

Anatomy of Choice Alignment Index (AOCAI) Description

The Anatomy of Choice Alignment Index (AOCAI) seeks to situate the ten Southeast Asian countries on a spectrum of alignment between CN and the US, based on twenty indicators (split into five domains), across a timeframe of thirty years. For our purposes, the term “Alignment” signifies: 1. ‘arrangement in a straight line’, 2. ‘a situation in which something is in the correct relationship with something else,’ and 3. ‘political, business or other support given to one country or group by another’.¹ Amid the escalating geo-political and geo-economic competition between the superpowers, the pressure to choose sides for entire regions and individual countries has intensified, even if many continue to proclaim their desire to ‘not want to choose sides’ in the unfolding tug-of-war, and even though the regional organization ASEAN has long espoused its aspirations for ‘neutrality’ and ‘non-alignment’ in great power conflicts. While there exist numerous qualitative interpretations about Southeast Asia’s alignment positions – various characterisations in the academic literature of the foreign policy of the region and of its constituent countries suggest that they are practicing a form of ‘hedging’ – the AOCAI represents the first systematic attempt to quantify where exactly each country might lie, both between the US and CN, and in relation to their fellow counterparts within the region, over the last thirty years.

In what does alignment comprise? With a total of twenty indicators, split evenly across five domains – namely Political-Diplomatic, Military-Security, Economics-Trade, Soft Power, and Signalling – the index enables users to combine, compare, and contrast multiple aspects through which alignment(s) may be manifest. In addition to this, users are also able to compare countries across different time periods, offering an idea of when and how the alignment positions of countries have (or have not) changed over time, within, between, and across domains. Default presets that our analyses have been predicated upon include [II Periods, by

¹ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/alignment?q=alignment>

15-year blocks: 1995-2009 vs 2010-2024], [III Periods, by 10-year blocks: 1995-2004 vs 2005-2014 vs 2015-2024], and [V Periods, by 6-year blocks: 1995-2000 vs 2001-2006 vs 2007-20012 vs 2013-2018 vs 2019-2024], although users are free to adjust the various presets – the time periods, the selected domains, and their weights – in order to explore the data. The utility of comparing a country or countries across different periods is that one is able to get an idea of the direction of travel, and the extent or magnitude with which they have shifted over time. Being able to observe what position a country/countries is at, where they are heading, during which periods, offers users both a broader and deeper understanding of their alignment trajectory across various domains. It may also further allow for cautious speculation as to where different countries are heading. If nothing else, the AOCAI seeks to provide a useful basis to start an informed discussion about the strategic alignment positions, movements, and strategies of a region that is as diverse as Southeast Asia.

The AOCAI is a dynamic project which is open to incorporating new and updated information in to the calculus. Aside from yearly-updates once data for 2025 and 2026 becomes available, the project may also consider feature other relevant indicators in the future. {INSERT HYPERLINK: See Limitations & Future Research}

AOCAI Methodology

The AOCAI has relied on open-sourced research and other established databases/datasets, with some indicators using a combination of both. The index uses no complex quantitative statistical methods to compute and analyse the data. The alignment position of each country for a particular year is taken to be the average score of the twenty indicators. Alignment Position in Year X = Average of [Indicator 1 Alignment + Indicator 2 Alignment ... + Indicator 20 Alignment]. Likewise, to derive its alignment position over a range of years, the scores of each of those years are averaged: Alignment Position over Years

$X+Y+Z$ = Average of [Alignment Position Year X + Alignment Position Year Y + Alignment Position Year Z]. The AOCAI's spectrum of alignment defines 'hedging' as being in the range of 45-55. Countries that are aligned with CN are in the range of 34-44, those that are heavily aligned with CN are 0-33. Correspondingly, countries that are aligned with US are in the range of 56-66; those that are heavily aligned with US are 67-100.

For the vast majority of indicators, in order to derive the alignment position of a given country in a particular year – with '0' denoting full alignment with China, and '100' full alignment with the US – the formula used to compute the respective ratios is: Value of US/(Value of US + Value of CN). To illustrate, if for a given year a country Imports \$3 billion worth of products from US compared to \$9 billion from CN, then its alignment is $3/(3+9) = 0.25$ – '25' on our spectrum, indicating heavy alignment with CN in Imports. In another example, if a country conducts 4 Military Exercises with CN, compared to 6 with the US in a certain year, its alignment is $6/(6+4) = 0.60$ – '60' on our spectrum, indicating alignment with the US for that indicator.

A minority of indicators involve computations that differ from (and indeed are the inverse of) the abovementioned formula. Whereas the nature of most of the indicators is such that a higher value connotes greater closeness ('pull' effect), for certain indicators such as Aggressive Acts, Foreign Debt, Negative Sent, and Negative Received, a higher value is conversely indicates greater distance ('push' effect). Therefore, the formula employed is Value of CN/(Value of US + Value of CN); the numerator changes from 'Value of US' to 'Value of CN'. For example, if in a given year a country encounters 2 Aggressive Acts from CN and 1 from the US, then its alignment is $(2)/(2+1) = 0.67$ – '67' on our spectrum, indicating heavy alignment with the US. Likewise, if a country Receives 16 Negative Signals in a given year from CN, compared to 64 from US, its alignment position is $(16)/(16+64) = 0.2$ – '20' on our spectrum, indicating heavy alignment with CN.

The ‘default’ setting, upon which most of the analyses is predicated, is that each of the five domains – Political-Diplomatic, Military-Security, Economics-Trade, Soft Power, and Signalling – are treated (weighted) with equal significance. Some might contend that certain domains, such as Military-Security or Economics-Trade, ought to weigh more heavily in or on the alignment position of a country, compared to, say, Soft Power – the AOCAI enables users to set their preferred ‘weights’ for each of the domains, which will alter the calculus – and therefore the alignment positions accordingly. The ability for users to choose their preferred weightings for the various domains makes the AOCAI truly interactive, given the innumerable combinations that are available.

AOCAI Limitations & Future Research

One of the key issues confronted was the lack of reliable data for a majority of countries stretching back 3 decades. This has resulted in the need to ‘satisfice.’ For example, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) can be a rather telling indicator that ought to feature in the Economics-Trade domain. However, pre-2010 data for FDI to Southeast Asia does not seem to exist, and therefore this indicator had to be excluded from the AOCAI. Another example of an indicator with strong validity for the ‘Soft Power’ domain might be Public Opinion about each of the superpowers. The annual publication of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies’ (ISEAS) ‘State of Southeast Asia Survey’ since 2019 directly taps such sentiments with questions such as “If ASEAN were forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals, which should it choose?”, and “How confident are you that the US/China will ‘do the right thing’ to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?”. However, because no comparable survey of Southeast Asian public opinion pre-2019 exists, this indicator could not be used for the AOCAI. Pew Research Centre has a longer-running survey that compares views of the US and China across subsections of the populations’ of various Asian countries, but because only

a small selection of Southeast Asian countries are represented, it too had to be excluded. Future research could consider expanding the list of indicators, where data avails, which might improve the robustness of the domains, and therefore findings.

Another limitation is conceptual: namely, the starting assumption that alignment between US-CN 1) is necessarily zero-sum in nature; one superpower's gain translates to the others' loss 2) can be isolated and treated separately from the alignments of (and with) third-party countries, particularly with respect to US-allies in the Indo-Pacific such as Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia. On the first point, much of the literature on Southeast Asia's strategic alignments in general, and hedging behaviour in particular, focuses on its 'omnidirectionality' of engagement, with the ultimate goal being 'omni-enmeshment', which presupposes that alignments with the superpowers can be 'positive-sum'. In other words, strengthening ties in a particular domain with one superpower need not necessarily translate into the weakening of relations in said domain with the other. The nature of the AOCAI's alignment spectrum generally does not allow for such a possibility.

On the second point, self-imposed analytical blinders means that the AOCAI's alignment spectrum cannot account for (inter)relations and potentially overlapping alignments with third-parties. The practical effect of this is such that it may undercount or underestimate the actual extent of US influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Since China remains by-and-large a 'lonely superpower', the omission of Southeast Asia's alignments/interrelations with Russia or North Korea is likely to be minimal at best. However, given that many, if not most, of Southeast Asian countries have developed fairly substantial ties with countries like Australia, Japan, South Korea, and even India – economically and politically, if not necessarily militarily – the inability to account for such alignments works to diminish the true extent of US influence in the region. The AOCAI also cannot account for collective regional action to engage one or both of the superpowers. ASEAN's post-Cold War efforts to court and enmesh Beijing and

Washington – separately or together – are numerous, although its particular effects upon individual Southeast Asian countries are diffuse, and in any case cannot be captured by our index. As this discussion suggests, the AOCAI, while being a “first” in providing systematic and longitudinal data to measure alignments in Southeast Asia, remains a work-in-progress. Subsequent editions of the Index will seek to improve on what has been achieved here, for example, by having a separate section on additional measures of alignment for which we may not have 30 years of data, but which are nevertheless compelling.

Future research could endeavour to expand the list of countries beyond SEA-10: aside from Timor Leste, countries in Northeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania could all conceivably be included, which would undoubtedly enrich the picture considerably. The US-China competition is, after all, almost certain to become the defining feature of international relations for the foreseeable future; having an idea of how countries line up on a spectrum between them, and indeed in relation to neighbours and regional states, is likely to be an invaluable resource.