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Southeast Asia's Response to the US-China Strategic Competition

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Abstract

This chapter outlines Southeast Asia's response to the stiffening US-China strategic competition. This story is told in three sections. First, this chapter offers a historical background of Southeast Asia's response to great power competition. The main point here being that Southeast Asia is not new to great power competition. In fact, this has been a permanent feature of the region's landscape. Second, it unpacks the US-China intensifying structural competition and how it impacts Southeast Asia. The main point here is that Southeast Asia is not isolated to the unfolding US-China competition. The third section outlines Southeast Asia's response to this great power competition. The main point being that the response have been varied and complex. Southeast Asia is comfortable to exist in complexity, that is, in both US-led and China-led orders. While states may show stronger leanings towards one power over the other in specific issue areas, these states are not comfortable siding one over the other.

Introduction

The US-China structural competition is the most important factor determining stability in global affairs. This competition is manifested in multiple issues, such as cyber-espionage, 5G technology, freedom of navigation, human rights, and trade. The negative effects of this structural competition impact all regions. This chapter focuses on Southeast Asia – a region that is rising in strategic significance for both the US and China. Though Southeast Asia is a collection of 11 relatively weak states, their choices towards the US-China competition would have significant consequences on the regional balance of power. Southeast Asia is made of 11 countries that border South Asia, Australasia and Northeast Asia. It is a dynamic region with over 650 million people with diverse religions, cultures, languages, ethnicities, economic size, political systems and many other factors. The region is a thriving economic region that show promising economic indicators, especially related to its relatively young labour force, growing consumer base, rising productivity rates and strong investment potential. It is collectively the 6th or 7th largest economy in the world today and is projected to climb to 4th place in 2050 (See HV, Thompson and Tonby 2014).

The region is represented by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) institution, where 10 out of 11 countries are members.¹ ASEAN, which was formed in 1967 during the height of the Cold War, has served as an important unifying force for the region until today. Geographically, Southeast Asia is home to two strategic waterways – Straits of Malacca and South China Sea. Both are critical waterways for trade and oil shipments for not only Southeast Asia, but also for Northeast Asia. Like all regions in the world, Southeast Asia/ASEAN must face the reality of the US-China competition. This chapter aims to understand how it has responded to this strategic challenge. This inquiry is divided into three parts: historical background of great power competition in Southeast Asia; unpacking the US-China competition and its impact on Southeast Asia; and Southeast Asia's response to this structural challenge.

Historical Background

The Southeast Asian region is a product of repeatedly instances of great power involvement and competition. In the modern period, this manifested itself through colonialism where the British, Dutch, Spanish, French, and later the Americans possessed colonies in the region. This was followed by the Japanese Occupation (1941-45) where the Japanese colonised almost all of Southeast Asia. The Japanese were defeated in 1945 by the Americans and British; and instead of returning to the former colonial powers, decolonisation and nationalist movements strengthened in the region. This led to the spread of independence in the region - Philippines (1946), Burma (1948), Indonesia (1949), North and South Vietnam (1954), Laos (1954), Cambodia (1954), Malaysia (1957), Brunei (1959), and Singapore (1965) (See Lee 2019; Shambaugh 2018, 93-5).

The Cold War - bilateral confrontation between the US and Soviet Union – was another moment in which great power competition shaped Southeast Asian affairs.² The bipolar structure at the international level was clearly reflected at the sub-regional level where the region was divided into communist and non-communist states. The region experienced a prolong struggle in Vietnam between the Soviet- and Chinese-backed communist and US-

¹ East Timor gained independence in 2002 but has yet to gain admission to the regional organization.

² For Southeast Asia and the Cold War, see the seminal book by Ang (2018).

backed non-communist states that caused widespread physical, human, and psychological devastation. China supported insurgencies and armed revolution in non-communist states to promote the communist ideology. With the defeat of the US and its withdrawal from Vietnam, maritime Southeast Asia became alarmed of the realisation of the domino effect should the region failed to contain the communist spread. This was brought home with Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia with the backing of Soviet Union in December 1978.

Southeast Asian states came up with several initiatives to mitigate the negative effects of the great power intervention during the Cold War. Certain states resorted to gaining external security guarantees for their national security, such as through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), bilateral alliances with the US that included hosting military bases, and defence agreement with a former colonial power (Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement that was replaced by the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in 1971) (Emmers 2018, 356). Some of the states participated in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which brought together states that chose to remain neutral during the Cold War. After two not-so-successful attempts to create a multilateral institution, five newly independent states (Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore) formed ASEAN in 1967. The multilateral nature of ASEAN was critical for Southeast Asia to compensate for their weaknesses as individual states and strengthen their collective approach against the great powers. In 1971, ASEAN issued the 'Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality' (ZOPFAN) Declaration, which was a commitment by the region to achieve security without the involvement of external powers in the domestic and regional affairs of Southeast Asia (Emmers 2018; Shambaugh 2018, 93). In 1976, ASEAN adopted the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) that enshrined the regional norms, such as the respect for state sovereignty, non-interference in domestic affairs, non-use of force, and peaceful resolution of disputes, to govern inter-state relations within ASEAN (Emmers and Caballero-Anthony 2020, 2 and fn. 2).

With the end of the Cold War, the US became the preeminent regional security actor. Southeast Asia was integrated into the US-led order and benefitted immensely in terms of economic prosperity, regional stability and America's pacifying effect on regional challenges. Though the Cambodian conflict ended following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, the region was faced with an unstable balance of power due to the US military withdrawal from the Philippines in 1992. Recognizing this uncertainty as being detrimental to regional stability, individual states began engaging the US both bilaterally and multilaterally. Outside of the US, ASEAN also pursued integration of other external powers, such as Australia, China, Japan, India and European Union into a range of multilateral arrangements covering economic, political and security issues (Shambaugh 2018, 93). This was an important way for ASEAN to "...engage, integrate and constrain..." these external powers (Corciari 2017, 255). Internally, ASEAN expanded to incorporate all the communist states in mainland Southeast Asia joined ASEAN.³ This changed the economic fortunes of these countries and integrated these states into the ASEAN community.

China established stronger relations with ASEAN after having established diplomatic relations with all ASEAN states by 1991. This was manifested in the expansion of China's multilateral engagement with Southeast Asia/ASEAN from the mid- to late-1990s (Kuik 2005, 105-6). The 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis proved to be an important catalyst for China's strengthened engagement with Southeast Asia/ASEAN. Not only did it widen its multilateral engagement with Southeast Asia/ASEAN, but it also started introducing proposals to build

³ Vietnam joined in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.

China-ASEAN relations and regional cooperation. Though it only became a dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1996, China was first among all the dialogue partners to commence free trade negotiations with the regional institution. Negotiations started in November 2001, and the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and China was signed in 2002. This agreement came into effect in 2010 in the form of the ASEAN-China FTA (ACFTA). China also became the first dialogue partner of ASEAN to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2003, as well as pledge its accession to the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Malaysia 2010). These Chinese attempts were viewed by some to form stable and peaceful China-ASEAN relations (Shambaugh 2004/05).

US-China Competition

After relative stability since the onset of the post-Cold War period, Southeast Asia is faced with greater uncertainty beginning in the late-2000s caused by the worsening US-China competition. This competition is defined by two factors.

The first is China's emergence as the 'new hegemon' and 'driver of global change' (*The Economist*, 2018). The optimistic reading of China before 2010 - namely that China did not view the international environment as hostile, China did not want to challenge the US for regional supremacy and China did not show revisionist tendencies (Kang 2003, 68) - seems to have unravelled. Having abandoned Deng's dictum of 'hide your strength, bide your time', China under the leadership of President Xi Jinping is arguably pursuing an assertive strategy (Poh and Li, 2017). China has pursued rapid military modernization in qualitative and quantitative terms to achieve its aspiration to become a continental and maritime power. With vast investments in defence spending, it has produced a more agile and high-tech military able to project military power and counter the US air and sea dominance in the region through the use of the advanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) air and sea military capabilities (Beckley 2018, 71-5). In terms of foreign policy, China has shown stronger assertiveness towards Taiwan and its maritime territorial disputes, namely the South China Sea and East China Sea (Liu 2016). China has introduced bold initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that made available large investments for infrastructure projects meant to promote trade and economic development in Asia, Africa, and Europe. This project is supported by the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which made available vast amount of finance for these infrastructure projects. China has also made headway in overturning its image of being decades behind the US in terms of technological development. It has incrementally gained an edge in innovation and technological areas, such as artificial intelligence, green technology and e-commerce.

At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in October 2017, President Xi Jinping announced that China was on the path of being a "great modern socialist country," and "a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence" by 2050 (*China Daily* 2017). Like all rising powers with such aspirations, it is not far-fetched to conclude that a rising China would seek to challenge the US leadership in the region and change elements of the US-led regional order that it perceives to be detrimental to its interests and security, as well as achieve its 'rightful' place in regional and global affairs.⁴ In fact, China has openly shared its preferred elements of a regional order, namely states should form a 'network of partnerships' and not alliances; there should be equality between big and

⁴ As Ikenberry (2011) noted, major states build and shape order to provide themselves security (p. 11).

small states; and there should be no targeting of any third-party country (Zhang 2018). Even though China continues to display signs of stability, such as its engagement with the regional and international community through both regional and multilateral institutions, the significant changes in the foreign and security policy posture leads one to question its intentions.

The other factor contributing to the competition is the relative weakening of American hegemony (Layne 2018; Heath and Thompson 2018). This is due to internal factors exposed by the 2008 economic crisis, as well as external problems revealed by the prolong war on terror and failure to reform the international order to adjust to the new power configurations (Pape 2005; Paul 2005; Ikenberry 2018, 18-21). These led to widespread of criticisms of America and increased questioning of US unipolarity (Ikenberry 2011, 3-4). Though this process began before 2016, the accession of the Trump administration (2016-2020) to power exacerbated discussions surrounding the weakening of the US hegemony (Layne 2018). The Trump administration's 'America-first' policy that led to the questioning of the utility of the alliances with Japan and South Korea, the US withdrawal from the TPP, and relinquishing support for multilateralism, free-trade and globalisation, have been harmful to preserving its regional and global leadership and challenge the liberal international order.

The Trump administration has persistently targeted China as the main challenge to the US. Though this perspective was present before the Trump administration, this administration adopted a stronger foreign policy against China with elements of containment. The US National Security Strategy published in 2017 stated that China (along with Russia) is working to "shape a world antithetical to US values and interests. China seeks to displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor" (The White House 2017, 25). In his speech at the Hudson Institute in October 2018, US Vice President Mike Pence said that "China wants nothing less than to push the United States of America from the Western Pacific and attempt to prevent us from coming to the aid of our allies" (The White House 2018). The assertive view of China led to the revision by the Trump administration of the 'blind engagement' strategy with China that began following President Richard Nixon's normalization of relations in the 1970s. The Trump administration adopted an adversarial position in its economic (the most visible being the tariff war between the two great powers, which was meant to correct America's trade imbalances with China), political (closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston and targeting of Chinese workers and students accused of espionage activities) and security (ramping up freedom of navigation missions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait) relations with China. In a rallying speech, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, called for collective action from all the 'free nations of the world' to counter the Xi-led Chinese Communist Party (US Department of State 2020). Such an approach is not a Trump or Republican phenomenon, but has become a consensus between both political parties in America. Both political parties are convinced that the peaceful foreign policy has failed to reform China and integrate China into the rules-based economic and security order in the region and beyond.

Southeast Asian countries are concerned about the US-China competition/rivalry and understands the region is at a 'turning point' (Lee 2019). The region has relied on the stability of the US-led order for prosperity, development and security through its bilateral and multilateral interactions. The US military presence has guaranteed the safety and open sea lines of communication that have been crucial for the region's economic growth and development and regional security.

China's rise and order-building efforts clearly challenge the status quo. It has become an entrenched political, economic and security actor in the region. While China's rise has brought immense economic and political benefits, it has also raised the level of strategic uncertainty in the region due to Beijing's assertiveness. One area where this is most visible is in the South China Sea territorial disputes where China has competing maritime and territorial claims with several countries. Chinese assertiveness has been expressed through various means, including the blocking a joint ASEAN statement when the grouping met for its annual summit in Phnom Penh in 2012, the reaching of a 'consensus' with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos on how to address the South China Sea territorial disputes between China and ASEAN, land reclamation and militarization of the islands and reefs in the Spratly and Paracel Islands beginning in 2013, the rejection of the ruling issued by the arbitral tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague that challenged China's expansive claims in the Southeast China Sea, the assertion of its own maritime rules that deviate from the standard understanding of the existing international law, its forceful actions in other claimants' EEZs that included attempts to prevent Philippine and Vietnamese ships from accessing hydrocarbon exploration within their own EEZ in 2011 and the deployment of an oil rig (Haiyang Shiyou 981) to the disputed maritime boundary near Vietnam in 2014 (Storey, 2013, 148–149; Singh, Ho and Tsjeng 2016). Apart from the concerns related to the militarization of the disputed islands, this discovery also raised concerns about China's intention to declare that the coverage of China's Air Defence Identification Zone extends to the South China Sea. To be sure, China and ASEAN have made efforts to resolve these disputes peacefully. Both signed the Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 and reached an agreement in 2011 on a statement that outlined the guidelines for the implementation of the Declaration. Nevertheless, due to the assertiveness on the maritime area, China's naval activities would be viewed as suspicious by Southeast Asian states (Lee 2020).⁵

Southeast Asia's Response

Southeast Asia is unable to influence the outcome of the US-China competition. Nevertheless, this is an important structural condition that the region has to address. The way the region responds to the US-China competition will determine the region's unity and stability. Is Southeast Asia shifting support to China due to the latter's economic wealth and political power? Cambodia and Laos, as well as Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte have been frequently cited as examples of this shift. Or is the region working hard to sustain the US leadership and US-led order? The answer is not as straightforward as many make it out to be. Many reasons attest to this, but I address two here. First, there is no singular Southeast Asian perspective. Southeast Asia is a collection of eleven countries with separate foreign policy strategies based on their own national interests. Moreover, Southeast Asian states have always underscored the importance of domestic politics and interests over regional policy and interests.

Second, as shown above, Southeast Asia have always adopted a multifaced approach to great power competition and involvement in the region. It has adopted this approach in addressing the US-China competition. The multifaceted approach stems from the position that Southeast Asia does not want to come in between the two great powers that could inevitably force them to make a decision on who to side. As Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

⁵ Another factor that causes Southeast Asian states to view China in suspicious terms is the presence of Chinese minorities in many Southeast Asian countries. These communities are sensitive about any attempt to upset their relationship with the non-Chinese majority. There is history in this perspective, as the non-Chinese majority are suspicious because of the Chinese past support of communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia that lasted till the early 1980s (Lee 2020).

wrote in the *Foreign Affairs* journal “Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, are especially concerned, as they live at the intersection of the interests of various major powers and must avoid being caught in the middle or forced into invidious choices” (Lee 2020). What this means is that the region prefers to cultivate relations with both the great powers and include the other powers, such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, New Zealand and Russia to work together to shape the emerging order (Lai 2020). To achieve this ‘impartiality’ (Emmers 2018) and mitigate the negative effects of the US-China competition/rivalry, Southeast Asia relies on several strategies collectively.

Southeast Asia’s response to the US-China competition has been to double down on open regionalism through the ASEAN framework. This has been a defining feature of the ASEAN-led multilateral order, especially in the post-Cold War period. This feature has allowed the organisation to develop robust relationships with all the great, major and middle powers in the Asia-Pacific. Prime Minister Lee wrote that such an approach, “...creates a more robust framework for cooperation and more space to advance its members' collective interests internationally” (Lee 2020). Moreover, this approach has ensured the central role of ASEAN in the multilateral order, Southeast Asia’s economic development and a stable balance of power that prevents a specific great/major power from dominating the multilateral order. This process has led to the development and promotion of diplomatic rules of engagement that are acceptable to all parties. Such an arrangement keeps the external powers ‘locked in’ in the ASEAN multilateral order (Emmers 2018, 363).

Within the multilateral order, Southeast Asian states have invested in strengthening ASEAN, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2017. The process of integration may not have progressed at a speed preferred by certain states and it is clear that the institution is suffering from a division due to the strong influence of external powers (Corciari 2017). However, there is cognizance among the Southeast Asian states that ASEAN has been central to the regional stability. It has balanced conflicting interests between the member states, as well its external partners. Despite the presence of mutual mistrust and border disputes, ASEAN has not recorded an inter-state war since the Cambodia-Vietnam conflict that ended in 1989/1990.⁶ Member states recognise that ASEAN is an important venue for dialogue and cooperation among the ten countries through its established normative structure defined by consensus-building, non-interference and non-binding features. Not only that, it has also been a critical platform for ASEAN to engage with external partners and maintain ASEAN’s relevance and centrality in the regional architecture.

Two recent developments exemplify the importance of ASEAN’s centrality feature. First, ASEAN led the process of the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which is a trade agreement that decreases trade barriers between 15 countries in the Asia-Pacific (excluding India). Second, in response to the widening prevalence and usage of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) geographical term by the great/major powers in the region, the ten ASEAN members announced their vision of the Indo-Pacific in the form of a non-binding ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. The document underscored key features that have defined the ASEAN-led multilateral order - ASEAN centrality, dialogue and cooperation to promote peaceful cooperation, a rule-based framework, and the pursuit of an open and inclusive regional order. These features were meant to address the mounting great power rivalry (ASEAN 2019; Singh and Tsjeng 2020).

⁶ Exceptions are the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple in 2008.

Southeast Asian states have also been active in supporting and participating multilateral frameworks outside of the ASEAN framework introduced by the US, China and even Japan. Some (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam) are members of the 11-member CPTPP and continue to support the re-entry of the US into this initiative. The region has also showed strong support for the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to strengthen integration and connectivity.

Outside of the multilateral framework, Southeast Asian states have maintained strong engagement with both China and the US both through bilateral terms and multilateral terms. This is in recognition of the importance of both the America's and China's contribution to the region. All Southeast Asian states have developed economic, political and military ties China. Despite China's assertiveness, there is deviation in the policy of strengthening diplomatic and economic relations with China bilaterally and with ASEAN. In fact, Asian governments are clear that a single issue should not dominate the bilateral relationship (Lee 2020).

The US is regarded as a critical resident power. Its strong commitment and participation are supported by the Southeast Asian states. The US economic strength that is manifested in its leadership in global and regional multilateral institutions, economic interactions and investments in the region, and the strength of the US dollar are critical for the Southeast Asian economic growth and development (Lee 2020). In strategic terms, the US remains a critical actor for regional stability. As Bilahari Kausikan wrote "The United States is a vital and irreplaceable component of the strategic equation in the region" (Kausikan 2017). Despite always treated as a secondary region compared to the Middle East and Europe in America's foreign policy priorities, the US-ASEAN relations experienced significant strengthening since the Obama administration, especially following the announcement of the rebalancing strategy in 2012. This was visible in terms of diplomacy, civilian and military assistance and economic assistance. A range of initiatives and policies were announced, such as the launching of US-ASEAN Defence Forum in 2014, military assistance and enhanced defence agreements between US and ASEAN states, improved US-Vietnam relations that included the lifting of the arms embargo, improved US-Thai and US-Philippines relations under the Trump administration, and the launching of the Lower Mekong Initiative. In 2016, the United States and ASEAN upgraded their relationship to a "strategic partnership" and convened the first standalone "Leaders' Summit" at Sunnylands, California, in February 2016 (Shambaugh 2018, 104-110).

Many strategies have been attributed to explain Southeast Asia's behaviour in addressing the US-China competition, such as balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning (Emmers 2018; Kausikan 2017). However, Kausikan (2017) argues that these are "...not mutually exclusive alternatives". These are pursued simultaneously to achieve an 'omnidirectional "balance"'.⁷ He wrote,

"ASEAN does not, however, define "balance" in the Cold War sense of being directed against one major power or another. The preferred Southeast Asian "balance" is the traditional formula: an omnidirectional state of equilibrium between all major powers that allows the countries of the region maximal room to maneuver and autonomy. The

⁷ Corciari (2010) has labelled this strategic as 'limited alignment', where Southeast Asian states prefer flexible security arrangements with the great powers depending on regional and domestic concerns, as well as the global balance of power (p. 3).

essential purpose of ASEAN's diplomatic engagements with external powers is to promote this omnidirectional "balance." (Kausikan 2017).⁸

Underlying the omnidirectional balance is pragmatism in Southeast Asia's approach to great power competition. While certain Southeast Asian states may make statements that point to choosing China, these same countries also have demonstrated opposite behaviour. When Duterte won the elections in May 2016, he announced Philippines recalibration of its foreign policy away from its ally and towards showing greater support towards China. For example, Duterte asserted that he would end joint naval patrols with the US Navy and request for the US Special Forces to leave the southern Philippines (Kausikan 2017), failing to include references to China's reclamation activities in the statement released by the 2017 ASEAN Summit when Philippines was the chair (Corciari 2017, 257). However, President Duterte has also made strong comments to challenge China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and showed support to Philippines's relations with the US military (Kausikan 2017)

Conclusion

This chapter outlined Southeast Asia's responses to the US-China competition. The main points are that the region is not new to great power competition and it utilises a multifaceted approach that includes bilateral and multilateral strategies. The aim is to ensure Southeast Asia does not have to choose sides. There are questions as to whether ASEAN is able to maintain the neutral position as the US-China competition worsens. In fact, as China becomes stronger and more assertive in the South China Sea dispute, the more challenging it would be for the Southeast Asian states (Emmers 2018, 365). This is probably the most significant challenge facing ASEAN and it is clear the member states are not united in addressing it (Lee 2019). This has the potential to divide the institution apart (Corciari 2017, 257-8). At the end of the day, Southeast Asia's multifaceted approach based on pragmatism has proven to be an appropriate strategy to navigate through the uncertainty of the US-China competition. Along with this approach, Southeast Asian states have to work hard to remain relevant to the multilateral order and strongly unified.

⁸ Also see Shambaugh (2018).

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