



REPLY TO PACNET 35

BY BRANTLY WOMACK

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In May 1949 Dean Acheson initiated US Cold War involvement in Southeast Asia because of concerns about China. Vietnam and Southeast Asia were not important in themselves, but as dominoes in the global fight against world communism. Like dominoes, Southeast Asians were assumed to have no agency of their own, or to understand their predicament. Seventy years later the same proclivity toward deriving a regional policy from global strategy is still evident inside the Washington DC beltway. Elbridge Colby in "Southeast Asia Must Deal with the World as It Is" (PacNet #35, June 21, 2019) is the latest to lecture the region about their true interest in supporting the US global strategy.

Colby sees different dominoes, but the same game. He argues that the Indo-Pacific is the most important region in the world, and "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." If China goes unchecked, "it would privilege its own prosperity and strength over others and would ensure that important decisions are ultimately made in Beijing, not locally." And if that happens in the Indo-Pacific, then "a China that dominated Asia could do the same to the US." As in the 1950s, the dominoes will not stop until they reach Hawaii. While this reality is vivid in Washington, Southeast Asians tend to get lost in the weeds.

We lost the Cold War in Asia, and the basic problem was that we were ignorant of – or didn't care about – regional perspectives and interests. We served a higher mission for the benefit of the unenlightened. Our intrusion into the region was one of the reasons for the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. Unlike the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the unsuccessful NATO clone that the US tried to start in the 1950s, ASEAN is not an alliance against anyone, but rather a regional association based on consensus that tries to improve relationships with any and all other countries. ASEAN has thrived, and so has the region. It has a population of over 600 million and an economy slightly larger than that of Latin America. It deserves serious attention in its own right.

Colby is certainly correct that China is a growing presence in the region. Except for a trough after 1989, every year since 1981 the Chinese economy has grown faster than that of Southeast Asia. It doubled the region in 2006, and is currently 296% of the region's GDP. By comparison, the US economy is 271% of Latin America's. In terms of sheer mass, therefore, Southeast Asia stands in the shadow of China. If China's economy grows at 6.2% in 2019 as forecast, then it will probably be slower than some Southeast Asian countries, but its added production in 2019 will be more than the entire Thai economy.

Another important dimension of China's economy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia is its rise in developmental status. There have been dramatic changes in China's relative status since 1980. Initially China's per capita GNP was beneath the "poor four" of ASEAN. It did not rise above that group until 1988, but by 2000 it had doubled their per capita GNP. China has been climbing relative to the middle ASEAN countries since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and in 2018 its GNP per capita surpassed their average for the first time. When the US looks at China it sees an economy with four times its population but one-fourth its GNP per capita, a demographic power but not an equal in developmental status. Southeast Asia looks sideways if not up at China in development. And a visit to Shanghai or Shenzhen only confirms the perception.

With twice the population and three times the production it is hardly surprising that China is again

becoming the center of attention in Southeast Asia. If we add its rapid increases in connectivity with the region, integration amplifies centrality. In a [recent poll](#) of regional opinion leaders, 73% thought that China had the most economic influence, compared to 11% for ASEAN and only 8% for the United States. One could say therefore, that, as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, Xi Jinping's notion of "a community of common destiny" is a reality rather than a dream. The question remains whether a shared destiny remains one of mutual benefit and respect.

Southeast Asians are certainly concerned about China's rise and what it portends. However, the major objections to Xi's leadership raised by the United States and other developed countries have a quite different salience in Southeast Asia. The region is not happy about the treatment of Uighurs, but it has its own problems, including the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar and their refugee status elsewhere, as well as Duterte's mass executions of drug suspects in the Philippines. At a deeper level, there is strong sentiment that Asian values are different from Western values and that official judgments should not be made concerning the internal affairs of other countries. Regarding intellectual property, the region shares China's situation of being on the receiving end rather than on the protecting end. Finally, the region did not share US illusions that China's economic development would lead to democratization. In fact, democratization has had its ups and downs in Southeast Asia, and tolerance of regime differences is part of the culture of ASEAN. The concern raised by [Kiron Skinner](#), chief of policy planning at the US State Department, that rivalry with China is "the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian" sounds a bit different when heard by other non-Caucasians.

The prestige of the United States has fallen dramatically in Southeast Asia during the Trump administration. After his first hundred days, 44% of [regional foreign policy elites](#) thought the US was undependable and another 11% considered it extremely undependable. In a [2018 poll](#) the US and China were equally distrusted. Colby is correct that Southeast Asia is in the weeds regarding the "Indo-Pacific region." 61% think the concept is unclear,

while 17% think it is a good idea and an equal number fear that it might undermine ASEAN's relevance in the regional order. If we assume that the Indo-Pacific includes the littorals of both oceans, then it stretches through three quarters of the world's longitude and all of the world's habitable latitude. No wonder it is so important. If only it were a region!

If there is to be a new Cold War between the United States and China, Southeast Asia would rather sit this one out. The last thing it wants to do is to side with one or the other. They were not a coalition of the willing in the first one, and they have even less reason to join in on the rerun. Contrary to the domino image, the region thinks for itself, and is not a pushover.

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