

PRAGMATISM VERSUS PRINCIPLES: HOW REGIONAL ACTORS ARE NAVIGATING THE CHINA-U.S. STANDOFF IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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The 33rd Asian Pacific Roundtable, held 24 to 26 June 2019, was enveloped by two major developments in the region: the start of the U.S.-China trade dispute and the publication of the United States' [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), which commits to “sustain American influence in the region to ensure favorable balances of power and safeguard the free and open international order.” With the background of the major power standoff, it was clear that Southeast Asian nations were questioning how to navigate what was often characterized as a binary security choice: side with China or the United States. However, in reality, the various roundtable discussions at the APR, revealed that few ASEAN countries felt compelled to choose between the U.S. and China. Rather, the question they seemed to be grappling with was how to best utilize the current focus on their region to support their national interests and how to continue engaging with China without being negatively affected.

This was perhaps best exemplified in the selection and placement of the second plenary

session on Asia-Europe partnership in which they explored how the EU can get more involved in the security arena in Southeast Asia. Speakers emphasized how the EU's involvement would help balance the global power structure and act as a pacifying force between China and the U.S. The session came off as a weak plea for someone else to get involved in the region and provide more security resources (I read, “money”) and asked for a strong commitment from the EU to stay involved. Is this a desire to side with the U.S. vision for the region but maintain a face of not openly siding with the U.S.? Probably not. The EU has many shared interests with the U.S. For example, France updated its [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) in May 2019 and highlighted the nuclear threat of North Korea, the militarization of contested islands in the South China Sea, terrorism, and the dangers of climate change. However, the plenary speakers, rather than call for a free and open Indo-Pacific, kept emphasizing that China's rise would not be stopped and that the region has to engage with China, and one speaker positively noted the common stereotype that Europe is soft on China. Southeast Asia is looking for partners that will work with China.

Are we all in a Catch-22 scenario? One of the Japanese speakers astutely asked, is there a free and open Indo-Pacific that includes China? That would be ideal, but the threat the region and international order face is one in which a rising power is trying to gain enough influence to rewrite an economic system in its favor at the expense of weaker states. In the first plenary session, Colby Eldridge from the Center for New American Security, broad-stroke described the U.S. intents in the region as one of checking the rising strength and assertiveness of China in the region to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. In his recent [opinion piece](#), he says, “The interests of the US are in preserving and protecting the sovereign freedom of nation states, so that we can trade and interact with them without undue encumbrance.” He goes on to address Southeast Asia saying, “You may not be interested in strategic reality, to paraphrase Russian intellectual Leon Trotsky, 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 you will preserve your sovereignty and national freedom.” A fellow Young Leader brought to my attention [a recent incident in the Philippines](#) in which President Duterte absolved China of any militant when a Chinese ship did a hit-and-run of Philippine fisherman in Philippine waters. Wanting to pursue a positive relationship with China meant not asserting the state’s maritime sovereignty. Where will this lead in the long run?

The U.S.-China standoff overshadowed a conference that is supposed to focus on ASEAN. No one in the region wants to pick a side on that. Does the US want people to pick a side? Yes, but not a pro-US side, rather a pro-Free and open Indo-Pacific vision for the region, which would require states to stand up to Chinese abuse of national sovereignty and predatory lending. Unfortunately, the phrase “free and open Indo-Pacific” seems to be synonymous to a message of “U.S., yes; China, no.” Southeast Asian states are being pragmatic, but what will be the cost on them and the international order in the long term? It is regrettable to mention that in the face of a bilateral security choice, multilateral efforts such as the Trans Pacific Partnership may have been the better strategic choice for a region that doesn’t want to choose only between the U.S. and China.

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