

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND
CHINA IN THE 21ST CENTURY



THE



DEER



AND THE



DRAGON

EDITED BY DONALD K. EMMERSON



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Stanford | Walter H. Shorenstein
Asia-Pacific Research Center
Freeman Spogli Institute

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Contents

Tables and Figures	vii
Abbreviations	ix
About the Authors	xiii
Introduction and Acknowledgments	xxi
OVERVIEW	
1 The Deer and the Dragon	1
ASYMMETRY VERSUS AUTONOMY	
<i>Donald K. Emmerson</i>	
CONTEXTS	
2 China's Changing Priorities in Southeast Asia	41
SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT	
<i>Thomas Fingar</i>	
3 ASEAN-China Trade and Investment	65
DIVERSITY VERSUS DEPENDENCE	
<i>Anne Booth</i>	
PERCEPTIONS	
4 China Seen from Southeast Asia	89
PATTERNS OF OPINION	
<i>Yun-han Chu, Min-hua Huang, and Jie Lu</i>	
5 Southeast Asia through Chinese Eyes	109
A STRATEGIC BACKYARD?	
<i>Mingjiang Li</i>	

EXTENSIONS

- 6 “Ambiguity is Fun” 133
 CHINA’S STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA
Donald K. Emmerson
- 7 Re-enlisting the Diaspora 171
 BEIJING AND THE “OVERSEAS CHINESE”
Geoff Wade

STRATEGIES

- 8 Coping with the Dragon 197
 VULNERABILITY AND ENGAGEMENT IN
 SINGAPORE-CHINA RELATIONS
See Seng Tan
- 9 Underbalancing the Dragon 221
 UNSTRATEGIC INDONESIA
Yohanes Sulaiman

DISPARITIES

- 10 Who Wins in China’s “Win-Win” Relations
 with Cambodia? 247
 A SKEWED ILLUSION
Daniel C. O’Neill
- 11 High Modernism in a Small Country 271
 CHINA “DEVELOPS” LAOS
Kearrin Sims

DISTANCES

- 12 Distance and Dominance 299
 CHINA, AMERICA, AND SOUTHEAST ASIA’S
 NORTHERN TIER
John D. Ciorciari
- 13 China’s 21st Century Maritime Silk Road 329
 A ROUTE TO PAX SINICA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?
Jörn Dosch and Shannon Cui

RETROSPECTION

- 14 China’s Myanmar, Myanmar’s China 353
 MYTHS, ILLUSIONS, INTERACTIONS
David I. Steinberg

- Index 377

Tables and Figures

Tables

3.1	ASEAN's exports and imports with its top eight trading partners expressed as shares of all ASEAN exports and imports (%)	71
3.2	Contribution to the 2002–14 growth in ASEAN exports and imports by country or region (%)	71
3.3	Trade between ASEAN countries and China, showing total trade and Southeast Asian balances (US\$ billions)	72
3.4	Breakdown by share of ASEAN countries' 2013 trade with China and other countries in ASEAN, and the same countries' total 2014 trade with ASEAN (%)	73
3.5	Global flow of foreign direct investment into ASEAN by originating region or country (%)	75
3.6	Foreign direct investment flows into and out of Southeast Asia and China (US\$ billions)	75
4.1	Which has the most influence in Asia now, China or the United States? (%)	93
4.2	Favorable views of China's influence (%)	96
4.3	Correlation between favorable views of both Chinese and American influence in Asia, 2014–16	97
4.4	Which country is preferred as a model for the future development of one's own country? (%)	100
4.5	"Substantial confidence" in US/Chinese presidents (%)	104

Figures

2.1	China's perceptions of security threats and development contributions by world region as of 1979	43
2.2	China's perceptions of security threats and development contributions by Southeast Asian country as of 1979	49
2.3	China's perceptions of security threats and development contributions by Southeast Asian country as of 2009	54
6.1	The nine-dash line and three exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the South China Sea	137

Abbreviations

A₂/AD	anti-access/area denial
ABS	Asian Barometer Survey
AC-FTA	ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement
ACFTA	ASEAN-China Free Trade Area
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AFCA	Asian Financial Cooperation Association
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
AIF	ASEAN Infrastructure Fund
AiIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APT	ASEAN Plus Three
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CCC	Cambodia Chamber of Commerce
CCCC	Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Cambodia
CCCL	China Chamber of Commerce in Laos
CCG	China Coast Guard
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
COC	code of conduct
CPB	Communist Party of Burma

CPC	Communist Party of China
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DOC	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
EAS	East Asia Summit
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
EU	European Union
FDI	foreign direct investment
FTA	free trade agreement
GCC	Guangdong Chamber of Commerce
GDP	gross domestic product
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
ICJ	International Court of Justice
INGO	international non-government organizations
KMT	Kuomintang
LDC	least developed country
LMC	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCI	Media Chinese International
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MPAC	Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity
MRC	Mekong River Commission
MSR	21st Century Maritime Silk Road
MSI	Malacca Strait Security Initiative
NGO	non-governmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NSC	National Security Commission
NSEC	North South Economic Corridor
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
NTS	non-traditional security
OBOR	One Belt, One Road

OC	overseas Chinese
OCAO	Overseas Chinese Affairs Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAP	People's Action Party
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PPP	purchasing power parity
PRC	People's Republic of China
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SAF	Singapore Armed Forces
SAM	surface-to-air missiles
SBY	Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono
SCS	South China Sea
SDNT	Single Draft Negotiating Text
SI	sensitivity interdependence
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SOE	state-owned enterprise
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UDG	Union Development Group
UNCLOS	UN Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNOSSC	United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation
VI	vulnerability interdependence
WCEC	World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention
XUM	Xiamen University Malaysia

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Introduction and Acknowledgments

This book explores and interprets what has happened and may happen in the physical and conceptual spaces where Southeast Asia and China interact and overlap. The region and its giant neighbor are both complex, let alone the intricacy of what goes on between them. A bird's-eye view of all that activity requires more than one bird. A single analyst, however steeped in expertise and broadened by learning, would struggle to do justice to the heterogeneity of Southeast Asia — multiple states with different histories, cultures, languages, economies, and politics behaving differently for different reasons. The focal point provided by the extra-regional state — China — reduces that diversity, but only to a degree. Whether Southeast Asian diplomats work with Beijing or hedge against it, they tend to keep other entities in mind. These include the United States and Japan, among other outsiders, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to which 10 of the region's states belong. In this challenging light, the multi-authored character of this book makes a virtue of necessity. As for the region's only non-ASEAN state, Timor-Leste, its economically and strategically peripheral role in Sino-ASEAN relations explains the lack of attention it receives.

Some editors impose order in advance. This one did not. Some books offer description at the expense of analysis. This one does not. Contributors were not given questions to answer. Within their zones of expertise, they were encouraged to choose their own topics and develop arguments about them under the broad rubric of Southeast Asia–China relations. The results are intentionally centrifugal, but not random. The authors' chapters were easy to subsume post facto under eight distinct if overlapping themes:

overview, contexts, perceptions, extensions, strategies, disparities, distances, and retrospection.

Overarching all of these headings and chapters is the broad subject of the book: the nature, dynamics, and implications of inequality between China and the countries of Southeast Asia. The book begins and ends with metaphors relevant to this topic. The first chapter opens with a tale of brain over brawn — mousedeer over dragon — drawn from Southeast Asian folklore that, in effect, questions the fatalist view that size and power must always prevail in Sino–Southeast Asian relations. The final chapter questions Beijing’s use of the Burmese term *paukphaw* to liken China–Myanmar relations to friendly familial ties between siblings. As normative responses to empirical asymmetry, these loaded metaphors differently evoke the inequalities of size and power that directly or indirectly influence the patterns of interaction between China and its southern neighbors. Introductory notes on the chapters follow, theme by theme.

Overview

Donald K. Emmerson argues that although asymmetries of size and power favor China in its relations with individual Southeast Asian states, those structural disproportions do not necessarily oblige the latter to do what the former wants. As a multilateral actor, ASEAN is no match for Beijing, weakened as the grouping is by its commitment to consensus, the diversity of its members, and the success of China’s proxy-veto diplomacy, especially regarding the South China Sea. Beijing’s campaign to build a regional sphere of influence and sideline ASEAN has left its members to deal with China more or less on their own. But they can, and some do, engage in creative diplomacy in search of strategic autonomy, including partnering with outsiders. Beijing alone will not decide the outcome. The future of Southeast Asia in relation to China will be shaped as well by what Southeast Asians, separately or with others, do or fail to do.

Contexts

In his review of the historical context within which China’s foreign policies toward Southeast Asia have evolved, **Thomas Fingar** concludes that Beijing has wanted and still wants to ensure that its influence in the region exceeds that of any other major outside power. Seen in that light, the brief border war with Vietnam that China initiated in 1979 may have been meant in part to warn Vietnam’s Russian backer against aligning with Hanoi to the detriment of China’s regional interest. A decade later, the Cold War’s end and the USSR’s disintegration created chances for China to engage the region

economically and thereby overcome Southeast Asian distrust. By 2009, that goal had been substantially achieved. But relations with the region soon soured for various reasons, not least among them a rising Chinese fear of domestic instability and its expression in a more nationalistic comportment abroad.

Anne Booth's data-rich chapter reviews the economic context of Southeast Asia–China relations, notably trade and investment, from the 1990s through 2018. The notion that China has benefited at the region's expense cannot be sustained. Both sides have gained from their interaction. The diversity of the ASEAN states' economic partners is a major reason why. Also notably diverse are the ASEAN member economies themselves and their experiences with China. Following the activation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement, for example, although the region's trade deficit with China grew, the trajectories of individual ASEAN economies continued to vary. Looking ahead, the regionalization of ASEAN's trade within an East Asian frame opens one of several choices for economic diplomacy by ASEAN and its member states. But those decisions will likely be influenced at least as much by political considerations as by economic ones.

Perceptions

Relative to China's influence in Southeast Asia, American influence has declined. In drawing this conclusion, **Yun-Han Chu**, **Min-hua Huang**, and **Jie Lu** take into account the regional hyperactivity of China under Xi Jinping and the uncertainty of American foreign policy under Donald Trump. Reservoirs of Southeast Asian goodwill toward the United States have not dried up, as shown by survey evidence that Southeast Asians consider America's influence, unlike China's, to be largely benign. Beijing's autocratic model is controversial. Yet in surveys of opinion in ASEAN countries as late as 2016, when asked to pick China or the United States as more influential in Asia, only in the Philippines did a majority choose the United States. Majorities in Myanmar, Singapore, and Vietnam picked China. Over time, Chinese primacy may seem less and less avoidable, like it or not. America may not be eclipsed, but the momentum could be China's to lose.

Mingjiang Li asks whether Southeast Asia qualifies as China's "strategic backyard." He is careful to distinguish the empirical reality from the normative judgment connoted by the term and to recognize the differences in how the term is construed in Southeast Asia and what it tends to mean in China. Beijing, without using the term, does think of the region as its strategic backyard in principle. Insofar as that vision implies Chinese control over its neighbors, however, it has not been realized in practice, at least not yet.

China hopes for stable and amicable relations with Southeast Asian states that will benefit its economic growth and extend its political influence in the context of a multipolar world. Neighborly relations have not been frozen, let alone broken. But especially since 2010, suspicions have risen on both sides, some Chinese initiatives have backfired, and a shortage of empathy toward its neighbors has further hampered China's welcome in the region.

Extensions

Donald K. Emmerson assesses China's approach to and behavior in the South China Sea. He identifies several different tactics used by China in advancing its campaign for maritime control. Differing Southeast Asian responses to Chinese pressure are also reviewed. The decades-long search for a code of conduct is described as an "institutionalized mirage" due to ASEAN's continuing commitment to negotiating one, despite intra-ASEAN disension abetted by Beijing and the elusiveness of agreement with China over the text. The Philippines and Vietnam receive particular attention given the size of their claims and their contrasting responses to Beijing's diplomatic and kinetic moves. The chapter ends by suggesting that one, two, or more Southeast Asian governments consider drafting a brief statement that no single country should control the South China Sea, an avowal that could then be opened for signing by China, America, and any other state.

Geoff Wade reviews how Beijing has attempted to instrumentalize the "overseas Chinese" (OC) in Southeast Asia in support of China's economic and political objectives. He traces the practice from the early 20th century, when Sun Yat-sen tried to rally the OC against the Qing empire, to present-day efforts by China's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and related agencies to co-opt OC individuals, firms, and organizations on the mainland's behalf. Some Chinese-language OC media have been bought or otherwise guided to slant their content in China's favor. OC social, business, and educational associations are encouraged to identify with their "motherland." In their most intrusive form, these extensions of influence may involve efforts to dilute the identities that OCs possess by virtue of being citizens of countries other than the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beijing is not bent on creating a subversive ethnic presence abroad. But the need for interpretive caution should not disallow further scholarly research on PRC-diaspora relations.

Strategies

Despite pressures from Beijing, Singapore retains strategic autonomy from China. However, as **See Seng Tan** also notes, frictions remain. Singaporeans

were angered when an industrial park based on the city-state's expertise and support was established in Suzhou, China, only to face competition from a rival entity sponsored by local officials there. Singaporeans have also resented the seemingly boorish ways of newcomers from mainland China. Yet such annoyances have not been destabilizing, and by diversifying its trade and investment linkages, Singapore has limited its economic vulnerability to China. Nor did the threat of Chinese displeasure stop Singapore from approving an international court's disallowance of China's "nine-dash line" around the South China Sea. Singapore works in various ways with China and America alike. Pressure from Beijing does not augur Singaporean acquiescence in Chinese control.

Indonesia's status as the largest Southeast Asian country has not motivated its leaders to think and act strategically regarding China and its ascendance in the region, argues **Yohanes Sulaiman**. Jakarta has been loath to offend Beijing. Indonesian leaders have instead wanted their country to have "a thousand friends and no enemies." That is not a foreign policy. It is wishful thinking. Rather than adapt defense policy to an external security environment where China is increasingly prominent, military leaders have paid more attention to bureaucratic priorities, such as redressing the mismatch in the armed forces between too many officers and too few positions for them to fill. Indonesia's president is more interested in economic goals—better infrastructure, less poverty. But those priorities need not preclude developing a credible deterrent to China's expansion in the South China Sea or playing a more active and constructive foreign-policy role in ASEAN.

Disparities

Daniel O'Neill locates Cambodia-China relations at the intersection of two disparities—one between the two countries, the other inside Cambodia. The patronage bestowed by the stronger power on the weaker one strengthens strongman Hun Sen and his wealthy, corrupt, and abusive ruling group in the weakest—poorest—state in Southeast Asia at the expense of its disempowered people. Illustrating the argument are the cases of three Cambodian tycoons who have profitably brokered Sino-Cambodian deals. Also noted are the roles of the police and the military. Loyal to Hun Sen, they have guarded the local facilities of companies from China involved with Cambodian tycoons in corrupt land concessions and evictions. Beijing's ways of rewarding such favors have included a \$3 million surveillance system for Phnom Penh, supplied free of charge in 2014–15. When Xi Jinping praises China's

elite-based “win-win” cooperation with Cambodia, he ignores the losses it inflicts on the lives of the people who live there.

Practitioners of “high-modernist” development in Laos are state-driven, top-down, technocratic, and unwilling to learn from local knowledge and practice. What most concerns **Kearrin Sims** is the disparity between the high-modernist priorities of PRC-sponsored development in Laos and the actual needs of poor Laotians. High modernism, born in the industrializing West, is not a Chinese monopoly. But Beijing is applying its precepts in concert with Vientiane to detrimental effect. China-built rail and highway corridors bypass villagers who lack the land, capital, and local roads to produce and market goods. Hydropower exports from the dams that China builds fill coffers to which the poor lack access. Nor does China-funded urban construction help the largely rural poor, whose precarity is worsened by China-backed rubber plantations that erode soil, threaten watersheds, and replace communal land. By catering to the Laotian state, such projects also fortify its authoritarian rule.

Distances

John Ciorcari reviews the ways in which Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam have been rendered vulnerable to Chinese influence not only by their proximity to China, but also by their physical and geopolitical distance from the United States. As they reflect and influence policy decisions, these distances are fluid. The consequences depend on the degrees and kinds of agency that the five states exercise. As a source of local reassurance or concern, however, the American role warrants particular attention. From the Vietnam War within the Cold War through President Obama’s “rebalance” to the “Trump factor,” US policy toward mainland Southeast Asia has been a mixture of intermittent commitment, criticisms over human rights, and indifference by default. In future, pending major re-engagement, the autonomy of the northern tier may come to be threatened less by domineering Chinese behavior than by American distraction and lack of interest.

The Belt and Road Initiative spans lengthy distances and multiple states. It is accordingly hard to think of the scheme as informed by a distinctively Chinese policy model. But there is a “Mekong mode” of naturally requisite and benign Chinese primacy that China has used to rationalize its leadership in providing infrastructure in the Southeast Asian countries through which the Mekong River runs. As **Jörn Dosch** and **Shannon Cui** also observe, however, the “natural” — necessary and inevitable — character of Chinese tutelage is contested. Sino-Southeast Asian connectivity via the

Belt and Road Initiative could evolve, along respectively realist, liberal, or constructivist lines, toward asymmetrical dominance, trade-based comity, or norm-sharing identity. But compared with Chinese hegemony, a less exclusively or coercively Sinified scenario is at least as probable, if not more so: that most or all of the ASEAN states will continue to cooperate with all major outside powers.

Retrospection

David Steinberg has the last word in the book. His critique of China-relevant misunderstandings of Myanmar covers, in addition to *paukphaw* propaganda: the legitimating myth of Burma/Myanmar as a nation-state; overblown Cold War fears of Chinese conspiracy; the false promise of federalism; excessive American, Chinese, and Burmese faith in foreign aid and sanctions as leverage toward desired outcomes; liberal democracy as a near-to-medium-term mirage; Washington's and Beijing's overestimation of the importance of China's rise in shaping Myanmar's behavior; the self-assurance that made Beijing so surprised by the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project; and the omission of an insider view of the state as a less than unitary actor. The last point, acknowledged in several other chapters, implicates the external-policy focus of the book, including the convenient metonymy of "Washington" and "Beijing" in this paragraph.

The chapters that follow were written before the coronavirus disease called COVID-19 spread from Wuhan, China, to the world. An edited volume takes long enough to process and publish without further delaying its birth to accommodate late-breaking and still-unfolding events. Suffice it instead to suggest that readers of this book, as they consider its contents, may wish to ask themselves to what extent and in what ways COVID-19 and its ramifications could affect the arguments that the authors make.

To evoke those arguments in the order in which they are summarized above: How will the pandemic influence China's foreign policy and Sino-Southeast Asian relations? Will the contagion weaken or strengthen the diversity of the region's economic partners that has limited its overdependence on China? Will the Chinese origin of the disease and Beijing's response to it make Xi Jinping's authoritarian model more or less attractive in Southeast Asian eyes? In that light, will Beijing lose or gain leverage over its neighborhood? Will COVID-19's impact on China dilute or fortify Beijing's ability to control the South China Sea? As the virus spreads, will it be easier or harder for China to mobilize support among the "overseas Chinese" in Southeast Asia? Will the answers to these questions cause Singapore to

reaffirm or rethink its strategic autonomy from China? Will the answers incentivize Indonesia to augment its inward-looking, development-first foreign policy with an outward strategy to lead ASEAN and offset China? Or not?

If the pandemic and its collateral effects severely damage the lives and livelihoods of the poorest and most vulnerable in Cambodia and Laos, will China reconsider the ways in which its policies have worsened corruption, autocracy, and inequality inside those countries? If Beijing offers major medical help to the ASEAN states located closest to China, while Washington does little by comparison, will China's nearest neighbors grow more sanguine about China and more repelled by American indifference? Will China's expensive and expansive Belt and Road Initiative survive the likely future virus-driven blow to the Chinese economy and the possible discrediting of China-sponsored connectivity by the pandemic's spread to other countries? And finally, projecting forward the final chapter's review of misunderstandings regarding Myanmar and China, readers may wish to imagine the possible contents of a book about Southeast Asia, China, and COVID-19 that someone may someday edit or write that would not only answer the above questions but explore as well the new myths and illusions to which that set of three-way interactions will have given rise.

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Hoping you enjoy the read,

Donald K. Emmerson
Stanford University

THE DEER AND THE DRAGON

CHAPTER 1

The Deer and the Dragon

ASYMMETRY VERSUS AUTONOMY

Donald K. Emmerson, *Stanford University, United States*

A book does not normally begin by doubting its looks — its visual self. This one does. The title and the animals on this volume's front cover raise questions of representation, comparison, and attribution that are intended to occur and re-occur to its readers while turning its pages.

Asymmetry, Diversity, Ingenuity

The *Cervidae* family of hooved mammals — deer — includes well-known creatures memorialized in the Anglophone West. Among them are Walt Disney's Bambi, the antlered sleigh-pullers of Santa Claus, and the Golden Hind of Sir Francis Drake. They are not the deer in this book. The metaphorically animalized Southeast Asian states discussed herein are mousedeer (or mouse deer) — chevrotains of the genus *Tragulus*. They are the miniature figures standing atop and flanking the book's title on its cover.

Art and fact easily collide. The mousedeer pictured represent all the countries of Southeast Asia — Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. For convenience and simplicity, they are identical in shape and color — and equally small. Distortions result. Were the artwork truthful demographically, compared with Brunei's mousedeer icon, the one for Indonesia would be 615 times larger. Some mouse.

As of 2018, an estimated 435 thousand people lived in Brunei compared with 267 million in Indonesia, respectively the least and most populous of Southeast Asia's countries. Of the 11, only one — the Philippines — had more than 100 million people. Only three — Vietnam,

Thailand, and Myanmar — had more than 50 million. A majority fell below 50 million — Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Timor-Leste, and Brunei — and of these six, each of the smaller four had under 20 million.¹ In contrast, measured by population, Indonesia is unquestionably large, fourth largest in the world in fact.

Southeast Asian states are differentiated along many other lines as well — their physical locations, shapes, and sizes; their histories, societies, cultures, economies, and politics; their geologies, ecologies, ethnicities, religions, and languages. With due regard to the ways in which parts of the People's Republic of China (PRC) differ from each other and aspects of being Chinese also vary, Southeast Asia the region is more diverse than China the country.²

The dragon on the cover of this book is a traditional symbol of Chinese imperial divinity and power updated to stand for China itself — and appropriately far larger than the mousedeer pictured above it. In 2018, China's 1.4 billion people more than doubled Southeast Asia's 657 million. China's population is 3,264 times larger than Brunei's. The 267 million people who live in Indonesia amount to less than a fifth of the people who live in China.³ Economically, the PRC overshadows the entire region. In 2018, China's estimated USD \$13.41 trillion gross domestic product (GDP) more than quadrupled the \$2.95 trillion figure for all of Southeast Asia's economies combined.⁴ But the interactions of Southeast Asian states with China cannot be explained by invoking the actors' relative magnitudes alone. By that monocausal logic, the mousedeer have no choice but to obey the dragon. This book's authors argue otherwise, albeit in different contexts, to different extents, and in different ways.

This chapter acknowledges China's efforts to thwart the strategic autonomy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by using the diversity of its members to forestall the growth of a regional consensus against Beijing. By selectively mixing co-optation with coercion, China has tried to induce particular ASEAN members to censor themselves, especially regarding Beijing's widely disputed claim to most of the South China Sea and its building and arming of land features there. China has also tried to frustrate the collective ability of the association to disagree openly with Beijing.

The "ASEAN Way" of consensus has benefited the institution's longevity by avoiding divisively win-lose votes. From time to time, China's clients inside the grouping have turned that institutional asset into a regional liability by voicing objections to policy positions opposed by Beijing. By casting what are effectively proxy vetoes on Beijing's behalf, ASEAN's China-favoring

members have undercut the strategic autonomy of the grouping as measured by its ability to stand up to the PRC. The region's diversity has thus abetted China's drive for influence over its neighbors. Yet that same diversity is also a liability for China. It enlarges the chance, other things being equal, that some Southeast Asian states will, on their own, continue to pursue and try to retain strategic autonomy from China as a matter of their respective national interests, even if ASEAN is hampered in doing so in the collective interest of the region.

In this chapter, these and related ideas are explored in the context of relevant policies and patterns of structure and agency. Such topics include bilateral and multilateral activity and design; meanings of regional centrality and co-optation; China's geo-economic diplomacy; patterns of elite regional opinion; and strategic autonomy's prospects with particular reference to Singapore, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in relation to China under Xi Jinping and America under Donald Trump. The challenge of asymmetry captured in the mousedeer-dragon metaphor recurs throughout.⁵

In coining and popularizing another metaphor, a "Thucydides trap" waiting to spring shut on China and the United States, Graham Allison adapted and imported into the 21st century a 5th-century-BCE historian's warning about what could happen when a gap in power between two rivals closes. Allison worried that the growing strength of a rising China could sufficiently alarm a no longer omnipotent America to render war between them unavoidable.⁶ Viewed from Southeast Asia, a narrowing of that disparity in strength could ignite a dangerously volatile mix of American apprehension and Chinese ambition. If not contained, the mix could explode and collaterally damage the ASEAN region. That is the lesson of the Thucydides trap for Southeast Asians. Conversely, from their standpoint, closing the gap in clout between Beijing and Washington could be desirable if and when the resulting balance of power is stable enough to check the inclination of either giant to dominate the region.

A fatalistic view would stress the mousedeer's impotence and vulnerability by portraying them as bystanders reduced to watching fearfully while, over their heads, China and America compete for control of Southeast Asia and its people. In that discouraging picture, whether Sino-American disparity shrinks or grows is irrelevant for Southeast Asians, who will remain vulnerable to subordination and exploitation by powerful states. Thucydides, in what could be called his "Melian dictum," phrased that bleak viewpoint as a general rule: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."⁷ Athens and Sparta, respectively rising and leading powers, did fight the Peloponnesian War. Athens did invade the small island of Melos

after which the “Melian dictum” is named. But as guides to Southeast Asia’s relations with China today, the structurally determined narratives of doom associated with these ancient events — unavoidable conflagration and subjugation — are helpful less for what they contend than for what they overlook.

Structure matters. But agency is not a property of the strong alone. Weaker powers can be proactive, too, however limited and contingent their agency may be. A trope widely encountered in Southeast Asia during the Cold War imagined two elephants — the United States and the USSR — either fighting or making love, but in either case trampling the inevitably hapless Southeast Asian grass. The binary determinism of that metaphor ludicrously denied to Southeast Asians any willful autonomy at all. At the dawn of this century’s third decade, Chinese president Xi Jinping’s expansionary and revisionist “China Dream” has begun to collide with Donald Trump’s transactional and revisionist commitment to putting “America First.” The outcomes of that contest in Southeast Asia will depend more than trivially on what the “grass” does or does not do.

Just because China looms over Southeast Asia on maps, it does not follow that its neighbors can only “suffer what they must.” Mousedeer stories are constructive in this context not because they are realistic, but because they conjure an anti-structuralist alternate universe in which the clever weak somehow manage to outwit the bullying strong — and thereby, if only in fantasy, prove the Melian dictum wrong. Mousedeer heroism, however fanciful, is an indigenous cultural reminder to an analyst not to infer impotence and subservience from inequality, and instead to think, realistically but also creatively, outside the boxes that Thucydidean entrapment and Melian destiny represent. The trick, and in a way the task of this book, is to acknowledge and explore the agency of Southeast Asians without recourse to deterministic underestimation on the one hand or to wishful exaggeration on the other.

In both reality and myth, mousedeer are authentically Southeast Asian in character. Most of them live in the remaining forests of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the southern Philippines, and they have been found as well in forested areas in mainland Southeast Asia as far north as Laos and Vietnam. Due to their small size, body shape, and physical agility, they can move quickly through undergrowth, where their fur coloring serves as camouflage. These features help to explain why, in parts of the region, mousedeer have been anthropomorphically recast in folklore as clever tricksters skilled at outsmarting enemies far larger and fiercer than they. In Malay-Indonesian folklore, for instance, the mousedeer Sang Kancil is featured in tales of how the smart though weak can defeat the strong but dumb.⁸

In one such tale, “Mouse Deer Defeats Greedy Dragon,”⁹ simplified here for reasons of space, the diminutive hero outwits a voracious and marauding dragon by duping him into thinking that the sky is falling and will crush them both if nothing is done. Mouse Deer has a rope and is tying one end of it around one of his hooves. Big Dragon, curious, asks why. Mouse Deer explains that he will tie the other end around the crossbar in a nearby well and then jump in. The rope will break his descent, and he will be safely inside the well when the sky crashes down. Big Dragon, envious, forces Mouse Deer to surrender the rope and makes him use it to tie the dragon’s own foot to the crossbar. When the dragon is sitting on the well’s edge waiting for the sky to fall, Mouse Deer pushes him in. Dangling upside down inside the well, with the sky still in its usual place, Big Dragon realizes that he has been tricked. The birds whose catches of fish Big Dragon had been stealing and eating are delighted. “Mouse Deer,” they cheer, “you are the smartest animal in the whole world!”

China’s Neighbors and the Melian Dictum

In the Mouse Deer story, ingenuity overthrows asymmetry and repeals the Melian dictum, but only thanks to the sheer stupidity — credulity — of Big Dragon. The useful moral of the tale is not that the weak can count on the gullibility of the strong. They cannot. It is that influence is not a function of size alone, that the weak have options, and that creativity counts. As far as options go, the mousedeer genre itself is insufficiently creative. By catering to the myth of a single hero who acts and prevails unilaterally, mousedeer stories ignore the strength-in-numbers option: recruiting other weak actors in a coalition better able collectively to counterbalance a strong opponent.

Mousedeer analogies also ignore the reality that the ASEAN economies have benefited from cooperating with China. If and when, through trade or investment, China helps meet the region’s desire for economic development while helping itself as well, assuming both sides proportionally enjoy net gains in welfare, the results may indeed warrant Beijing’s favorite accolade — “win-win.”¹⁰ It is on matters of security that China’s relations with its southern neighbors have tended to be zero-sum, especially regarding the South China Sea and Beijing’s expansive claim to that maritime space located in the heart of Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, no Chinese behavior illustrates the Melian binary of strength over weakness more clearly than Beijing’s unilateral, adamant, and expansive assertion of full sovereignty over or proprietary rights in

virtually all of the waters and land features in the South China Sea. China's claim overlaps to differing extents the also differently overlapping claims made by four ASEAN members — Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam — and Taiwan, which has traditionally supported the Chinese position. China claims the right to fish in certain Indonesian waters as well. An allocation of sovereignty decided bilaterally by and between any two of these seven states could violate overlapping claims made by some of the others, who would, understandably, reject a usurping or infringing settlement reached in their absence. The complexity of the situation makes obvious the need for inclusively multilateral negotiation.

Despite this multilateralist logic of cooperation, Chinese diplomacy has been tenaciously bilateralist on matters of sovereignty and sovereign rights. China has insisted on maximizing its preponderance in such negotiations by dealing only with one rival claimant at a time. Beijing even told Southeast Asian states not to talk about the South China Sea among themselves prior to meeting as a group with China. Before the 48th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur in August 2015, Chinese vice foreign minister Liu Zhenmin warned the Southeast Asian foreign ministers not to discuss the South China Sea in China's absence.¹¹ This pressure to self-censor directly threatened the strategic autonomy that every member of ASEAN, and ASEAN itself, is entitled to enjoy. Beijing's presumptuous admonition also implicitly acknowledged that, if the Southeast Asians did freely caucus among themselves, they might develop a unified position and thereby weaken China's win-lose Melian advantage in structural power.

In Hanoi in July 2010, at a meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum, America's then secretary of state Hillary Clinton suggested that the conflicts over sovereignty in the South China Sea be addressed in multilateral discussions. She recommended "a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants" to resolve the disputes.¹² Of the 27 countries attending the forum, 12 spoke in favor of such an approach, including all four self-acknowledged Southeast Asian claimants — Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

China's foreign minister Yang Jiechi was furious. He neither denounced multilateralism nor quoted the Melian dictum. But the structural determinism in what he did say was clear: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries — and that's just a fact."¹³ He made his intimidating reminder more pointedly bilateral by staring at the foreign minister of one small country, Singapore, while delivering it. Yang was later promoted to state councilor and, in 2017, to the Politburo of China's Communist Party.

In 2016, almost as if to reply to Yang's put-down in Hanoi six years before, Singapore's ministry of defense countered the Melian dictum in

a front-page piece on the city-state's ability to deter a full spectrum of 21st-century threats. The article did not cast Singapore in a heroic mousedeer role. But it did recap the strategies associated with animal metaphors for Singapore that had evolved since the 1960s when the city-state's founder and first ruler Lee Kuan Yew argued that "in a world where the big fish eat small fish and the small fish eat shrimps, Singapore must become a poisonous shrimp."¹⁴ Lee's Singapore would, in other words, arm itself and fight back, even in defeat, as if to say: You can eat us, and we will suffer what we must, but if you do, you too will die.

Over time, as Singapore's economy and military grew stronger, it had less reason to settle for posthumous revenge. In the 1980s, the killer shrimp as a symbol of deterrence gave way in official doctrine to a porcupine who would not only punish an enemy but survive the experience. Since 2004, in the eyes of some analysts, the porcupine has been replaced by an orca — "agile, intelligent, quick and capable of killing more ferocious sharks with its razor sharp teeth when provoked."¹⁵

If porcupines are larger than shrimp, orcas — killer dolphins — are larger still. They can and do kill sharks. Even in a high-tech, cyber-vulnerable, 21st-century world, smarts alone are not a sufficient or reliable substitute for superiority in size and power. Scale still matters. Singapore's metaphorical evolution from poisonous shrimp to ruthless orca — from suicide to survival with even a chance of success — may be comforting. Singapore's realistic leaders know, however, that faith in purely kinetic solo success — Singapore, all by itself, surviving and defeating the dragon — is beyond naïve. It is lunacy. But the Melian dictum is wrong. The strong are not immune to constraint and suffering. The weak, too, can possess and exercise agency. For the ASEAN states, asymmetry is not slavery, and the alternative to lunacy is not resignation. Yang Jiechi's reminder that China's clout over Southeast Asia is "just a fact" has not stopped the region's mousedeer from spending on defense.

How much or how little time and thought do defense planners in each ASEAN capital devote to the probabilities of military conflict with China? What rankings and reasons might such officials have assigned to the likelihood of clashing with China compared, for example, to the chance of fighting a fellow member of ASEAN? The invisibility of such provocative calculations due to secrecy does not mean they do not exist.

Consider Cambodia. No ASEAN state appears to have spent more on its defense as a share of GDP in 2017 and 2018.¹⁶ Yet relations between Phnom Penh and Beijing have been uniquely close. In that light, Cambodia's history of conflict with Thailand or Vietnam might explain Cambodian strongman

Hun Sen's stepped-up military spending better than fear of China would. It may not be coincidental, for instance, that Cambodian allocations for defense began rising in the wake of sometimes fatal clashes on the country's border with Thailand in 2008–11.¹⁷ But military spending can serve other purposes — job creation, pay raises, procurement corruption, or military modernization — all with no current or could-be domestic or foreign enemy necessarily in mind.

If defense spending motives and targets are often opaque, so does uncertainty hamper the estimation of a spending country's relative military strength. Two recent and contrasting portrayals of the military endowments of ASEAN states illustrate the point by juxtaposing quantity versus quality, size versus skill. The size of a country appears to be the most influential variable in the data-analytics firm Global Firepower's 2018 ranking of the ASEAN countries from strongest to weakest in military terms.¹⁸ Vast and populous Indonesia tops that list as militarily the most powerful ASEAN member, while tiny Singapore ranks third from the weakest, Laos.

The Lowy Institute's measure of "military capability" is different. It includes, alongside quantitative components, qualitative factors such as experience, organization, intelligence, and readiness to deploy forces rapidly and for a sustained period in a hypothetical confrontation on either land or sea. Proficiency is thus taken into account. Accordingly, Lowy's listing of ASEAN states puts Singapore in first place, above second-place Vietnam and third-place Indonesia. Still more striking is Singapore's top-rung location on Lowy's ladder of ASEAN countries differentiated by "overall power." That multidimensional variable contextualizes "military ability" by adding to it an array of less directly kinetic measures — "defense networks," "resilience," "economic resources," "economic relationships," "diplomatic influence," "cultural influence," and even "future trends." In this understanding of "overall power," Singapore's lead over Indonesia is not only retained; it widens a bit.¹⁹

These distinctions do not alter China's first- or second-place berth on a listing of all the world's countries by military capacity — just above America (Firepower) or, more plausibly, still just below it (Lowy). The most credibly muscular ASEAN states on Lowy's list do nevertheless pose a hypothetical risk for contingency planners in Beijing. If Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia were someday to agree to coordinate their defense policies and capacities in the event of an external threat to their well-being, without mentioning China or any other potential assailant, Beijing would at least be reminded of what a local war could cost. For such a defense agreement to occur, however,

Southeast Asia's "power threesome" would have to set aside the economic, political, and policy differences that continue to keep them apart.

The good news is that, as of 2019, the short-term probability of war between China and an ASEAN state was surely zero or near-zero, and the medium-term chance not significantly higher. The logic of asymmetry combined with a natural preference for peace explains why no ASEAN member, let alone ASEAN itself, is about to start a physical conflict with China. Nor is China eager to make outright enemies of its neighbors, asymmetry's temptations notwithstanding.

How much could an ASEAN country protect itself by relying on a partner as powerful as the United States? Would the Trump administration or one of its successors-to-come defend a single ASEAN country against China if doing so almost assuredly meant full-spectrum Sino-American war? Projecting current conditions, no, although Washington might well consider options short of war. The nature and status of the existing Philippine-American alliance may serve to illustrate the risks and ambiguities involved in relying on outsiders.

Alliance as Deterrence

The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the Philippines and the United States would be activated if either party were attacked by a third party, conceivably China, "in the Pacific" or "in the Pacific Area." But such an event would merely oblige Washington and Manila to "consult together" and respond to unspecified "common dangers" in keeping with the two countries' respective "constitutional processes." The American process could even require an authorizing vote in the Senate before war-making action could be taken.²⁰ The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty that the Philippines and Thailand signed with the United States and five non-Southeast Asian countries in 1954 is technically still in effect. But its wording similarly dilutes the duty of one signer to defend another from attack.²¹

The rise of China has also fostered fears in Manila that, if Beijing did attack, a geographic ambiguity in the MDT's text could serve as a loophole through which Washington could escape its responsibility under the treaty. If the attack took place in the South China Sea, would its waters qualify as part of "the Pacific" or "the Pacific Area"?

In Manila in February 2019, on behalf of the Trump administration, US secretary of state Mike Pompeo answered that question: "As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft,

or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our mutual defense treaty.”²² The sea’s waters were thus unequivocally placed within the scope of the MDT. Less noticed was Pompeo’s implied exclusion of private vessels from the category of objects whose experience of being attacked would activate the treaty. The omission could be considered an incentive to China to continue its long-standing practice of harassing the operations of Philippine fishermen in the South China Sea. Beijing used that tactic again mere weeks after Pompeo spoke.²³

On paper, the mutual defense treaty is a two-way deal. By its reciprocal terms, the Philippines should come to the defense of the United States if the latter is attacked anywhere in the vast “Pacific Area” in which Pompeo included the South China Sea. Just as some Americans have feared entrapment by Manila in a Sino-Philippine clash, so have Philippine voices been raised against the risk of enlistment in a Sino-American war.

Just four days after Pompeo’s reassurance, Philippine defense secretary Delfin Lorenzana said his concern was not the need for American reassurance but the risk of “being involved in a war that we do not seek and do not want.”²⁴ Lorenzana is by no means a Sinophile inclined to bend to the will of Beijing. He knows that kinetic involvement would not be automatic, but would depend upon procedural decisions that the treaty requires. Conceivably, the treaty’s reciprocal obligations could be revised to operate in only one direction — making the United States defend the Philippines but not the reverse. In Washington, however, even under a less “America First” president than Trump, that idea would likely be dead on arrival. Illustrating the division of opinion in Manila, Philippine foreign affairs secretary Teodor Locsin Jr. saw no need to review the MDT, contending instead that “in vagueness lies the best deterrence.”²⁵

The Philippine case shows that a treaty can give rise to nearly as much uncertainty as it was meant to replace, especially in a country where disagreements are allowed. Dependent deterrence, reliant on outside help, may not be dependable. Worth noting in that light is the record of independent, China-facing deterrence in a Southeast Asian country that has forsworn alliances: Vietnam.

Of the Southeast Asian states, Vietnam is the one most likely to cause China to think twice before attacking it. No ASEAN country has a national identity more animated by historical antagonism toward the PRC and its imperial antecedents. In the National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi, large wall maps anachronistically frame invasions of “Vietnam” by “China” that took place long before the nation-state was even invented.

Since the 3rd century BCE, by one calculation, 21 conflicts of varying intensities and lengths have pitted “Vietnamese” against “Chinese” forces.²⁶

This legacy of hostility was renewed in the South China Sea in 1974 when PRC troops seized the Paracel Islands from what was then the Republic of [South] Vietnam, killing an estimated 75 Vietnamese soldiers in the process. Vietnam was reunified as a socialist republic in 1975. Three years later, Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia, ousting and replacing Pol Pot’s murderous Beijing-backed Khmer Rouge regime. In 1979, China invaded Vietnam to teach it a “lesson” for what it had done to China’s ally. The ensuing brief but bloody war took the lives of an estimated “tens of thousands” of Vietnamese and Chinese soldiers.²⁷ A month later, China’s troops withdrew.

China claimed to have successfully delivered its “lesson” to Vietnam. A scholarly consensus, however, supports the argument that in this instance the mousedeer’s skill and tenacity surprised, embarrassed, and seriously wounded the dragon, despite the clear numerical superiority of China’s forces—200,000 men, 1,500 artillery pieces, and 400 tanks. Cognizant of the prowess that Vietnam’s air defense system had acquired by experience under American attack during the Vietnam War, China kept its planes on the ground.²⁸ The 1979 war confirmed the Lowy Institute’s attention to quality, including experience, alongside quantity in its measure of military capacity. Not coincidentally, following China’s withdrawal, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) underwent modernizing reforms, as if it had not only delivered a “lesson” but learned one as well.²⁹

A sustainable peace did not follow the 1979 war. Intermittently from then until the normalization of Hanoi-Beijing relations in 1991, the two countries clashed not only along Vietnam’s land border with China but also at sea. In 1988 they fought in the South China Sea for control of land features in the Spratly Islands. In March of that year, dozens of reportedly unarmed Vietnamese sailors standing in the water with a Vietnamese flag on Johnson South Reef were mowed down by gunfire from a PLA Navy frigate.³⁰ China seized the reef and other land features in the Spratlys and has occupied them ever since. Repeatedly over the subsequent three decades and counting, China has harassed Vietnamese ships and fishermen in the South China Sea, including inside Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone.³¹

Understandable in this context was the nearly 700 percent jump in the value of arms imported by Vietnam in 2011–16 compared with 2006–11. The increase boosted the country into eighth place worldwide by that measure. Hanoi’s acquisitions were made with the water-and-air setting of the South China Sea clearly in mind. The purchases, completed or planned, favored

submarines, ships, aircraft, and drones over weapons usable only on land. An analyst who noted these data in 2017 suggested that Vietnam could now pursue its own equivalent of an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, alluding to an ability that observers normally reserve for China alone.³²

Merely buying weapons ensures neither their scrupulous maintenance nor their adroit use. But among ASEAN states, Vietnam's unique and long evident will and wherewithal to resist aggression, a capacity rendered all the more deadly by modern materiel, could at least frustrate a hypothetical Chinese attack for a limited time. And even in the medium to longer term, China would be hard put to transmute victory into pacification and domination. The long reliance of the Philippines on its alliance with the United States, in contrast, reduced Manila's incentive to develop a credible military deterrent of its own. In part for that reason, the Armed Forces of the Philippines are notoriously weak.³³ That weakness in turn helps explain Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's evident reluctance to stand up to China.³⁴

Unlike Manila, Hanoi formally renounces alliances and alignments. As a matter of doctrine, Vietnam anchors its foreign policy in a triple abstention: "no military alliances, no aligning with one country against another, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil."³⁵ These "three noes" would appear to rule out soliciting and leveraging third-party support against Beijing. But they have not foreclosed creative mousedeer diplomacy in Hanoi. Vietnam's ongoing military-related cooperation with Moscow and Washington is a case in point. Purchases of Russian materiel, including Kilo-class submarines, have bolstered Hanoi's strategic autonomy in kinetic terms, while the warming of Sino-Russian relations has attenuated though not removed Chinese suspicion that Hanoi and Moscow are conspiring to thwart Beijing. Improved relations between Hanoi and Washington have also tended to support the strategic autonomy of Vietnam.

Although it may seem like no more than playing with words, Hanoi has also used creative labeling to tailor what its "three noes" are intended to mean for its interactions with a given country. "No military alliances" has not prevented Vietnam from maintaining a nuanced hierarchy of "partnerships" whose adjectives supposedly indicate how close its relations with a given country actually are. On that listing in 2019, the top — most adulatory — level of recognition was reserved for any country that had earned a "comprehensive strategic cooperative" partnership with Vietnam. China sat there all by itself, presumably enjoying its tripled accolade.

Vietnam's partnership with America, in contrast, merited only a single adjective: "comprehensive." All of the other major powers' relations with Vietnam were at least "strategic." Did Hanoi privately assuage Washington

that a “comprehensive” partnership necessarily included a strategic aspect? Did Hanoi assure Beijing that Vietnamese-American relations were not “strategic” because that would imply a nascent alliance to be leveraged against China in violation of the three noes? Speculation aside, the eighth iteration of America’s joint Naval Engagement Activity with Vietnam did take place off Cam Ranh Bay in 2018.³⁶ That training exercise included rehearsing the handling of unplanned maritime encounters, a proficiency of use to Vietnam as it faces Chinese harassment in the South China Sea. In sum, a mousedeer’s ingenuity may lie partly in the difference between what it says and what it quietly continues to do.

Formally and uniquely in Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Thailand are still designated by treaty as American allies. But that status has long ceased to predict the foreign-policy behavior of either state. In the 21st century, the more contingent, multipolar, and therefore uncertain international relations become, the more obsolete will the fixed and permanent commitments implied by alliances appear to be.

The ASEAN Way and Beijing’s Way

Resignation and passivity among Southeast Asians are natural responses to the massive asymmetries in economic and military power that favor China over its ASEAN neighbors and allow Beijing to assert itself forcefully on land and sea. These imbalances and pressures, made more pointed by doubts about the reliability of outside help, are naturally conducive to fatalist pessimism in the region. Apart from romantic optimism, which is vanishingly scarce, there are three obvious alternatives to versions and degrees of deference toward and dependence on China: go-it-alone deterrence, constrained by what a single country can afford; external reliance on outsiders to counterbalance; and regional coalition-building designed to incubate a united front of Southeast Asian states determined to negotiate with China from a unified position of collective strength. National deterrence and extra-regional alliance having been covered above, albeit within constraints of space, the third option — intra-regional cohesion — is reviewed next.

The sole conceivable candidate for a region-wide experiment along regional lines is ASEAN, whose 10 countries together, in effect, account for nearly all of Southeast Asia.³⁷ In tandem with the manifold differences among its members, however, ASEAN’s own makeup and procedures have rendered the grouping incapable of forging a common front against Chinese regional expansion.

ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization of sovereign states. It is not a transnational agency endowed with executive power. Its states have not delegated to their organization the authority to represent them in world affairs. Gathered in a summit, the 10 can make decisions on behalf of ASEAN as an organization, but those decisions do not enforceably overrule the members' own policies. Member-state sovereignty is protected by the principle of non-interference, while the principle of consensus — the ASEAN Way — preserves the ability of a single member to block whatever it dislikes, whether the objection is authentic or attributable to pressure by an outside power such as China. A case in point is China's success in co-opting Cambodia into service as a proxy whose veto, if wielded, can block any ASEAN statement on the South China Sea that Beijing dislikes.

Iconic in this regard was the shambolic ending of the 45th meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in Phnom Penh in July 2012. In February and again in June, Phnom Penh and Beijing had signed agreements providing for nearly \$750 million in Chinese loans to Cambodia. In July, at China's behest, Cambodia blocked any specific reference to the South China Sea disputes in the foreign ministers' communiqué at the end of their meeting. Chinese officials may even have gone so far as to telephone guidance to that effect to the Cambodian delegation during the discussion.³⁸ Beijing did not and does not want ASEAN to have an independent position on the matter of maritime sovereignty that might express or imply criticism of China's sweeping claim.

Accordingly, despite a decades-long record of 44 completed meetings and agreed-upon communiqués behind them, the ASEAN foreign ministers failed to issue any statement at all. Less than two months later, in September, Cambodia's state secretary for finance announced that, in addition to more than \$500 million in Chinese loan agreements then signed or planned, China's foreign minister had just promised an outright "gift" worth \$24 million that Cambodia would be free to use on any priority project.³⁹ Phnom Penh and Beijing were thus able to link and ostensibly satisfy two different interests — Cambodia's in economic development, China's in regional primacy — in a way that overrode and thwarted a third interest: the collective interest of Southeast Asians in uniting to defend their region's strategic autonomy from outside interference. How much of China's material largesse wound up supporting avarice rather than welfare in a country long ranked as the most corrupt in Southeast Asia is a separate question.⁴⁰

The institutionalized power of a single member state to veto a draft ASEAN resolution critical of China makes it easier for Beijing to export self-censorship to Southeast Asia. But Chinese bribery is not the only culprit. Diverse views among member states independently impede agreement on sensitive

matters, including whether and how much to resist Beijing. More often than not, ASEAN's members have tolerated Beijing's efforts to twist arms and buy silence. The partly fear-based case for maintaining a façade of comity with China and of agreement among themselves rationalizes the Southeast Asian states' forbearance. The longer ASEAN's members continue to furnish Beijing with diplomatic cover to divide and manipulate them, the harder it will be to distinguish the self-censoring ASEAN Way from the censorship-mongering "Way of Beijing."

In addition to cultivating proxy roadblocks inside ASEAN, China has sought to weaken the grouping through what could be called "preemptive co-optation" — presumptively claiming a consensus that does not exist. PRC foreign minister Wang Yi's itinerary through Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos in April 2016 illustrated the gambit and its risks. At each stop he reaffirmed Chinese economic support for the hosting government. At the end of the trip, in Laos, he announced that all three ASEAN countries had joined China in agreement — a "consensus" — supporting the Chinese position that the South China Sea was none of ASEAN's business, although he worded the alleged agreement's content more diplomatically than that.⁴¹

Asked about this allegedly four-way concurrence, ASEAN's secretary-general Le Luong Minh said that ASEAN was unaware of any such agreement. He had "heard nothing" from Laos or from Brunei as to "what was agreed or what [had] happened" during Wang's visits. Even more notable was a Cambodian government spokesman's on-the-record disavowal: "There has been no agreement or discussions, just a visit by a Chinese foreign minister."⁴² Nor did the statements made by the Laotian and Bruneian foreign ministries following their meetings with Wang mention the South China Sea or any agreement with China related to it.⁴³ In this instance at least, preemptive co-optation failed to yield the acquiescence that Beijing desired.

As if to further negate Wang's announcement, Le added that "an ASEAN country cannot negotiate with China on disputes that involve other ASEAN countries," as the South China Sea disputes certainly did and still do.⁴⁴ That comment was less effective than it might have seemed, however, for Wang had not claimed that he and his hosts had negotiated the disputes themselves. A bolder riposte would have urged China to stop excluding ASEAN from any dispute-settling role. But that would have meant bypassing the ASEAN Way of consensus, risking Chinese wrath, and likely incurring demurals by Cambodia and other ASEAN members, whether China-friendly or China-cowed. Le could not argue that China and the ASEAN claimant states should put the maps of their sovereignties on the same table for multilateral

negotiation. That would have exceeded his mandate to administer but not lead the association.

Their demurrals notwithstanding, none of Wang's three hosts gave Beijing cause for outright alarm. None criticized China's maritime claim. And in withholding public support for China's desire to ban ASEAN from playing any role in resolving the disputes over sovereignty in the South China Sea, their intent was likely less to challenge Beijing than to avoid appearing, in the eyes of their co-members in ASEAN, complicit in China's effort to incapacitate the association. Nor has the option known as "ASEAN Minus X" gained traction — the idea that the four ASEAN claimant states should settle their own differences first, the better to deal as a united group with Beijing's divide-and-defeat effort to control the maritime core — the heartwater — of Southeast Asia. China is willing to meet with ASEAN's members as a group to discuss rules of behavior in the South China Sea, but not to negotiate allocations of sovereignty, let alone question China's claim.

Two months after Wang Yi's tour, a new brouhaha arose to replay the debacle that had closed the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Phnom Penh four years before. In June 2016 in Yuxi, China, an ASEAN-China Special Foreign Ministers Meeting derailed, embarrassing ASEAN once more. Wang Yi hosted the event and co-chaired it with his Singaporean counterpart. Censorship with Chinese characteristics again fed the fiasco. Basically, Wang Yi tried to bully the ASEAN states into accepting an utterly anodyne draft joint statement with China, prepared by China, whose 10 points spared China even an implicit whiff of dissatisfaction with its behavior in the South China Sea.

The Southeast Asians were not persuaded. They had a statement of their own. It "expressed serious concern over recent and ongoing developments" that had "eroded trust and confidence" and "increased tensions" that could "undermine peace, security and stability in the South China Sea." It stressed "the importance of non-militarisation and self-restraint." It singled out "land reclamation" as a possibly tension-raising activity. It called such happenings "an important issue in relations between ASEAN and China." The implied criticisms of Beijing were hard to deny.

Wang Yi not only rejected the statement. He successfully pressured his ASEAN counterparts to bury it.⁴⁵ Cambodia and especially Laos, ASEAN's chair at the time, played key proxy spoiler roles. As if the intra-ASEAN rancor stoked by Wang were not embarrassing enough, the China-censored draft that some ASEAN members had resisted was released as a "media statement," only to be retracted soon after. As for the meeting in Yuxi, it broke up — no consensus, no statement, nothing.⁴⁶

In one sense, ASEAN's initial courage notwithstanding, China won that round. To Beijing's demanding ears, silence by manipulated stalemate was better than even a veiled remark that might have been thought to question China's assertive comportment at sea. But the dragon also lost in that it failed to cajole or intimidate its mousedeer guests into public and unanimous agreement with its position. ASEAN also won and lost. China's effort to censor and rubber-stamp the outcome failed. But whereas the ASEAN foreign ministers had said in their draft that they could not "ignore what is happening in the South China Sea," Chinese intimidation obliged them, at least officially and textually on this occasion, to ignore exactly what Chinese intimidation was making happen in those waters.

In July 2016, a month after the fiasco in Yuxi, an international arbitral court declared China's position and conduct in the South China Sea to be at variance with international maritime law. But the judges' rebuke of Beijing did not precipitate the vocal and sustained global approval that would have been needed to institutionalize their ruling. Nor did US president Barack Obama's administration campaign on the ruling's behalf, even as China vilified the court and refused to implement its decision. The ASEAN states, meanwhile, knew from Beijing's anger that it would punish them if they championed what the judges had done.

In the wake of the ruling, intra-ASEAN divisions again played into China's hands. Benigno Aquino III was then president of the Philippines, a claimant state. His administration had brought the original "suit" against Beijing on Manila's behalf. By the time the court issued its ruling, however, his elected successor, Rodrigo Duterte, had replaced him. Duterte chose not to take yes for an answer. Ignoring the judgment's net benefit to the Philippines, Duterte virtually reversed course, letting his new leverage lie fallow and cultivating Chinese investments instead — commitments that Beijing was more than willing to pledge, though less willing to fund.⁴⁷ Fortunately for Duterte, the Philippine economy continued to grow at one of the region's most rapid rates.

The lesson of these embarrassments is that ASEAN is losing its centrality. But in what sense? ASEAN has never been central to the daily living or thinking of the 650 million people who live in its member countries; that was never the grouping's intent. For the more than five decades since its birth in 1967, its self-imposed lack of domestic centrality and corresponding reverence for member sovereignty have helped ASEAN survive. In view of the extreme diversity of its region, had its leaders fostered a more intrusive version of centrality, directly involving the association in possibly controversial issues of domestic consequence for its member states, local pushbacks could

have splintered the group. By making ASEAN less centralized, less impactful, and less contentious, the association's founders made it more likely to last. Concomitantly underfunded and understaffed, the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta has kept its profile low.⁴⁸

In a tolerably stretched comparison with Europe, given the empowerment and bureaucratization of the European Union (EU), one could say that, in Southeast Asia, the lack of a Brussels prevented a Brexit. But at what price in terms of ASEAN's coherence, purpose, and ability to respond to China? While Xi Jinping works to "rejuvenate" his country, far less attention is paid in Southeast Asia to renovating ASEAN to improve its capacity to defend and strengthen the strategic autonomy of its region.

Centrality and Connectivity

ASEAN has long prided itself on its "centrality" in regional affairs. But centrality is an ambiguous term. It can refer to ASEAN's location, to its importance, or to both, and they are not the same. ASEAN can look at a map and liken itself to the interoceanic hyphen at the heart of the "Indo-Pacific." That aspiration was evident in 2019 when the grouping proposed the adoption of "ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation" across the entire "Indo-Pacific region."⁴⁹ But how realistic is that dramatically enlarged desire? The behavioral centrality of ASEAN—its operational importance—will signally depend on whether the grouping is supported, disregarded, or undermined by powerful outsiders, notably China and the United States.

Many Southeast Asian analysts define and defend ASEAN's centrality in geopolitical terms: the neutral but helpful bridging role of the hyphen in a "Sino-American" cold war that may already be underway. Southeast Asian leaders are understandably reluctant to align their countries with either China or the United States, as if both were equally worthy of circumspection if not suspicion. But Chinese and American policies challenge the strategic autonomy of Southeast Asia to different extents and in different ways. Opinions differ as to the scope of the PRC's ambitions, but there can be little doubt that the rejuvenation of China proposed and pursued by Xi Jinping is intended to return the Middle Kingdom to more than passive importance. If that assertive campaign is successful—a large if—it could reduce if not replace the diplomatic centrality that ASEAN has managed to acquire and retain since the end of the Cold War. America, by comparison, is too distant, too preoccupied on other fronts, and arguably too chastened

by previous foreign misadventures to aspire to control the South China Sea, let alone Southeast Asia.

Notwithstanding the modesty of ASEAN's centrality as a reliable host of international meetings rather than a major shaper of their outcomes, the association deserves full credit for its innovations. During propitious regional and global conditions in the 1990s, ASEAN's diplomatic creativity blossomed. Knowing that ASEAN was not designed to be a supranational body with its own foreign policy, the group's leaders developed its comparative advantage as a catalyst and convener of interstate discourse and activity. No longer constrained by the Cold War, ASEAN innovated a dense Venn diagram of "ASEAN Plus" initiatives that all had ASEAN in common. A raft of acronyms ensued. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), and the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) all date from the '90s. Earlier initiatives were augmented. ASEAN's Dialogue Partners (ASEAN Plus One), for instance, grew in number from six to ten.

ASEAN deserves full credit for birthing and incubating these regional arrangements and hosting the related events. But the diplomatic centrality of the association depended in no small measure on the absence of a proactive counter-center. The continued willingness of China's leaders to follow the advice proffered in the 1980s by their predecessor Deng Xiaoping—keep a low profile and focus on domestic economic reform—allowed ASEAN's centrality to proceed unrivaled by Beijing.

Xi Jinping broke that mold. As general secretary of the Communist Party of China since 2012, China's president since 2013, and chair of multiple commissions and shadowy "leading small groups," Beijing's new strongman dramatically raised his country's profile abroad. In October 2013 in Indonesia, he announced his 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, the southern counterpart of a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) that he had unveiled the month before in Kazakhstan. Basically, these pathways of physical infrastructure and diverse parallel projects were meant to connect China westward to Europe—MSR mainly by water via the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea, SREB mostly by land across Eurasia. Incorporating both of these schemes is Xi's massive and wide-ranging Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as it came to be called.

The BRI is essentially bilateral in nature. China is the hub from which spokes of connectivity in construction, trade, investment, and finance are meant to radiate to and through dozens of recipient countries. In that design, the proactive and impactful centrality of China could not be more evident. ASEAN's plural composition and lack of sovereign authority prevents

it from playing such a role. An ASEAN region perforated by the fanned-out infrastructure of a vast bilateralist BRI is thus at risk of becoming a collection of pathways and projects disproportionately serving the operational reach and centrality of China.

As if to hedge against that future, in 2016, three years after the MSR through Southeast Asia was announced, ASEAN's leaders launched a Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025. Aimed mainly at linking the ASEAN economies more closely and smoothly together, the plan was ambitiously tasked to achieve "a seamlessly and comprehensively connected and integrated ASEAN [region] that will deliver tangible benefits to ASEAN citizens" by its targeted year.⁵⁰ But ASEAN is not a country, "ASEAN citizens" do not exist, and its Master Plan lacks a master — an executive agency such as a government equipped with the sovereign power and ability to implement the plan, or at least push it forward.

Abstractly compared and other things held equal, bilateralism is more efficient than multilateralism — fewer actors — whereas multilateralism is more legitimate than bilateralism — more participation. Concerns in Southeast Asia that China's BRI could outperform and undermine ASEAN's MPAC 2025 illustrate the difference.⁵¹ ASEAN's scheme was born from disappointment over the performance of ASEAN's first multilateral MPAC, begun in 2010. But the revised version — MPAC 2025 — still suffers from inefficiency due to the need to coordinate policies and take decisions involving all 10 member states; national borders continue to impede momentum toward "seamless" regional integration.

Meanwhile the legitimacy of the BRI has suffered in Southeast Asian eyes from evidence that its empowered Chinese hub is more interested in using the ASEAN states-as-spokes in its own interest than in generating "tangible benefits" for Southeast Asians.

Criticisms of the BRI have been articulated in all of the ASEAN states that have hosted its projects. Complaints have targeted high project costs, above-market rates on loans, and unrepayable debts whose conversion into equity could give China controlling stakes in host-country facilities and resources. China's practice of supplying Chinese labor to build BRI infrastructure has denied jobs to locals in need of paid work. The clearing of land for project use has displaced poor families with no recourse, scant compensation, and little or no regard for the environmental damage done. In host countries near China's borders, despite the need for electricity in project areas, the energy generated by BRI ventures has been disproportionately earmarked for China's own use. Dam projects on the Mekong River and

its tributaries are constricting the supply of water for planting and fishing by Southeast Asians farther downstream.⁵²

Beijing is not single-mindedly trying to impoverish the ASEAN states. China's party-state is not a smoothly operating machine free of friction between its moving parts. Corruption and competition among Chinese actors and agencies and among their counterparts in Southeast Asia share blame for what has gone wrong with the BRI. Unfortunately, apportioning that responsibility is obstructed by the sheer opacity of the BRI. In the accurate words of one analyst writing in 2019, "Despite its grand scale there is still no reliable list of BRI projects, no disclosure of the lending standards China follows, nor even the amount China has invested."⁵³ Reinforcing this lack of transparency in China are incentives for reciprocal secrecy in hosting countries, especially those under venal and autocratic rule.

Further obscurity follows from Beijing's penchant for ambiguity. Consider the equivocations embedded in Wang Yi's 2017 acknowledgment that China "has no intention of designating clear geographic boundaries" for the BRI; that it somehow represents "international cooperation in its essence"; and that it "is not a member's club, but a circle of friends with extensive participation."⁵⁴ A *China Daily* story in April 2019 praised Xi Jinping for working "to connect China with 152 countries through the Belt and Road Initiative," but left unsaid how many are actually connected to the PRC, in what ways, and to what extents.⁵⁵ The BRI does nevertheless have a strategic purpose: to elevate and invigorate the behavioral centrality — the operational importance — of China to Asia and the world, and not only in economic terms. Xi Jinping himself has acknowledged the initiative's political ambition by describing the BRI as "an important pathway to improve global development patterns *and global governance* [*italics added*]."⁵⁶

The BRI's country-by-country, hub-and-spokes pattern locates Beijing indispensably at the center of its "circle of friends" and ensures that it will never be outnumbered at the negotiating table. Analysts can therefore be forgiven for speculating that, if the BRI is a prototype, it augurs a Sinocentric model of interstate relations and project management based on separated spokes, asymmetric influence, and deference to Beijing. Nor do the official "eight requirements" that BRI-participating states and organizations must meet encourage confidence that China is willing to accommodate a variety of partners and ideas. The very first condition is that the participants "effectively promote unity of thought." BRI participants are also required to "effectively promote public opinion," including "strengthen[ing]" unidentified "theories," and to propagate the also unspecified "spirit of the Silk

Road,” apparently while evincing China-guided “unity of thought” as to what those “theories” and that “spirit” are.⁵⁷

Lofty rhetoric and grounded reality are not the same. The BRI is necessarily decentralized in actual practice by its sheer complexity — the global spread of its projects and the multiplicity of entities and actors they involve both in project-hosting countries far from Beijing and inside China itself. But complexity does not ensure a level playing field for host and guest alike. The operational meaning of the abstract and seemingly benign concept of coordination warrants brief illustration in the case of Thailand.

Countries that sign up for the BRI are required to promote “concerted coordination.”⁵⁸ When Beijing began negotiating a BRI project with Bangkok involving high-speed rail, Thai officials were angered when their Chinese counterparts treated the term as a euphemism for greater Chinese control, including extraterritorial rights to commercial use of the land on either side of the planned tracks.⁵⁹ Excessive too, in Thai eyes, were the proposed rate of interest on Chinese loans, China’s desired ownership role, and the likely costs of construction, further complicated by issues involving labor recruitment and the environment. Bangkok also bridled at Beijing’s unaccommodating demeanor. Affronts included project maps written, against explicit Thai wishes, in untranslated Chinese.⁶⁰ Eventually the Thai side rejected Chinese funding and sought to replace it from domestic sources. When those proved insufficient, Bangkok reopened the bidding to foreign lenders without privileging Chinese banks.

The future centrality of ASEAN will depend on more than what happens to the BRI. For the foreseeable future, ASEAN will not disappear, in part because it is not powerful enough to be controversial. But it is at least conceivable that, in the years and decades to come, China’s infrastructural penetration of Southeast Asia will tie the region to China in roads and railroads, ports and dams, resource extraction and energy generation, not to mention digital protocols and could-be surveillance algorithms in cyberspace. In that unlikely but imaginable event, ASEAN’s sun will be outshone.

Anxiety, Destiny, Autonomy

In Southeast Asia, diverse conditions and variables will shape the success or failure of the BRI and the irrelevance or centrality of ASEAN. Not least among those influencing factors will be the opinions of Southeast Asians themselves, especially in elite circles equipped with knowledge of and access to the making of foreign policy in their respective countries. In

November-December 2019, the Singapore-based ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute surveyed such opinions in purposive samples drawn in all 10 ASEAN-member countries. Of the 1,308 respondents who took part, 40 percent were officials in the public sector and 36 percent were analysts in universities or think tanks. The rest (and their percentage shares) were in business (11), in the media (7), or in non-governmental organizations (7).⁶¹

At the 2nd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in April 2019, Xi Jinping did not acknowledge the mounting criticisms of the BRI—that its activities inflicted burdensome debt, were closed to inspection, fostered environmental damage, and were tainted by corruption. But he likely had such charges in mind when he pledged to make the BRI “open, green and clean.”⁶² Six months later, the ISEAS survey asked its respondents to evaluate his promise of reform: “Are you convinced that this approach will lead to a fairer deal for your country as a recipient of BRI loans?” Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of those who replied had “little or no confidence” that it would. Only in Brunei did a majority have “some or full confidence” that “a fairer deal” would be forthcoming.

ISEAS had administered a similar survey throughout the ASEAN region a year earlier, in November-December 2018. Both surveys included a question about trust in China and one about China’s rise. Those findings too were unkind to Beijing. On the matter of trust, confidence in China to “do the right thing” for “global peace, security, prosperity and governance” was low in 2018 and even lower a year later. Among those who answered the trust question, the proportion who were “confident” or “very confident” that China would “do the right thing” shrank from 20 percent (2018) to 16 percent (2019). Those who expressed such confidence in the United States actually grew from 27 to 30 percent—notwithstanding Trump’s idiosyncratic presidency and the tit-for-tat spat that broke out between American and ASEAN leaders during the ASEAN summitry in Bangkok in November 2019,⁶³ a mere week before the second survey began. That said, those expressions of assurance were dwarfed by the increasing majority with “no or little confidence” in China (from 52 to 60 percent) and the stable majority with no or little confidence in the United States (from 51 to 50 percent).⁶⁴

In the 2019 ISEAS survey, respondents were shown five statements and asked to choose the one that “most accurately reflects your view of China’s re-emergence as a major power with respect to Southeast Asia.” Compared with the scarcity of confidence that China would “do the right thing” in world affairs, the views of China’s rise were even less likely to please Beijing. Or so it would seem. A miniscule 1.5 percent of the respondents chose

the answer most obviously favorable to China, namely, that “China is a benign and benevolent power.” In contrast, a 38 percent plurality agreed that “China is a revisionist power and intends to turn Southeast Asia into its sphere of influence.” Almost as many — 35 percent — affirmed that “China is gradually taking over the US’[s] role as a regional leader.” Only 19 percent thought it was “too early to determine China’s strategic intentions at this moment.” And even fewer — 7 percent — agreed that “China is a status quo power and will continue to support the existing regional order.”⁶⁵

What does it mean that nearly three-quarters — 73 percent — of the Southeast Asian respondents saw China as a “revisionist” power bent on turning their region into its “sphere of influence” (38 percent) or as “gradually” replacing America as “a regional leader” (35 percent)? Some of those who chose either of these answers may have wanted such a shift to occur. Given the survey’s other results, however, respondents were more likely anxious at the prospect of Southeast Asia’s induction into a Sinosphere led from Beijing. Would Xi Jinping’s China rather be feared than loved? If so, seen from Beijing, the survey’s results could be good news.

Apart from love or fear, a third motivation behind the answers is also possible: fatalism — that China’s primacy is Southeast Asia’s destiny, like it or not. If China’s presence in Southeast Asia continues to expand — bolstered perhaps by the indifference or unreliability of the United States — the more inescapable China’s eventual dominance in “its” neighborhood may appear to be. The PRC’s comparative advantage in the ASEAN region plausibly rests more on Southeast Asians’ awareness of China’s superior economic and military clout than on empathy with or attraction to China itself. Signs of that clout in addition to Chinese money, products, and markets would include Beijing’s growing coercive power, its acts of intimidation in the South China Sea, and its relative success in pressuring Southeast Asians to censor themselves regarding China’s behavior and “core interests.”⁶⁶

Unable or unwilling to convert regional fear into love, China may find it easier and more effective to rely on cognition over emotion: to speak and act in ways that will convince Southeast Asian influentials of the sheer inescapability of Chinese sway over the region. Deference to Beijing would no longer require the deferent to censor themselves; they would sincerely and pragmatically defer, wanting to be on the side of history.

Notable among Southeast Asians who think along these lines is Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean analyst known for celebrating China, castigating “the West,” and advising his small country to accommodate if not actually kowtow to its giant neighbor to the north. Mahbubani called the Melian dictum “an eternal rule of geopolitics.” “Small states,” he wrote, “must

always behave like small states” — fated as they are to cater to big ones. In relations between unequals, might really does make right. For fear of annoying Beijing, Singapore should not criticize China’s expansionist ambition in the South China Sea, not even in politely vague and allusive terms. Another prominent Singaporean analyst, Bilahari Kausikan, disagreed. Singapore had not survived and prospered “by being anybody’s tame poodle.” Its citizens were not so “stupid” as to ignore meaningful “asymmetries of size and power.” But that knowledge did not oblige them to “grovel or accept subordination” as normal. “No one respects a running dog,” Kausikan added. “What kind of people does Kishore think we are?”⁶⁷

Relevant in this context is Xi Jinping’s repeated characterization of China and its Southeast Asian neighbors as a single “community of common destiny.”⁶⁸ The phrase may appear to contradict the Melian dictum by replacing the inequality that is supposed to make small states suffer with the empathy implied by a “community” of states with a shared future. But reciprocal empathy based on egalitarian fraternity is not an obvious or inevitable “common destiny” that China and the ASEAN countries share. More plausibly, their destiny flows from their inescapable physical proximity and their incongruity in size and power, just as Foreign Minister Yang reminded his Singaporean counterpart in Hanoi in 2010. Viewed from Beijing, it is those starkly unequal conditions that could help to convince China’s neighbors that their future as small states living in China’s shadow requires their “inevitable” deference to Beijing — as the Melian dictum would expect and Mahbubani would advise.

In December 2018, the astute doyenne of foreign-policy studies in Indonesia, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, restated a growing worry in Southeast Asia: “that ASEAN and its 10 member states may be forced to choose between China and the US.”⁶⁹ She wondered whether Southeast Asians could withstand Chinese and American pressures to pick one or the other side in strategic feuding increasingly reminiscent of the Cold War. She worried that the region could become again a theater for proxy conflicts between powerful outsiders.

Resisting partisan alignment with either China or the United States and avoiding collateral damage from the rivalry between them, Dewi wrote, would require of ASEAN and its constituent states one thing above all: strategic autonomy. She noted that ASEAN and its individual members were highly diverse, relatively weak, and located in a part of the world notably susceptible to Sino-American competition. The strategic autonomy of these Southeast Asian actors, she argued, was not a luxury — something they

could decide they could not afford. It was a necessity if they expected to survive.

Inadvertently reprising the metaphor for asymmetry featured in this book, Dewi ended her piece with the hope that “ASEAN can take inspiration from the familiar Southeast Asian fable of the wily ‘Kancil’ or mousedeer that often outwits much bigger animals, the moral of the story being that those who are weaker must be more cunning and clever” than those who are strong.⁷⁰

How collectively “cunning and clever” has ASEAN been? The evidence is discouraging. Southeast Asia’s diversity, China’s intervention, and the veto-empowering ASEAN Way have prevented the grouping’s 10 members from leveraging their regional association into a united front that could have enabled them to deal more effectively with Beijing’s pressures and demands. ASEAN’s disunity has been plain to see. The four member states with self-described claims to parts of the South China Sea, for example, have done almost nothing to resolve their overlapping territorial avowals. A resolution of their disagreements might not only have strengthened the four states’ bargaining position vis-à-vis China. It might even have generated momentum toward an ASEAN-wide definition and defense of the strategic autonomy of Southeast Asia as a whole.

In 2011–15, Australian maritime analyst Carl Thayer wrote a series of papers for ASEAN’s consideration. In them he proposed, creatively and in helpful detail, the drafting and signing of an ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia’s Maritime Domain.⁷¹ Such a compact would have strengthened the strategic autonomy of Southeast Asia. To the extent that Southeast Asian officials were even aware of his idea, however, they ignored it. So did the region’s policy scholars. Emailed in 2015 and again in 2019 about the fate of his idea, Thayer replied both times that it was “dead in the water.”⁷²

Absent effective collective action, it has been up to each individual ASEAN country to develop its own ways of trying to strengthen its China-facing autonomy by and for itself. In their efforts to avoid exclusive alignment with either China or the United States, ASEAN’s members have hedged against both. Often, the hedger chooses to cooperate first with one of the two and then with the other, but does so in limited ways meant to deny the chosen power a full embrace while assuring the unchosen one that it is not being rejected.

The intended message conveyed alternately to China and the United States in this sequence is: “Do not expect me to work only with you. At times, I may work with your rival as well, and I reserve the right to do so.”

Strategic autonomy in this sense is not a rejection of alignment. It is an allocation of limited gestures that help to preserve the possibility of alignment, at least inside the mind of each big power hoping to be aligned with. A move meant to assuage Beijing while cautioning Washington is accompanied or followed by a move to assuage Washington while cautioning Beijing. Such moves reference strategic autonomy without announcing it. And the autonomy they imply is not of the region; it is national in nature.

Structure, Agency, Prospect

In different ways, the Thucydides trap, the Melian dictum, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Yang's infamous "just a fact" remark all showcase the causal power of structure. So do the China-favoring imbalances of size and strength in Sino-Southeast Asian relations. Underestimated in this emphasis on structural frameworks and connectivity by design is the role of agency, including the structure-altering agency of empowered individuals, most notably Xi Jinping and Donald Trump.

Unbothered by the term limits faced by Trump, Xi has begun the cultivation of a long-run sphere of Chinese influence in Asia — a durably enlarged version of Chinese primacy reliant, as needed, on structures and linkages of China's own making, including the operational legacies of the BRI. But Xi's campaign to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" does not require a Chinese assault on the liberal-capitalist-democratic international order fostered by American agency after World War II. Xi's China has more to gain from continuing to work selectively within the current version of that established system while developing supplementary and prospectively alternative arrangements — would-be institutions that could be called upon to amplify the agency of Beijing.⁷³

What is striking about this proto-structural strategy is how limited its achievements have proven to be. In 2014 in Shanghai, for example, Xi keynoted that year's Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). During and after the meeting, he criticized alliance-based security concepts as Cold War relics that Asian countries should "completely abandon" in favor of a "new regional security cooperation architecture" to be led by CICA so that Asian problems can "be solved by Asians themselves."⁷⁴ What sounded like a structure-upending move, however, proved to be little more than rhetorical in nature. The conference failed to take up Xi's call. CICA was too Central Asian in leadership and location;

its members were too many and too divided; and its focus on counterterrorism sidelined broader issues of Asian security.

Neither has the Hainan-based Boao Forum for Asia or the Beijing Xiangshan Forum successfully implemented Xi's Asia-for-Asians line. As for the Belt and Road Forum, held biennially in Beijing, those who attended in 2019 were reported to have come from "more than 150 countries"⁷⁵ — hardly a constituency for putting Asia first. China has been either unable or unearlier to develop a Sinocentric set of Asianist alternatives to the multilateral platforms for regional security discourse that ASEAN continues to host. The unattractive aspects of Beijing's agency continue to hamper its ability to innovate and sustain a multilateral Sino-Southeast Asian "community of common destiny" structured to magnify China's influence.

The BRI is global in scope. If it succeeds, its infrastructural legacy of corridors, ports, and intersections could be used to propagate and institutionalize rules and models made in China, thereby amplifying the agency of Beijing. But that same connectivity could alienate host countries along the BRI's corridors for fear of what accelerated intimacy with China could bring, including the dangers of infection from viruses such as the one that arose in Wuhan in December 2019.

In the contest between agency and structure in American foreign policy under Trump, structure never had a chance. His presidential role in world affairs will likely be remembered for having displayed the obsessed agency unleashed by his own personality — narcissistic, vindictive, paranoid, mendacious, and willfully uninformed — locked in battle with less-than-properly sycophantic allies and with multilateral institutions whose plural nature necessarily denies him sole possession of the spotlight.

The good news for Southeast Asians as of 2019 was that Trump's propensity for chaos had not weakened their ability to exercise strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China. On the contrary, American steps toward counterbalancing China were undertaken more vigorously during Trump's tenure than they were during Obama's. Security cooperation between the United States and Southeast Asian partners helped to diversify the latter's foreign-policy options beyond simply deferring to China to protect themselves from being bullied by it.

More than 120 million votes were cast in the 2016 US presidential election. To widespread surprise, Trump won by a mere 107,000 votes in only three of the country's 50 states.⁷⁶ The unpredicted trumped the expected. Although Xi Jinping need not fear an election, changing conditions and "black swan" contingencies will alter China's future, too.⁷⁷ The decline in China's rate of economic growth could accelerate. China's bubble of debt

could burst. Another virus in China could spiral out of control. Domestic discontent could stoke nationalist anger. Abroad, Xi's signature project, the BRI, could wind up costing China too much in red ink, failed projects, and lost goodwill. Party leaders could blame Xi for such failings and perhaps even challenge him, to further destabilizing effect.

China's deficit in soft power and its corresponding surplus in repellent power were amply evident in 2019. Along China's rim, thousands of young self-labeled Hong Kongers, by demonstrating for human rights and against Beijing, demonstrated the extent of Beijing's failure to appropriate their identity despite decades of legal and economic affiliation with the mainland. Among Taiwan's residents, China's importance to the island's economy could not slow the growth of a robustly local identity. Beijing's high-tech repression of Muslims in Xinjiang naturally stifled pro-China sentiment among their co-religionists elsewhere in the world. Chinese intimidation in the South China Sea, as in Xinjiang, suggested that Beijing would rather be feared than loved. However diverse these instances and consequences of agency were, they all implicated, first, Beijing's desire to convert imbalances of power into structures of control, and second, the difficulty and collateral damage that Xi's China faces in trying to bring that conversion about.

This is not to say that Xi's expansionist agenda cannot succeed. It could. It could even set the stage for the lasting hegemony of the PRC in Southeast Asia, or for the absorption of Laos and Cambodia into a "greater China," leaving a cluster of ASEAN's more maritime members to steer what is left of the group. Inside China, conceivably, a series of shocks, shortcomings, and protests could persuade Xi or a successor to engage in serious reform at home, enhance Chinese soft power abroad, and facilitate a stable trans-Pacific peace.

Conceivable, too, is a hot war between China and America that would originate in Southeast Asia and render fully kinetic the already worsening economic and diplomatic animosity between the two powers. Such a calamity is extremely unlikely, however, and especially so as a matter of unprovoked and premeditated official agency on Beijing's or Washington's part. An unwanted war could flare up from a match struck in the South China Sea. Sino-American naval jostling in those waters, however, has become almost routine. A full-spectrum effort to blockade the Malacca Strait could trigger a war, but the plausibility of an American or a Chinese motivation to take that precipitating step requires assumptions too strenuous to be plausible. More lethal risks lie in Northeast Asia or, beyond geography, in cyberspace.

This chapter has both featured and undermined the structural asymmetry that distinguishes China from Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia's diversity contributes to the region's political disunion by inhibiting strategic consensus and opening chances for China to divide and disable ASEAN. But that same variety helps to limit the effectiveness of a one-size-fits-all "Beijing way" of dealing with its neighbors.

The obsolescence of alliances and the shift to calibrated partnerships has benefited the strategic autonomy of individual ASEAN states by giving them options that were less available in the either-or context of the Cold War. Those national autonomies serve to remind Beijing not to rely too heavily on its success in neutering ASEAN as a strategic actor capable of standing up to China — an achievement already enabled by the group's intergovernmental rather than supranational design operating in tandem with the lowest-common-denominator ASEAN Way. At the same time, Southeast Asians who define and defend the centrality of ASEAN as a mere convener of meetings unintentionally frustrate the substantive centrality and creativity of Southeast Asian policymakers, not least by discouraging the formation of like-minded mini-coalitions inside ASEAN that could more effectively face China's overweening ambitions in the South China Sea. In this unpromising context, lacking the regional shield that ASEAN cannot provide, it makes sense for Vietnam and other member states to look for extra-regional partners while improving their national capacities for physical deterrence, notwithstanding China's size and strength.

If there is a single conclusion to be drawn from this chapter, it is this: The future of Southeast Asia will greatly and probably decisively depend on what its individual states themselves either do or fail to do. This expectation turns full circle back to the moral of the mousedeer story with which the chapter began. Not back to the romantic fantasy of go-it-alone heroism whereby a little chevrotain thwarts a big but stupid dragon using nothing more than a piece of rope and an obvious ploy. Back, instead, to the more useful understanding that strategic autonomy necessarily begins at home. Outsiders can help or hurt. But nothing can substitute for the creativity of Southeast Asian states in individual and joint pursuit of their own and their region's security.

Notes

- 1 “Countries in South-Eastern Asia,” in “South-Eastern Asia Population,” Worldometer, accessed 13 October 2018, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/south-eastern-asia-population>.
- 2 Without homogenizing let alone essentializing the different empirical referents of “Han” ethnicity, suffice to note that an estimated 92 percent of China’s population are covered by that term. “Chinese Ethnic Groups,” Travel China Guide, <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/nationality>, based on the Fifth National Population Census (2000).
- 3 “Population of China (2018 and Historical)” and “South-Eastern Asia Population (2018 and Historical),” Worldometer, accessed 13 October 2018, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/south-eastern-asia-population> and <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-population>.
- 4 Sourced from the data portal *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263770/gross-domestic-product-gdp-of-china> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/796245/gdp-of-the-asean-countries> on 2 February 2020.
- 5 This is not to suggest that Sino-Southeast Asian relations are necessarily zero-sum. Brantly Womack has usefully argued, for example, in his *China among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships in Asia* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), 3–4, that asymmetric relations between a small state and a large one need not be unstable or hostile if the former is willing to defer to the latter to gain the assurances that the latter is willing and able to provide in return. He has also argued that whereas asymmetric relations tend to be less subject to control by the smaller country, the larger country tends to be less attentive to their details. In principle, that relative lack of attention may allow the smaller state a limited degree of freedom it might not otherwise have. Of particular interest with reference to the mousedeer-dragon analogy featured here, however, is his estimation that the smaller state, compared with the larger one, “will be more agile and less trusting of the overall climate of the relationship.” For more, see his *Asymmetry and International Relationships* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 6 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017).

7 For more, see Donald K. Emmerson, “ASEAN between China and America: Is It Time to Try Horsing the Cow?,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): esp. 7–8 and, on Thucydides and Allison, 20–21, 23.

8 In other Southeast Asian cultures, other animals play the trickster role. In Laotian folklore, for example, a rabbit and a monkey respectively outwit an elephant and a crocodile. See Regina Beach, “11 Fascinating Lao Folk Tales and Legends,” *Culture Trip*, 7 November 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/laos/articles/11-fascinating-lao-myths-and-legends>.

9 “Pelanduk Mengalahkan Naga Yang Rakus” [Mouse deer defeats greedy dragon], Sekumpulan Cerita’s Blog, 4 June 2010, <https://sekumpulancerita.wordpress.com/2010/06/04/pelanduk-mengalahkan-naga-yang-rakus>.

10 China uses the term “win-win” loosely and often. It appeared, for example, four times and “all-win” once in a single paragraph of Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at the Boao Forum for Asia on China’s Hainan Island on 29 March 2015, as seen on China.org.cn, http://www.china.org.cn/business/2015-03/29/content_35185720.htm. (On the implications of a genuine “win-win” for China’s soft power in the region, see Evelyn Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia,” *Asian Survey* 54, no. 5 [2014], <https://as.ucpress.edu/content/54/5/825>.) Nor does official Chinese secrecy regarding the PRC’s aid to other countries facilitate the calculation of proportional gains in welfare.

11 “China Wants No Talk of South China Sea at Tuesday’s Asean Meeting in Kuala Lumpur,” *South China Morning Post*, 3 August 2015, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1846145/china-wants-no-talk-south-china-sea-tuesdays-asean>. Knowledgeable ASEAN diplomats told this chapter’s author of being warned not even to gather informally in an unscheduled meeting with one another to discuss and determine a unified position that would only later be conveyed to Beijing.

12 As she explained in her “Press Availability,” U.S. Department of State, Hanoi, 23 July 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013/clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

13 John Pomfret, “U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone with China,” *Washington Post*, 30 July 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html>. Also see Donald K.

Emmerson, “Singapore and Goliath?,” *Journal of Democracy* 290, no. 2 (April 2018): 76–82.

14 Quoted by Major Bernard Tay, “Is the SAF’s Defence Posture Still Relevant as the Nature of Warfare Continues to Evolve?,” *Pointer, Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces* 42, no. 2 (2016): 33, n. 4, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/oms/safty/pointer/documents/pdf/Vol42No2_3%20SAF%27s%20Defence.pdf.

15 Tay, “Is the SAF’s Defence Posture,” 25, including n. 8 on 33.

16 “Southeast Asia: Defence Spending as % GDP, 1993–2018,” in Tim Huxley, “Why Asia’s ‘Arms Race’ Is Not Quite What It Seems,” World Economic Forum, 12 September 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/asias-arms-race-and-why-it-doesnt-matter>. Although this source omits Laos for lack of recent data, in 2013 its military spending was thought to be a mere one-fifth of 1 percent of its GDP; “Laos — Military Expenditure (% of GDP),” Trading Economics, accessed 3 March 2019, <https://tradingeconomics.com/laos/military-expenditure-percent-of-gdp-wb-data.html>.

17 See, e.g., Prashanth Parameswaran, “Cambodia Boosts Defense Budget for 2016,” *The Diplomat*, 3 December 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/cambodia-boosts-defense-budget-for-2016>.

18 “Southeast Asian Powers Ranked by Military Strength,” Global-Firepower, accessed 3 March 2019, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing-southeast-asia.asp>. Brunei is omitted, and beyond their apparent emphasis on quantity, the proprietary methods used to generate the ranking are unclear.

19 See “Military Capability,” “Overall Power,” and “Methodology,” in “Asia Power Index 2018,” Lowy Institute, Sydney, accessed 3 March 2019, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org>.

20 *Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines; August 30, 1951*, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, New Haven, CT, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp, Articles III–V.

21 *Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact); September 8, 1954*, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp, Article IV. The body that would have implemented the treaty was dissolved in 1977.

22 See John Reed, “Pompeo Assures Philippines of Mutual Defence in South China Sea,” *Financial Times*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/d7bee564-3bf8-11e9-b72b-2c7f526ca5d0>.

23 See, e.g., Niharika Mandhana, “China’s Fishing Militia Swarms Philippine Island, Seeking Edge in Sea Dispute,” *Wall Street Journal*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-fishing-militia-swarms-philippine-island-seeking-edge-in-sea-dispute-11554391301>.

24 Lara Tan, “Lorenzana Warns of ‘Chaos during Crisis’ with So-called Vague US-PH Defense Treaty,” CNN Philippines, 5 March 2019, <https://cnnphilippines.com/cnn-website/search/2019/3/5/US-Philippines-mutual-defense-treaty.html>.

25 Patricia Lourdes Viray, “Lorenzana Contradicts Locsin on US-Philippines Treaty Review,” *Philstar Global*, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/03/05/1898877/lorenzana-contradicts-locsin-us-philippines-treaty-review>.

26 “List of Wars Involving Vietnam,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_involving_Vietnam. The “Chinese” opponents of “Vietnam” in these engagements included, chronologically, the Qin and Han Empires, the Wu, the Liang, the Sui, the Great Tang, the Great Han, the Great Song, the Mongol Empire, the Great Yuan, the Great Ming, and the PRC.

27 Nguyen Minh Quang, “The Bitter Legacy of the 1979 China-Vietnam War,” *The Diplomat*, 23 February 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/the-bitter-legacy-of-the-1979-china-vietnam-war/>.

28 Peter Tsouras, “War of the Dragons: The Sino-Vietnamese War, 1979,” *Military History Magazine*, 11 April 2016, <https://www.historynet.com/war-of-the-dragons-the-sino-vietnamese-war-1979.htm>. That Tsouras should have elevated Vietnam to dragon status alongside China adds metaphorical cachet to a country that has earned that appellation from other analysts as well, in keeping with the prominence of dragons in both Vietnamese and Chinese culture and folklore.

29 See, e.g., King C. Chen, “China’s War against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis,” *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1983): 233–63; and Markus B. Liegi, *China’s Use of Military Force in Foreign Affairs: The Dragon Strikes* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 214.

30 Chinese footage of the massacre was included (4:57–6:19) in a pro-Hanoi film created with the help of “some Vietnamese students in Germany” in May 2009. Ten years later the video had garnered more than

1.6 million views on YouTube. See “Evidence[s] of China’s Crime: The Spratly Islands Massacre,” accessed 5 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy2ZtFphSmc>; and Greg Torode, “Spratly Islands Dispute Defines China-Vietnam Relations 25 Years after Naval Clash,” *South China Morning Post*, 17 March 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1192472/spratly-islands-dispute-defines-china-vietnam-relations-25-years-after>.

31 For example: Nguyen Phuong Linh and Michael Martina, “South China Sea Tensions Rise as Vietnam Says China Rammed Ships,” Reuters, 6 May 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-seas-fishermen/south-china-sea-tensions-rise-as-vietnam-says-china-rammed-ships-idUSBREA4603C20140507>.

32 Felix Heiduk, “An Arms Race in Southeast Asia? Changing Arms Dynamics, Regional Security and the Role of European Arms Exports,” SWP Research Paper 10, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, August 2017, 5, 20, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/an-arms-race-in-southeast-asia>.

33 Edu Pinay, “Philippines Capability to Stop Ship Intrusions ‘Very Weak,’” *Philippine Star*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/08/28/1947073/philippines-capability-stop-ship-intrusions-very-weak-dnd>.

34 Jim Gomez, “Duterte: Can’t Stop China in Disputed Seas, Won’t Risk Clash,” AP News, 22 July 2019, <https://apnews.com/841e38011f084772be1bb74199f9235e>.

35 Derek Grossman and Dung Huynh, “Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes,’” *The Diplomat*, 19 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/vietnams-defense-policy-of-no-quietly-saves-room-for-yes>.

36 Peter Rathmell, “Navy to Train with Vietnam amid Rising Tensions with China,” *Navy Times*, 6 July 2017, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2017/07/06/navy-to-train-with-vietnam-amid-rising-tensions-with-china>.

37 The cautionary “in effect” references Timor-Leste. Respectively small and tiny in physical and economic size, it enjoys little to no regional influence as it hopes and waits to become ASEAN’s 11th member. See Truston Jianheng Yu, “2019: The Year of Timor Leste in ASEAN?” *Jakarta Post*, 13 December 2018, <http://bit.ly/2LkwPFd>.

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