



Battleground Southeast Asia: China's Rise and America's Options

CHARLES DUNST



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INTRODUCTION: CHINA'S RISE AND SOUTHEAST ASIA'S TEPID RESPONSE

China is challenging the United States in Southeast Asia, bringing the region closer economically through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and enlisting governments in the region to back Beijing's political stances. Some observers in the American and foreign press, citing China's increased influence and the US's diplomatic retrenchment under President Donald Trump, have declared the end of decades-long US predominance in Southeast Asia, deeming it to have been supplanted by China. Headlines indeed scream 'crisis,' but the reality is far more complex: Beijing's efforts in Southeast Asia have a ceiling provided by Southeast Asians' long-running preference for the US. Washington, despite ongoing missteps, evidently remains well-positioned to challenge Beijing's premature bid¹ for regional hegemony.

The character of Southeast Asia's governments generally determines the level to which they engage with China: One-party Cambodia and Laos, along with the increasingly autocratic Myanmar and Thailand, are generally most interested in China's offers. These countries' leaders seek to solidify their respective grips on power amidst middling (and in some cases declining) domestic support and increased Western pressure; China, in return for certain (geo)political goods, backs them and supports development projects aimed to engender local goodwill for these leaders. Alternatively, the more democratic Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines have better balanced the US and China. This is unsurprising, given that states with stronger traditions of democracy and human rights generally prefer the international community to China, as is the case in Latin America.² And while the Indonesian, Malaysian, and Philippines governments

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still see the Belt and Road Initiative as a way to fund development that will bolster their public support, citizens of these countries are increasingly anti-China or at least China-skeptical. Additionally, Singapore, although autocratic, is a rich city-state awash in Western capital and influence, rendering it more able to balance the US and China and less in need of Chinese development investment.

It's evidently too soon to write off Southeast Asia as Beijing-aligned and lost to Washington. Still, the absence of Western financing as a viable alternative keeps driving Southeast Asian governments, irrespective of regime type, back into Beijing's arms. But Chinese victory is not guaranteed, despite Trump's diplomatic blunders. The US remains Southeast Asia's favoured great power; Washington needs only a coherent plan—and perhaps a new commander-in-chief—to cement its enduring strength in the region.

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND CHINA

Democracy is under siege in Southeast Asia. In recent memory, Thailand and the Philippines have experienced democratic recessions, Myanmar's liberalization has stalled, while Singapore has maintained its autocratic efficiency. Indonesia and Malaysia are two notable exceptions, with both witnessing multiple peaceful transfers of power in recent years. Still, Southeast Asia's significant backsliding in rights and freedoms has rendered the region ripe for Chinese influence, as developing

autocratic countries are the most receptive to Beijing.^{3,4} This is partly because of the "South-South" solidarity partnerships on offer—which Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi defines as a "peaceful collaboration according to the norms of justice and fairness"—but which would be better described as Beijing's promise of non-interference in regimes' unsavory human rights issues.⁵ The terms of China's engagement are unapologetically authoritarian and explicitly rival the West's human rights and democracy-focused analog. As a result, what China puts forward is understandably attractive to Cambodia's Hun Sen, Thailand's Prayut Chan-o-cha, and Laos's Bounnhang Vorachith and others who are interested in protecting their own regimes' interests and, perhaps secondarily, in weakening Western power.⁶

Despite "no strings attached" assurances, Chinese aid does come with some obligations to Beijing's political objectives, such as upholding the "one China" policy regarding Taiwan and ignoring the detention of Uighur and other Muslims in Xinjiang Province.⁷ On balance, authoritarians in the region and around the world—even those leading Muslim countries—have considered this a relatively marginal price to pay. It is, therefore, unsurprising that China exerts significant influence over many Southeast Asian governments. It is also no surprise that Cambodia and Laos—two of the region's poorest and most autocratic countries—have become near vassals of Beijing.

CHINA'S AGENDA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia holds a special place in China's policy mind due to the region's geography, its historical and economic ties to China, and the around 30 million of ethnic Chinese scattered throughout.⁸ Since the early 2010s Beijing has pursued increased friendliness with these countries through a form of neighbourhood diplomacy designed to turn Southeast Asia into a "community of common destiny" (CCD), an idea described by Chinese officials in terms of inclusiveness and win-win cooperation. Chinese leader Xi Jinping delineated this neighbour-centric foreign policy in 2013, echoing his predecessor Hu Jintao to say that Chinese diplomats should "[let] the awareness of community of common destiny take root in neighbouring countries."⁹ Ultimately, as Hoang Thi Ha writes, CCD rhetoric injects "a deterministic sense of inevitability in the intertwined destiny" of China and ASEAN in attempts to integrate Southeast Asian states into a Sino-centric political, cultural, and security network to rival the US.¹⁰ Beijing has made headway on promoting this view, as was evident throughout Xi's mid-January visit to Myanmar, during which the two countries inked dozens of BRI deals. Myanmar's *de facto* leader Aung San Suu Kyi also told reporters: "It goes without saying that a neighbouring country has no other choice but to stand together [with China] till the end of the world."¹¹

Broadly speaking, Beijing hopes to win over Southeast Asia through financial and political support, ultimately folding the region into "a harmonious global order

without the overlay of Western influence," as Chris Alden and Ana Cristina Alves note.¹² The BRI is the most visible form of China's economic statecraft, but other BRI-connected sub-regional initiatives like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) should not be overlooked. The LMC has \$22 billion at its disposal, and Laos and Cambodia, its top beneficiaries, were the first countries to sign bilateral plans endorsing China's CCD vision.¹³ China's economic statecraft is also important domestically as it allows for the export of excess Chinese labor, capital, and capacity—thereby tamping concerns at home about unemployment, asset bubbles, falling profits, and, most worrying for Beijing, stagnant growth.^{14 15} China is also now "looking into the possibility of relocating some low-skilled, highly polluting industries to other countries," including those in Southeast Asia.¹⁶

China employs a range of other policies in Southeast Asia, including reconnecting with the Chinese diaspora there to strengthen its relationship with Southeast Asian countries and influence their politics.¹⁷ Beijing has also been more aggressive in the South China Sea, building islands there—much to the dismay of some Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, China has managed to defend its claims to the Sea by leaning namely on Cambodia, perhaps its most loyal ASEAN member, to veto the body's resolutions on the issue.

China views Southeast Asia as a means to many ends: It's a region of special cultural and historical interest in which China seeks to forge anti-US political

unity, open business opportunities to Chinese firms, and to which it can export human and technical overcapacity to satisfy domestic concerns. Indeed, compared to other peripheral regions, Southeast Asia is the most important and accessible gateway for China's global expansion.¹⁸

PEOPLE PROBLEMS

Beijing may have the backing of some of Southeast Asia's ruling regimes, but the ruled remain skeptical. Anti-Chinese sentiment is rising,¹⁹ and it has become most evident in Cambodia,²⁰ Vietnam,²¹ the Philippines,²² Indonesia,²³ and Malaysia.²⁴ What's more, when polled by the Pew Research Center in 2014, every Southeast Asian nation with the exception of Malaysia deemed China its top threat; a staggering 93 percent of Filipinos and 84 percent of Vietnamese were concerned that disputes between China and its neighbours could lead to military conflict.²⁵ (That said, the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte is unpredictable, and, in a move that could significantly weaken American influence in the region, it recently began the termination process of its Visiting Forces Agreement with the US.²⁶) China also earned the lowest trust ranking among Southeast Asians in *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*.²⁷ The 2020 version of this report produced similar results, with 71 and 85 percent of respondents, Southeast Asian elites, saying they were worried about China's economic and strategic influence, respectively.²⁸

The Southeast Asian public also remains pro-US. Ninety-two percent of Filipinos, 90 percent of Vietnamese, 86 percent of Burmese, 85 percent of Cambodians, 80 percent of Singaporeans, and 75 percent of Thais hold "strongly positive views" of the US's impact in Southeast Asia.²⁹ Only majority-Muslim Malaysia and Indonesia come in at less than 70 percent, thanks to President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric.³⁰ Indeed, recently-ousted³¹ Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in early February asked the American president "to resign to save America," indicating disdain not for the US but for Trump specifically.³² It's unclear how Mahathir's successor, Muhyiddin Yassin, will approach China, but it is fair to assume that Malaysia under

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his leadership will generally cooperate with China.³³ Still, Malaysian anti-Chinese sentiment undermines the nation's relationship with China. In 2018, Mahathir was elected prime minister on an explicitly anti-China platform. Soon after, he visited China to renegotiate BRI deals agreed to by his predecessor, warning publicly of a "new colonialism"³⁴—"a pointed expression of Asian unease about China's increasing economic and political influence in the region," Lucy Hornby writes in the *Financial Times*.³⁵ Mahathir later implemented anti-China policies at home³⁶ and stood up to Beijing at sea.³⁷ He continued, however, cooperating with China on BRI projects, saying that if forced to choose between Beijing and Washington, he would ally with the "rich" former rather than the fickle latter.³⁸ And yet, the US-Malaysia relationship also remains positive. The US is the largest source of Malaysia's total foreign direct investment,³⁹ and Malaysian government bodies continue to publicly profess their interest in strengthened ties with the US.⁴⁰ Although Malaysia's BRI cooperation could rub against the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy, this has yet to happen. The US, if it avoids forcing Malaysia to choose between Washington and Beijing, will certainly retain significant influence in that country, particularly given extant anti-Chinese sentiment there.

Despite not necessarily being pro-US, Indonesians also hold anti-China views that undermine Beijing-Jakarta ties. A late 2019 poll showed that Indonesians believe China has become most influential country in Asia—but that Indonesian anti-Chinese sentiment rose rapidly alongside

this Chinese ascension.⁴¹ And while Jakarta looks to Beijing for infrastructure assistance, Indonesia continues to hedge and protect its own interests, as was most evident in December 2019, when Chinese coast guard ships escorted dozens of Chinese fishing boats through Indonesian waters—and Jakarta responded by deploying warships and four F-16 jet fighters. The goal, according to an Indonesian military spokesman, was to drive China away without escalating tensions.⁴² Indeed, Indonesia is among the most reluctant countries in Southeast Asia to choose between the US and China,⁴³ and, unsurprisingly, it has continued cooperating with the US on security and counter-terrorism matters even while spats over trade and the Jakarta-Beijing relationship persist. The US-Indonesia relationship is far from perfect, and their 2015 "strategic partnership" has yet to materialize, but Indonesia remains open to American efforts.

For now, Southeast Asians are not ready to abandon the US for China, despite President Trump's disquieting leadership.⁴⁴ The reality of anti-Chinese sentiment—the result of elites in client countries attaining proximity to Chinese power and wealth at the public's expense⁴⁵—is a major hurdle for Beijing, one that is increasingly evident,⁴⁶ and for which there is no American equivalent. If democracy were to take root in Southeast Asia, it's apparent that anti-Chinese political movements would have a strong chance at claiming power across the region. And even without democracy, there is always the potential of anti-Chinese uprisings. "Not now," a Cambodian man in Sihanoukville,

an overrun-by-Chinese Cambodian city, recently told *The Atlantic* when asked if Cambodians would soon take to the streets to protest the influx of Chinese into their country. “But if things keep getting worse for another year or two—yes.”⁴⁷

DISCUSSION: CHINESE MIGHT AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONCERN

To most, it appears that China’s BRI-centered influence-building efforts in Southeast Asia have been overwhelmingly successful. All eleven Southeast Asian nations are now BRI members. In addition, China has drawn Cambodia and Laos—and increasingly Myanmar—quite close, with those countries’ governments often doing Beijing’s political bidding. China may appear mighty, but might does not foster goodwill in those upon whom it is wielded.

No issue looms larger over China–Southeast Asia relations than China’s 2009 unilateral declaration of sovereignty over more than 80 percent of the South China Sea. Chinese diplomats, for instance, during a 2016 meeting in Kunming, China, without any prior consultation asked ASEAN member state diplomats to sign a “consensus” paper addressing contentious issues including territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This gambit provoked visible anger from some of those with their own claims to the Sea, including the Philippines, Vietnamese, and Malaysian delegations.⁴⁸ “The Chinese over-reached and backfired,” said one diplomat who attended the meeting. “There is a nicer way to say these things but instead their message was ‘We’re right and you’re wrong.’”⁴⁹ China’s aggressiveness in this

realm continues to provoke backlash. In 2019, a former senior Vietnamese foreign ministry official accused China of “intimidation and coercion,” even questioning whether Hanoi and Beijing could ever negotiate claims to the area in “good faith.”⁵⁰ This Chinese bluntness is evident elsewhere in its diplomatic efforts and seems to be a weakness therein.⁵¹

Southeast Asian governments are also not entirely convinced by China for other reasons, including fears of debt diplomacy and frustration at the lack of local involvement in BRI projects. After seeing China’s Sri Lankan takeover—China in 2018 got Sri Lanka “to cough up a port” for 99 years⁵²—Southeast Asian leaders are concerned that the BRI exposes them to similar “debt traps.”⁵³ This fear is augmented by Southeast Asian frustration with the lack of local involvement in BRI projects. Leaders generally see the BRI as a means to create local jobs and, accordingly, gin up public support for their governments, but nearly 90 percent of BRI contractors are Chinese companies.⁵⁴ This is the result, as previously mentioned, of China’s need to export its domestic overcapacity, and does not come without costs: A BRI rail link in Laos has attracted local criticism for employing almost exclusively Chinese,⁵⁵ while Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen keeps finding himself needing to justify the influx of Chinese who, rather than Cambodians, work on BRI projects⁵⁶ and regularly denigrate their Cambodian counterparts,⁵⁷ generating widespread Cambodian anti-Chinese sentiment in the process.

China's own economic struggles may also hamper its Southeast Asian efforts. With trade, investment, consumer spending, and business confidence all in retreat, China's economic growth has slowed to its lowest rate in 27 years,⁵⁸ with some warning that its economy may slip further. This kind of slowdown, which would likely be exacerbated by the ongoing coronavirus crisis, has negative impacts for Southeast Asia, whose economies depend heavily on exports to China.⁵⁹ If China is forced to purchase fewer goods from Southeast Asia, the region would likely turn to the West. Even now, every Southeast Asian country—including Cambodia and Laos—seeks to profit and benefit from their relationships with China and the West without forcing themselves to choose between Beijing and Washington. (Cambodia has not been particularly successful on this front.⁶⁰) The BRI indicates that China is getting better at geopolitics, but many of its neighbours are evidently becoming increasingly clever as well.

Anti-Chinese sentiment in Cambodia has skyrocketed as the Phnom Penh-Beijing relationship has intensified, indicating the broader superficiality of China's Southeast Asian influence. Cambodia has for years readily absorbed many Chinese elements, but China's newest advance is seriously straining this traditional amity.⁶¹ Indeed, anti-Chinese sentiment has become so widespread that Sen himself has had to publicly address the issue, while pro-regime newspapers have taken to publishing pro-China pieces written by Chinese propagandists.⁶² And although Sen's grip on power remains strong, anti-Chinese sentiment is becoming a proxy for anti-ruling party sentiment and could threaten his son's potential succession.⁶³ The rest of Southeast Asia will face a similar problem if they deepen relations with China while downgrading those with the West, as Southeast Asians want ties with both Beijing and Washington (and Brussels and London). Therein lies China's major problem: Despite the BRI's merits,

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Southeast Asia remains both wary of China and a reservoir of goodwill for the US.

Cambodian politics also present China with a troubling conundrum. Sen's successor, for reasons both unique to Cambodia and standard to patrimonial successions, will face significant public and elite opposition when he tries to take over.⁶⁴ Given the widespread nature of Cambodian anti-Chinese sentiment, as well as the opposition's anti-Chinese and pro-US rhetoric, it's fair to assume that a non-Hun clan Cambodia would downgrade relations with China in favor of relations with the West. But China appears to be taking over two chunks of Cambodia for military purposes.⁶⁵ Any Cambodian regime change and subsequent renegotiation of these plans would not be tolerable for China. The potential for anti-Chinese political change like this is not, however, limited to Cambodia, as evinced by Malaysia's election of Mahathir and the increasing popularity of anti-Chinese views elsewhere. It's therefore notable that China, in a surprising break from its promised non-interference, has become somewhat active in Cambodian politics.⁶⁶ It remains unclear how Beijing might respond to a public uprising or regime change that damages Chinese interests, but current behaviour seems to suggest an increased willingness to intervene.

If the West does not pivot back to Asia, albeit with more human rights concern than US President Barack Obama managed,⁶⁷ China could emerge dominant in Southeast Asia by default—even as Beijing's popularity sags.⁶⁸ Still, Chinese power remains "synonymous with brute strength, bribery

and browbeating," as Edward Wong writes in *The New York Times*,⁶⁹ while US power is potent and widely seen as more benevolent. Barring a further collapse in diplomacy and strategy, the West, namely the US, is well-positioned to maintain some semblance of its regional predominance.

CONCLUSION:

WASHINGTON'S NEXT STEPS

The US retains pole position in the race to win over Southeast Asia, but Washington needs to up its efforts. This is particularly important given Southeast Asian doubts regarding current American leadership: 60 percent of US skeptics in the region say their confidence in Washington would increase if Trump were no longer president.⁷⁰ Those numbers are particularly high in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore—countries with most of the region's Muslims who, as previously mentioned, have bristled at Trump's constant anti-Muslim rhetoric. Although the US's chief problem, an inability to focus on Southeast Asia, predates Trump, China's foreign policy struggles are deeper and far more chronic, leaving the door open for the US. But the Trump administration has squandered, rather than taken advantage of, this opening. Its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy unwisely singles out China for leveraging "predatory economics"⁷¹ to coerce countries into joining its fold without offering a reasonable alternative. Southeast Asians, meanwhile, concerned that China's rise implies a binary choice between Beijing and Washington to which their governments will respond by choosing China,⁷² see

confirmation of that binary in FOIP. Even US partners like Vietnam maintain relations with Beijing. Telling Southeast Asia to choose between China—the nearby, predictable, and active option—and the increasingly distant and erratic US is self-defeating, particularly given Washington's inability to yet articulate a plan more attractive than the BRI.

The West must, therefore, avoid creating rival blocs in Southeast Asia. The Cold War-like implication that countries must choose sides does not apply there: compared to that era, the security environment is more benign and middle power countries have much more agency.⁷³ In eras past, the US was able to bully states like Cambodia, a state no longer functional given that Cambodia is a Chinese ally but continues to receive American aid, and with whose government the US retains ties. Thailand and the Philippines have similarly cultivated warm ties with the US and China when it suits them. Clearly, in today's world, these countries are not "pawns" on a chessboard, but "knights," as longtime American diplomat Richard Armitage put it.⁷⁴ Southeast Asia hungers for economic opportunities from both the United States and China and seeks to play the superpowers off one another. But if forced to choose, as Trump's FOIP seems to imply they will be, Southeast Asian countries will begrudgingly go with China.⁷⁵

Washington's Cold War era preoccupation with military spending also no longer makes sense. If Sen, for example, wants to coordinate militarily with China, as he already has, so be it; his forces are among the weakest in the

world. The US, rather than focus militarily on Southeast Asia, should instead shift its resources to promoting economic development in the region as a means of capitalizing on extant pro-America sentiment. Mahathir in early 2019 said that "we have to go to the Chinese" for infrastructure.⁷⁶ He was speaking about Malaysia, but the "we" can stand in for Southeast Asia writ large, given that the US has not articulated a tangible plan to rival the BRI. Doing so will be difficult, but the US must offer a multilateral regional proposal to provide alternative financing. As it has in Cambodia, Washington can further development without cementing authoritarianism by providing economic aid to sectors—agriculture and healthcare, for example—that are not directly controlled by autocrats. The US can also coordinate with regional partners to implement infrastructure development based on transparency and high environmental standards, both of which the BRI lacks.⁷⁷ The West's goal should not be to directly confront the BRI, but to develop a compelling alternative to it "and then re-engage China from a position of strength."⁷⁸

Furthermore, Trump must fill empty diplomatic positions and increase America's presence in Southeast Asia. His summer 2019 installment of W. Patrick Murphy, a seasoned career diplomat, as ambassador to Cambodia is a strong start, and one that telegraphs Washington's interest in Cambodia to Phnom Penh. Statements from the White House about Cambodia help that effort. It's inexcusable, though, that US ambassadorships to ASEAN, the Philippines, and Singapore

remain without nominees, while Trump's nominee for the Indonesian post has yet to be confirmed. China, of course, has ambassadors in each of those posts. It's similarly shortsighted that the US cut funding for the Young South-East Asian Leaders Initiative, a vital supplement to official diplomacy and a low-cost, high-impact way to reach young people in the youthful region.⁷⁹ China, of course, has its own programmes designed to win over Southeast Asian youths.⁸⁰ Additionally, US presidents also must not skip the Southeast Asian summits, as Trump did in 2018 and 2019. The US sent to the 2019 summit the lowest level of representation since 2011,⁸¹ embarrassing the host and traditional US partner Thailand. ASEAN leaders matched this lacking diplomacy by ditching a later meeting with US officials (leaders from Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam were the only ones to show up).⁸² Trump's planned Las Vegas March summit with all ten ASEAN states—since cancelled due to coronavirus fears⁸³—was a step in the right direction. Regardless, the US's continued absence indicates that Washington doesn't care about Southeast Asia, a

message that the region's leaders evidently hear loud and clear. This indifference, amidst other American messaging of a forced choice between Washington and Beijing, fatalistically forces Southeast Asian leaders to side with China.

Still, the US remains well positioned to cement its predominance in Southeast Asia. But doing so requires a more coherent approach from Washington, which will include coordination with Washington's European, Australian, and Japanese allies. This increased focus must come in the form of a multilateral economic approach, a decreased focus on military power, the prioritization of diplomacy, and, as indicated by Trump's low approval ratings throughout the region, perhaps a change in leadership. If the US takes such steps, Washington is likely to secure its preeminent status in Southeast Asia, despite China's BRI-paved influence inroads, and thanks to the anti-Chinese sentiment stemming from Beijing hegemonic hubris.⁸⁴ But the clock is ticking, and the US cannot afford to let Southeast Asia languish in Beijing's orbit much longer—for soon, the region is likely to see China as its only option. ■

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Battleground Southeast Asia: China's Rise and America's Options

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Southeast Asia, while still a reservoir of goodwill for the US, has in recent years come increasingly under China's umbrella. In this Strategic Update, Charles Dunst analyzes China's expansion there, discusses Southeast Asians' predilection for America, and offers steps the US can take to "win back" the region.

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