

Navigating the Narratives of Indo-Pacific: “Rules,” “Like-mindedness,” and “De-risking” in the Eyes of Southeast Asia

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The intensifying U.S.-China rivalry is not just a rivalry over trade and technology; it is also one over narratives. Narratives matter in international politics as they reflect preferences, shape perceptions, and affect policy choices. Both superpowers construct their own narratives and counter their rival's in an attempt to woo and win over other states. While China has developed its own narratives (e.g., a community of common destiny, Asia for Asians), it is trailing in this competition. By comparison, the United States—at times acting together with its allies—has been the primary driver in pushing clusters of ideas, values, and words into the mainstream, thus forcefully shaping the cause—and the course—of world politics in the post-Cold War era. Terms such as “rules-based order,” “like-minded nations,” and “de-risking” (modified from “decoupling”) are among the more recent examples of the core mobilizing and rallying ideas central to the United States and its key allies’ converging (albeit not necessarily coordinated) efforts to render the “Indo-Pacific” construct into geoeconomic and geopolitical realities.

This essay provides a brief analysis of the Southeast Asian states’ perceptions of and responses to the Indo-Pacific construct and related narratives. It examines how and why the small and secondary states in Southeast Asia view the three aforementioned core terms in the ways they do. The terms have been selected because each of them, which entered the lexicon at different junctures (“rules-based order” was among the earliest, “de-risking” the latest), reflects different aspects of the Indo-Pacific construct. That is, “rules-based order” is about system-wide arrangements, whereas “like-mindedness” is about relationships and sources of solidarity among state actors and “de-risking” is about ends and means. Each of these terms captures the prevalent perceptual gaps between the mainstream powers and the global South countries.

“Rules” and “Rules-based Order”

As weaker and smaller states in an anarchic international system, Southeast Asian states are, by and large, supporters of “rules” and the “rules-based” arrangements. While many states are critical of aspects of the Liberal International Order (LIO), virtually all embrace such ideals of the “rules-based system” as sovereign equality, territorial integrity,

the rule of law, economic openness, multilateralism, regionalism, humanitarianism, as well as the maintenance of peace and security under the UN system.

However, as post-colonial states which have experienced centuries-long colonization and decades-long Cold War struggles, Southeast Asian states are acutely sensitive about power-driven practices and interest-driven inconsistencies. They perceive a glaring gap between the ideals and the actual implementation of the rules in the real world. In the eyes of Southeast Asian states (and the wider global South community), the so-called LIO has often been neither liberal nor international. As observed by a member of Malaysian foreign and security establishments:

The West led by the US is defending the present Western-dominated international order, upon which the term “liberal” is affixed. It is liberal (in the sense that it is based on the rule of law) only to those with power, influence, and means. After all, Iraq was justifiably punished for invading Kuwait in 1991; [but] the US was not when it in turn invaded Iraq in 2003. Many countries, including Malaysia, deemed the American invasion as illegal as it was not sanctioned by the UN Security Council. However, no action was taken against the US.¹

It is not just Malaysian and Southeast Asian elites who are critical about the inconsistencies of the LIO. Political and thought leaders in other parts of the global South have similarly expressed skepticism and criticism. Matias Spektor, a professor at Fundacao Getulio Vargas in San Paulo, for example, wrote recently in *Foreign Affairs*: “most countries in the global South find it difficult to accept Western claims of a ‘rules-based order’ when the United States and its allies frequently violate the rules—committing atrocities in mistreating migrants, dodging internationally binding rules to curb carbon emissions, and undermining decades of multilateral efforts to promote trade and reduce protectionism.”²

Hence, when it comes to narratives regarding “rules” and “rules-based system,” small powers in Southeast Asia and elsewhere typically ask: “whose rules,” “who makes these rules,” and “why have these rules been enforced with inconsistencies?”

“Like-mindedness”

Southeast Asian states are also ambivalent about “like-mindedness.” This term is often used hand-in-hand with the notion of “rules-based order” and related constructs to underscore the salience of solidarity in strengthening U.S. alliances and partnerships in Europe and Asia in virtually all domains across the Indo-Pacific. For instance, during U.S. President Joe Biden’s May 2022 trips to Seoul and Tokyo to boost his administration’s

1 Raja Nushirwan Zainal Abidin. “Major Power Rivalry: One Malaysian’s Perspective – How a Shrimp Views the Aquarium and Big Fishes.” *Foreign Relations* 1 (2022): 21.

2 Matias Spektor, ‘In Defense of the Fence Sitters.’ *Foreign Affairs*, April 18, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/global-south-defense-fence-sitters>.

Indo-Pacific strategy, Biden stressed, apparently with China in mind, that stronger ties and solidarity among “like-minded countries” are required, amid “competition between democracies and autocracies.”³ In January 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, at a joint press conference with their Japanese counterparts, said their meeting discussed updating their alliance’s roles and missions “so that Japan can more actively contribute to regional security alongside the United States and other like-minded partners.”⁴ In May 2023, at a G7 finance ministers meeting, U.S. Treasury secretary Janet Yellen called for “coordinated action by a group of like-minded countries” against China’s “use of economic coercion.”⁵

While the term has been used frequently by leaders, high-level officials, and pundits alike, thus far there has been no explicit articulation as to what exactly “like-minded” means, who the “like-minded” countries are, et cetera. Judging from the speeches and actions of the United States and key allies, however, Southeast Asian states have gradually formed the following impressions: “like-minded” presumably means *ideologically* adhering to liberal-democratic principles, *strategically* standing up against China, and *economically* willing to join the U.S.-led decoupling efforts vis-à-vis China.

Each of these attributes only partially converges with some of the Southeast Asian states’ external outlooks. The majority of Southeast Asian states are not liberal democracies by Western standards. Only three out of ten ASEAN states were invited to the Biden administration’s Summits for Democracy in 2022 and 2023: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Singapore and Vietnam—two of the U.S. closest defense partners in Southeast Asia—were not invited. Hence, the more Washington emphasizes “like-mindedness” in its efforts to mobilize and solidarize the U.S. alliances and partnerships, the more Southeast Asian states realize they are not quite like-minded with the United States after all.

Even more important, Southeast Asian states are becoming increasingly uneasy about the growing rhetoric of ideological “divide,” which was aggravated by the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. For Southeast Asian states, the ongoing, dominant discourse of depicting the Ukraine war—and growing tensions in Asia—as a matter of “democracies versus autocracies” is simplistic and superficial at best, and dangerous at worst. Like many countries in the global South, Southeast Asian states view the war

3 “Remarks by President Biden and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea in Joint Press Conference,” The White House, May 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/05/21/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-yoon-suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-in-joint-press-conference/>.

4 “Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa and Japanese Defense Minister Hamada Yasukazu at a Joint Press Availability,” U.S. Department of Defense, January 11, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3265802/secretary-of-state-antony-j-blinken-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-jap/>

5 Kana Inagaki, Henry Foy, Sam Flemming, and Demetri Sevastopulo. “US Urges ‘Co-Ordinated Action’ by G7 against China’s Use of Economic Coercion.” *Financial Times*, May 11, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/e7f5e8a1-%20f84e-4697-a80c-e6bd13b615b4>.

more as a proxy war, an extension of great power politics.

Moreover, Southeast Asian states' perceptions of threat and solution are not black-and-white, but shades of gray. In the United States and some other Western countries, mainstream commentators assume that Southeast Asia and much of the rest of the world shares their strategic outlook. That is: China is the principal threat; the South China Sea dispute is the most pressing problem; and military tools—especially alliances among “like-minded nations”—are the principal means of responding to these seminal challenges.

For Southeast Asian states such assumptions are too simplistic. Although smaller states in the region are indeed concerned about China's growing assertiveness and its impact on the regional status quo, they do not necessarily view China as a problem with which they must tackle immediately and at all costs. Instead, they view China as a permanent and increasingly profound factor that must be engaged (not confronted) to jointly manage regional issues and maintain regional prosperity, especially at a time when each country is occupied with post-pandemic economic recovery efforts.

For these and other reasons, Southeast Asian states want Chinese power to be *constrained*, not contained, and they do not want *any* single-sided alignment that would tie them to one camp over another. Countries in Southeast Asia—most of which are quasi-democracies and virtually all of which are post-colonial polities—know very well the dangers of over-emphasizing the democracy-authoritarian “divide” and over-privileging alliance-based “solutions,” especially those that involve extra-regional powers.⁶ Containment means Cold War 2.0, and Southeast Asian states will be among the first to suffer. Hence, while many in the West have advocated alliances as the principal solution for smaller states, most Southeast Asian states remain allergic to full-fledged alignment, insisting on non-alignment instead (i.e. selective and partial engagement with all powers). They view alliances against specific powers as self-fulfilling prophecies, resulting in greater polarization and turning security risks into immediate threats.

It is therefore not surprising that while Southeast Asian states welcome the Biden administration's renewed commitment to U.S. allies and partners, they hesitate to fully align with a Washington-led coalition, especially when the coalition is becoming increasingly explicit in targeting Beijing. In addition, while many Southeast Asian states view a strong partnership with the United States and/or its allies as a core component of their external policies, they have also insisted on maintaining stable relations with China and other powers, cultivating multiple layers of partnerships with as many countries as possible, while guarding against regional polarization, the escalation of tensions, and great power conflicts.

6 Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective,” *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (December 2021): 300–315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>.

“De-risking”

When the word “de-risking” was recently introduced (by U.S. allies in Europe) to replace “decoupling,” Southeast Asian states remained doubtful and reserved. This is because risks are *omnipresent* and cannot be eliminated; risks are *multiple* and never single; and most importantly, risks are *subjective* and *relative*: your primary risks are not mine, and the reverse is true.

Southeast Asian states, like the United States and its key allies, prioritize economic diversification to mitigate the risk of becoming economically dependent. However, unlike Washington, elites in the ASEAN capitals do not think economic decoupling is a desirable or feasible approach. In October 2022, the U.S. Commerce Department placed sweeping new restrictions on technology exports, curbing the supply of semiconductors and chip-making equipment to China. This latest measure, aimed at hampering Beijing’s domestic research and technology industry, is viewed by many in Southeast Asia as a move with widespread consequences. Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong cautioned that more decoupling of the world’s two largest economies will result in “less economic cooperation, less interdependency, less trust and possibly ultimately a less stable world.”⁷

Fundamentally, countries see multiple risks. While economic over-dependence is one risk, there are other risks and dangers, some of which are even more profound and pressing for regional states. These include the possible problems of entrapment, polarization, and marginalization, as well as the erosion of the elite’s domestic political relevance and authority. To simultaneously mitigate these external and internal risks, multiple approaches or combinations of multiple tools are needed. Instead of alliances, Southeast Asian states view ASEAN-centered, multi-layered partnerships as the principal tool to mitigate risks and challenges as international uncertainty deepens. While ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms are at times imperfect and ineffectual, they are *indispensable* in providing platforms for continuous dialogue and cooperation —not only for Southeast Asian states, but also for all dialogue partners of ASEAN, including competing great powers.

To conclude, the emerging narratives surrounding the “rules-based” LIO, “like-minded” nations, and “democracies versus autocracies” have effectively increased anxieties among Southeast Asian countries. The more the United States signals its vision of solidifying a U.S.-led alliance of “like-minded” nations, as well as soliciting support to actualize Washington’s “decoupling” or “de-risking” strategy, the more the ASEAN states see a spectrum of heightened risks. They become concerned about what really drives Washington’s moves: preserving regional stability or preserving U.S. primacy. Some have interpreted these narratives as growing pressure from the United States to take sides.

7 “PM Lee Hsien Loong at the Joint Press Conference with Australian PM Anthony Albanese (Oct 2022),” Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, October 18, 2022, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-%20Joint-Press-Conference-with-Australian-PM-Anthony-Albanese-Oct-2022>.

The smaller states are apprehensive about the eventual consequences of these trends on their own interests, regional prosperity, and international stability. To mitigate and offset perceived risks amid increasing uncertainty, they have insisted on hedging, even as the space for maneuvering continues to shrink.

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