



SOUTHEAST ASIA MUST DEAL WITH THE WORLD AS IT IS

BY ELBRIDGE COLBY

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For the United States government, competing with China must now be a national priority, as indicated in multiple US strategy documents. But the US is not competing for its own sake; rather, it is seeking to achieve very specific goals that are of the utmost importance for Southeast Asia. The US has a deep and abiding interest in the region's fate. This is because the Indo-Pacific is more and more the world's most important region, primarily because of the size and dynamism of its economy. Any country that can set the terms of trade and write the rules of the road for the Indo-Pacific will do so for the world.

It is increasingly evident in Washington that China seeks to do just this by establishing its hegemony over the Indo-Pacific region. So empowered, Beijing would be able to shape trade and regional order to favor its own prosperity, security, and political interests. China does not seek to conquer territory for its own sake; rather, it seeks to have important decisions in the region be routed through Beijing. This may be natural, as some argue, but it is also unacceptable for those who wish to preserve their freedom and autonomy.

It is sometimes put in very general terms that China simply wants "a seat at the table" or to "have a share in writing the rules." But let us be concrete. Observe

how China has used canola with Canada, bananas with the Philippines, tourism with South Korea, and rare earth metals with Japan to consider how a China that becomes the strongest in the region will treat subordinate countries, including in Southeast Asia. In recent years China has disregarded intellectual property protections, imposed unfair joint venture requirements, and held investment decisions over weaker countries' heads. Now consider how a stronger China will behave in the future if unchecked. In practice, such a China would privilege its own prosperity and strength over others and would ensure that important decisions are ultimately made in Beijing, not locally. This is of such gravity to the United States because a China that dominated Asia could do the same to the US, given the scale of the Indo-Pacific economy.

This is important because the United States is the only state in the world that can plausibly match China in total power. Yet already, a number of key Asian states are making clear that they do not want China to dominate Asia. In particular, Japan and India are both powerful states that have pushed back on Chinese assertiveness – in the case of Japan, especially over the Senkakus, and in India's over Doklam.

As a consequence, China has focused on Southeast Asia and will likely continue to do so. Southeast Asia is composed of a significant number of states, none as strong as Japan or India, and with many differences among them. Unsurprisingly in this light, China has made tremendous strides in seizing disputed features in the South China Sea and turning them into military bases. The military power these bases provide may not be much compared to that of the US military, but they certainly are significant when compared to the capabilities of the individual Southeast Asian states. At the same time, China is dispensing investment and access around the region to build leverage.

For many years, Southeast Asia has temporized, resisting going in one direction or another. But whether they like it or not, those in the region do face a choice. To paraphrase Trotsky, you may not be interested in strategic reality, but it is interested in you. That choice is not between total affiliation with the United States or with China. But it is a choice as to

whether these states will preserve their sovereignty and national freedom.

The interests of the United States are in preserving and protecting the sovereign freedom of states, so that it can trade and interact with states in the region without undue encumbrance. This interest goes back to the “Open Door Policy” and our opening of Japan. The US does not want to have to check with Beijing or anyone else to trade or interact with other states. The US interest is therefore in strengthening Southeast Asian states and in their standing firm for their sovereign interests, including but not limited to claims in the South China Sea. The US thus does not seek confrontation with China, let alone to dominate it; rather, it recognizes that the only way to achieve stability is through competing – building the strength together that is needed to check any overweening Chinese ambitions.

Beijing’s interests are in ASEAN’s lassitude. China is and will be so strong that it does not need states in Southeast Asia to do anything. Simply ignoring the problem is enough. Thus, if these states “accept [Beijing’s] assurances at face value” about its commitment to “work together with all partners in the spirit of openness, inclusiveness, and transparency,” as Foreign Minister Balakrishnan of Singapore recommended recently – despite all evidence to the contrary – then they will be doing enough for China.

Fundamentally, the nations of Southeast Asia must see strategic realities as they are, not as they might wish them to be. All states will continue trading and interacting with China to some degree, but they must together build positions of strength to ensure – not simply hope – that China will respect the common interests in national sovereignty and freedom.

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