

# Introduction: Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China

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*Southeast Asian states face numerous security challenges that require the assistance of external partners. China and India, two Indo-Pacific powerhouses, could offer potential solutions but their relations with Southeast Asian states vary considerably. At the same time, escalating tensions between China and India increase the risks of their engagement with Southeast Asian states leading to greater polarization in the region. By utilizing the “4-C Calculus”, which comprises cost, complexity, credibility and capacity, this special issue seeks to understand how Southeast Asian states evaluate China and India as potential security cooperation partners, and whether cooperation with both—together or individually—can help address the region’s security needs. The articles in this special issue employ the 4-C framework to analyse five key security concerns: defence modernization; health security; the post-coup crisis in Myanmar; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief;*

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*and maritime security. They contribute to the literature on security partnerships by providing fresh insights into our understanding of why and how smaller states partner with larger powers over shared security challenges, as well as by illustrating how certain policy considerations can influence the direction and quality of security partnerships.*

**Keywords:** security cooperation, Southeast Asian security, China-India relations, Southeast Asia-China relations, Southeast Asia-India relations.

Can Southeast Asian states address their security needs by cooperating with China and India? How should they evaluate such cooperation? Could China and India put aside their geopolitical rivalry and work together, or would Southeast Asian states need to engage with them individually? These are the questions which are addressed in this special issue of *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. To do so, we begin by introducing an analytical framework that underpins the calculus Southeast Asian states often use when assessing potential security partners, including China and India. We focus on how they think about four key elements: cost, complexity, credibility and capacity. We developed this “4-C Calculus” framework from the wider literature on security cooperation and defence diplomacy that has multiplied over the past two decades.

Second, we invited regional scholars to examine five major security issues that Southeast Asia has had to grapple with in recent years: health and pandemic security; the post-coup crisis in Myanmar; defence industrial development; maritime security; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) governance. The six authors we gathered are experts from and working on Southeast Asia, China and India. We started with the premise of evaluating Southeast Asia’s security needs, rather than those of China and India. These five security problems cut across traditional and non-traditional security domains and are considered long-term challenges for the region as a whole, not just individual Southeast Asian states.<sup>1</sup> They are also “strategic” in that they are part of the broader concerns and responsibilities of not only the armed forces but also a range of other domestic actors, from ministries of foreign affairs and health to state-owned enterprises and coastguards.

The security problems we address are those for which China and India—individually or together—could offer potential solutions. The two Indo-Pacific powerhouses would certainly make for potentially constructive security partners, especially as Southeast Asian states are now considering different partnerships as geopolitical

competition among the major powers escalates. Although China is widely perceived as a crucial, if not the primary, economic partner of Southeast Asian states, its security role is seldom understood. Studies on China's defence diplomacy are few and far between, and those that have been produced tend to focus on military cooperative activities, such as education exchanges, joint exercises and arms sales.<sup>2</sup> We know surprisingly little, however, about China's security partnership potential more broadly. The same can also be said for India's security cooperation with Southeast Asia; it has strong potential but, after two decades of engagement, has so far been found lacking in strategic impact.<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, China and India could also work together to help address some of Southeast Asia's security needs. But considering that China-India relations are deteriorating, it remains unclear whether by engaging both together, rather than individually, Southeast Asian states would foster improved cooperation or engender greater polarization in the region.

This introduction is divided into several sections. We begin by explaining the 4-C Calculus framework that we have developed from the existing literature on international security. This framework poses a set of questions that states must evaluate when considering potential security partnerships. However, as we shall see, the authors of the five articles in this special issue have modified and appropriated each of the 4-C elements into their respective empirical contexts. The second section describes problems of policy surrounding the five security themes. We briefly summarize the authors' key arguments based on how they apply our framework to their analysis. Finally, we end with a broad set of conceptual and policy implications that arose in this special issue.

### **Security Partnerships: The 4-C Calculus Framework**

The study of international security cooperation has been a central feature of the field of International Relations (IR) for decades. However, the current literature has been developed around paradigmatic debates over cooperation using neoliberal institutionalist theories, while it tends to focus on security dilemmas between rivals or during crises.<sup>4</sup> Recent policy work on security cooperation, particularly those drawn from the examples of the United Kingdom and the United States, focuses on whether (and how) defence diplomacy and engagement can influence favourable outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Only recently have scholars revisited the lack of a rigorous conceptual foundation for "international cooperation".<sup>6</sup> Perhaps because it is less puzzling

to scholars, relatively little has been written about the conceptual underpinnings of security cooperation between non-rival states. A study of when and how such states think about entering into cooperative relationships with partners could yield interesting insights for theory and policy. In particular, how weaker states seek to address shared security challenges with more powerful states could provide a deeper understanding of regional relations and whether security concerns can be addressed effectively.

We define security cooperation as the explicit coordination of policies, including, but not exclusively, joint action over security-related problems involving the key security actors of two or more states. In short, security cooperation takes place when states try to improve their own security through joint initiatives.<sup>7</sup> To be clear, scholars of Asian security have studied the way regional states develop and implement security cooperation concepts—collective, comprehensive, common and cooperative—as well as notions of a security community.<sup>8</sup> But these concepts tend to focus on multilateral approaches to regional security rather than on how policymakers think about security partnerships and cooperation. Furthermore, these concepts are often examined and interpreted as activities to enhance international legitimacy,<sup>9</sup> not as practical policy guides to address a set of shared security problems with potential partners. None of those concepts clearly specify how smaller states formulate, think about and implement security cooperation with larger partners.

We focus on how states think about engagement when considering potential partners. In many ways, this line of inquiry fits within the existing literature on international security cooperation which seeks to explain why and how states develop interests and perceptions that permit them to enter security cooperation.<sup>10</sup> We begin with the premise that security cooperation involves a spectrum of factors, from simple communication between officials, at one end, to highly integrated joint commands with interchangeable assets, at the other end.<sup>11</sup> Much of the security cooperation involving Southeast Asian states and their partners takes place in the middle of this spectrum. The form of their preferred security cooperation is a “strategic partnership”, which is a structured collaboration that responds to security challenges.<sup>12</sup> These goal-driven relationships also tend to be informal in nature and entail low-commitment costs, so they fit within the comfort zone of how many Southeast Asian states want to engage with security problems, especially when it comes to involving larger regional powers such as China and India. Perhaps, this is why East Asia’s security cooperation landscape has been

fragmented and weakly institutionalized, consisting of overlapping formal and informal forums.<sup>13</sup>

However, just because most Southeast Asian states “hedge” between larger powers, where they seek autonomy by signalling ambiguity, that does not mean they lack a strategic calculus when thinking about addressing their security problems with potential partners.<sup>14</sup> We offer four policy concepts that middle and smaller states, such as those found in Southeast Asia, consider when weighing up security cooperation platforms and partners: cost, complexity, capacity and credibility. This 4-C Calculus framework poses specific questions as to whether certain partnerships under certain arrangements can effectively and efficiently address shared security problems.<sup>15</sup> In other words, states seek an overall “strategic fit” when choosing security partners.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing in this conceptual framework suggests that states must engage in a particular sequential analysis of the different elements or that considerations of these elements must be coherent. There is likely to be a significant degree of overlap between the different elements when policymakers consider their security partnership options. As we shall see throughout the special issue, different analysts modify how the four concepts could best be used to examine specific cases. Our framework is neither conceptually rigid nor limiting in its application.

### *Cost Calculus*

When weighing security cooperation costs, states ideally adopt a portfolio approach. How many resources—financial, diplomatic and political—should they expend on which partnership to obtain which benefits? This should be straightforward as far as financial commitments are concerned, while non-financial costs are often more complicated. This is particularly the case when the selection of one partner could exclude others (the “autonomy cost”). Although this is more difficult to assess than the “sovereignty cost”, where certain arrangements, such as hosting foreign military bases in exchange for security guarantees, reduces the sovereignty of one party. Such costs are often more readily identifiable prior to the formation of a security partnership.

On the one hand, for states with limited resources, a diversity of partners is often an important indicator of their strategic autonomy. On the other hand, the greater the number of security partners, the more likely it is that there will be language problems, misunderstandings

and disagreements.<sup>17</sup> Yet, an undiversified security partner portfolio is considered riskier than a diversified one because of the danger of creating a dependency on one or more partners.<sup>18</sup> States that “hedge” are most likely to prefer partner diversity.<sup>19</sup> Given that the solution to a security problem is, by nature, probabilistic, states engaging in security cooperation have an interest in increasing their number of partners while maximizing the quality of security they can acquire from each.<sup>20</sup>

Two sets of portfolios are relevant here. The first revolves around different forms of security cooperation, while the second comprises the different security cooperation partners. There are numerous forms of security cooperation through which Southeast Asian states can engage China and India, including combined military exercises, high-level dialogues and education and training exchanges, as well as capacity building programmes.<sup>21</sup> Each form brings its own set of costs. The second set of portfolios is often referred to as “strategic diversification”, in which regional states increase the number of extra-regional powers that have a stake in that region.<sup>22</sup> Attempts to limit diversification are perceived as reducing a state’s strategic options and undermining its strategic autonomy, and this is particularly the case for medium and smaller states that seek out different major powers as alternative partners.<sup>23</sup>

### *Complexity Calculus*

Aside from the cost calculus, Southeast Asian states should also consider that security partnerships with regional powers such as China and India do not occur in a vacuum. The prospects of a future security partnership often depend on pre-existing conditions and relationships. For example, how often both sides’ armed forces engage in combined exercises can explain whether joint defence industrial collaboration is a realistic prospect. In theory, the more institutionalized and complex a security partnership is—even without a rigid formal alliance—the higher the cost but the more effective it could become.

Questions of partnership complexity are more likely to emerge as states weigh up the different forms of security cooperation. What is crucial, however, is not the specific form that security cooperation takes but the level of complexity it entails for the smaller state. The more complex the partnership—involving the deployment of more specific and expensive security resources—the greater the fear of dependency and abandonment grows over time.

### *Capacity Calculus*

Security policymakers ought to ask themselves key questions when considering a security partnership with a larger regional power: Does the partner have the capacity to deliver effectively on its security commitments, and how sustainable is the partnership, especially if the capacity to deliver might become inconsistent over time? Indeed, whether the potential partner can be expected to deliver will often determine the cost and complexity calculus.

The challenge here is twofold. First, can the capabilities of a partner in one security area (such as HADR) easily translate into another (advanced weaponry, for instance), or will choosing a partner for its specific security provision mean foregoing engagement in other areas? Second, can the capacity of a partner be accurately assessed ahead of time? Moreover, who should make these assessments? These are questions that Southeast Asian security policymakers often confront when dealing with shared security challenges.

### *Credibility Calculus*

The reputation of the partner must also be considered.<sup>24</sup> Has the potential partner delivered on its security commitments in the past? Has it delivered in other, non-security areas of cooperation? There is an assumption that states ought to prefer working with a partner that has a solid reputation for reliably delivering on its security promises. After all, perceived reliability—the *ex-ante* expectation of the likelihood that a security partner will fulfil its commitments<sup>25</sup>—is at the heart of the credibility calculus. However, policymakers must also consider the credibility of the security arrangement or product itself. Even if the potential partner can reliably deliver a security provision, is that provision reputable and can it address the problem? For example, a country might be able to reliably deliver vaccines during a health security crisis, but the effectiveness of the vaccines themselves must also be assessed.

Taken together, these four elements—cost, complexity, capacity and credibility—provide us with conceptual signposts for assessing how Southeast Asian policymakers think about the promises and pitfalls of engaging with major powers such as China and India in addressing their security problems. These concepts are by no means exhaustive or ever-present, and they are analytical starting points rather than definitive benchmarks.

## **Southeast Asian Security Problems: Can China and India Provide Answers?**

We asked the invited authors to examine five key security issues that Southeast Asian states need to address and, regarding each, how India and China could potentially help. This section will briefly summarize the key arguments made by the authors in their respective articles.

### *Defence Modernization and Industrial Collaboration*

Southeast Asian states confront a number of traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including maritime and territorial disputes, natural disasters, great power competition, terrorism and illegal trafficking. Perhaps it is not entirely surprising that countries in the region are spending more on their militaries to deal with these threats. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Southeast Asia's military spending grew by 33 per cent between 2009 and 2018.<sup>26</sup> As part of this defence modernization drive, several regional states—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines—are also developing “rudimentary” domestic defence industrial bases.<sup>27</sup> Yet, Southeast Asian states still need international partnerships to accomplish their long-term military modernization plans.

Southeast Asian states generally prefer to diversify their foreign military suppliers because of concerns over the financial costs and possible implications for their autonomy, as well as “to spread the risk of negative relations with supplier states”.<sup>28</sup> Theoretically, because of their large domestic defence industries, China and India could assist Southeast Asia's military modernization programmes. The Chinese arms industry is highly developed and capable of manufacturing “all categories of major arms, including almost all key components”.<sup>29</sup> India is relatively successful at manufacturing foreign-licensed arms and equipment that include a large percentage of local content, even if, by volume, more than 80 per cent of its arms are still imported.<sup>30</sup>

But can India and China deliver on the defence industrial front? There are numerous challenges.<sup>31</sup> India has historically been limited to providing spare parts to countries—including Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia—that use Russian-made equipment. More recently, however, interest has grown for Indian-produced arms because of improvements in its manufacturing capabilities and India's comparatively benign image in the region.<sup>32</sup> China's core



advanced technology also remains dependent on Western imports. This poses a challenge because of Beijing's deteriorating relations with the West. In 2017, for example, China signed a US\$400 million agreement to build a new submarine for Thailand, but this deal looked to have been sunk after Germany later refused to sell the necessary engines to China.<sup>33</sup> Southeast Asian security policymakers are also increasingly distrustful of China because of ongoing maritime disputes and Beijing's coercive statecraft.

Curie Maharani's article provides a systematic assessment of the challenges and promises of defence industrial collaboration with China and India, especially in light of Russia's declining standing as a reliable arms supplier because of the Russia-Ukraine War.<sup>34</sup> She analyses the patterns of weapon diversification across seven Southeast Asian nations and evaluates the cost, complexity, capability and credibility of India and China as arms suppliers. In particular, she examines arms maintenance, emerging technology and Russian-origin conventional arms. She concludes that India has the potential to be a partner for maintenance while China could be a partner for emerging technology and major conventional arms (although not those that still depend on critical foreign technology). Her findings highlight how India and China could occupy areas of defence industrial collaboration that the other cannot. At this point, it seems that there is little to no prospect of China and India working together with Southeast Asian states in these areas.

### *Pandemic and Health Security*

As well as the major disruptions it caused, the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the necessity of cooperative mechanisms to respond to major regional health security crises. Given that they are global pharmaceutical producers, China and India could become key partners for Southeast Asia in this area. Chinese manufacturers produce around 40 per cent of all active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) used worldwide.<sup>35</sup> This gave China an advantage during the global race to develop COVID-19 vaccines because its domestic pharmaceutical companies did not have to depend on imports.<sup>36</sup> By late 2022, it was estimated that China could domestically produce 5 billion COVID-19 vaccines per year.<sup>37</sup> India is the world's third-largest producer of medicines (by volume) and accounts for 20 per cent of generic drugs sold globally.<sup>38</sup> It is also home to the Serum Institute of India, the world's largest vaccine producer.

China and India provided assistance to Southeast Asian states during the COVID-19 pandemic. While other countries, including the United States, were prioritizing their own domestic needs, China was the first country to send vaccines, as well as medical equipment and personnel, to the region.<sup>39</sup> By the time the first batch of US-made vaccines arrived in Southeast Asia, more than 7 million doses of Chinese vaccines had already been delivered.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, India provided vaccines to Southeast Asia through COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), a global mechanism aimed at distributing vaccines to lower- and middle-income countries.

However, China and India have since lost some of the goodwill they had earned in the early stages of the pandemic. Chinese vaccines were found to have low efficacy and several Southeast Asian countries stopped using them once more effective alternatives became available. At the same time as the pandemic was spreading through the region, China also escalated tensions with Indonesia and the Philippines over disputed maritime claims. China's insistence on pursuing a "zero-COVID" policy led to manufacturing and supply bottlenecks, underscoring the need for Southeast Asian states to diversify their critical supply chains away from China.<sup>41</sup> In India's case, it failed to establish itself as a reliable source of vaccines, especially after it was forced to halt all vaccine exports as domestic infection rates spiked between April and November 2021.

Ian Chen's article investigates the decision-making processes of Singapore, Cambodia and Myanmar when choosing vaccine partnerships during the pandemic. He argues that several factors—the capacity of and cost to national governments in controlling the pandemic, as well as the credibility of the vaccines and geopolitical relationships with potential partners—led to different qualities of partnership. Singapore did not rely on China or India for its vaccines, but its acceptance of some support from China was a diplomatic move to maintain a balanced stance amid the strategic rivalry between China and the United States. Cambodia and Myanmar required partnerships with China or India due to their relative inability to manage the crisis independently, as well as their inability to procure top-tier, Western-produced vaccines. The comparison of these three Southeast Asian states demonstrates how the selection of security partners depends on a specific calculus of the cost, credibility and capacity of the partners and their products. These considerations are also intertwined with domestic and geopolitical dynamics.

*The Post-Coup Crisis in Myanmar*

Since the February 2021 coup, Myanmar has been plunged into an ever-worsening conflict. Armed pro-democracy resistance groups, supported by the ousted civilian government, have battled against the military junta, raising the severity of the ongoing civil war. ASEAN's attempts to end the bloodshed have been unsuccessful. Its Five-Point Consensus (5PC), issued in April 2021, has failed to engender any significant improvement and violence continues to escalate; the junta is executing democracy activists and carrying out airstrikes against civilian villages suspected of supporting pro-democracy insurgents.<sup>42</sup>

Despite ASEAN's traditional opposition to the involvement of any extra-regional power in the domestic affairs of its members, China and India, as neighbouring states of Myanmar, could potentially help. Both have deep cultural, political and economic ties in the country, as well as an interest in the return of peace and stability. China views Myanmar as an alternative route for oil shipments—by passing through the Bay of Bengal, it avoids the longer route via the Malacca Straits.<sup>43</sup> China is Myanmar's largest trade partner and the largest provider of military hardware, accounting for half of the country's major arms imports between 2014 and 2019.<sup>44</sup> India, meanwhile, views Myanmar as a "land-bridge" through which it can foster better economic ties with other Southeast Asian countries.<sup>45</sup> It has undertaken major connectivity projects in collaboration with the Myanmar government, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, while the cooperation of the Myanmar military has been vital to the Indian army's destruction of Northeast Indian insurgent camps located in the borderlands.<sup>46</sup> India is also one of Myanmar's major trade partners and a leading investor in its energy sector.<sup>47</sup>

However, China and India's strategic interests in Myanmar have become double-edged swords for ASEAN. While both powers want to see the return of peace to the country, it is also in their interests to maintain cordial ties with the military junta. According to some commentators, China has conferred legitimacy on the junta by publicly meeting with its officials and by Beijing pledging support for the military regime "no matter how the situation changes".<sup>48</sup> Similarly, India has sent representatives to public events hosted by the Myanmar military and has adopted a "business-as-usual approach to cross-border relations".<sup>49</sup> Both countries abstained from a United Nations Security Council resolution in December 2022

that condemned the military coup. More worryingly, they have continued to sell arms to the junta.<sup>50</sup>

The article by Monalisa Adhikari links the implementation of ASEAN's 5PC to Indian and Chinese engagement via a framework of "strategic resourcing". It argues that ASEAN could take advantage of Indian and Chinese borderlands to establish humanitarian corridors to deliver aid into Myanmar, and use their economic, political and normative leverage over different constituencies in the country to bring a swift end to the violence and to foster dialogue. Using the 4-C Calculus, her article evaluates the prospects and limitations of that process and considers the institutional mechanisms that ASEAN could wield to cooperate with India and China over the Myanmar crisis. The article highlights the value of having India and China engaged in the same cooperative partnership, even if it is mediated by ASEAN-led mechanisms. Each side can bring unique strengths to the table, and these could be amplified if they were to work together with ASEAN. The conceptual development of strategic resourcing as a basis to which the 4-C Calculus framework can be applied also offers important analytical and policy insights.

#### *Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief*

Southeast Asia is particularly prone to extreme weather events. Between 2015 and 2019, more than 32 million people in the region were displaced by weather-related natural disasters.<sup>51</sup> Flooding is a particular concern given that 77 per cent of the region's 2.6 billion inhabitants live in coastal areas.<sup>52</sup> ASEAN has developed various mechanisms and institutions over the past two decades to improve its ability in providing and coordinating climate-related HADR. That includes the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), the Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA) and the ASEAN-Emergency Response and Assessment Team. However, because of limited resources and capacity, ASEAN still needs the assistance of external partners such as China and India.

Since the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, China has been improving its disaster response capabilities. For example, it established a 50,000 strong emergency response unit that can be deployed overseas and created a special ministry to coordinate relief efforts during domestic and international crises.<sup>53</sup> India has also demonstrated an ability

to conduct overseas disaster relief operations, having dispatched response teams to Myanmar following Cyclone Nargis in 2008, to Nepal after an earthquake in 2015 and to Bangladesh following Cyclone Mora two years later. ASEAN has established several bilateral workshops and initiatives to enhance disaster cooperation with China, such as the Nanning Initiative on China-ASEAN Cooperation in Meteorology. As part of a memorandum of understanding on disaster management signed in 2014, China pledged US\$8 million towards the implementation of the AADMER Work Programme.<sup>54</sup> India's engagement with Southeast Asia on disaster relief operates through the framework of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), of which some Southeast Asian states are members.

Yet, many Southeast Asian countries remain distrustful of China. Accepting Chinese HADR assistance, which often involves the participation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is a politically sensitive issue for several countries in the region. Indeed, China was forced to limit its use of military assets when delivering aid to the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 and to Indonesia following earthquakes in late 2018.<sup>55</sup> While Southeast Asian states are more politically receptive to India's HADR diplomacy, its ability to deliver in a timely manner is limited. According to some commentators, India's priority remains South Asia and the Indian Ocean, so it remains in doubt how much assistance it would be willing and able to provide to Southeast Asia during a crisis.

Through the conceptual lens of "status-seeking", the article by Lina Gong and Dhanasree Jayaram takes a detailed look at China and India's HADR diplomacy with Southeast Asia. Through such diplomacy, they argue, China has sought to elevate its status as a regional security partner, but this has only been partially accepted by Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, India has gone from a low-key to an important security partner. The authors also use the 4-C Calculus to assess how Southeast Asian states have come to "accept" the status-seeking behaviours of China and India. The article presents yet another example of how China and India can play different though complimentary roles yet will continue to engage with Southeast Asia individually. Its conceptual engagement with the literature on status-seeking further demonstrates the analytical flexibility of the 4-C Calculus framework.

*Maritime Security*

With many Southeast Asian states strategically located at the crossroads between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, they have come to depend heavily on the maritime sector for trade and economic development. But Southeast Asia's maritime security landscape faces a host of threats—piracy and armed robbery, maritime terrorism and drug and human trafficking, as well as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Interstate disputes, particularly with China in the South China Sea, have resulted in several Southeast Asian governments strengthening their security presence in the contested waters, which in turn has resulted in periodical acts of violence involving fishing vessels and coast guard units while also increasing the likelihood that tensions could escalate into a larger conflict.

China and India also depend heavily on seaborne trade through the region, so they have an interest in keeping these sea lanes open and secure. They already engage in maritime security cooperation through several ASEAN-led frameworks, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). China's maritime security interests are also driven by a desire to project itself as a responsible great power that is seen "as a positive contributor to regional maritime commons".<sup>56</sup> Notwithstanding the South China Sea disputes, China has concluded agreements with ASEAN aimed at enhancing maritime security cooperation.<sup>57</sup> India also engages in maritime cooperation with various Southeast Asian states through India-led platforms, including the Milan naval exercises, as well as IONS and IORA. On a bilateral basis, India conducts regular coordinated patrols with Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

However, distrust of Beijing remains high within Southeast Asia, driven largely by China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea. According to some, maritime cooperation initiatives could open the door for China to sustain, if not increase, its presence in these regional waters while also allowing Beijing to exert a greater influence within regional institutions.<sup>58</sup> India's maritime presence is welcomed by some Southeast Asian states as a potential "secondary balancer" to China.<sup>59</sup> However, they are cautious about engaging India too much in case they draw China's ire. For example, India's offer to join the Eyes in the Sky initiative—which allows aircraft from participating countries to patrol the Malacca Strait—was not accepted over concerns that India's entry would encourage China

to make the same request.<sup>60</sup> As such, tensions between India and China pose significant challenges to how Southeast Asian states try to boost cooperation with each of them.

The article by Yogesh Joshi explores the current and future dynamics of Southeast Asia's maritime cooperation with China and India. He argues that the region's maritime security needs define how they perceive partnerships with the two regional powers. Given China's geographical centrality, its strong economic influence and the proximity of its military power, Southeast Asia will remain far more invested in maritime security cooperation with China, he argues. However, China's engagement strategy has resulted in non-traditional maritime security cooperation taking precedence. At the same time, growing polarization within the region—because of the strategic competition between the United States and China—provides New Delhi with more opportunities to engage with at least a few Southeast Asian countries over maritime security issues. Joshi concludes that the choice of security partner does not only depend upon the interests of individual Southeast Asian states but also on how they calculate the credibility and capacity of the partner, the complexity of such partnerships and the associated costs.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Overall, the prospect seems greater for a "Plus-1" mechanism, in which ASEAN or individual Southeast Asian states work with either India or China separately to meet some of their security needs. A "Plus-2" mechanism, in which they cooperate with China and India together, has some potential for resolving the Myanmar crisis. However, increasing great power polarization and deteriorating China-India relations make it a remote prospect. The overarching theme of this special issue is that India and China appear only to be able to provide limited or niche security provisions across a range of problems facing Southeast Asia. In part, that is because of India's limited capacity and China's geopolitical behaviour. But the framework we offer also points to a deeper set of problems.

We do not purport to offer an entirely novel analytical policy framework. However, given the surprisingly under-developed literature on security partnerships that are not alliances and on crisis cooperation between non-rivals, our 4-C Calculus could be a useful analytical starting point to assess why and how smaller states partner with larger powers over shared security challenges. In this regard, we hope to have contributed to the nascent research

on Southeast Asian defence diplomacy and the region's security relationships with China and India. Interestingly, most analyses also tend to focus on Southeast Asia's relationship with either China or India, rather than a comparison of the two regional powers or their potential to act together to address Southeast Asian security concerns. Our authors' focus on five key security problems, paired with several conceptual innovations, are also important contributions to the literature.

However, this special issue is more than just an academic exercise. It offers important policy insights as to why Southeast Asian states continue to need external partners in managing their security problems. Given the promises and perils of deeper cooperation with major powers, we also see that complex policy considerations shape the direction and quality of those partnerships. China and India need to be aware of their standing in Southeast Asia, and this is where the 4-C Calculus framework could be of some use to their policymakers, too. Southeast Asian states do not want to be caught up in great power polarization, whether it is US-China or China-India competition. But they are likely to welcome targeted, even if limited, contributions from India and China in areas where they feel they can still assert autonomy and control. After all, partner diversity is central to Southeast Asia's hedging.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The distinction between "traditional" and "non-traditional" security problems is something of a conceptual misnomer. What many in the West may see as "non-traditional" security issues, such as disaster relief, internal conflict or health security, are often perceived as "traditional" by Southeast Asian countries, which also see high-end kinetic warfare as somewhat "non-traditional" in their historical experience. We merely wish to point out the diversity of the five security problems selected in this issue.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, B.S. Sachar, "Military Diplomacy through Arms Transfers: A Case Study of China", *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 2 (2004): 290–310; Ian Storey, "China's Bilateral Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia", *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012): 287–310; Kenneth W. Allen, John Chen and Phillip Charles



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