand's Engagement with Asia', Inaugural Professorial Lecture, Victoria University of Wellington, 19 July 2011.

²⁴ See: A. Oliver, 'MFAT Survives NZ Zero Budget', *Lowy Interpreter*, 29 May 2012, <www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/05/29/MFAT-survives-NZ-zero-budget.aspx> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; A. Oliver, 'NZ Diplomacy: The Budget Buzz Cut', *The Lowy Interpreter*, 23 May 2013, <www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/05/23/NZ-diplomacy-The-budget-buzz-cut.aspx> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; and, in the context of Australia [which has parallels to New Zealand in this case], see A. Oliver and A. Shearer, *Diplomatic Disrepair: Rebuilding Australia's International Policy Infrastructure* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2011).

across government will be and are involved. But these officials are fewer in number than they were. If New Zealand economist Shamubeel Eaqub is right and New Zealand is facing seven years of economic famine,²⁵ then New Zealand is facing a future with a smaller public service.

Diplomacy by Default?

This brings us back to the role of Track II diplomacy. We may want to consider Track II diplomacy as 'diplomacy by default'. Where fewer diplomats are available to give attention to a greater number of issues, visits and events, might Track II diplomacy be the place in which some of the long-term thinking and debate takes place? We may answer that question with a qualified yes. Yes, because arguably that is the role of Track II diplomacy anyway and *qualified* because there are officials who *do* give thought to identifying and addressing long-term trends. There is strategic, long-term thinking being developed by New Zealand's officials on many of the significant regional issues facing New Zealand. The 'yes' is also qualified because Track II diplomacy needs to be more than just diplomacy by default. If that is all it is then it would appear to have no inherent value. It would be at great risk of becoming both irrelevant and illegitimate if it relied wholly on "filling gaps", as there will be a time when those gaps may no longer exist and so have no need to be filled.

What, then, is Track II diplomacy good for? Is it second-rate diplomacy, which the designation of 'diplomacy by default' might suggest? Or is it worthwhile in its own right because it is distinct in important ways from official diplomacy? Track II diplomacy is distinct from Track I diplomacy in *form* certainly. It is characterised by dialogue rather than negotiation, informality instead of formality, a freedom to float trial balloons instead of being held to expressed views, and participation of academics, retired diplomats and journalists rather than officials.²⁶ But in substance? Many of the same topics are discussed at a Track I meeting, perhaps with firmer lines in the sand, perhaps with prejudice and greater force, but those things are a matter of tone. These differences, even if they are subtle, are nonetheless real. It may well be that the same topics are discussed at both, but that Track II offers a liberty to broadly discuss issues, without the constraints of being held to official lines, is an important feature.

Track II think-tanks in Asia are often founded, staffed or patronised by current or former officials or academics with close links to government.²⁷

²⁵ New Zealand Institute for Economic Research, 'Seven Years Of Economic Famine—Quarterly predictions June 2012—media release', New Zealand Institute of Economic Research, 29 May 2012, <<http://nzier.org.nz/media/seven-years-of-economic-famine-quarterly-predictions-june-2012-media-release> 2012> [Accessed 18 July 2013]; Williams, 'Proposed Changes to MFAT'.

²⁶ Capie and Evans, *The Asia Pacific Security Lexicon*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 303-5.

New Zealand's approach to Track II has generally been more ad hoc by comparison and rarely so closely entwined with Track I as in Asia. In much of Asia, Track II diplomacy is an important tool in diplomacy. Track II diplomacy in New Zealand has not had quite the same level of attention by officials. Dominated for a long time by key individuals, often academics and retired diplomats, who were also often well connected themselves to their counterparts in Asia, New Zealand's Track II presence in Asia was small but persistent. For a long period, from the 1980s through to the mid-2000s, this presence took the form of CSCAP (Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific) and PECC (Pacific Economic Cooperation Council) committee members, who were sometimes the same people.

Both CSCAP and PECC undertook predominantly multi-lateral Track II diplomacy; that remains the case. Increasingly, however, bilateral Track 1.5/Track II diplomacy has emerged as being significant. Most of these dialogues are led by the not-for-profit Asia New Zealand Foundation, an organisation established in 1994 to "promote New Zealanders' awareness and understanding of all things Asian".²⁸ The Foundation is New Zealand's lead Track II organisation, but there are other important institutions as well, including the Centre for Strategic Studies, the home of CSCAP New Zealand, based at Victoria University of Wellington, and the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs. New Zealand now has regular Track 1.5/Track II bilateral dialogues with Vietnam, China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Myanmar. But it has also expanded its multilateral dialogues to include ASEAN and Australia.

Both multilateral and bilateral Track 1.5/Track II dialogues have their place. In the case of the multilateral dialogue between ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand, which is hosted by the think-tank Malaysia ISIS, and is now in its sixth year, it gives Australia and New Zealand an opportunity to engage at a Track II level with both the full range of ASEAN countries and on topics that address issues pertaining to ASEAN as an institution. Bilateral Track 1.5/Track II dialogues, while often mirroring existing bilateral dialogues at officials' level, have the potential to explore ideas that may be of interest to officials but which they are not in a position to explore at Track I interactions. Beyond that, bilateral dialogues can also serve to tighten the web of networks between think tanks in Asia and beyond who are often looking at similar issues including New Zealand academics linking and collaborating with their Asian counterparts. Confidence-building, networking and collaboration may be intangible but they are nevertheless important.

²⁸ For more on its establishment, see E. Bohan, *Burdon: A Man of our Time* (Christchurch: Hazard Press, 2004), p. 196.

The Challenges for Track II Participants

New Zealand holds Track 1.5/Track II dialogues with some of the top think-tanks in Asia and on a wide range of topics. Recent agenda have featured the United States rebalancing in Asia, the role of ASEAN, the South China Sea, the Korean peninsula, climate change, people movement, pandemics, and responding to natural hazards. Increasingly, so-called 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' security topics are merging. Once economic Track II and security Track II were treated differently, evidenced best in the distinction between ABAC (APEC Business Advisory Council), PECC (Pacific Economic Cooperation Council) and CSCAP (Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific).²⁹ The former are for economists, the last for international relations scholars. PECC had its Track I counterpart in APEC while CSCAP had its Track I counterpart in ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum). Underlining the links between Tracks I and II, Gary Hawke, a New Zealand economic historian and participant in both PECC and APEC, has suggested that PECC is more successful than CSCAP because APEC is more successful than ARF.³⁰ If there were ever a true delineation between 'economic' and 'security' Track II, it is less true now. The Trans Pacific Partnership, for example, while of great interest to economists, also has an important security dimension to it. Climate change is another issue which has important security implications to it, and requires the expertise of those who may be climate scientists as much as by those from economics or international relations backgrounds. Therefore, the pool of Track II practitioners has had to broaden.

Some potential Track II participants might be resistant to participating in Track II dialogues, for fear that they might be appropriated by officials, or silenced if their views are too contentious, or forced to lie for their country. But, on the last point, the late Michael Green, a former New Zealand diplomat, noted that

[f]or New Zealand, credibility and a reputation for constructive participation are priceless diplomatic assets. When lying abroad for our country, our diplomats know that honesty serves us better.³¹

If those things—appropriation, silencing or lying—happen then they demonstrate Track II diplomacy at its worst. A feature of Track II diplomacy is its independence. Not full independence, to be sure; perhaps, constrained

²⁹ For further discussion on PECC and CSCAP, see D. Ball, 'CSCAP's Foundations and Achievements', in D. Ball and C. G. Kwa (eds), *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia Pacific Region* (Singapore and Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010), p. 10.

³⁰ In Capie, 'When Does Track Two Matter?', p. 305.

³¹ M. Green, 'Lying Abroad for One's Country', *New Zealand International Review*, vol. 33, no. 5, (Sept/Oct 2008), p. 18.

independence. Herman Kraft has referred to this as the “autonomy dilemma”.³²

[t]he trends in the Asia Pacific, including Southeast Asia, indicate that Track 2 is moving towards greater alignment with governments and their agenda. In this context, how far can Track 2 maintain its autonomy and provide effective support to Track 1? If these trends continue, Track 2’s role as a source of policy ideas will eventually diminish.³³

In some countries “the demarcating line between Track I and Track II is often so blurred as to become almost indistinguishable”.³⁴ However, there should be daylight between Tracks I and II; Track II cannot be Track I by another name. Nevertheless, Track II diplomacy *is* constrained: it can roam wider than official meetings but not so wide that it ventures into the policy irrelevant or the academically obscure. Track II diplomacy, in order to be of best use to Track I officials, must attract and maintain the state’s interest, support and involvement but it also, *simultaneously*, needs to maintain intellectual independence, objectivity, para-regional perspectives, unfettered thinking and simulating and imaginative research agendas.³⁵ That is a very fine line to walk. Track II’s use is not exclusively for the benefit of officials, though that clearly is part of it. Track II dialogues can go further than Track I dialogues, in participants certainly and usually in content too. Track II can test ideas that in Track I might be construed as being fixed policy. Track II diplomacy can also bring academics and others into contact with peers from different parts of the world and across different academic disciplines. This cross-fertilisation can not only spark new ideas but can also lead to collaborative research, broaden views of individual academics, and bring together the combined value of robust academic enquiry with pragmatic policy decisions.

Conclusion

New Zealand’s foreign service might be shrinking but it is not disappearing. Thus, Track II diplomacy can never be ‘diplomacy by default’, because diplomacy, official diplomacy, will still exist and operate and do what it does. “Track 2 is not a substitute for Track 1 activities”, Herman Kraft has argued, “otherwise it loses the advantage of its non-official status”.³⁶ But Track II diplomacy will—or, at least, *should*—inform what people think and do at

³² H. J. S. Kraft, ‘The Autonomy Dilemma of Track 2 Diplomacy in Southeast Asia (2000)’, in D. Ball and C. G. Kwa (eds), *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia Pacific Region* (Singapore and Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010), p. 176.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

³⁴ Taylor et al., *Track 2 Diplomacy in Asia*, p. 8.

³⁵ D. Ball and C. G. Kwa, ‘Conclusions: Assessing CSCAP and its Prospects’, in D. Ball and C. G. Kwa (eds), *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia Pacific Region* (Singapore and Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010), p. 255.

³⁶ Kraft, ‘The Autonomy Dilemma’, p. 170.

Track I level. Track I has to respect its Track II practitioners. Officials may not agree with them, and it is probably a good thing that disagreement exists, but there has to be two-way communication. If, as some may view, Track II diplomacy is seen as an old-boys club and not much else then it will not earn the respect or favour of its Track I masters or its Track II colleagues elsewhere.³⁷ But if it is seen, especially (but not only) as an important and necessary tool of diplomacy, because of what it delivers in both form *and* substance, then it will not so much be 'diplomacy by default' but, rather what we might call, borrowing from the lexicon of regional security architecture, 'diplomacy plus'.

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³⁷ Ibid.