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Strategic Competition between China and the U.S. in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's Essential Role

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Abstract

Sino-US Competition is seen shifting focus to Southeast Asia where geostrategic importance and economic potential are attracting increased attention from both China and America. As the premier regional organization, ASEAN is expected to manage this rivalry while at the same time protecting the sovereign rights of its members alongside that of regional security. China's BRI and the increasing economic strength challenge the United States Indo-Pacific strategy and security partnerships where ASEAN is immersed. ASEAN is strategically located in the middle of an emerging Sino-U.S. rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region and has become the focus of this emerging bipolarity. In its attempt to balance power between China and the United States, ASEAN has adopted a privileged position and leverage to organize and influence regional forces. ASEAN's principle of not taking sides through being a non-aligned organization and the practice of consensus the group can have strategic partnerships with different parties of the

great powers without siding with any. However, it is found that ASEAN has problems in terms of cohesion because of the difference in the priorities of the member states and the impact of the external actor. The paper analyzed ASEAN's approach to engaging the Sino-US competition, as well as its positive possibility for stabilizing the conflict and negative one for the possibility of its marginalization or division. Therefore, using the analysis of diplomatic, economic, and strategic functions of ASEAN, the study stresses its significance as the key player supporting the rules-based order and sustainable development of the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: ASEAN, Sino-US Competition, BRI, China, The United States

Introduction

In Sino-US relations the administration of Donald Trump has been in a unit of branding China as a revisionist state and an adversary. China's foreign strategy changed from taoguangyanghui (Keeping a Low Profile) to fenfayouwei (Striving for Achievement), especially in the South China Sea (SCS) issues (Xuetong, 2014). Therefore, it is Southeast Asia which is considered a most strategic region for China as the country relies mostly on oil imported through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. The ASEAN region is significant in China's policies since the partnership between the two has been leading since 2020 as its most important trading partner (Akram, Khan, & Ahmad, 2022). The Chinese leadership has reiterated its policy of putting ASEAN first in China's neighborhood diplomacy (Zha, 2023). Washington has a significant strategic and economic interest. Southeast Asia has therefore become a frontline for Sino-US confrontation in regards to debates regarding China's power in the region (Representative, 2021).

This research article analyzed the challenges faced by ASEAN to mitigate the Sino-US rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region and strategic choices of Southeast Asian states, the possible shift in ASEAN centrality, and the emerging new order among sizzling great power contestation. The bilateral conflict between China and

the United States governments has been impacting regional government decision-making processes and ASEAN stance, thus fostering the speed of shift in the regional order. Notably, the study uses the works of Western and Southeast Asian scholars together with some of the most popular Chinese publications to offer a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of power relations.

Sino-US Competition and the New Order in the Asia-Pacific Region

The existing bipolar rivalry between China and the United States continues to alter the regional order in the Southeast Asia context. The analysis below shows how the rivalry is shaping regional governance structures, diplomatic alignments as well as the deliberations of regional states. It also takes into account the employment of a long-term vision about the future of regional relations and the IPR in general.

Military and Security Aspects

The military and security premises of Sino-United State relations. The strategic competition in Southeast Asia is important to analyze to separate the region's strategic environment better. At the same time, China and the United States retain large and active militaries within the region as a mix of a force in being and force estimate.

Military Presence and Capabilities

Today's China has enhanced its military power very hugely within the last few decades, especially in the naval forces. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is being increasingly modernized and new aircraft carriers, submarines, and advanced missile technologies have strengthened its power projection beyond China's immediate region. For instance, the South China Sea has been characterized by new Chinese military activities like the construction of artificial structures and the deployment of troops. Such actions are not unique because they represent China's long-term plan to strengthen its authority in the South China Sea and overseas (Salisbury, 2024). The U.S. military also always conducts regular

combined exercises and cooperates with regional states on defense, asserting the country's unswerving stance on guaranteeing stability in the region (Grossman, 2023).

Security status in Southeast Asia can be described as the system of cooperation and interactions with the United States at the forefront. The U.S. has treaty allies, such as the Philippines and Thailand, partner countries, which are Singapore and Vietnam, and others. Such cooperation is based on defense treaties, mutual educational exercises, and the provision of weapons, which strengthens the capacities of the regional states and also safeguards them against possible dangers. Nevertheless, China does not have official military partnerships with the countries; however, China has focused on developing defense cooperation and has actively employed military diplomacy. This can be observed in matters concerning military cooperation, training, visits to the ports among others, and sales of arms to countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar. It is widely regarded as a part of China's strategy to strengthen its stand and contain the US military endeavors in the region.

Military Buildup and Naval Rivalry

In the present era, the South China Sea area has emerged as an intense strategic region that exhibits China's and the United States' rivalry in the military domain. It also suggests that China has been employing modern naval ships, missiles, and other related military structures in the artificial land reclamation structures in the South China Sea. China has made such deployments to improve its capacity to counteract the entry into the South China Sea and outreach in the entire area. It turned into the circumstance for the intensive augmentation and operation of military capability and actions in the South China Sea by the United States. Some of the manifestations of the naval presence of the USA include navy ships, Aircraft patrols, friendly nations, members of APEC, and a strike force that entails aircraft carriers and submarines (Ahmed, 2023). In other words, the U. S. does not permit

any actions that would risk the freedom of navigation while simultaneously seeking to convey to its friends in the region that it will protect Security.

Therefore, naval rivalry cannot be seen only in the SCS but also other facets, based on the interests of the main counterparts of the Asia-Pacific countries, including Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. In the strategy for the IPR that also relates to the containment of China, the U.S. wishes to intensify these ententes and affiliations.

Regional Responses and Alignments

The Southeast Asia countries perceive the security threats in the South China Sea as existent without a single exception; however, they responded based on their interest, capacity, and relation with China and the United States of America. For example, Vietnam and the Philippines, which have had problems with China, have outright condemned China for the act and have actively increased defense cooperation with the U.S. and other regional actors outside of the Asia-Pacific region. For instance, Vietnam has endeavored to upgrade its defense relations not only with the U. S but with other nations; on the other hand, the Philippines, in different terms of government, has been interested and concerned over the aggression of China. Other non-claimants like Malaysia and Indonesia are mindful of the threats harped by China, the treatment of sororities, and the rule of law in the region (Klimenko, 2023) . These countries have advocated for 'peace for solutions to conflict' and in touching the UNCLOS United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Like any other regional organization, ASEAN has had and continues to be responsible for managing rivalry in the South China Sea. ASEAN-China discussions on the Code of Conduct aim to find out understandings over proper conduct in the sea so as not to have conflicts and to address accidental cases. However, the change has been gradual. Recent progress has shown that implementing changes in such circumstances is far from easy and is filled with

challenges, evidenced by the fact that the discussed reforms refer to somewhat highly controversial issues.

Maritime Security and Naval Competition in the South China Sea

The South China Sea is among the world's significant, vital, and disputed sea lanes, where significant global trade and shipping occur (Shaheen, 2024). China has established territorial claims to most of the sea through the nine-dash line while constructing artificial structures on many islands and reefs through dumps and concrete. Such actions have included establishing military-related facilities such as runways and ports, increasing China's prowess in power projection in the region. Hence, the South China Sea, which is reckoned as a crucial area of Southeast Asia's strategic concern, is one of the principal areas of Sino-U.S. competition, mainly in the area of maritime Security and naval force. This mainly covers what constitutes the Chinese-American rivalry in this strategic sea geographic area, the changes in the military dimension, and the role played by the region.

Security Challenges and Conflicts

Due to expansive assertions supported by militarization and force, China has created friction with other participants and the US, which advocates for the non-interference principle and legal examples (Yi, 2024). The other possible hotspot is the Taiwan Strait, a self-governing island state that is in confrontation with China and is on the receiving end of protection by the United States of America. The United States still does not recognize Taiwan officially, but at the same time, they observe the policy of strategic uncertainty and support Taiwan's military forces. China continues to lay claims to sovereignty over Taiwan and has, in recent years, upped its military muscle in the region, thus presenting a threat to stability in the area (Voloshina, 2023).

The Economic Interdependence in Sino-American Security Competition

The case of economic cooperation combined with security concerns is one of the most fundamental elements of the Sino-U.S. competition in the Indo-Pacific

Regions. Economic sanctions are utilized to attain tactical goals, and, the two powers presume that an economic twist implies grave security stakes.

The Economic Force is One of the Key Elements of Strategy

Economic relations with Indo-Pacific nations are a very important part of the general image of the further development of Chinese tactics. China under President Xi Jinping in his Belt Road Initiative (BRI) has embarked on infrastructure development within the region by financing ports, railways, and energy infrastructure (Malik, 2018) . These investments are not only meant to increase trade and connection but also to form nodes of influence and gain strategic assets under Chinese control. The United States General magazine of Power is a security alliance still it also has an economic power card as well. The FOIP strategy spearheaded by the United States focuses on promoting fair trade and adherence to international laws, thus differing from the view of China's model, which is more of short-term economic deals with the objective being more forceful. The United States also engages with the region through mechanisms like the U.S.-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Agreement and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which aim to strengthen economic ties and support regional stability (Lee, 2024).

The trade war between US-China

The existing contest between the US and China, which has been manifested in the trade war and the competition in the technological industry, has consequences for the Southeast Asian countries' important supply chains. The region is highly developed in manufacture and assembly, especially in volatile products such as electronics, textiles, automobiles, etc. As rivalry between both giants continues to heighten organizations are now contemplating how to diversify their supply chain to cut ties with China. Such a decoupling might increase investments in Southeast Asian countries – something that will have a positive and a negative aspect simultaneously (Steinbock, 2018) . On the one hand, the continuance of the

sources of foreign investment, such as Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and the shift of production facilities are possible in South-East Asia countries. At the same time, they have to address such challenges as the necessity to be on good terms with both China, which is one of the countries their economy is closely connected with, and the USA. One threat that is always looming is getting caught up in the middle of tariffs, sanctions, and every other economic weapon that is out there (Dilshad, Shah, & Ahmad, 2023).

Economic Interdependence and Security Concerns

Thus, economic interdependence between Chinese and Southeast Asian countries may also produce security risks. For instance, dependence on Chinese investment or technology brings in such issues as political influence or pressure. This is now especially important concerning critical sectors like telecommunication, in which China's Huawei and other companies are involved. The United States has expressed its security concern on espionage or cyber issues related to Chinese technology, persuading its allies and partners to refrain from using Chinese (Chiang et al., 2022).

Evolving Regional Governance Structures

In the Southeast Asia region, several regional governance institutions are comprised mainly of ASEAN. However, what is more and more challenging to the above structures is the Sino-U.S. competition. The two powers want to influence the rules, norms, and institutions in the region and the process of attaining their strategic objectives. China has been engaging with the region's integration and cooperation processes through institutions that do not necessarily include the United States, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). Such activities are a part of the massive plan to create a Sinocentric system in Asia where China becomes a dominant actor in the economic and political contexts (Zha, 2023). These competing visions and initiatives are shaping the region's governance architecture

circumstance both opportunities and prospects for Southeast Asian states. On one hand, they can give countries numerous options for cooperation and act as an effective tool for interaction. On the other hand, they form a more elaborate structure of expectations and pressure which sometimes contradict each other.

Diplomatic Alignments and Strategic Controls

Southeast Asian states' diplomacy and overall geopolitics are increasingly shaped and reasoned by the contrast of Sino-US relations. Strategic rival governments in the region are thus wording their relations with both powers in a way that will give them maximum gains while assuming minimal losses. That is why the management of relations with a partner is based on a balance between engagement and restraint that may imply both cooperation and competition and a deliberate lack of clarity (Shambaugh, 2018). For example, Singapore and Vietnam are loyal partners of the USA regarding security, but both actively participate in trade with China. There are other countries, for example, Cambodia and Laos, that are relatively closer to China, economically or for some political reasons. While the Philippines seems to be between the United States and China for quite some time, the relationship between the two depends on the administration in power. The rational thinking of these countries is based on factors such as geographical neighborhood, economic interdependencies, security, and internal political situations. Such issues as the territorial disputes over the SCS the location of which affects the strategic actions of the claimant states including Vietnam and the Philippines as well as the non-claimant states that are keen on the freedom of navigation and maintenance of stability in the region (Schulenburg, 2023).

ASEAN's Role

ASEAN is a key factor in defining the strategic orientation of the region as a whole and its evolution as a regional organization. These status characteristics mean ASEAN has a principle of 'centrality' concerning its members' relations with external actors and has an ethos of dialogue cooperation. However, the

organization's disadvantage is that it struggles to be united and coherent due to the conflicting interests of its member states concerning relations with China and the US. This chapter will discuss these strategic dynamics further and present examples of particular Sino-U states' stances on and policies for managing the relationship. S. competition. It will also discuss the general effects of these strategies on regional security and the changing security structure in Southeast Asia (Zhang, 2023).

ASEAN's Role in Navigating Sino-US Competition

As a regional organization, ASEAN is in a central position to mediate relations of Sino-U.S. concerning the SCS Strategic competition. Based on the concepts of non-intervention, consensus, and regionalism, ASEAN aims to preserve peace and development within the Southeast Asia region. However, the organization's cohesion and efficiency are often challenged by the different interests of the member states, especially by the impact of the other powerful states, such as China and the United States.

Centralities of ASEAN and other Related Regional Issues

The principle of centrality in the context of ASEAN means that the organization itself is at the center of managing certain aspects of security and economic cooperation in ASEAN. This centrality is evident when ASEAN responds to security issues through forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), which involve ASEAN and its major partners like China and the United States. These platforms allow ASEAN to interact diplomatically with the major powers while also easing tensions through negotiations (Kominfo, 2023). Nevertheless, the organization's performance in this role tends to be undermined by the tendency that the definitive mode of decision-making within this organization is based on consensus which may lead to either slow or even low observes during crises. Further, it implies that the ASEAN member states' reliance

on China and the United States varies in different degrees, thus making it difficult for the organization to speak as one voice on issues such as the SCS disputes and trade relations (Ali, et al. 2023).

Challenges to ASEAN Unity

On the one hand, ASEAN's member states are diverse on the other hand this diversity poses a significant challenge to the organization. On the one hand, it provides a diverse view of the relations with the external actors and several tools and concepts to apply to these relations; however, at the same time, it implies that the member states have different agendas and approaches to the regulation of the relations with the external partners. For instance, Cambodia and Laos are viewed as part of China's sphere of influence, while the Philippines and Singapore prefer to cozy up more to the United States (Kosandi, 2014) . Such differences may culminate in cleavages among the members of the ASEAN hence are unable to come up with a harmonized policy, or response to external forces. For instance, ASEAN's effort to assert a common stand on the SCS Issue has been somewhat blunted by disagreements among its members some of which are claimants to the territories while others are more interested in preserving their relations with China.

Strategies for Maintaining Relevance

Nevertheless, ASEAN remains relevant in the realm of diplomacy and up to date is a very significant factor in the region. Some of the ways that the organization ensures its relevance are through pushing for an open regional architecture, economic integration based on community blueprints such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and lastly through integration and engagement through partnership and Financial Trade Agreement (FTA). The relations between ASEAN and China as well as between ASEAN and the USA are cautious and conciliatory (Bing, 2024). The organization aims to involve China in the economic aspect of the global market but at the same time will remain allied to the US and

other partners like Japan, Australia, and India. This is basically, to keep ASEAN strategically independent and avoid the entrapment of the region to any specific extra-regional actor.

Implications for Regional Security

Security threats were another concern, especially regarding the Security of the South China region and naval competition. One can always speak about occasional cases of military confrontations or about the situation when some actions that have been taken can be readily interpreted as hostile by one or another party, taking into account the fact that the member states' armed forces are closely situated to one another and are experiencing high levels of activity within the region. The competition also determines Southeast Asia's strategic context concerning defense, equipment acquisition, and partnering. China and the United States are both enhancing their military forces and gaining prominence in directing military bloating in the Pacific area, so this may enhance the race in the region to strengthen the defense mechanism to safeguard their respective interests.

Long-Term Effect on the Regional System

There are significant long-term consequences of Sino-U.S. competitors to challenge the regional order are multifaceted and about which there is significant uncertainty. The several scenarios include the return to a bipolar system that divides the area based on loyalty to either China or the United States. The division could, in such a circumstance, lead to considerable tensions and instability if it assumes a militarized strategic competition form. There is also the likelihood of converging to a multipolar system, where different powers like ASEAN, Japan, India, and more participate in projecting the world's future. Thus, the countries of South East Asia would have more independence and manageability of foreign policy, to solve problems connected with dependence between China and the USA more effectively (Cook, 2014) . For this, Japan, Australia and so out demand significant attention in determining the regional structure. They often behave as

'balancers' who balance with both China and the United States and work towards the region's stability and rules-based order.

Conclusion

Southeast Asia has emerged as a vital arena for brilliant power competition, especially between the United States and China. Both countries have personalized their financial and safety strategies in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics, pushed by a complicated interplay of local alliances, military posturing, and monetary initiatives. China's pastimes inside the Indo-Pacific are more often than not focused on securing its territorial claims, improving its monetary effect through projects like the BRI (BRI), and countering US-led coalitions that threaten its local aspirations. The Chinese government perceives the USA Indo-Pacific Strategy as an attempt to comprise its upward push and disrupt its effect inside the area. Consequently, China has sought to strengthen its military talents, enlarge its monetary partnerships, and leverage its position as a primary trading partner to steer local nations. ASEAN has a chance to shape these processes by being a consensus-seeking organization that strictly follows neutrality, multilateralism, and regional integration principles. ASEAN has substantial potential and opportunities to become an influential organization, it also has essential obstacles and risks that may hinder cooperation and can become a pressuring factor from both China and the US. ASEAN needs to consolidate its institutional frameworks, build economic security, and apply ASEAN principles to sensitive issues such as geopolitical conflicts and economic inequalities. Thus, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of ASEAN in minimizing the threats of the Sino-American competition to the advantages of ASEAN will only depend on the potential of ASEAN organizations to act assertively and cohesively.

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