

## Asia policymaker perspectives: Multipolarity and great power competition in Southeast Asia

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*In a new series of interviews, members of Global Counsel's Asia team will interview thought-leaders in policy and business from across the region, focusing on key themes for Global Counsel including geopolitics, trade and technological developments and the impact on business and politics.*

*In the first interview of the series, Global Counsel Senior Associate Andrew Yeo speaks with Mr. Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore's former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and current Chairman of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore, to discuss multipolarity and why Southeast Asian countries view ongoing US-China relations in non-binary terms.*

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**Some people have characterised Southeast Asia as being a lot more attuned to Chinese influence, especially with the US's America First policy and its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Is this an accurate assessment?**

Some years ago, I asked a Vietnamese friend - my counterpart in the Vietnamese foreign service - what an impending change of leadership in Hanoi meant for Vietnam's relations with China. And his reply was: every Vietnamese leader has to both get along with and stand up to China, and if you think you cannot do both at the same time, you do not deserve to be leader. That is the Southeast Asian diplomatic instinct, practiced in different degrees and ways by almost every country in the region.

As a big country contiguous to Southeast Asia, China will always have significant influence. But it does not mean that countries will want to have an exclusive relationship with China, or even that China will their dominant relationship.

For example, Philippines's President Duterte has cancelled the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US. He is obviously playing to the gallery. There has always been an anti-American streak in Filipino nationalism which he, to some extent, shares. And he is doing so because there has been a certain backlash by the public about his handling of the Wuhan coronavirus and he is trying to balance it off. At the same time, he has enhanced his relationship over the last few years with Japan, America's principal ally in East Asia. And you will find Southeast Asia replete with similar examples.

The only country that has wholeheartedly swung to China's side is Cambodia under Hun Sen. Will that last? I doubt it. There is a very strong undercurrent in Cambodia of wanting a more balanced relationship with the major powers, especially among younger people. And Hun Sen will not be there forever. There is a biological end to his rule, whether he understands it or not.

Even Laos, a Leninist state like China and with little options, removed some leaders in 2016 for being too pro-Chinese, including the deputy prime minister and foreign minister.

It is thus too simple to think that Southeast Asia thinks of their choices as being binary. This is a naturally multipolar region, and the natural inclination of multipolarity is going to be enhanced moving forward.

**Why do they think that way in managing relations with great powers?**

There are two points to bear in mind. First, Southeast Asia is no stranger to great power competition. It has always been an arena for different great powers from time immemorial. The cast of great powers changes, and right now it is focused on the US and China.

Secondly, we tend to think of the period of the so-called liberal international order as the natural order of things. It is not the natural order of things. In fact, the only time when there seemed to be only one viable idea of international order was historically very short, from 1989 when the Berlin Wall went down, to 2008, when the global financial crisis broke out. It was exceptional because international order has historically usually been divided and contested. We are now returning to a more normal period. We may not find it comfortable, but that's the fact.

If you bear these two facts in mind, then I think you have a more nuanced idea of the position most Southeast Asian countries take. A dynamic and complex pattern of relationships has developed in Southeast Asia with countries sometimes tilting one way or another as their interests dictate but never conceiving of their choices in a simplistic binary way.

**Could you elaborate on the trends that are enhancing Southeast Asia's natural multipolarity which you described earlier?**

Southeast Asia's natural inclination of multipolarity is going to be enhanced by three factors.

The first factor is that all major power relationships in the post-cold war period are not free of ambiguity. They combine deep strategic mistrust with profound interdependence, which means that they cannot separate themselves as much as they like from strategic competitors. That's quite clear as we look at the US-China trade war. That doesn't mean they will not try, but it's impossible because they are too intertwined. They may divide themselves in certain domains, but not overall, in the same way as with the Soviet Union during the cold war.

The second factor is the idea of America being in retreat is a trope. America is recalibrating the manner of its engagement with many regions of the world in accordance with a narrower and more transactional idea of its national interest, with a greater emphasis on unilateralism or bilateralism. But at the same time, it has made very clear both in words and in deeds its intention to compete robustly with China through technology transfer, trade and other things.

If I am going to compete robustly, I am not going to retreat. President Trump doesn't make as pretty speeches as Obama, but Obama was a disaster. He made pretty speeches but did very little. When Obama drew a red line over the use of chemical weapons in Syria and then did nothing, he degraded the credibility of American power in East Asia. When Trump bombed Syria while having dinner with Xi Jinping, he did quite a lot to restore the credibility of American power. For all its crudity, Trump has restored deterrence.

Obama's handling of the Scarborough Shoal was a disaster. He talked about the pivot but did very little and every time the 7th Fleet conducted a Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea (SCS), immediately a quasi-metaphysical discussion broke out between the Pentagon and the White House about whether a FONOP is really a FONOP, which destroyed its effect. Under Trump, the 7th Fleet is doing what it always should have done, which is to just conduct FONOPs, and people who need to know will know.

The third factor is that the nature of alliance systems is changing. Japan has decided it will remain within the American alliance system. However, it will do more by itself in order to remain within the alliance system and to deal with a more transactional America. For example, it is providing maritime domain awareness capabilities and ships to ASEAN countries and has come clean on its so-called helicopter aircraft carriers with the purchase of the vertical take-off F35s; they are real aircraft carriers. A Japan playing a greater strategic role is a good thing.

In the long run, the logic of the situation will lead Japan - as it led France and Britain many decades ago in Europe - to obtain an independent nuclear deterrent within the American alliance system; and they are doing it with American acquiescence. The US-Japan nuclear cooperation agreement is unique because it allows Japan to reprocess nuclear material and there is only one reason any country needs to do that. That agreement is about 40 years old. So this is not just because of Trump, although he may have speeded things up. For almost 40 years, the Americans have acquiesced and tacitly encouraged the Japanese to prepare for an eventual independent nuclear deterrent.

When that happens a nuclear balance of mutually assured destruction will reinforce the natural multipolarity of the region. A nuclear balance freezes a multipolar order because it becomes too dangerous to change it. The US is not going to disappear. Japan is going to step up. India is slow, but it is contiguous to Southeast Asia. Indonesia is not an inconsiderable power. Vietnam is not an inconsiderable power. There is also South Korea and Australia. This is a multipolar region.

#### **How do major powers seek to influence Southeast Asian states?**

Major powers try to influence other countries by a variety of means both overt and covert. This is a fact of life. The Americans did it, the Chinese do it, the Japanese, Australians and Indians try to do so too.

Interestingly, an unintended consequence of the trade war was to wear some of the shiny gloss off the Chinese narrative. The Chinese story is a story of success. But it was so brilliantly shiny that we did not see some of the flaws in the story. The trade war began to expose those flaws and weaknesses. It exposed gaps in Chinese technology that is not going to be easy for them to fill. People are taking a far more cautious attitude towards Belt and Road projects. Nobody is going to shun Chinese investment, but people will be more cautious about doing their due diligence, doing their sums and so on. This is important because 'influence' is ultimately a psychological phenomenon and if you see China whole, warts and all, you keep your psychological poise.

And now, you have the COVID-19, which has really thrown into stark relief China's strengths and weaknesses, not just for other countries but for the Chinese people themselves. The strengths

are obvious. Very few countries can lock down an entire province or build a couple of hospitals within ten days. On the other hand, it has also become very clear that the system incentivises concealing information from the top which allowed the disease to spread.

**Let's talk about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). What role does it play in the preservation of this multipolar order?**

ASEAN is not a perfect organisation. But far too much criticism of ASEAN amounts to criticising a cow for being an imperfect horse. This is pointless. A cow is useful in its own right but it will never be a horse.

ASEAN's fundamental purpose is to manage relations among its members because stable relationships among its members is not to be taken for granted, given the historical background of Southeast Asia, which is still a very relevant factor. Everything else ASEAN does is a means to this end, whether it is economic cooperation or projects we do together. It is a means of developing this habit of working together in order to manage relationships.

In that respect, ASEAN has done very well, because there has been peace for more than 50 years since its formation in 1967. This was not to be taken for granted given the condition in Southeast Asia prior to 1967. There have been skirmishes, periods of tension and diplomatic shouting at each other, but no major conflict or war. That is a major achievement.

**How does ASEAN differ from the European Union (EU)?**

ASEAN is not a supra-national organisation. It is hard for people in Europe to understand this because when they think of regional organisations, they instinctively think of the EU.

ASEAN is an inter-state organisation, so it cannot move faster than the slowest of its members. It works by consensus, because any other type of decision-making risks even small differences escalating out of control. Consensus decision-making also reassures the smaller countries that the bigger countries are not going to impose their will on them and reassures the bigger countries that smaller countries are not going to gang up on them. That helps manage relationships.

But frankly, even the EU is not working too well, because it comes up against the hard reality of nationalism and the ideals of its leaders are not always shared by its people. Hence you have things like Brexit and right-wing movements, even in Germany.

**Does this limit the effectiveness of ASEAN in managing relations with external powers?**

All inter-state organisations work best when they do not work too well, starting from the United Nations (UN). The League of Nations failed because it tried to take actions against the interest of big powers. The UN did not make mistakes because it has a fuse-box called the veto of the five permanent members. That's why the UN has survived while the League of Nations disappeared into history.

Similarly, ASEAN and its forums such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus work because they work well enough for the major powers to find it useful for them to participate, but they don't work so well that they can jeopardise or stymie any vital interest of

any major power. But the very fact that ASEAN manages relationships among its members minimizes opportunities for major powers to engage the region in disruptive ways, as has happened during the cold war.

**What is your assessment of current domestic politics in Southeast Asia? How does it affect the working of ASEAN?**

Indonesia has not yet reached a stable post-Suharto equilibrium. Indonesia is an idea as well as a geographical place, and there is contest between whether it will be a secular, nationalist idea of Indonesia, or an Islamist-of-some-kind idea of Indonesia. Another contestation is whether it is going to be a unitary state or a looser federated arrangement. Most of the Indonesian elite will say it should be a unitary state, but within that there is still a lot of room for discussion about the exact relationship between the centre (Jakarta) and the regions. This is not a trivial question for a huge, sprawling archipelago. It was made more complicated because after Suharto fell, Habibie in a rather ill-considered way, passed regional autonomy laws which made these relationships very ambiguous.

Malaysian politics is in a state of utter confusion right now. The Pakatan Harapan coalition that defeated Barisan Nasional did not expect to win, cannot keep its promises and is beset by infighting. The fundamental cause is demographics. The Chinese amount to 23.4% of the population and is falling fast. Therefore, Malaysian politics is going to become even more Malay-Islamist politics. The ruling coalition won with only about 30% of the Malay vote - by the most optimistic estimate - whereas the opposition PAS and UMNO have 65% of the Malay vote - by the most pessimistic estimate. This is just not sustainable, and you can see it in the confusion. What little order in Malaysia is being held together by a 94-year old prime minister.

Thailand is in a state of suspended political conflict. It seems stable but there is a lot going on beneath the surface. Again, this is not sustainable over the long run. I can go on but let us not depress ourselves too much.

We will be in this situation for a long time to come because the domestic political complexities are not going to disappear overnight. But we have gone through worse; when ASEAN was born in the midst of a hot war on the mainland of Southeast Asia, we survived that. At that time, all the original ASEAN-5 members faced internal communist insurgencies. Right now, it's going to be very difficult between the US and China, but because it is not just going to be the US and China, there will be Japan, Australia, India, South Korea, so there is manoeuvre space for the smaller countries of Southeast Asia provided we have the wit to recognise it and the courage to use it.

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