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ASEAN Centrality and Regional Security in the Context of Great Power Rivalry

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Cover Photo: ASEAN member nations' flags flying in Singapore, 2015. Razak Latif, iStock.

ASEAN CENTRALITY AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GREAT POWER RIVALRY

INTRODUCTION

The great power competition involving the United States (US), Japan, Australia, and India is intensifying across the Indo-Pacific, with a focus on Southeast Asian nations. The 10-member ASEAN bloc (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is the third-largest economy in Asia and the fifth biggest in the world, thereby becoming one of the most important emerging markets in the Indo-Pacific. Recently, the region has become a hotbed of strategic rivalry between China and the United States, which is intensified by geo-political and economic ambitions. The United States has significant economic and strategic ties in both Northeast and Southeast Asia, while Southeast Asia works as a key player in Chinese foreign policy owing to geography, historical economic ties, and the migration of millions of ethnic Chinese to the region. In the conception of great power status, Southeast Asia is widely regarded as a pilot area and regional.¹ Indeed, according to Amitav Acharya, the idea of ASEAN centrality has originated from “the start, vulnerable to the vagaries of great power relations.”²

ASEAN has released its own “Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, a more ASEAN-centric approach that relies on ASEAN’s values of inclusiveness, openness, economic development and connectivity, and centrality, while other regional

(middle) powers like Japan and Australia are increasing their involvement in the region through trade, development aid and investment, as well as promoting political and security ties. With the space for autonomy and non-alignment appearing to narrow, can Southeast Asian countries continue to stay in the middle of this battlefield without determining who the best partner should be to align with? Is ASEAN coherence, autonomy, and national sovereignty threatened? To some extent, how expedient is the non-alignment strategy that ASEAN has strived to maintain since the end of the American War in Indochina in the current period? The case of ASEAN probably provides a searching test of their diplomatic skills and capacity to remain neutral in the great power turbulence.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

China’s growing power has indeed brought out challenges to both US dominance of the international order and the development of ASEAN. The United States and China are battling for power and influence whereby each wants Southeast Asia to align with their vision of a regional order. This great power rivalry has further intensified in this dynamic region since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The region, a small theatre of this New Cold War, has experienced the competition in all sectors including security, trade, investment, development cooperation, technology, and infrastructure. This despite the fact that both US President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping have continuously emphasized, either in

¹ Jonathan Stromseth, “The Testing Ground: China’s Rising Influence in Southeast Asia and Regional Responses” (Brookings Institution, November 2019), 3.

² Amitav Acharya, “The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 2 (2017): 273.

bilateral conversations or in multilateral fora, the necessity for sustained diplomacy and institutionalized dialogue in order to avoid a geopolitical confrontation.³

Although former President Trump did not give Southeast Asia much attention as compared to former President Obama, Trump did attempt to consider its growing strategic importance in the US-China struggle and launched a number of cooperation initiatives. The United States is strengthening its regional commitment with the American version of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), rolled out since 2017, with deep concern for security cooperation. In practice, this involved reviving the multilateral security dialogue started in 2007 with Australia, India, and Japan, as well as intensifying freedom of navigation operations in the disputed South China Sea. President Biden has embraced his predecessor's strategy towards the Indo-Pacific, evident in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy which even admits to "mounting challenges...from the PRC" as a reason for "intensifying American focus" on the region.⁴ The Biden administration has to a large extent stayed on-course with its predecessor's "New Cold War" against China, notwithstanding greater interest in diplomatic

engagement, alliance-building, and multilateralism embedded in Obama's foreign strategy.⁵

With a view to advancing its role and influence in the world as well as setting itself up in a superpower position, China has attached great importance to the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region. In neighboring Southeast Asia, China's approach is characterized by a mixture of expansionism and a quest for security through stable partnerships.⁶ In a speech made at the Indonesian parliament in October 2013, President Xi referred explicitly to China and ASEAN as good neighbors sharing a common future. In Chinese leadership's thinking, "the China-ASEAN community of shared destiny is closely linked with the ASEAN community and the East Asia community".⁷ So, deciding whether the "rise of China" represents more of a threat or an opportunity has rapidly emerged as the quintessential foreign policy question facing the much less powerful, perennially insecure member states of the Association.⁸

In April 2020, during a meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers to discuss the coronavirus, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo strongly criticized China for taking aggressive actions in

³ Tony Walker, "Xi-Biden meeting is cordial, but will anything change between the superpowers?" *The Conversation*, November 16, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/xi-biden-meeting-is-cordial-but-will-anything-change-between-the-superpowers-171926>.

⁴ Saha Rushali, "The Pitfalls of Great-Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific," *South Asian Voices*, April 28, 2022, <https://southasianvoices.org/the-pitfalls-of-great-power-competition-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

⁵ Richard Javad Heydarian, "Great Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific: The Lull Before the Storm?" *Trends*, February 13, 2022, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/great-power->

[competition-in-the-indo-pacific-the-lull-before-the-storm/](https://trendsresearch.org/insight/great-power-competition-in-the-indo-pacific-the-lull-before-the-storm/).

⁶ Linda Maduz and Simon Stocker, "South-East Asia: A Hotspot in Great Power Rivalry," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 277, February 2021, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse277-EN.pdf>.

⁷ "Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament," ASEAN-China Centre, October 2, 2013, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

⁸ Mark Beeson, "Decentered? ASEAN's Struggle to Accommodate Great Power Competition," *Global Studies Quarterly* Vol.2, Issue 1 (2022): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab044>.

the South China Sea, even accusing China of taking advantage of the pandemic to push its military objectives and territorial ambitions. Subsequently, in July, the United States declared for the first time that China's maritime activities in the South China Sea are "completely unlawful and coercive" acts which are inconsistent with international law, and then sent two aircraft carriers to the region to conduct joint military exercises.⁹ The United States thinks China is determined to remake a sort of tribute system in which East Asia once again would be put under a Chinese sphere of influence.¹⁰

In addition, both the United States and China have actively initiated and supported many multilateral initiatives to pursue their own respective interests. Over the past years, the United States intensified its defense relations with fellow Indo-Pacific powers Australia, India, and Japan, further institutionalized the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and warmed up frayed strategic relations with ASEAN's key members.¹¹ In the security field, the establishment of the Quad (involving cooperation between Japan, India, and the Australia-US AUKUS alliance) is perhaps the most striking illustration of the United States' long-term commitment, along with tacit indictments of alternative institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The United States is also trying to temper China's rise with initiatives in development cooperation, infrastructure financing, and technology development. For its part, China has increasingly launched regional and global initiatives since Xi Jinping came to

power in 2012, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Lancang-Mekong cooperation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, etc. China's original reasons for the largest initiative (BRI, rolled out in 2013) bear witness to its geostrategic calculations: to foster its domestic socio-economy and to expand its influence westwards, thereby reducing Western and American influences in Asia. As China's flagship foreign policy, China has been deeply engaging with ASEAN through BRI and remains committed to promoting BRI projects' progress. This region rose to become the top BRI investment receiver in 2020, in spite of a strong decrease in China's overall BRI investments worldwide caused mainly by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² Furthermore, China has realized unexpected achievements by concluding the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement at the end of 2020, which creates the world's largest free trade area including all ten ASEAN countries, China, Japan, and South Korea. This success became more meaningful in the context of the 2017 US's formal withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal (TPP).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, China and the United States have competed for influence through their proactive "vaccine diplomacy" which provides financial support and vaccines to ASEAN countries. China sent tons of medical supplies including China-made masks, test kits, ventilators, and civilian medical teams to the region in early 2020 and had committed to providing Chinese COVID-19 vaccines once

⁹ "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," U.S. Department of State, July 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

¹⁰ Graham Allison, "The New Spheres of Influence: Sharing the Globe with Other Great Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 99 (2): 30–40.

¹¹ Heydarian, "Great Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific".

¹² Wang Zheng, "Assessing the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia amid the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021-2022)," *ISEAS Perspective* 2022/57, May 26, 2022, 3.

they became available. Beijing has also promised to help Indonesia become the production hub for Chinese vaccines in Southeast Asia.¹³ Meanwhile, the United States' charm offensive has culminated in the donation of 23 million US-made COVID-19 vaccines and 158 million USD in public health infrastructure assistance to Southeast Asian nations.¹⁴ The Trump administration announced in September 2020 that ASEAN countries would receive US \$87 million of US government assistance to fight COVID-19 in the framework of a US-ASEAN Strategic Partnership. China then sent missiles into the South China Sea, demonstrating the potential costs of armed conflict in the region, although a series of meetings and calls between China and ASEAN leaders discussing COVID-19 recovery aid, and economic cooperation was still initiated.

ASEAN CENTRALITY: VULNERABILITY IN THE GREAT POWER RIVALRY

'ASEAN's centrality' is a prominent yet controversial notion. Since the adoption of ASEAN's Charter in 2007, 'ASEAN's centrality' has been the vocabulary used and reiterated in all of ASEAN's annual chairman statements. The notion has also become the mantra for officials from around the world when speaking about their vision of Asia's future, particularly when addressing Asian audiences.

While scholars and practitioners have been unable to unravel a clear-cut definition for the term, there are several things can be learned about ASEAN and its role in the region: (1)

ASEAN's life has always been closely associated with power rivalry, (2) the central role of ASEAN is based on ASEAN's efforts in maintaining internal and external linkages to regional countries and the Association's dialogue partners, (3) 'centrality' is the goal and guiding principle for all the activities of the Association that helped ASEAN manage to maintain its autonomy and development in the emerging regional geopolitics; and (4) ASEAN's centrality is encountering new challenges from geopolitical competition.

Fifty-five years of ASEAN has proven that great power rivalry is discernibly not novel nor a strange phenomenon to the Association. At the outset, ASEAN itself was the product of a turbulent Cold War when the founding members refused to be included in dividing lines between the Soviet Union and the United States. Back then, the Association found itself developing and emerging following the power vacuum left by the United States and the distrust and competition between Japan and China in the early 1990s. For the past decade, as China's clout has been expanding, as China-US relations are under 'unprecedented' strain, and as regional powers and middle powers have been emerging and tilting their concern towards East Asia, ASEAN has gradually been moving from a peripheral region to a key battleground of intensifying geopolitical struggle.

Over the years, to avoid being bystanders in their region, ASEAN spared no effort in engaging major powers and managing their interactions in the region. The Association spun a series of concentric organizational circles, namely the

¹³ Jonathan Stromseth ed, *Rivalry and Response: Assessing Great Power Dynamics in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC : Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

¹⁴ "U.S. Support to ASEAN in Fighting COVID-19," U.S. Department of State, August 4, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-to-asean-in-fighting-covid-19/>.

ASEAN Regional Forum (1994), ASEAN Plus Three (1998), East Asia Summit (2005), ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus (2010), and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF, 2012). These institutions form the process termed “Omni-meshment”.¹⁵ The influence of ASEAN features on these institutions and imprints from their name to their modus operandi, organization, agenda, and membership criteria.

ASEAN’s special place in intra-regional affairs entailed the organization to use normative suasion to prevent potential confrontation. ASEAN instilled its set of fundamental principles of consensus, consultation, and non-interference in internal affairs into its ‘low cost, low stakes’¹⁶ layers of institutions, from the document of Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and ASEAN-centric mechanisms. The TAC became the code of conduct for relations between members and countries that wish to become a member of EAS.

From the outside, the hustle and bustle of ASEAN’s meetings, the support of ASEAN dialogue partners to ASEAN’s central role, and newspaper headlines quoting ASEAN’s positive statements make ‘ASEAN’s centrality’ appear as a sustained notion. The regional organization seems to deal well with regional issues. East Asia, however, is no longer what it was a few decades ago. As mentioned earlier, China-US contention and the increasing involvement of powers in the region, economically and politically, are providing ASEAN with more reasons to be concerned over its existence and development,

not to mention its diplomatic skills and capacity to navigate between great powers.

Emerging geopolitical tensions exacerbate the fragility of ASEAN’s internal linkages. So far, ASEAN has always been characterized by diversity, which partly resulted in member states’ differences in perception of national threats, interests, and consequently strategic calculations. The South China Sea is still there as a flashpoint and a source of ASEAN’s fragmentation. What happened in 2012 is a permanent scar in ASEAN history to remind anyone optimistic about ASEAN’s consolidation and unity. ASEAN’s division is also illustrated as some member states have sought and developed bilateral defense or economic linkages with outsiders.

In addition, the ongoing power struggles between the United States and China put pressure on ASEAN as its member states inevitably face the dilemma of “choosing sides” on different issues. Per the abovementioned points, for years, the United States has been the pivotal actor in the region through both security and economic engagements. This has been the case since China became more assertive in territorial contestation. Notwithstanding, the past decade witnessed the emergence of China as the most important trading partner of ASEAN. The country is also one of the biggest donors providing infrastructure loans for Southeast Asian countries through its mega plan, the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, China aims to demonstrate its image as a “responsible major country”. Some scholars even argue that China seemed to win over Southeast Asia during the

¹⁵ Evelyn Goh, “Great powers and hierarchical order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing regional security strategies,” *International Security*, Vol.32, No.3 (Winter 2007/08): 113-157.

¹⁶ Evelyn Goh and Amitav Acharya (2006) “The ASEAN Regional Forum and security regionalism: comparing Chinese and American positions,” in *Advancing East Asian Regionalism*, ed. Melissa Curley and Nicholas Thomas (London: Routledge).

Covid-19 pandemic with its intense and coordinated diplomacy (Fraser & Maude, 2022).¹⁷

More importantly, despite advocating for ASEAN's centrality, both the United States and China as well as regional middle powers continue to develop grand strategies such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy or Belt and Road Initiative and seek to strengthen existing mechanisms to affirm their leading position. The Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building (CICA), Boao Forum for Asia, the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (LMC), the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP), the QUAD, and recently the tripartite defense agreement between Australia, the UK, and the United States (AUKUS) are all examples. These mechanisms present ample challenges to the Association since they are seeking to perform similar functions as well as involve considerable overlap in the membership and agendas of ASEAN.

WHAT'S NEXT? RECOMMENDATIONS

No region is more likely to be directly and strongly impacted and challenged than Southeast Asia, a part of the world that once again finds itself at the epicenter of a rapidly changing geopolitical context.¹⁸ From ASEAN countries' perceptions, China and the United States are considered their most important economic partner and most important security guarantor, respectively.¹⁹ So, this great power

rivalry not only challenges the countries of the region individually, but also collectively. Although ASEAN itself provides an established, joint/multilateral platform, its members are increasingly searching for country-specific solutions or partnerships with external powers/organizations in dealing with this great power competition.²⁰ Consequently, what should ASEAN do to maintain its central role in regional architectures and to harmonize ongoing power politics? Is coming up with ASEAN's View on the Indo-Pacific (2019) or ASEAN Foreign Ministers Statement on the Importance of Maintaining Peace and Stability in Southeast Asia (2020) enough?

To save the principle of ASEAN centrality, **ASEAN should maintain its capability of connecting regional members and partners**, which not only provides the Association with legitimacy acting on behalf of Southeast Asian states, but it also reduces the effects of divergent forces from the ongoing power contestations to regional unity. To this end, ASEAN members could be proactive in encouraging regional economic integration through negotiating free trade agreements with other key partners and increasing intraregional trade. For this point, the ASEAN Economic Community project needs to be promoted as key for ASEAN Centrality.

In parallel, **ASEAN could try for new constructive forms of "minilateralism" on critical issues "whereby core, likeminded Southeast Asian countries adopt more feasible and robust responses to common risks, including in**

¹⁷ Dominique Fraser and Richard Maude, "China Won Over Southeast Asia During the Pandemic," *The Diplomat*, July 20, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/china-won-over-southeast-asia-during-the-pandemic/>.

¹⁸ Beeson, "Decentered? ASEAN's Struggle to Accommodate Great Power Competition," 1.

¹⁹ ISEAS Survey 2020, 2021, and 2022, "State of Southeast Asia Survey", ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>.

²⁰ Maduz and Stocker, "South-East Asia".

cooperation with external powers”.²¹ By doing so, ASEAN claimant states like the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia can bilaterally and individually announce their dissatisfactions with China’s coercion in the South China Sea and show their willingness to raise their “minilateral” initiatives in maritime dispute settlement. To do this, ASEAN might have to recalibrate its insistence on maintaining an ASEAN Way. A thorny question here is whether the principle of ‘consensus’ continues to be the core regulator guiding ASEAN’s activities?

A future focus on other regional powers like Australia, India, Japan, and (increasingly) on potential EU partners might be a catalyst for strengthening ASEAN centrality and its collective leadership to a higher dimension. For example, ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) should expand and strengthen a formal Dialogue Partnership, institutionalizing cross-regional dialogue and cooperation between their international secretariats, notwithstanding that some ASEAN member states have been admitted as Dialogue Partners to the PIF. Also, a Dialogue Partnership has been established among PIF, ASEAN, and the EU which aims at creating greater understanding of the potential for enhanced multilateral governance in the regions.²²

In general, in Southeast Asia the escalating US-China competition is clearly moving into the spotlight. This strategic contestation poses the ever-most serious difficulty to the stability of the region. ASEAN member states are increasingly having to make tough decisions and are unable to develop close relations with China and the

United States at the same time as they once were during the Cold War. Given ASEAN’s inherent diversity, its decision-making process has faced great challenges and dilemmas in reaching a consensus on how to counter the uncertain regional architecture in which its member states are embedded. In the best of times, collective activities made by the Southeast Asian states have been difficult, and the influence of external major powers has been maintained (Beeson 2022, 8).²³ Also, in the future, while the economic situation of Southeast Asia might increasingly be impacted by China, the security architecture will remain highly influenced by the United States.

²¹ Richard Javad Heydarian, “At a strategic crossroads: ASEAN centrality amid Sino-American rivalry in the Indo-Pacific,” *The Brookings* (April 2020): 7.

²² Stromseth, “Rivalry and Response”.

²³ Beeson, “Decentered? ASEAN’s Struggle to Accommodate Great Power Competition,” 8.

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The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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