



**AMIDST GREAT POWER
COMPETITION, ASEAN NATIONS
FAVOR DIVERSIFICATION**

BY ANGELO M'BA

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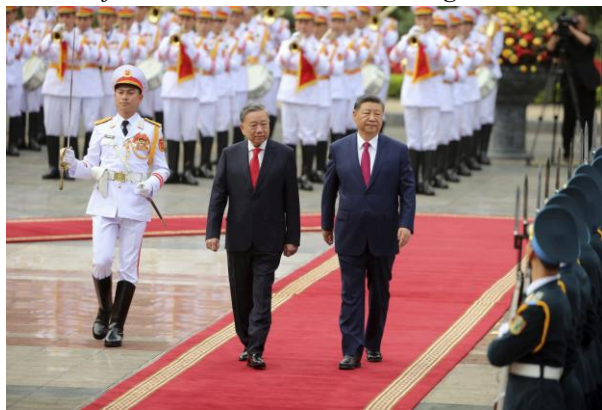


Photo: Vietnamese General Secretary of the Communist Party to Lam, center and Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, review the guard of the Presidential Palace in Hanoi, Vietnam Monday, April 14th, 2025. Credit: [Associated Press](#)

As the great power competition between China and the United States intensifies, its ripple effects reshape the global geopolitical chessboard, forcing third parties to revisit their strategies. This holds particularly true in the Indo-Pacific and constitutes a growing challenge for Southeast Asian nations, which are increasingly drawn into the U.S.-China power struggle.

In such a scenario, textbook Realist international relations literature would expect smaller regional powers to align with either the United States or China for protection. Media outlets tend to echo such beliefs through frequent speculative takes on whether a smaller power will succumb to the charm offensive of either great power—the [Fiji](#) being a recent such example. However, such assumptions fail to appreciate the nuances of regional geopolitics.

Indeed, reality challenges such neatly defined—and contrived—theories, which do not account for the agency or idiosyncrasy of the concerned actors. We notice increasingly louder calls from Southeast Asia to escape the binary choice between Washington, a traditional security provider, and Beijing, the regional economic and trade powerhouse.

Caught between Two Giants

Injunctions to align with either great power are not explicit, across-the-board ultimatums. Rather, they are creeping rhetorical, security, and economic strategies simultaneously pressuring ASEAN countries on both flanks.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific footprint has mostly been built through its role as a security provider—a role no other military can endorse. Leading initiatives such as the Quad, AUKUS, and bilateral security partnerships, Washington has established itself as the only actor able to safeguard Southeast Asian security, especially against increased tensions in the South China Sea, a central regional issue.

This posture is routinely backed by rhetoric targeting China. This was particularly apparent in the [address](#) of U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at the Shangri-La Dialogue in May-June 2025, where he strongly asserted that “the threat China poses [to the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific] is real, and it could be imminent.” Through such language, Washington prompts regional powers to align with the United States against its strategic and economic rival.

On the Chinese side, Beijing is deepening its imprint in regional economics, using [infrastructure](#)

[and trade](#) as its main incentives. These charm offensives do not operate in a vacuum. Following Trump's "Liberation Day" reciprocal tariffs in April 2025, which severely impacted [ASEAN nations](#) such as Cambodia (49%), Laos (48%), and Vietnam (46%), Xi Jinping went on an official visit to Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. The Chinese President leveraged this opportunity to [criticize](#) "protectionism and unilateralism," a clear reference to the United States, thus drawing a sharp contrast with China, its "[good neighborhood diplomacy](#)," and its commitment to regional stability and development. Amidst rising mistrust of U.S. economic commitment, Southeast Asia cannot shrug off China.

Strategic flexibility

Facing this dilemma, certain ASEAN countries align more clearly with a superpower at the expense of the other. Notably, the Philippines is strengthening its security relationship with the United States, mostly prompted by rising tension with China in the South China Sea over disputed territories. That said, this rapprochement comes after six years of distance under the presidency of Rodrigo Roa Duterte (2016–2022), who adopted equidistant diplomacy vis-à-vis Beijing and Washington—underscoring that alignments are not set in stone and indeed are influenced by domestic politics.

This example, among others, highlights that ASEAN is not a monolith with a uniform set of interests. However, Southeast Asian countries usually prefer to selectively engage great powers and avoid over-relying on them. This strategic flexibility ensures independence while not sacrificing national interests by leaving strategies dictated by a third party. While not choosing becomes increasingly harder for ASEAN nations, the alternative would considerably alienate either a strong security provider or a key economic partner—a costly decision either way.

Exercising strategic flexibility does not mean that ASEAN nations are neutral. Rather, they temporarily align on discrete topics with one or the other superpower, or a third actor, while rejecting allegiances. This approach is key for the survival of smaller powers, which would rather engage all

parties, thereby multiplying avenues to serve their interests. As such, multilateralism and minilateralism have emerged as preferred regional governance frameworks.

Minilateralism

Given the power imbalance in a bilateral relationship between two countries with a significant power disparity, multipolarity gives room for smaller powers to safeguard their agency. Smaller platforms, such as ASEAN, have become key platforms for such players to engage in even-footed relationships. That said, Southeast Asian actors understand they cannot solely rely on ASEAN and actively diversify their "partnership portfolio."

To this end, minilateral frameworks fit ASEAN members' strategies remarkably well. In short, minilateralism is a form of multilateralism that involves a few select countries collaborating on a specific issue. Operating in reduced numbers, each party holds considerable power in decision-making. By multiplying minilateral partnerships on select issues, smaller powers can cater to their various interests without developing any dependencies.

Despite these efforts to diversify their partnerships, this strategy should not be mistaken for subordination to another actor. Indeed, diversification is but a means to the end of not over-relying on a single superpower to maintain independence.

Is Pressuring Smaller Powers Counterproductive?

As smaller powers caught between two giants, ASEAN nations have no choice but to adopt a pragmatic foreign policy. This has materialized in calls for other regional, like-minded actors to establish a web of partnerships to promote balance in an increasingly tense region.

Not unlike the EU, which many mistakenly thought would move closer to China after repeated economic and rhetorical attacks from the United States, ASEAN nations' answer to intensified great power competition has been to prioritize

themselves and seek new approaches—such as minilateralism—that benefit their interests and agency.

Ultimately, it is not a sound strategy for either superpower to force Southeast Asian powers to align with them, as pressuring smaller powers in the Indo-Pacific may only accelerate the latter's desire for strategic diversification and reduce strategic and economic opportunities. Rather, embracing ASEAN nations' strategies while offering pragmatic venues for partnership is the best way for Indo-Pacific-facing powers to increase their footprint.