

# Strategic Competition and Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	
<i>Carl Baker</i>	1
1 SOUTHEAST ASIA FACES ITS BOOGEYMAN – GREAT POWER COMPETITION RETURNS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE 21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY	
<i>Drew Thompson</i>	7
2 GEOECONOMICS AND GEOPOLITICS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA	
<i>Thitinan Pongsudhirak</i>	13
3 ECONOMICS ASPECTS OF NATIONAL SECURITY	
<i>Brad Glosserman</i>	19
4 CHINA AS A TECHNOLOGICAL POWER: CHINESE PERSPECTIVES AND THE QUANTUM CASE	
<i>Hoo Tiang Boon</i>	25
5 MINILATERAL GROUPINGS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO MULTILATERALISM IN AN ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION	
<i>Thomas Wilkins</i>	35
6 THE ROLE OF INDO-PACIFIC ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS IN SHAPING SECURITY COMPETITION	
<i>Prashanth Parameswaran</i>	41
7 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AMID INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC COMPETITION	
<i>Gong Xue</i>	49
8 REGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE US-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION	
<i>Kei Koga</i>	59
9 STRATEGIC COMPETITION AND SECURITY COOPERATION	
<i>Raymond Jose Quilop</i>	65
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	71

# 1

## **Southeast Asia Faces Its Boogeyman - Great Power Competition Returns to Southeast Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*Drew Thompson*

## Strategic competition – The boogeyman is back

**I**ntensifying US-China competition is deeply distressing for Southeast Asian states because it evokes traumatic memories of the past, poses uncertainty about the future, and threatens to reverse hard-won social and economic development gains earned over the last 30 years. Like the proverbial boogeyman, the specter of US-China competition is corporeal, manifesting itself in difficult lose-lose choices already imposed on smaller states by either Washington or Beijing. It is also ethereal in the knowledge that great power competition is already deeply entrenched, comprehensive, and likely to be a feature of the strategic landscape for decades to come. Southeast Asia survived a generation of violence and foreign interference during the Cold War, making the prospect of the return to open conflict between the US and China both plausible and a visceral concern.

Contemporary strategic competition between the US and China is decidedly different than the US-USSR Cold War, with unique underlying causes and dynamics that make historical comparisons flawed and problematic. While elements of competition between the United States and China existed in various forms following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the degree has increased and the scope has expanded since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, heralding what the Communist Party of China (CPC) describes as a “new era.”

The new era beginning with Xi Jinping’s appointment as secretary general of the CPC ushered in significant changes to the governance of China, particularly the increased presence and authority of the CPC over all aspects of Chinese society, economy, and polity. Independent civil society has been eliminated while the CPC has exerted authority over the entirety of the media, culture, and education systems, and has sought to dominate the economy through oversight of private sector companies and state-owned enterprises. By establishing and invigorating a framework of CPC-led committees and commissions, which he heads, Xi Jinping has ensured the Party dominates the government, essentially reducing the State Council to an implementing agency for the aloof and secretive CPC. The CPC’s internal political discourse has evolved under Xi Jinping as well, affecting both the way China is ruled, and the way it interacts with the outside world. Since 2012, the Party has perceived itself as facing increased risk from both internal and

external forces. References to various risks in Xi’s many speeches and subsequent analysis by CPC ideologues have increased steadily since 2012. Identified internal risks include rampant financial corruption as well as ideological corruption stemming from the expansion of the CPC under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, which diluted the Party’s ideological cohesion with the addition of entrepreneurs and private sector business people more interested in building business relationships than achieving socialism. External risks include a range of economic, societal, and environmental challenges that create public dissatisfaction and lead to the phenomenon the CPC calls, “contradictions amongst the people.” Interestingly, foreign risks are discussed less than domestic risks, but foreign risks are seen by Beijing as catalyzing forces that exacerbate domestic risks. This elevated sense of risk has been reflected in the CPC’s response to threats and efforts to build ideological resiliency, marked especially by the elimination of civil society and the Party’s increased control over government. Milestone CPC risk reduction outcomes establish the parameters for the Party’s ideological security and national security, most notably the August 2013 Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere, commonly referred to as Document Number 9, and the Holistic Security Concept introduced by Xi at a Politburo study session in April 2014.

This elevated sense of risk and omnipresent threats has justified the CPC’s strategy to make itself and the country more resilient. To provoke a sense of urgency and ensure rank-and-file cadre prioritize national security work and ensure the CPC’s political security in all sectors, the tone and tenor of deliberations have sharpened under Xi. The more frequent use of Marxist and Maoist terms and concepts, such as “struggle,” and the evocation of martial phrases framing risks and challenges as existential threats to the Party justifies robust and sometime socially disruptive responses. The adoption of Marxist dialectic processes by the CPC to shape its internal deliberations and the evocation of martial terms to motivate CPC cadre and government officials has intensified an adversarial outlook in Beijing. Risks and threats are pervasive, and relationships are defined by inherent existential, zero-sum competition, much as Marx himself characterized the struggle between capital and labor, and the superstructure with the base. Certain that both foreign and domestic forces seek the CPC’s demise (if not just the containment of the country), Beijing has embarked on a resiliency campaign focused on

preventing hostile ideology from infiltrating China and isolating its economy to withstand exogenous shocks or coercion. Industrial programs like Made in China 2025, and the dual circulation concept seek to make China's domestic economy more resilient and less dependent on foreign technology and trade while making foreign economies more dependent on China, giving Beijing greater coercive power and international leverage inducing a greater sense of security.

## **“Southeast Asian states are increasingly concerned about the risks they face from a deteriorating US-China relationship.”**

The political changes that have taken place under Xi Jinping have induced a range of political, economic, and military reactions from Washington that taken together have resulted in a deteriorating bilateral relationship, which is at the core of Southeast Asian concerns about great power competition. Some Southeast Asian observers assess that Washington has intentionally set out to challenge China, contain it, or prevent its rise, resulting in what they see as legitimate responses by China, rather than rational reactions by Washington to the new era under Xi. Causation is hotly debated, with the so-called “Thucydides Trap” often invoked as an explanation, arguing that, like a force of nature, the established power will invariably challenge a rising one. The US-China relationship is more complex and not well explained by a historical trope, however. The Trump administration sought to re-shape the economic relationship to make it more reciprocal and expand market access in China, threatening and then imposing sanctions when a trade agreement could not be reached, inciting retaliatory actions by China, resulting in a so-called trade war. The Biden administration has focused on a two-pronged strategy, investing in much-needed infrastructure at home, and strengthening alliances and partnerships to enhance US power and shape the environment around China to constrain it and shape its behaviors. Bilateral engagement with China has thus far eschewed functional dialogues on traditional issues such as economic and security relations, emphasizing instead high-level engagements to reduce risk, seeking to create guardrails to increase mutual understanding and reduce the chance of

misperception and miscalculation. The breakdown of longstanding bilateral dialogues, such as the US-China Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade (which was established in 1983 and last convened in 2018), reflects Washington's resignation that dialogues with China have been unproductive. After years of good faith efforts to secure incremental commitments from China, the US became frustrated as China failed to follow through. The abandonment of functional US-China dialogues, and the public acrimony displayed at the high-level talks in Anchorage in March 2021 at the outset of the Biden administration underscored the depths of mistrust between the two sides and risk that the uneasy state of competition could devolve into confrontation or even conflict. This baseline, coupled with Washington's increasingly overt expressions and demonstrations of support for Taiwan culminating in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 is deeply unsettling to Southeast Asian states that feel increasingly worried about the risks of US-China competition.

### **What are Southeast Asian concerns?**

Southeast Asian states are increasingly concerned about the risks they face from a deteriorating US-China relationship. While few fear that the US and China will come into direct conflict as they did during the Cold War in Indo-China and the Korean Peninsula, the possibility of a conflict over Taiwan is an ever-present concern. Southeast Asian states are particularly focused on how to avoid entanglement in the US-China dyad, while trying to maximize benefits from each on separate terms. Faced with dilemmas, senior officials articulate their anxieties in overused metaphors about elephants and whales, punctuated by simple slogans such as the commitment to not choose sides. Official Southeast Asian statements often describe concerns and examples of disconcerting incidents involving bigger powers without even mentioning countries, much less attributing responsibility. While the pledge to not choose sides is immediately understandable to Southeast Asian publics, it is inaccurate, as well as a flawed policy prescription. Each state will inevitably make many choices based on their national interests, which does not equate to choosing sides. There is no requirement to make a single grand choice or join a camp as there was during the Cold War. The “don't choose sides” sentiment, however, reflects the deep concerns and dilemmas faced by Southeast Asian states.

Southeast Asian policy choices are complicated by public opinion, which does not always align with the government's conception of national interest. Some Southeast Asian intellectuals are immensely proud of the abstract notion of China's rise (while overlooking CPC governance shortcomings, or even the dramatic changes since 2012), seeing it as a return to a previous world order when China was the region's leading technological innovator and economic and cultural power. When Beijing's actions potentially harm the interests of Southeast Asian states, such as assertions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea or hostile influence or interference operations, governments have to tread carefully to avoid escalation pathways with Beijing, simultaneously managing disagreement from their own publics who believe the Thucydides trope, and see China in a generally positive light as well as the victim of hegemonic designs by the United States.

While US officials continually seek to reassure Southeast Asian interlocutors that Washington does not ask them to choose sides, the experience of Southeast Asian states belies the assertion. Washington's pressure on governments to eschew Huawei 5G telecommunications infrastructure exposed regional capitals to political pressure and coercion from Beijing, affirming their fears of the risks and consequences of great power competition. Southeast Asian states are fully cognizant of China's penchant to use economic and political coercion and are effectively conditioned to avoid criticizing or opposing Beijing. In the security arena, Southeast Asian concerns are heightened by the US, Japan, and Australia strengthening security cooperation to counter an increasingly powerful China. Regional reaction to AUKUS has been largely negative and seen as needlessly provocative toward China, contributing to China's sense of threat and therefore validating China's investments in military modernization. The region's prescription for ending the security dilemma is to not provoke China and accept its rise. Southeast Asian states do not share US security interests (or obligations) in maintaining cross-Strait deterrence, leading them to affirm their commitment to non-alignment, and even strengthening their own military capabilities to defend their sovereignty and prevent belligerents from accessing their territory in the event of a conflict.

## **The Ukraine factor**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was illuminating, but ultimately not measurably impactful in Southeast Asia. Singapore had the strongest response of the Southeast Asian states, speaking eloquently at the United Nations in defense of international law and norms against the use of force, and imposing unilateral sanctions on Russia, the first time Singapore had sanctioned another country outside UN processes since Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978. Interestingly, Singaporean public opinion largely sided with Russia, echoing China's narrative, assigning blame to Ukraine and NATO for undermining Russia's security and provoking a rational response. This divergence of perceived interests underscores the dilemma faced by some Southeast Asian governments whose economies are dependent on China and at risk of economic and diplomatic coercion, while their populations are positively disposed to support the paradigm of a regionally dominant China.

The US-led response to the invasion has not appreciably affected perceptions of Washington's alliance commitments or military capabilities. The collapse of the Afghan government and messy US exit did not meaningfully affect US credibility in Southeast Asia, underscoring the parochial nature of both perceptions and security interests in the region. Other issues and incidents directly affecting Southeast Asia do greater harm to US credibility than security dynamics in Europe.

The US is undisputedly the leading security partner in Southeast Asia, and its ability to underwrite Ukraine's war, just as it supports Taiwan's defense needs comes as no surprise to Southeast Asian states, but security cooperation alone is not sufficient for the US to achieve primacy. Shortcomings in US diplomatic, informational, military, and economic engagement are the American Achilles heel in the region, however.

## **The state of US-China competition in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asian states are committed to an independent foreign policy and have no aspiration to align with either China or the US, due to inherent risks of doing so and the inadequacies of both powers. To induce bandwagoning, one power would need to

be proficient, continually attentive, and ultimately dominant in all aspects of the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic spectrum. Because neither power is able to dominate in all aspects, Southeast Asian states are deeply committed to hedging and seeking to balance relationships and gain benefits from both powers.

### Diplomatic

US diplomacy with Southeast Asia is sometimes clumsy and seen as arrogant or easily distracted by events elsewhere by Southeast Asian partners. Framing US diplomacy as a means to promote democracy alienates virtually all Southeast Asian partners, including US treaty allies. Southeast Asian state governance is an incessant kaleidoscopic evolution of shifting power balances between monarchs, militaries, oligarchical families, and powerful personalities heading amorphous political parties and coalitions lacking ideological underpinnings. US emphasis on democratic values creates an indelible rift that prevents the development of trust and US diplomatic relationships from strengthening.

and glowing propaganda coverage when they visit China, bringing home an important win and validation. Beijing is effective at conditioning Southeast Asian politicians to not challenge China, due to the certainty of diplomatic and economic coercion against those who oppose Beijing. China's diplomatic treatment of small states is far more reciprocal and responsive, and a tangible example of the US failing to effectively compete with China in Southeast Asia.

### Information

The United States lags China in the region's information sphere. While US local-language media such as Voice of America is well read in some countries such as Cambodia, and of higher quality than China's foreign media outputs, Chinese propaganda is ubiquitous and pervasive, preventing US narratives from dominating. The United Front Work Department has been rejuvenated and energized by Xi Jinping and is active throughout the region, cultivating elites and the influential Chinese diaspora. Public opinion toward China is favorable among the general public and support for China is

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Protocol and appearances matter too. The awkward US-ASEAN Summit convened in May 2022 was a diplomatic step backwards when President Biden refused to meet the ASEAN Chair, or any of the other heads of state individually after they traveled across the globe at his invitation. The inability of the US to accept and respect Southeast Asian states as they are (unlike the ASEAN grouping) assures that no Southeast Asian state will align with what they see as feckless or unreliable partner.

China lavishes better diplomatic attention on Southeast Asia than the US does. Despite China's size, Beijing treats its partners as diplomatic equals regardless of their size—heads of state can reliably meet Xi Jinping on the margins of multilateral meetings or when visiting Beijing, getting democrats and dictators alike the treasured grip-and-grin photo

ensconced in key regional elite constituencies according to reliable polling conducted by US and Southeast Asian organizations. China's narratives about its rise and the historical inevitability of Beijing achieving its grand objectives is more politically penetrating than US messaging or US soft power refrains, the most successful of which are largely commercial, and not political.

### Military

The United States is undisputedly the dominant military actor and security partner in the region, but the utility of US security relationships is limited, and China's security relationships in Southeast Asia are likely to grow over time.

Southeast Asian states do not perceive China as a military threat (though China can present broader security challenges, such as influence, interference and identity politics surrounding the Chinese diaspora). Southeast Asian states appreciate that security cooperation with China is a political activity and therefore seek to maintain military-to-military relations with China to achieve political benefits or avoid castigation from Beijing. The People's Liberation Army is the armed wing of the CPC after all, making engagement with them a political activity that garners a political benefit, rather than a military one, while partnering with the US brings tangible military benefits. Territorial disputes with China are seen as only one variable of a comprehensive relationship, to be balanced with beneficial economic and political relations.

Southeast Asian states partner with the United States not only to acquire capabilities for their own forces, but to manage intra-regional security dynamics and address their parochial security interests, not broader regional ones. Singapore welcomes a permanent US military presence to enhance its own deterrence, not to deter the PLA, which poses no military threat to them. The US will be challenged to leverage its security partnerships and alliances in Southeast China to deter China, or directly counter the PLA should a conflict arise. No Southeast Asian state will overtly align with the US to deter China from using force against Japan, or Taiwan, and some will be deterred from even providing passive support, such as base access. Indonesia and Vietnam will likely deny the US and its allies transit rights in the event of a Northeast Asian conflict. Indonesia has made area denial a military modernization objective, which presents challenges for Australia if they hope to project power northwards.

### **Economic**

China is the largest trading partner for each Southeast Asian state. The region is essentially a component supplier for China, creating a hub-and-spoke manufacturing economy with China at the core. Intra-ASEAN trade is miniscule despite an ASEAN FTA, furthering economic dependence on China. China's propensity to leverage its economic relations for political gain has discouraged Southeast Asian states from diversifying their economies away from China.

The lack of a coherent trade policy is perhaps the US' greatest competitive inadequacy. The US has not compensated for this gap with a compelling narrative emphasizing its economic strengths, such as the preponderance of US-invested companies in the region (many of whose goods comprise the region's trade with China), and the positive trade balance enjoyed by US trading partners in Southeast Asia, which totaled \$140 billion in 2020.

### **Conclusion**

The specter of US-China competition is deeply disturbing for Southeast Asian states, who are all too familiar with the risks that it brings small states. Deepening that sense of unease is the recognition that the Cold War experience does little to prepare them for the likely challenges that the contemporary dynamic presents.

The risk of certain backlash from Beijing should it be opposed, and perceived unreliability of the US cements Southeast Asia's political hedging strategy, which is deemed necessary because of perceived shortcomings of both the US and China as a reliable partner that would provide both benefits and permit small states to retain agency. Without predominance in all aspects of the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military spectrum, the US will struggle to capitalize on its regional relationships to leverage them to compete with China.

China's ability to synthesize and leverage its various advantages across the spectrum—including its willingness to use economic coercion and ability to suborn Chinese companies to support national security objectives gives China an immense advantage in the competition to influence Southeast Asia. That advantage however spurs Southeast Asian instincts to preserve their own autonomy and sovereignty by ensuring the US has the access to maintain a substantial presence in the region, thereby maintaining the balance, stability, security, and prosperity that the region desires.



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