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Introduction: Domestic Determinants of Southeast Asia's Relations with the United States and China

CHIN-HAO HUANG AND SELINA HO

The strategic competition between the United States and China is often seen as a rivalry confined to the two great powers alone, in which secondary states such as those in Southeast Asia have little influence and will inevitably end up "choosing sides". However, this assumption overlooks how the domestic politics of Southeast Asian states shape their foreign policies. Furthermore, if the United States or China is to attain a leadership role and legitimacy in the region, it requires the validation, support, and deference of smaller states, none of which can be achieved without consideration of domestic politics. Thus, this Special Issue—including case studies of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, Thailand and the Philippines—underscores the domestic determinants of the foreign policy of Southeast Asian

Chin-Hao Huang is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Head of Studies for Global Affairs at Yale-NUS College, National University of Singapore. Postal address: 28 College Avenue West, #01-501, Singapore 138533; email: ynchch@nus.edu.sg.

Selina Ho is Assistant Professor in International Affairs and Co-Director of the Centre on Asia and Globalization at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. Postal address: 469A Bukit Timah Road, Tower Block, #10-01H, Singapore 259770; email: selina.ho@nus.edu.sg.

states, identifying how their concerns about economic security, political legitimacy and regional stability mediate their engagement with the United States and China.

Keywords: balance-of-power politics, US-China-Southeast Asia relations, strategic diversification, domestic politics.

Southeast Asia is at a crossroads between two superpowers—the United States and China—and their intensifying strategic competition. According to the conventional narrative, Southeast Asian states possess a relatively limited and constrained set of options available to respond, especially as China's military and economic influence surges in the region.[1] This Special Issue questions that assumption. Each of the six country case studies reveals that the region's foreign policy statecraft is far broader and more complex than is often assumed.

Southeast Asian states take a long-term perspective.[2] Instead of fearing or resisting China's economic and geopolitical rise since the 2000s, they have mostly seen it as strategically beneficial for themselves. Indeed, it has not only helped them financially but also compelled China to bilaterally and multilaterally engage in the region, including through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), thus incentivizing Beijing to adopt peaceful, norms-based behaviour and re-evaluate its own approach to potential regional conflicts. Moreover, an active China allows Southeast Asian states to pursue economic and geopolitical diversification, preventing them from becoming overly reliant on the United States. At the same time, it provides a strategic rationale for Southeast Asian states wanting the United States to maintain a commitment to the region, assuaging their concerns about Washington potentially abandoning them.

Thus, Southeast Asian states have not simply chosen sides, even if the uncertainties—from China's growing economic and military capabilities to suspicions about Washington's long-term commitment to the region—are of considerable significance to regional stability.[3] Rather than choosing the United States over China (or vice-versa), they have pursued policies that minimize their sense of vulnerability.[4] This is often referred to as "hedging". According to Evelyn Goh, it is "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding—or planning for contingencies in—a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing,

bandwagoning or neutrality. Instead, they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another."[5] Small states can broaden, expand and diversify their economic and strategic dependencies by seeking pragmatic ties across security and economic domains with as many powers as possible.[6] Doing so gives the external powers a stake in a stable regional order. Moreover, in pursuit of greater inclusivity, Southeast Asian states try to minimize the chances of suboptimal outcomes, such as an increasingly coercive China, a disengaged United States and an unstable regional order.[7]

However, the domestic factors influencing Southeast Asia's foreign policy outcomes are vastly underemphasized in the existing literature. Observers tend to assess the changing balance of power in the region solely through the lens of US-China rivalry and great power prerogatives. But this overlooks many important factors that influence a Southeast Asian government's foreign policy. For instance, how do historical legacies and cultural differences with either superpower affect Southeast Asian decision-making? What role do regime legitimacy and political fragmentation play in domestic politics? By examining how foreign policy is, to some extent, shaped at the domestic and national level, the rationale for Southeast Asia in adopting strategic diversification externally becomes much clearer and more nuanced. More importantly, uncovering how domestic factors vary across time and space further enables us to map the changes and continuities in Southeast Asian states' policies towards great powers. Interestingly, while Southeast Asian states' policies may evolve over time, the rationale behind these decisions has been remarkably consistent, driven by the imperatives of political survival and regime legitimacy.

Unfortunately, such a crucial role that small states play has often been relegated to immateriality in the field of International Relations. For instance, according to Kenneth Waltz, "It would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be to construct an economic theory … based on the minor firms. The fates of all states are affected much more by the acts and the interactions of the major ones than of the minor ones."[8] But it is not always the case, as the adage claims, that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must". After all, a major power's authority cannot be realized through force alone. Coercion as a

means of demonstrating strength might be convenient and expedient, but it is also costly to maintain over time and often undercuts a state's ability to wield actual influence.[9] A more enduring form of leadership and influence derives from the validation and acceptance by others, a critical aspect of relational power which is much more difficult to attain than material strength. Indeed, when smaller states confer upon a larger state the recognition of regional or global leadership, it comes with the expectation of providing order and upholding (or at least not violating) the existing norms of regional security.[10] In short, small states possess an influence with which large, powerful states must contend.[11] Southeast Asian states can provide and confer the legitimacy the United States and China desire. According to Alice Ba,

> Ultimately, major powers cannot simply decide to lead; others must also be persuaded to follow. What this suggests is that leadership is not just a material relationship but also a socially negotiated one—one that, moreover, requires a minimum of attentiveness to the concerns and sensitivities of other states.[12]

Large, powerful states also rely on "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions".[13] Given that self-legitimation is an oxymoron, it stands to reason that whether the United States' or China's behaviour is deemed desirable depends largely on affirmation by Southeast Asian governments, which requires an exploration of how domestic politics within the region's states inform that affirmation.

Beyond Balancing

This Special Issue was borne out of a conference held in Singapore in the spring of 2023. With the 2024 US presidential elections in mind, one of the reasons for convening this workshop was the need to better inform US policy elites about why Southeast Asia matters to US foreign policy and how the region views the United States' role in Southeast Asia. As the US-China strategic competition intensifies, it becomes increasingly important to understand how Southeast Asian states think accurately. Indeed, it is often easy to misread them if one only looks through the perspective of Washington or Beijing. To ensure that the thoughts and voices

of Southeast Asians are accurately represented, the conference participants cum authors of these articles are senior and emerging Southeast Asian scholars. The guest editors of this Special Issue are also from the region.

The analysis in each country case study in this Special Issue affirms two key observations: Southeast Asian states are not engaging in all-out deterrence or hard military balancing in response to China's rise—the region is not embracing China's rise without any qualms, but it is engaging in strategic diversification while keeping all channels of communication open[14]—and the increasing reliance on military capabilities by the United States and China to assert their authority in the region is not conducive for regional security and stability. In fact, the jostling for regional influence between the United States and China is exacerbating tensions and disrupting the regional order.

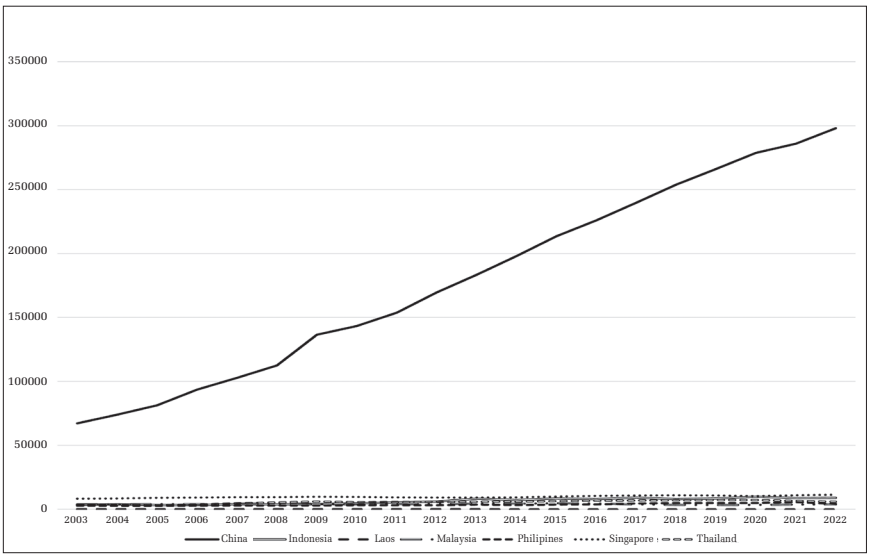
Amid ever-growing concerns about a new arms race in Asia, coupled with a more robust US military re-balancing towards the Indo-Pacific, many observers see the region as ripe for superpower rivalry.[15] By most metrics, China has already completed a regional power transition, with regional distribution of capabilities and wealth changing rapidly over the past generation. For instance, China's share of regional gross domestic product (GDP) in East Asia and the Pacific grew from 7 per cent in 1988 to nearly 60 per cent in 2022, while Japan's fell from 72 per cent to 14 per cent in the same timeframe.[16] Indeed, the debate over whether China's rise would instil fear in its Asian neighbours began at least two decades ago.[17]

Given that China has already risen to regional economic dominance, the only question is how much larger the gap between China and its neighbours will become. The "just wait" narrative that China's neighbours would balance out China's own economic growth might have been a reasonable prediction in the mid-1990s or even the early 2000s, but if Southeast Asian states were going to compete head-on with China, this balancing process would have had started a long time ago. Moreover, those who think that a counterbalancing coalition of Asian states will emerge to deter China's assertive behaviour need to explain why this has not yet occurred after three decades of China's rapid economic and military growth. Instead, as this Special Issue suggests, the apparent need to deter or balance China's rise reflects the United States' strategic priorities

in Southeast Asia rather than being the priorities of the Southeast Asian states themselves. To assume that the region's governments share the United States' threat perceptions about China reveals the most obvious and problematic assumption of military deterrence, which risks making Southeast Asia appear to be a powder keg. It also obscures the fact that no two regional states share the same views on the efficacy of the use of force and threats.

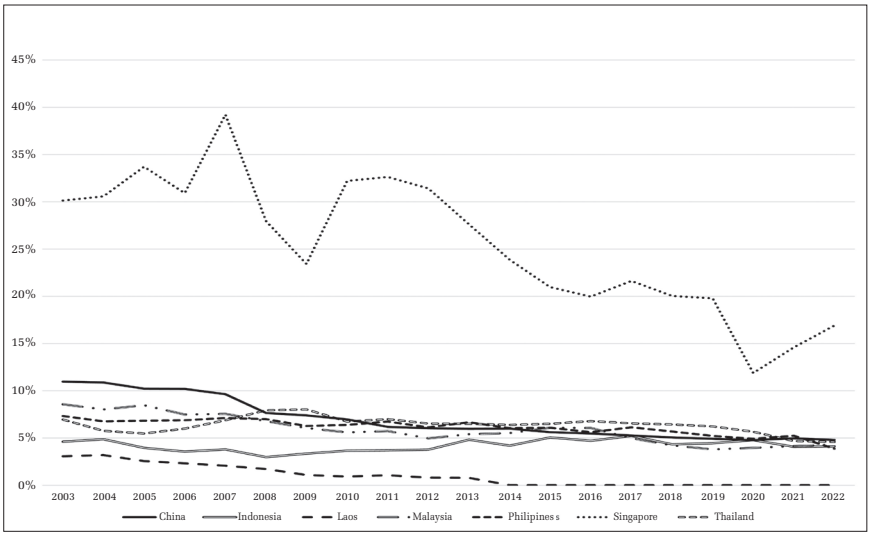
The data on Southeast Asian defence spending appears to reaffirm this puzzle: if the region's governments are increasingly concerned about a conflict in their backyard, as some observers suggest, why has their military expenditure declined or remained relatively stable for more than two decades (see Figures 1, 2, and 3)? However, if one focuses on what Southeast Asian states are doing rather than what external observers in the United States (or elsewhere) think they are doing, then we have to critically assess how they are actually prioritizing domestic politics and their own security situation in the context of a rising China.

Figure 1
Military Expenditure in Southeast Asia, 2003–22
(In constant 2022 US$ million)



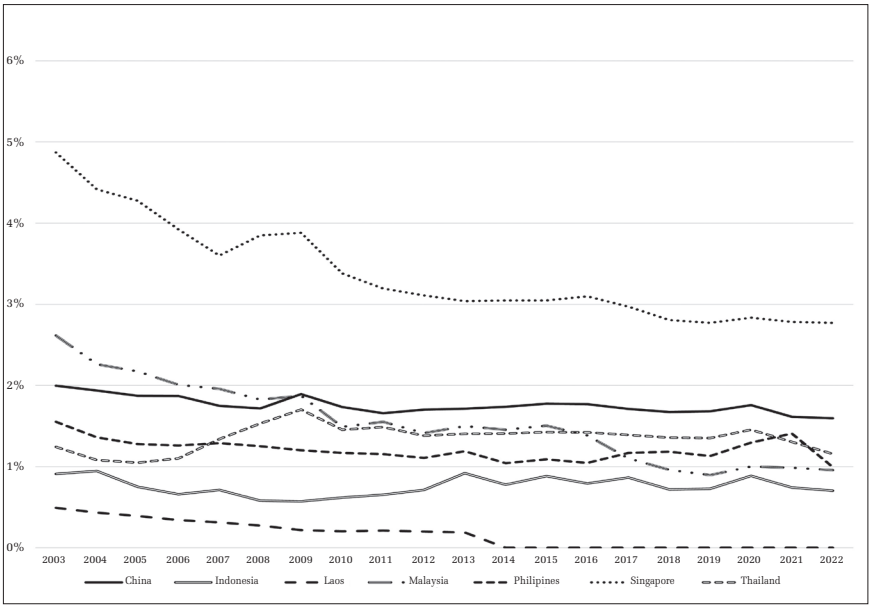
Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Figure 2
Military Expenditure as a Share of Government Spending, 2003–22



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Figure 3
Military Expenditure as a Share of GDP, 2003–22



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

The standard way security scholars measure a country's militarization is to measure the "defence effort" or "defence burden", usually presented as the ratio of defence expenditure to GDP.[18] In some ways, this measure serves as a proxy explainer of a country's foreign and domestic politics since the share of its economy that a nation devotes to defence reflects its priorities. When a country perceives there to be a significant external threat, expenditure on its military will usually take precedence over domestic priorities, such as education or social welfare. In reverse, during times of relative peace, a country is more likely to devote a greater share of its economy to domestic priorities, as was the case following the Cold War when many countries across the world cut defence spending as part of the so-called "peace dividend".

However, things become more complex when economic relations are factored in. As the case studies in this Special Issue demonstrate, all Southeast Asian states are actively increasing their economic interactions with China because they believe that economic security is an indispensable part of Southeast Asia's comprehensive security, so a rising China is inextricably linked to the region's economic growth. Infrastructure development and cooperation have been particularly salient in China's engagement with the region.[19] On trade, the ten ASEAN states replaced the European Union (EU) as China's largest partner in early 2020, while bilateral ASEAN-China trade has more than doubled since 2010 and was valued at nearly US$510 billion in 2019.[20] These strong commercial ties are undergirded by the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement—a regional trade treaty that came into effect in 2010 and is considered the largest free trade zone (by population) and the third largest (by combined nominal GDP)—and by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) of 2020.

Southeast Asian states have consistently engaged in what some observers, such as Goh, call complicity *and* resistance to external powers. Such an approach can explain relations with the United States and China today.[21] For instance, this strategic positioning is most clearly demonstrated by Indonesia. Although it does not formally contest claims over territory in the South China Sea with Beijing, it has witnessed China launch incursions around the Natuna Islands, where parts of Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) overlap with China's disputed "nine-dash line". Ordinarily, one might expect Jakarta to respond by forging closer security cooperation with the United States. However, in October 2020, Jakarta publicly

rebuffed a US proposal to allow P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance planes to land and refuel in Indonesia. When then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo subsequently visited Jakarta and sought clarification, Indonesian officials did not yield. This is not to say that US-Indonesian military ties have been cut off completely. In fact, the two sides have engaged in annual military exercises, such as the Super Garuda Shield. This illustrates how Indonesia practices complicity *and* resistance in its interactions with the United States. Similar to most Southeast Asian governments, Indonesia applies the same approach to China and prefers to resolve its differences with China through multilateral dialogue and diplomacy, even as they lodge protests in response to Chinese maritime incursions in the South China Sea.

A consequentialist viewpoint, of material capabilities and distributions of power, is only one way of understanding state interactions, particularly between large powers and smaller actors. The United States and China may be competing for regional leadership, but few Southeast Asian states feel the need to choose sides.[22] Moreover, few Southeast Asian leaders appear willing to make the costly domestic and economic trade-offs required to significantly bolster their military capabilities and, thus, their ability to ward off apparent Chinese aggression. Furthermore, apart from those with maritime disputes with China, namely the Philippines and Vietnam, most Southeast Asian states do not view China as expansionist or a military threat. Instead, they prefer not to become trapped within the US-China rivalry and are wary of anything that could potentially incite conflict or exacerbate tension between the superpowers, such as the US military increasing the frequency of its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea and the Chinese responses with increasing anti-access, area denial systems and capabilities. According to Nick Bisley,

> A FONOP should not happen because of a sense that something must be done to push back against a country that seems only to understand the currency of force. Such a rationale massively increases the risks of miscalculation and escalation, badly overstates the ability of such an operation to achieve the lofty goals of pundits and politicians, and needlessly increases the temperature in a region which is already pretty febrile.[23]

Therefore, calls for a more interventionist US military role in the region must be considered cautiously and based on an understanding of Southeast Asian states' security preferences.

Southeast Asian Priorities amid US-China Competition

Given its unique geography, history and ethnicity, Southeast Asia is characterized by as many differences and variations between countries as similarities. However, analysis of the countries included in this Special Issue—a state that appears to be in China's sphere of influence (Laos), US allies (the Philippines and Thailand) and middle powers that maintain longstanding, strategic ties with both external powers and yet pursue independent foreign policies (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore)—finds converging trends of how and why each of the six countries is responding to rapidly changing dynamics in regional security. These countries were chosen because they are "least similar" cases in that they comprise different regime types and vary in how close they are to China and the United States. Yet, their policy response to both external powers is driven by similar sets of domestic considerations, specifically regime legitimacy, political fragmentation and economic growth.

Each author in this Special Issue was asked to address a common set of questions: What key factors—historical, cultural, political, institutional, economic and strategic—shape a country's overall foreign policy decision-making? How do domestic politics, political fragmentation, political systems and regime legitimacy determine foreign policy choices concerning the United States and China? Having established the domestic politics and priorities, we then asked the authors to turn to their assessed country's foreign policy considerations with the following questions: What are the most important bilateral security and economic developments in relations with China; and what are the most important bilateral security and economic developments in relations with the United States? The authors were also asked to consider the broader implications for regional security that arise from their analysis.

Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia—which have maintained longstanding strategic ties with both external powers—emphasize an independent foreign policy. This is particularly salient for Indonesia and Malaysia, which have consistently articulated non-alignment and neutrality as guiding principles for their foreign policies regardless of leadership transitions and regime changes. Similarly, Singapore is keen on retaining regional centrality amid geopolitical uncertainties and has emphasized friendly relations with all countries as a key prong of its foreign policy. Each of these foreign policy considerations can be traced back to domestic politics.

Adhi Priamarizki observes that after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, Indonesia's political system has meant that domestic determinants play an even more essential role in foreign policymaking. For instance, after 1998, the Indonesian government was hesitant to engage with the United States because of the prevalence of anti-Western sentiment among the public. Although the Indonesian public rarely treats foreign policy as a daily concern, some foreign policy issues, such as those related to Islam or nationalism, attract their attention. The need to maintain popular support emerged as a key domestic determinant, as the failure to accommodate mainstream voices can undermine the popularity and electability of Indonesia's political leaders. Similarly, negative public opinions about China—because of the allegedly harmful impact of Chinese investment projects on society and the environment, as well as tensions in the South China Sea—have limited Indonesia's ability to fully embrace economic cooperation with Beijing.

Singapore adopts a policy that largely seeks to maximize the gains it can reap— extenuating its economic centrality in Asia and its role as a robust regional commercial and financial hub with global ambitions—from cooperating with the United States and China. Moreover, maintaining this strategic position is essential for its survival as a small state. Terence Lee argues that the domestic imperative of legitimizing the political dominance of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) also shapes the government's foreign policy towards external powers. Maintaining strategic ties with the United States and China accrues performance legitimacy for the city-state's government. For instance, Singapore's close relations with Beijing augment the PAP's standing with the ethnic Chinese community and their business interests in the mainland, sustaining *specific* support. At the same time, taking on an independent and more assertive foreign policy (against China, in particular), while necessary for a small state, creates a rally-around-the-flag effect and increases *diffuse* support for the ruling party.

In Malaysia, the governing elites' concern for their own political legitimacy in a multiethnic society is perhaps the most salient domestic determinant in foreign policy decisions vis-à-vis China and the United States. Cheng-Chwee Kuik notes that this domestic process intersects with pluralistic sociopolitical contestations, prompting political leaders to adopt policies that may seem contradictory at times. For Malaysia's foreign policy, this means positioning itself "equidistant" between the United States and China, maintaining

a neutral position at the macro level while seeking inclusive but selective multilayered partnerships with both external powers across micro-level domains. Such a pragmatic policy is manifested not only in economic development initiatives but also in the defence and diplomatic domains. For example, the US-Malaysia defence partnership is much closer than that between Malaysia and China, whereas Malaysia-China diplomatic and developmental ties have expanded in recent years and are more multifaceted than those between Malaysia and the United States. Malaysia's equidistant stance is not unique among similarly situated ASEAN states, but the domestic politics that undergird Kuala Lumpur's foreign policy decisions are quite distinctive. Kuik argues that the power blocs that represent the diverse array of sociopolitical and economic interests in Malaysia's multiethnic society are constantly competing for influence, prompting the state to hedge by pursuing seemingly paradoxical approaches to offset risks while maximizing benefits with politically acceptable trade-offs under conditions of uncertainties.

Laos' foreign policy is also guided by a search for equidistance between the two great powers, despite being regarded as a client state of China.[24] Soulatha Sayalath argues that the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the ruling party since 1975, has sought to achieve an even-handed policy towards China and the United States. Importantly, it was the LPRP's fear of both countries supporting counter-revolutionary and anti-regime groups that prompted Vientiane to adopt closer relations with both countries in the late 1980s. The loss of economic assistance from the Soviet Union was another key motivation for the LPRP to adopt market reforms in 1986 and to develop closer security and economic ties with China and the United States. Thus, regime survival and performance legitimacy through economic development drove Laos' pursuit of better relations with the two external powers. However, Sayalath notes that there are limits to Laos' relations with the two countries. Traditional ties with Vietnam prevent Laos from becoming too entrenched in the Chinese camp, and Laos has been treading a fine line between the two communist neighbours as it does not want to be sucked into their territorial dispute in the South China Sea. Furthermore, anti-China sentiments have grown more prevalent among the Lao public because of the impact of China's growing economic clout on Laos' society and environment. With regards to the United States, anti-US sentiment is strongly ingrained among senior LPRP cadres who still

believe that the United States is promoting "peaceful evolution" to weaken and overthrow the communist regime.

Regime insecurity is also paramount in driving Thailand's foreign policy towards the United States and China. Pongphisoot Busbarat argues that although there has been a historical pattern since the nineteenth century for Bangkok to swiftly adjust its policies to align more closely with whichever external power it thinks is prevailing in regional and world politics, we might be witnessing a deviation from this traditional "bamboo diplomacy" because of domestic politics, specifically the resurgence of the Thai military since 2014. As a US treaty ally, Thailand has maintained close security relations with the United States, although it has been drawn closer to China for economic reasons. However, the crisis of legitimacy that the military junta faced at home and abroad after the 2014 coup led it to accommodate China in the security realm as well because Beijing offered political support to the military junta. In contrast, the United States responded to the coup with criticism and sanctions. But, according to Busbarat, closer accommodation of China since 2014 dates back further. Its roots can be traced to the end of the Cold War, when the *raison d'état* of the Thai-US military alliance (anti-communism) disappeared, and after Washington was perceived as being unhelpful after Thailand's economy was struck by the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis. By contrast, Beijing has been seen as more reliable and generous in aiding Thailand's economic recovery since then. Despite some rapprochement with the United States since the 2019 general elections, Busbarat argues that Bangkok's increasingly accommodative stance towards China and its fear that Beijing might misconstrue Thailand's engagement with the United States as a sign that it is joining US efforts to contain China are likely to continue under the coalition government that took office in August 2023. Indeed, the pursuit of regime legitimacy and economic growth is expected to draw Thailand even closer to Beijing.

The articles in this Special Issue also demonstrate that while the contours of foreign policy may differ because of leadership transitions and different leaders' varied interpretations of what constitutes their own political survival, the broad principles that guide foreign policy have been consistent throughout the decades. This is especially evident in the Philippines, another US treaty ally that has drawn closer to China primarily for economic reasons. Raymund Jose Quilop argues that despite leadership transitions and

the seemingly closer stance that the Duterte administration (2016–22) took towards China, Manila has not deviated from the three pillars of its foreign policy: the protection of territorial integrity and sovereignty; economic development; and the protection of overseas Filipinos. Quilop demonstrates how the outsized influence of the president on foreign policy, the Philippines' personality-oriented political culture, the dynamics among various government agencies and public opinion have shaped Filipino foreign policy towards the United States and China. He argues that the Department of National Defence, the Senate and public opinion played key roles in constraining Duterte's policy towards China, particularly concerning territorial disputes with China and relations with the United States. Notably, the improvements in relations with the United States have actually begun towards the tail end of the Duterte administration and hence, cannot be completely attributed to the shift by the Marcos Jr. administration (2022–present) back to a more traditional foreign policy posture.

Conclusions and Outlook

The findings suggest the primacy of regime survival and political legitimacy in all of the assessed Southeast Asian countries. The need for economic security largely drives their foreign policymaking, ensuring that the ruling party and governing regime can address the economic needs of its citizens and thereby enhance their legitimacy and survival. The primary motivation for Southeast Asian states is, thus, to expand pragmatic cooperation with the United States and China in the economic domain as much as possible.

Beyond material benefits, ideational factors are also at stake. For instance, what constitutes the ideal developmental and governance model? How important are values such as human rights, separation of power, political accountability and democratic institutions? Who supports a rules-based international order? The Southeast Asian countries analysed in this Special Issue generally support a strong developmental state but also embrace free trade and export-oriented growth to sustain long-term growth. At the same time, they recognize the importance of regime stability and govern through a delicate balance of democratic practices or strong personal or party rule. The region has yet to fully adopt the political values or governance models that either the United States or China espouses or represents,

a practice that reflects Southeast Asia's longstanding preference for diversity and approach of delimiting the dominance of ideas and influence by any single actor.

Thus, strategic diversification is a common-sense strategy in Southeast Asia because it ensures maximum flexibility in alignment options while facilitating agency as and when necessary to suit each country's domestic priorities and politics. In the short term, countries that engage in strategic diversification (or hedging) may seem to be leaning more towards China or the United States. However, they will also continue to preserve their strategic options in the other direction. Overall, the region undertakes constant adjustments to achieve the overall effect of equidistance between two competing great powers. Indeed, rather than employing exclusive power balancing by choosing one side, they ultimately seek "an omnidirectional state of equilibrium that will enable [Southeast Asian states] to maintain the best possible relations with *all* the major powers and thus preserve autonomy".[25]

The challenge for the United States and China in seeking greater influence and an expanded leadership role in the region is to understand the motivations of Southeast Asian states and what they are willing or unwilling to do. If either Washington or Beijing wants to emerge as the legitimate great power in the region, it will need to pay far more attention to how domestic politics influences the preferences and priorities of Southeast Asian states.

NOTES

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