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Southeast Asia: Navigating Between China and America

By [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

The story of Southeast Asian foreign policy is largely one of standing on pins and needles as China and the United States vie for control of the region. But as Sreeram Chaulia explains, Southeast Asian countries can set the acceptable limits and parameters of this interaction by generating domestic and regional consensus in favor of an existence of dignity.

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The problem of being beholden to external powers who, either directly or indirectly, shape a nation's fate has been an enduring one since the dawn of the Westphalian state system. Asymmetries in material power and influence frequently generate relationships of subordination between great powers and lesser powers.

It would be wishful thinking to imagine that China and the United States will reach a modus vivendi and ease these dilemmas for the lesser powers.

In certain geopolitical circumstances and times, there can be cases of the tail wagging the dog. However, the classic situation is one in which a militarily and economically superior state can throw around its weight to determine policy outcomes and directions in substantially weaker states.

During the era of European empires, this process was labeled as colonialism. In today's world, it is still visible, often in Africa, Latin America and even in economically advanced Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, a number of small to middle powers have existed since the decolonization of the mid-20th century in positions of inferiority and dependence on far more powerful external actors, whether they be the United States, the former Soviet Union or China. Sovereignty has been ironically both preserved and squandered by Southeast Asian states in their bids to woo, ally with and prostrate before these foreign overlords.

Strategic location and the extremely fractured nature of local politics fueled unequal exchanges between Southeast Asian countries and external great powers.

The possibility that these states would be left to their own devices was disallowed by their vital locations on the world map in the eyes of great powers, an attitude exemplified by U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower's "domino theory" of 1954 in which he identified "the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula and Indonesia" to communism as unacceptable for strategic reasons.

Domestic turmoil within Southeast Asian nations also generates a pattern of elites seeking foreign protectors and overlords. During the Cold War, the ruling establishments within Southeast Asian countries sensed threats from socialist, nationalist or communist forces. They enlisted the backing of Washington to alter the domestic balance of power in their favor, always in the name of preserving stability.

In current times, this pattern is especially prominent in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. The perceived threats of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism have pushed elites there to seek U.S. counter-terrorism assistance and counsel. As a result, the strategic doctrines of these countries are now being written by U.S. advisers and framed by the steady supply chain of weapons provided by Washington.

In terms of material capabilities and intentions, China presents the foremost threat to the United States' own strategic calculations, leading to a widely shared belief that the alliance systems Washington is sewing up across the Asian sub-regions are aimed at containing China's extraordinarily fast rise.

With lesser powers in Asia nervous in the wake of China's muscle-flexing, the possibility of an "Asian Union" that keeps the levers of decision-making within regional hands — and out of reach of the vested priorities of China or the United States — is a non-starter.

The United States is now reconciled to dealing with China as a near equal because the latter now has the economic growth, the military wherewithal and the diplomatic influence (in Africa and Latin America) to more than match Washington in many theaters.

The real question is what path the rest of Asia, minus China, will take, and whether they have any choice in the context of their own respective clashes of interest and bones of contention with Beijing.

The quest for a self-determining and a regionally integrated Asia is more relevant to these lesser powers as they "emerge" and try to come into their own. A position of equi-distance from China and the United States sounds reasonable and might even apply to the diplomacy of ASEAN at present. And yet, whenever strategic tensions and boundary disputes undergo resurgence, the smaller states of Asia are forced to choose sides and enter into counter-balancing alliances, which come with strings attached and eventually reduce autonomy.

It would be wishful thinking to imagine that China and the United States will reach a modus vivendi and ease these dilemmas for the lesser powers. Neither Washington nor Beijing is particularly bothered if their games of one-upmanship against each other lead to collateral damage among the smaller Asian states.

The absence of a third genuine great power in the world, apart from the United States and China, also leaves these weaker Asian states with the hard and only choice of fast-tracking their respective economic growth agendas and to modernize and equip their militaries for 21st century digital warfare.

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Until India rises to its predicted stage as a true great power and Japan revives after two successive "lost decades" of economic slumber and a dearth of steady political leadership, the story of Southeast Asian foreign policy will remain one of standing on pins and needles as China and the United States vie for control of the region.

Self-reliance in defense and able stewardship of one's own economy are two concrete strategies that do not depend on the whims and preferences of the United States or of China. To the extent that the global economy is highly integrated

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_____ today, the markets and technological developments produced by the two great powers of the world will impact the economic and military fates of lesser Asian states.

But the growth of the BRICS and the MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey), as well as the "Bolivarian" front in Latin America, do provide alternative sources of capital and economic dynamism. Weak or undependable as they may seem from Washington's perspective, Asia's lesser powers can use them as avenues to coordinate with each other and escape the fate of being appendages of Washington or of Beijing.

It takes grand vision on a global scale for the leadership of these weaker Asian states to implement plans that take advantage of these non-U.S. and non-Chinese sources of support in the emerging multipolar world order. The example of Malaysia's foreign policy is instructive here, because Kuala Lumpur has managed to eke out its distinct brand of equidistance as well as interdependence with Beijing and Washington.

Since the 1980s, Malaysia moved away from a pro-Western, anti-communist track to one that emphasized national economic growth and criticism of neoliberal agendas. At the same time, Malaysia has retained a healthy suspicion and caution about Chinese intentions in the region.

Added to this middle course is Malaysia's keenness to bolster ASEAN as a joint negotiating forum with China, so as to neutralize Beijing's colossal advantages in pure bilateral dealings with individual Southeast Asian states. What Malaysia has not done thus far is to explicitly "invite" the United States to assist it in facing up to China's claims over disputed islands that Kuala Lumpur also claims.

This contrasts with Vietnam's rapid rapprochement with Washington over the last two decades that is implicitly premised on containment of China. The Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Pham Binh Minh, has been pushing to upgrade U.S.-Vietnam ties to "a new level" and has been advocating for Washington to "pay more attention" to Southeast Asia "for the stability of the region." The sharp historical animosity between China and Vietnam continues to arouse strong passions in the latter — and hence opens the door for a repetition of past U.S. involvement in the erstwhile Indochina as an offshore balancer.

The absence of a third genuine great power in the world leaves these weaker Asian states with the only choice of fast-tracking their economic growth agendas.

The extent to which pro-free-market liberalization is gaining influence in Southeast Asia, even in communist Vietnam and Laos, means that there will be new segments of domestic constituencies throughout the region that seek a greater U.S. presence in their countries and in the wider neighborhood. Caution may be in order, however. As history tells us, "invitations" to outside great powers lead to overstay and can even produce domination.

The Malaysian method of non-alignment between China and the United States, and of trying to unify the region under the multilateral banner of ASEAN to deter overbearing Chinese pressure, holds out hope. Its promise — and premise — is that Asia's smaller powers will all eventually outgrow the habit of handing over the keys to their destinies to foreign arbiters, whether U.S., Chinese or otherwise.

For that to come to pass, strong local advocacy within each of the Southeast Asian states to strive for foreign policy independence from China and the United States will need to proceed hand-in-hand with geostrategic maneuvering by Southeast Asian diplomats and politicians.

Realistically, Southeast Asians cannot make do in the economic and security realms without the United States or China. But they can set the acceptable limits and parameters of this interaction by generating domestic and regional consensus in

favor of an existence of dignity for Asia's "small fry" countries.

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