



***THE STATE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC  
CALLS FOR A UNITED AND  
ASSERTIVE ASEAN***

BY RON HUISKEN

*Ron Huiskens ([ron.huiskens@anu.edu.au](mailto:ron.huiskens@anu.edu.au)) is an adjunct Associate Professor, Strategic & Defence Studies Centre, ANU and Editor of the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook.*

*The following has been adapted from the introduction to the [Regional Security Outlook 2024](#), prepared by the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific.*

The contemporary China-US relationship—the relationship between the world’s oldest and newest major powers—lies at the heart of our region’s dilemma. This relationship has its roots in the remarkable meeting between Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong in Shanghai in 1972. This meeting occurred over a decade after China’s alliance relationship with the Soviet Union collapsed, three years after infantry skirmishes between the former allies along the Azur River in 1969 almost spiraled into open war and, reportedly, with the United States dampening Soviet overtures to support an attack on China’s nascent nuclear forces. Thereafter, the US-China relationship, although not without occasional frictions, had some depth and intimacy. For instance, China hosted US intelligence and verification facilities directed at the Soviet Union and the Reagan administration even directed the Pentagon to plan for significant assistance to China in the event of Sino-Soviet conflict.

An enduring source of US optimism about relations with China was Deng Xiaoping’s experiments with market economics from the late 1970s and the eventual adoption of the market system as a central component of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Washington’s crude rule of thumb

was that economic liberalism would eventually seep into China’s political culture.

The first signs of a deeper change in US confidence about a positive relationship with China came during the presidential election campaign in 2000, when Al Gore and the Democrats continued to characterize China as a “partner,” while Republicans behind George W. Bush preferred “rival” or “competitor.”

The new century brought a further crucial dimension to the China factor: greater clarity that Beijing would acquire the economic weight and technological capabilities commensurate with those of a major power and grow further to become the largest economy in the world. This heightened the impact of major US policy blunders, such as the 2003 intervention of Iraq and the global financial crisis of 2007-8, because they diminished US power and influence, sharpening the potential challenge from China.

As widely anticipated, ensuring that the post-Cold War contours of the Indo-Pacific exhibits robust stability has been exceedingly challenging. As the Cold War unraveled in the early 1990’s, many placed their trust in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the most suitable manager of the pioneering multilateral security process in the region, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Complementary ASEAN processes—the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting—emerged later alongside several bilateral initiatives focused on high-level dialogue.

These initiatives, however, have failed to foster attitudes and develop processes to manage and diminish regional tensions and the potential for conflict. An intensifying animosity between the United States and China has deflated the regional spirit, inflamed quarrels, replaced optimism with trepidation, and made the notorious “Thucydides Trap” into a regional theme song.

In these circumstances, nurturing the recent revival in China-US engagement is a welcome development, as it will help minimize the risks of a relapse into the deep animosity that has seeped into the relationship in

recent decades. Engagement can help nudge these giants toward a workable accommodation and a more constructive regional security agenda. While regional countries should encourage and support this endeavor—and most certainly will—ASEAN has crucial agency in this regard. Any actor seeking regional primacy must either intimidate or attract the support of this cluster of medium and small powers. It was the recognition of that reality that led to ASEAN securing management of the ARF some 30 years ago, and it remains the case today.

ASEAN should readily accept and manage the existence of two disproportionately powerful states and further embed them in the region's security architecture. Doing so would echo the notion of inclusivity that permeates the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN should make clear that aspirations to contain or sweep away a rival power is irresponsible and a threat to regional peace and stability. History should be a guide; past conflicts in various parts of the world show that key players have a proclivity to be driven by hazy and misleading images of outsized power and influence, often yielding bad, even terrible, outcomes. ASEAN should thus convey that message relentlessly to both Beijing and Washington, in the hope that they will listen and won't repeat past mistakes.

ASEAN leaders should use this as a foundation to encourage an earnest dialogue with and between the United States and China to identify joint goals and priorities for the region, and a strategy to achieve them in a timely fashion. ASEAN leaders should draw on skilled analysts to define the scope and scape of the various issues and/or themes that should receive attention and to facilitate and advance this work. Doing so would make clear that ASEAN means business.

The Indo-Pacific faces a formidable challenge, one that requires focused leadership on the part of many, notably ASEAN.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*