



SOUTHEAST ASIANS HOPE FOR NEUTRALITY, PREPARE FOR A CHOICE

BY HUONG LE THU

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As the United States openly pursues great power competition with offers of an Indo-Pacific vision that does not accept China's dominance, Southeast Asians are increasingly uncomfortable with being forced to "choose."

Southeast Asia – a region traditionally influenced by great power competition – has transformed itself into a convening venue for major power politics. In the process, Southeast Asian states have perfected hedging strategies by avoiding commitments to any outside power to maximize their influence while minimizing the gap between themselves and the major powers. They have managed to transform the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) into the host of big and important summits that endorse cooperation, while discussing security concerns and strategic intentions. In this sense, ASEAN through its summits has become a fulcrum where regional and even global politics are part of the discussion.

Leading up to this year's summits, several pressing questions were in the spotlight. How would the great power competition between the US and China play out amidst a budding tariff war and growing military confrontation? How would the US elaborate on its Indo-Pacific strategy, and could it get ASEAN buy-in for that strategy?

Following the announcement in the US National Security and Defense strategies and more recently in Vice President Mike Pence's speech at the Hudson

Institute that the Trump administration viewed China as a competitor and revisionist power, most Southeast Asian states reiterated the region's mantra of not wanting to choose sides. The US version of the free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy that gained attention after President Trump's speech a year ago at the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in Vietnam, has had a mixed reception in the region. Most regional actors saw the US version of FOIP as a strategy to contain China and as dismissive of ASEAN, despite numerous reassurances that ASEAN centrality was a key tenet of the strategy. The recent incident in the South China Sea involving a near-miss between the *USS Decatur* and a Chinese *Luyang* destroyer has prompted some to acknowledge what Beijing has been saying for years – the US presence in the region escalates tensions.

This year's summits showed, in a crafty, subtle ASEAN way, that Southeast Asian countries are increasingly working their ways with China. Despite concerns over China's growing military might and Beijing's disregard for international law, leaders of ASEAN states have officially emphasized their collective ability to resolve tensions with China over the South China Sea within the framework – however problematic it is – that they have worked out over years: negotiation of the Code of Conduct. Newly initiated multilateral maritime exercises have also shown ASEAN's collective ability to engage in security cooperation with China.

During his visit to Singapore for the ASEAN summits, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang signed several agreements with Singapore – this year's chairman and host of ASEAN – including an upgrade of the China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, which will give Singapore companies greater access to the Chinese market. More interestingly, the two parties emphasized being 'like-minded.' As Li said, "We share many common beliefs. We both want to safeguard multilateralism and free trade, we also want to safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea."

This like-mindedness seems to be shared with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who also expressed concern that US warships are responsible for increasing tension in the region.

Referring to the evolving US strategy in the region, he responded: “Well, if the strategy does not include sending the [Seventh Fleet](#) into the area, we are welcome to that.”

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte’s stance is no surprise. In characteristic bluntness, Duterte, who arguably has the highest stakes (next to Vietnam) in relations with China, said that China was “[already in possession](#)” of the South China Sea, and that military drills by the US and its allies are creating frictions that were derailing efforts to settle disputes over these waters between Beijing and its neighbors.

Within ASEAN, there has been a concern that the US-led FOIP excludes China – something that none of the regional actors see as desirable. Vice President Pence’s mission during this year’s summit season was to clarify US intentions. He said, “Let me be clear, though: our vision for the Indo-Pacific excludes no nation. It only requires that nations treat their neighbors with respect, and respect the sovereignty of our nations and international rules and order.” He emphasized, however, that, “We all agree that empire and aggression have no place in the Indo-Pacific.” The rally for support continued at the APEC meeting in Papua New Guinea, which was transformed into an arena of mutual finger-pointing between Xi Jinping and Pence.

Despite Washington’s wooing, ASEAN seems to have adopted its version of the Indo-Pacific, responding to FOIP with one that would include China. Indonesia, which has taken the lead in conceptualizing ASEAN’s version of an Indo-Pacific strategy, extended an invitation to China to work with ASEAN during meetings in Singapore. President Jokowi said, “We are facing a host of security challenges in the region, not only in the Pacific Ocean but also in the Indian Ocean. [ASEAN-China has no choice but to collaborate](#) in addressing these developments. One issue that I want to underline is the importance of ASEAN and China to strengthen cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.”

Neutrality remains the most desired option for a Southeast Asia that wants to engage with all powers. But as Prime Minister Lee admitted, ‘circumstances may come’ where ASEAN could have to “[choose one](#)

[over the other.](#)” Singapore, Lee added, will opt for selective choices depending on the area, as well try to benefit from great power competition. But not all regional countries are in this position. Most Southeast Asians are making efforts to delay, if not avoid, such a moment. But pragmatism dominates in Southeast Asia despite the neutral official language. “China is here” is a reality that all recognize.

The US articulation of its Indo-Pacific strategy thus far focuses on China by countering its influence. But in doing so, it plays to China’s strength, which is its dominant role as an economic partner in Southeast Asia. Washington should provide more substance to its strategy and highlight US contributions to the region rather than its competition with China over influence to make the FOIP strategy more than simply countering Beijing.

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