

Southeast Asia's American Embrace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Australians have become used to thinking about the rise of China, the role of America, and what the interplay between these two powers means for us. But we give much less thought to what these changes mean for Southeast Asia: the region inhabited by 600 million people that sits *between* Australia and China.

The rapid emergence of China as a potential global superpower means Southeast Asia is changing fast: The balance of power within the region is shifting at the same time as its geopolitical importance is on the rise.

All Southeast Asian states want to take advantage of the benefits of a rising China, yet none wants it to be in a position to dominate the region strategically. All welcome America's strategic 'pivot' towards Asia because they hope it will provide a counterbalance to China's growing weight. But like Australia, Southeast Asian states worry about a future where their major economic partner may come into conflict with their security guarantor.

Southeast Asian countries have very different histories and relationships with the United States and China. But the uniformity with which they now welcome America's engagement in their region is striking.

Maritime states, surrounding the hotly disputed South China Sea, hope America's influence will keep China's naval ambitions in check. America has long had close relationships with maritime states such as Singapore and the Philippines. But now even Vietnam, with its history of animosity towards the United States, enthusiastically welcomes Washington's overtures.

Mainland states bordering China have more distant relationships with the United States, and fall closely within Beijing's economic orbit. But they too see engaging with America as insurance against being completely controlled by Beijing. Most striking is Burma. Effectively a Chinese client state, Burma has recently made small steps towards reform in an effort to engage America and the West. Even the isolated Burmese generals hope that America's presence will give them a little more leverage over their giant northern neighbour.

Ultimately, all Southeast Asian states want to preserve their own autonomy and sovereignty. They hope that by engaging both major powers in different ways, they will be dominated by neither.

Southeast Asian states value multilateral engagement because it helps them pursue this strategy. It means they can engage both China and America without ruffling the other's feathers, and employ both in resolving thorny security issues like the South China Sea without stoking head-on tensions between them. Southeast Asian states have especially welcomed America's strategic pivot towards the region because of its multilateral element.

Like Australia, Southeast Asian states have benefitted immensely from the existing order. They can trade with China, and get lifted by the rising tide of its economic boom. They can also free ride on America's implicit security guarantee, meaning they can get on with the job of development without having to worry about waging costly wars. This model has served the region well for a number of decades. So it is not surprising that across Southeast Asia, governments judge that their interests are best served by the maintenance of this status quo. They know that as small countries, they only have limited power to affect this. But they also know that an actively engaged America is a necessary prerequisite to achieving it.

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Let there be no doubt: in the Asia Pacific in the 21st century,
the United States of America is all in.

— *Barack Obama in Canberra, November 2011*

Introduction

In November 2011, American President Barack Obama made his long-awaited first official visit to Australia. Any visit by an American president to Australia is considered momentous. But this visit held special significance. With wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, and the global centre of economic gravity shifting to Asia, Obama came to Australia not just to bolster our alliance but also to sell a clear message: America's strategic 'pivot' towards the Asia-Pacific.

Obama used his visit to announce an increase in American troops stationed in Darwin. But his speech in Canberra was not just targeted at Australians. Instead, it was carefully crafted for a wider Asian audience. Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, had begun to outline America's policy shift towards Asia a few weeks earlier. In a cover story for the magazine *Foreign Policy*, she declared that 'one of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will ... be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region ... We are prepared to lead.'¹ A few days before arriving in Australia, Obama outlined the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement between nine Asia-Pacific countries.

A significant aspect of America's policy shift is a renewed focus on Southeast Asia. America has long been the preponderant military power in the region. But since the end of the Cold War, it has been dogged by the perception that its interest has wavered—a perception exacerbated by Washington's focus on terrorism and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now, with the global centre of geopolitical gravity shifting towards Asia—largely thanks to the growing power of China—America is keen to once again bolster its leadership credentials. The question for the United States is whether its pivot will work. Will Asian countries naturally gravitate towards China as its influence expands, rendering America an increasingly irrelevant power?

So far, in Southeast Asia at least, the answer is no. As China has grown to become the region's leading economic power, and as debate swirls about whether it will become the region's leading military power, Southeast Asian states have not moved closer towards Beijing.² Quite the reverse: Almost all have deepened their interactions with America. Southeast Asian states' relationships with the United States are vastly different, yet their recent willingness to be embraced by the United States is remarkably uniform: All genuinely welcome America's re-engagement.

Southeast Asian states' views on America (and their views on China) are varied, but there are key points of commonality. All see America's presence as a useful way to balance a growing China. Recent dramatic policy shifts by countries such as Vietnam, and especially Burma, highlight how much this is the case. Southeast Asian states, many of whom have had quite recent experiences of colonialism, value regional autonomy and their own sovereignty above all else. All the countries in Southeast Asia have different reasons for welcoming America's renewed interest in the region. But all welcome it nevertheless.

**America has
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Southeast Asia.**

Box 1: Did America ever leave?

While many commentators welcomed America's so-called pivot towards Asia, others have criticised it as being unnecessary, provocative and counter-productive.³ Another question is whether America's rhetoric will translate into substantial action. President Obama wants the region to know America is back, but did it ever actually leave?⁴

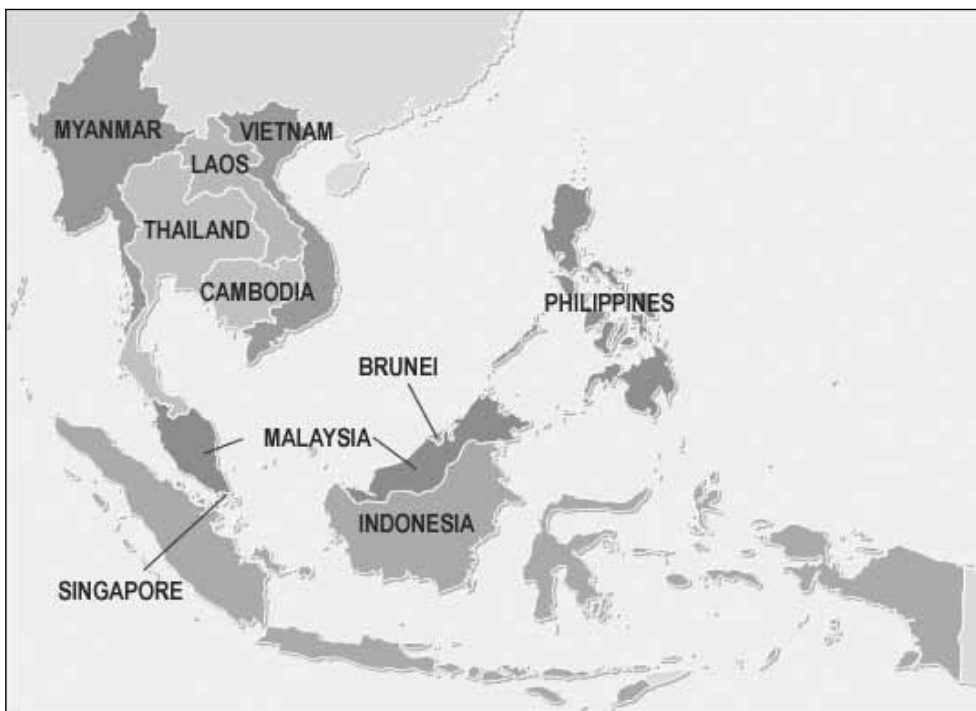
The United States Pacific Command, which operates throughout the Asia-Pacific, is made up of about 325,000 military and civilian personnel. Six aircraft carrier strike groups are based permanently in the Asia-Pacific region. The US Navy makes about 700 port visits each year, and carries out a number of bilateral and multilateral military training exercises.⁵ America maintains formal military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Australia, and has a significant presence in Singapore.

Due to its focus on the Middle East following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there has been a perception throughout Southeast Asia that America's focus on the region was fading. But America's continued presence in the area over the past decade suggests this perception was never grounded in reality—at least in terms of America's military presence. To reinforce this commitment, Obama has promised to quarantine the Asia-Pacific from any defence budget cuts.

Rather than representing a real and significant policy shift, America's strategic pivot appears to be important largely because of its symbolism. It is designed to reassure countries in Southeast Asia and throughout the Asia-Pacific that America will maintain its interest in the region—even as budgetary pressures bite and other conflict zones such as the Middle East demand Washington's attention.

America's strategic pivot appears to be important largely because of its symbolism.

Figure 1: Southeast Asia



Source: www.mizzima.com/international-policy/asean.html.

Maritime Southeast Asia

All Southeast Asian states have relationships with America, but their level of engagement varies markedly, reflecting their differing strategic considerations. Maritime Southeast Asian states—the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia—are far closer to the United States than their mainland neighbours.⁶ Vietnam, geographically a mainland state, has begun to behave much more like its maritime neighbours. This maritime-mainland division is partly historic: The United States has always been a maritime power in Southeast Asia and consciously built relations with maritime states. It is also partly economic: The maritime states tend to be the largest and most developed countries in Southeast Asia, and therefore, better integrated into the global economy. However, the primary reason the maritime Southeast Asian states welcome America's 'pivot' is strategic. They worry that China's growing naval power means it may soon have the capacity to project its forces southwards, and want a powerful friend in the form of the United States.⁷

Any state that controls the South China Sea would also wield great economic and military power over the entire region.

Box 2: Tension in the South China Sea

The South China Sea is a maritime bridge between the Indian and Pacific oceans, and the geographic centre of Southeast Asia. One-third of global maritime traffic, including 80% of China's crude oil supplies, passes through it.⁸ An estimated 7 million barrels of oil and 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas lie untapped under the seabed.⁹ Any state that controls the South China Sea would also wield great economic and military power over the entire region, making it a substantial strategic prize.

China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei claim overlapping parts of the sea, but until recently, all have seemed happy to let the conflict lie dormant. There have been a few brief flare-ups, such as clashes between China and what was then South Vietnam in 1974. But none of the claimants has wanted to risk overt conflict by forcefully defending its claims—and none has had the force projection capability to do so either.

However, in 2009 China stoked tensions when it lodged a map with the United Nations that included a claim over much of the South China Sea, including waters that fell well within its neighbours' Exclusive Economic Zones. China also reportedly called the sea a 'core national interest,' putting it on par with Tibet and Taiwan.¹⁰ It later backed away from this claim, but the damage was done. Adding fuel to the fire, Chinese official statements and media reports became increasingly nationalistic and even belligerent. Hostility has intensified since then.

In mid-2011, the Vietnamese government claimed Chinese patrol vessels had deliberately severed cables being dragged by a Vietnamese oil exploration ship.¹¹ A few months later, the Philippines alleged that Chinese vessels had harassed Filipino boats just 79 kms off their coast.¹² There remains consistent low level provocation on all sides. In February 2012, Vietnam alleged that Chinese forces assaulted Vietnamese fishermen seeking shelter from a storm. Around the same time, the Philippines confirmed it would push ahead with oil exploration in the disputed waters.¹³

All states agree that the goal is ensuring 'freedom of navigation.' But there are concerns that China interprets this differently to the United States and most other countries, and could forcibly prevent commercial activity such as fishing or mining by Vietnamese, Filipino, Indonesia or Malaysian vessels if it controlled parts of the sea.¹⁴ If overt conflict were to emerge, Beijing might

also seek to block naval vessels. Only a few years earlier, Southeast Asian countries had largely seen China as a benign and friendly potential regional leader. Now, they worry what Beijing's real intentions might be.¹⁵

Even countries such as Singapore and Indonesia, who are not directly involved in the South China Sea disputes themselves, worry about the precedent set if China is able to expand its influence in the Sea. Will China then turn its attention to other strategically important waterways such as the Malacca Strait separating Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, considered to be one of two 'choke-points' for global oil supply?

Figure 2: Territorial claims in the South China Sea



Source: www.bbc.co.uk.

Perhaps not surprisingly, all maritime Southeast Asian states have responded to China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea by strengthening ties with the United States. The history of America's engagement with Vietnam and the Philippines is almost diametrically opposite. Yet both these countries, on the front-line of the South China Sea disputes, have eagerly increased cooperation with Washington over the past three years.

Vietnam in particular has drastically shifted its policy towards the United States. America suspended diplomatic relations in 1975 and did not re-establish them for 20 years. Since the Vietnam War, dubbed the 'American war' by Hanoi, anti-American sentiment has run strong in parts of Vietnamese society. But security cooperation has increased in leaps and bounds since the mid-2000s.¹⁶ In 2010, the destroyer *USS John McCain* made a historic and highly symbolic visit to the port of Danang to mark the fifteenth anniversary of restored relations. The same year, the *US Quadrennial Defense Review* stated America's desire to build a 'comprehensive partnership' with Vietnam.¹⁷ In 2011, despite protests from China, American naval ships visited Vietnamese ports for joint training exercises.

Vietnam has drastically shifted its policy towards the United States.

Mainland Southeast Asian states such as Burma, Cambodia, and Laos have much weaker relationships with the United States.

Hanoi remains conscious not to get Beijing offside, and is careful that its relationship with the United States doesn't supersede its relationship with China.¹⁸ But for Vietnam, which shares land and sea borders with China, 'China is a permanent existential problem.'¹⁹ The enthusiasm with which Vietnam has welcomed America's overtures is a striking symbol of just how much the maritime Southeast Asian states hope America's presence will keep China's maritime ambitions in check.

Unlike Vietnam, the Philippines has been a formal military ally of the United States since 1951. The relationship has not always been smooth. In the 1990s, Manila requested that Washington remove its military bases from Filipino soil, and a constitutional ban remains to this day. But, with tensions running high over the South China Sea, Manila has vocally welcomed America's strategic re-engagement in the region.²⁰ The Obama administration has been particularly careful to reassure the Philippines, America's only treaty ally in maritime Southeast Asia, of its ongoing commitment. When Obama was in Canberra in November, Clinton was making a symbolically charged appearance on the decks of an American warship in Filipino waters in the South China Sea,²¹ promising Manila a new coast guard vessel to help it patrol the disputed area.²² In early 2012, America handed a second ship to Manila, which has already been deployed in the disputed waters.

Other maritime states are also cognizant of the role that the United States plays in maintaining regional security, but don't feel as threatened by China's recent assertiveness as their neighbours. Singapore is a vocal and unwavering supporter of America, and has the closest military ties with the United States of any of its neighbours. Despite not being a formal ally of the United States, Singapore hosts one of the commands of the *US Seventh Fleet*. Thailand, which has had a long-standing formal military alliance with the United States, has also become known for 'bending' with the prevailing foreign policy winds and has built a closer relationship with China in recent years.²³

'Hesitant hedgers'²⁴ such as Malaysia and Indonesia are closely engaged with the United States, but also keenly value their independence. As the largest country in Southeast Asia, both in terms of geographic size and population, Indonesia sees itself as the de facto regional leader and is careful to maintain its own independence from Washington.²⁵ But both countries nevertheless maintain close strategic ties with the United States. In 2010, Indonesia and America signed a Comprehensive Partnership Agreement, including a pledge to ramp up both trade and defence cooperation.²⁶ And in what the then Defence Minister (now Prime Minister) Najib bin Tun Razak described as a 'well kept secret',²⁷ Malaysian and American forces regularly train together, US forces are often permitted to train on Malaysian soil, and the US military regularly accesses Malaysian naval bases. The maritime Southeast Asian states have certainly had very different relationships with America in the past, but the degree to which they are now clamouring to strengthen ties with the United States is strikingly uniform.

Mainland Southeast Asia

In contrast to their maritime neighbours, mainland Southeast Asian states such as Burma, Cambodia, and Laos have much weaker relationships with the United States. Small, poor states such as Laos and Cambodia have little choice but to stay within China's economic orbit,²⁸ and they necessarily see their relationship with Washington as one of secondary importance to that with Beijing. Yet they are strengthening their relationships with America too—albeit from a very different starting point.²⁹

Burma's recent strategic shift is emblematic of just how much all Southeast Asian states worry about China, and want America to play the role of balancer. America cut ties with Burma after a brutal military coup there in 1988. Burma has since then maintained a close friendship with China and cooperated with its Southeast Asian

neighbours, joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997. But all this time, it was shunned by Western countries horrified by its abysmal record on human rights. America and the West still maintain extensive military and economic sanctions against the Burmese regime.

Small steps towards reform in Burma since 2011 have led to a thaw in relations with the United States. Some political prisoners have been released, and there are signs that restrictions on the media may be lifted. Perhaps most symbolically, the pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi has been released after nearly 15 years of house arrest and is being allowed to campaign for by-elections in April 2012.³⁰ Washington has responded by cautiously beginning to rebuild ties. In December, Clinton visited the country. In January, the United States appointed its first ambassador in more than 20 years. Washington is considering whether to lift sanctions.³¹

Burma is essentially a client state of Beijing, and has even been mockingly dubbed the twenty-third province of China.³² But this strategic shift is seen as a move to distance itself from Beijing's orbit. In October, the Burmese government cancelled a controversial Chinese backed hydroelectric dam—a major infrastructure project that was wildly unpopular in Burma—in a move that was widely perceived as a snub to Beijing.³³ Recent political reforms are seen as an olive branch towards the West,³⁴ and Burma's budding relationship with America could embolden the regime to move further away from China, depriving Beijing of its only real ally in Southeast Asia.³⁵

The significance of these changes should not be overplayed. The regime still remains by far the closest of any of the ASEAN states to China, and its relationship with the United States is a very long way from being close. But Burma's changing strategic posture is remarkably symbolic: Even the most pro-Beijing of all the Southeast Asian states appears worried about the implications of China's rise, and sees the benefit of America's renewed engagement.

Southeast Asia's hedging strategy

Despite their willingness to embrace America's pivot, Southeast Asian countries are not willing to be seen as *too* critical of China—even those that are very close to the United States. They may be nervous about what China's rise might mean, but they certainly don't want China to be isolated or make it feel like it is being contained. There is no appetite in Southeast Asia for stoking US-China strategic competition. Yet Southeast Asian states know that to keep China's relative power in check, its level of engagement in the region must be matched by the United States.

Explicit balancing against China is rare.³⁶ None of the Southeast Asian countries has signed a formal alliance with the United States since 1954. But all, to varying degrees, are now trying to hedge their bets by building close relationships with China *and* the United States, as well as other regional powers such as India and Japan. Southeast Asian states do not want to have to choose sides between China and the United States, judging that building close relationships with both is the best way to prevent conflict with and between either.³⁷ And they certainly don't want to be estranged from China in the event of it growing into the preponderant regional power.

Singapore probably exemplifies this hedging strategy best.³⁸ Despite its strong support for the United States, it has also long pursued a policy of 'complex interdependence' with China. Singapore has consistently supported China's entry into regional multilateral forms, arguing that enmeshing it in the regional architecture is the best way to ensure its rise is peaceful.³⁹ Even its economic relationship with the two powers is quite finely balanced: China received 10% of Singapore's exports in 2010, America 6%. The United States is Singapore's largest source of inbound foreign direct investment; China is the largest destination for outbound Singaporean FDI.⁴⁰ This strategy minimises the risk of being drawn into conflict with either of the major powers, or being caught in the middle of conflict between the two.

Even the most pro-Beijing of all the Southeast Asian states appears worried about the implications of China's rise.

Southeast Asian states have especially welcomed America's strategic pivot towards the region because of its multilateral element.

American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski argues that it is not only in Southeast Asian states' interest but also in China's interests that its neighbours pursue this type of hedging strategy. China, as much as any other country in Asia, has benefitted from the stability brought about by America's implicit security guarantee, which has allowed China to develop not only its economy but also its military power without being bogged down in regional conflicts. Southeast Asian hedging, according to Brzezinski's logic, has a peace dividend because it allows both China and its neighbours to quietly pursue their own self-interest in the absence of overt conflict.⁴¹

Southeast Asian states are conscious that for this strategy to be successful, America must make its presence felt. But Washington must also refrain from stoking tension or upsetting the carefully aligned balance of power. It is for this reason that Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natelagawa, like some other Southeast Asian leaders, expressed concern about America's expanded troop commitment in Darwin announced in November. Natelagawa did not say he opposed America's broader shift towards Asia, or even that he opposed the troop deployment. On the contrary, he is a leading supporter of America in the region. But Natelagawa worried that the move might create a 'vicious circle of tension and mistrust.'⁴² He is well aware that his government's and his neighbours' strategy of engaging both China and the United States will backfire if both powers are drawn into a cycle of provocation. Southeast Asian leaders, such as Singapore's Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam, have made it clear that they despair of the anti-China rhetoric in domestic US debates,⁴³ which runs completely counter to their engagement strategy. The further America and China go in provoking each other, the harder it becomes for Southeast Asian states to preserve the status quo and the harder it becomes to pursue a finely balanced engagement and hedging strategy.

Multilateral cooperation

Realists are often quick to brush off multilateral engagement, but it is important for Southeast Asian states because it complements their hedging strategy so well. It means they can engage both China and America without ruffling the other's feathers, and employ both in resolving thorny security issues like the South China Sea without stoking head-on tensions between them. Southeast Asian states have especially welcomed America's strategic pivot towards the region because of its multilateral element.

ASEAN's early years were shaped by the Cold War. When the group was formed in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, the Vietnam War was in full swing. Anti-communist in orientation, the original five ASEAN members sought a solid relationship with the United States. ASEAN's two key strategic objectives were to prevent intra-regional conflicts that could distract member states from their focus on economic development, and to insulate maritime Southeast Asia from Cold War great power politics—in large part by accepting US naval primacy.⁴⁴

Despite this, America has historically been much more keenly focused on bilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia—building what has been dubbed a 'hub and spokes' model. Up until the late 2000s, the United States was heavily criticised throughout the region for its half-hearted engagement with multilateral ASEAN-led security forums.⁴⁵ But in a precursor to its recently articulated strategic shift, America has spent the past few years expanding its multilateral efforts.

In 2008, Washington appointed its first ambassador to ASEAN. In 2009, Clinton signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, created to encourage peaceful cooperation and dispute resolution throughout Southeast Asia. At the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, Clinton offered to mediate the South China Sea disputes, throwing her support behind the ASEAN-backed multilateral

negotiation track.⁴⁶ In 2011, Obama became the first American president to attend the East Asia Summit (EAS), a regional security dialogue chaired and convened by ASEAN. Obama flew straight from Australia, where he had made his major troop announcement, to Indonesia to attend the summit, symbolically highlighting the importance of multilateral engagement in America's pivot. There he joined the majority of ASEAN states (excluding Burma and Cambodia) in speaking about the South China Sea issue, in the words of China expert Minxin Pei, 'skillfully coordinat[ing] a pushback against China's assertiveness.'⁴⁷

ASEAN, like its member states, is ultimately realist. It has been criticised as a 'talk shop.' But these criticisms miss a fundamental point. By facilitating the maintenance of the regional balance of power, ASEAN serves the vital informal function of promoting regional stability.⁴⁸ By involving other regional powers such as China and the United States in multilateral dialogue, Southeast Asian states use ASEAN as part of a strategy to ensure China's rise is as peaceful as possible.⁴⁹ The relatively powerless countries, in a region long dominated by great powers, believe that by putting ASEAN at the centre of regional diplomacy, they can deal themselves into a security discussion they would otherwise be excluded from.⁵⁰

This has always been ASEAN's *raison d'être*: to prevent quarrels between Southeast Asian states, and shield Southeast Asia from great power domination. China has long advocated an exclusively East Asian model of multilateral cooperation that excludes the United States. Several Southeast Asian states (such as Malaysia) have until recently agreed.⁵¹ But their recent eagerness to welcome America into regional forums suggests they now believe American cooperation is needed to counterbalance China's growing weight.

Cambodia's role as ASEAN chair

For the maritime Southeast Asian states, it was particularly important for America to assert its influence in regional multilateral forums such as the EAS by the end of 2011. The chair of ASEAN is a rotating position held for one year, and includes responsibility for hosting the EAS, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and other ASEAN offshoot meetings. Vietnam was the ASEAN chair in 2010 and Indonesia in 2011—both maritime countries that strongly welcome America's presence as a counterbalance to China.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Clinton first became involved in the South China Sea debate at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, or that in the same year, America was invited to join the EAS. Both Vietnam and Indonesia advocate greater American involvement in regional multilateral security dialogue and a multilaterally negotiated solution to the South China Sea dispute.

In contrast, the 2012 chair, Cambodia, is a mainland country that is closer to China in its strategic alignment than any Southeast Asian country except Burma and perhaps Laos. Cambodia is also heavily dependent on China for aid and investment. China provided \$6 billion in investment and a further \$2 billion in non-conditional loans and aid to Cambodia between 2006 and 2010⁵²—a significant amount considering Cambodia's total GDP in 2010 was \$11 billion.⁵³ This has led to questions about how much political influence Beijing has in Phnom Penh. Much of this investment is in hydroelectric dams, and like in Burma, questions are being raised about how evenly the gains will be shared between China and Cambodia.⁵⁴ In 2009, Cambodia returned a group of 20 Uyghur refugees to China, despite protests from the United States and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees.⁵⁵ Days later, China gave Cambodia \$1.2 billion in economic assistance,⁵⁶ leading to speculation that the deal was a *quid pro quo*. According to Wikileaks cables released in 2011, the Cambodian deputy prime minister admitted his government was put in a 'difficult position due to pressure from outside forces.'⁵⁷

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Southeast Asian countries would like to preserve the status quo for as long as possible.

What does this mean for Southeast Asian multilateralism? At the EAS held in November, Cambodia was one of only two ASEAN members that did not speak about the South China Sea issue, suggesting it either supports China's position or is unwilling to take Beijing to task over the contentious dispute. Even though the South China Sea dispute remains unsolved, it is unlikely that Cambodia will place the issue high on the ASEAN agenda as the previous chairs Indonesia and Vietnam have.⁵⁸

Maritime Southeast Asian states must surely be relieved that the United States is now a member of the EAS, is an active participant of the ASEAN Regional Forum, and seems prepared to vocally support its Southeast Asian partners and friends in these forums. With Cambodia, a close friend of China, as the chair, they will need the backing of a powerful friend to help them keep the South China Sea and their preferred multilateral rules-based solution on the agenda.

This will become even more important when Burma, which despite its recent reforms is still extremely close to China, becomes ASEAN chair in 2014. If not for the recent detente, Washington would have been left with a choice of boycotting the 2014 meeting—effectively allowing China to dominate—or agreeing to work with the slowly changing Burmese regime. America has long been committed to improving human rights in Burma and genuinely welcomes any move towards democracy there, but the recent rapprochement undoubtedly has a strategic element too.

America's reengagement with multilateral forums in Southeast Asia goes beyond simply reassuring its allies and partners of its commitment to the region. It is also a move to shore up its own influence within the region. America too is hedging against the possibility that China's relative influence continues to grow. Investing in Southeast Asian multilateral cooperation, a far cheaper way to gain influence than building bilateral military alliances, is also a hedge against the possibility that America may not always have the budget to maintain its naval primacy.

Conclusion

Southeast Asian countries, many of whom were under colonial rule until the middle of the twentieth century, value regional autonomy and their own sovereignty above all else. They believe that binding both major regional powers into both bilateral and ASEAN-led cooperation is an insurance policy—insurance against the possibility that China's rise turns out not to be peaceful, that the United States withdraws from the region into isolationism, or that either power can aggressively dominate the region.

Southeast Asian states don't want China to be able to dominate the region—nor do they want to put themselves in a position where they are beholden or tied to the United States. They do not want to be dominated by any great power; instead, they tolerate America's primacy because it has proven to be benign⁵⁹ and welcome its pivot because it suits their own interests.

Ultimately, Southeast Asian countries would like to preserve the status quo for as long as possible. They see China as 'the economic partner who facilitates prosperity, America the security provider who guards the peace.'⁶⁰ They hope America's re-engagement will help them achieve this. Like Australia, Southeast Asian states are facing a future where their biggest economic partner and their major security partner are not the same country, and in fact, may even become hostile to each other. Their strategies for dealing with this may be even more advanced than Australia's. Australian National University Professor Hugh White made headlines arguing that Canberra should convince the United States to allow China to play a larger strategic role in the region.⁶¹ But there are big questions about whether the rest of Asia—including Southeast Asia—would actually support this.

What is most remarkable about Southeast Asia's American embrace is its striking uniformity. Despite having very different relationships and histories with

both America and China, all Southeast Asian states welcome America's renewed engagement in the region because they worry about what the future might look like as China's power grows. Southeast Asian states have long used a two-pronged strategy to manage regional security, engaging all major powers—but primarily the United States and China—bilaterally, and enmeshing them in ASEAN-led multilateral cooperation. Ultimately, this is designed to ensure no one power dominates the region. America's renewed focus on Southeast Asia is intended to reassure its friends and allies that they should sustain this effort. Southeast Asian states—especially the larger, more strategically important maritime states—welcome America's 'pivot,' not because it changes the status quo but because it helps preserve it.

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