New Zealand and ASEAN at 50

Southeast Asia's Security in the Era of Strategic Competition

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Contents

IN THIS REPORT

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Nicholas Khoo portrait, supplied by author.

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Introduction

Formed at the height of the Cold War in 1967, the states that constitute the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) have repeatedly faced complex challenges that belie simple characterisation.[1]

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN experience during the Cold War is an instructive example. The Cold War era has been famously characterised as "the Long Peace".[2] For Southeast Asians, this is a curious formulation on two counts. First, during the Cold War, a succession of 'hot wars' occurred in the region at the exact time that the Southeast Asian regional economy was increasingly internationalised.[3] Second, from a foreign policy perspective, Southeast Asia was deeply divided, with the original five ASEAN member states arrayed against their fellow Southeast Asians in Laos and Viet Nam.[4] At the same time, Burma remained studiously non-aligned, and Cambodia was variously neutral, aligned with the United States, and subsequently practiced a form of anti-Vietnamese communism.

The theme of 'complex challenges' carried on into the 'unipolar moment' of US dominance in international politics (1991–2016). Divisive exchanges with the United States over 'Asian values' in the 1990s was followed by active cooperation in the post 9/11 'Global War on Terrorism' (GWOT). Throughout the post-Cold War era, the South China Sea disputes gradually intensified. To further complicate the picture, following the structural transition in the US-China relationship in 2017 from an era of 'engagement' (1972–2016) to 'strategic competition'[5] great power rivalry now casts a long shadow over Southeast Asia's foreign policy landscape.[6] Even on its own terms, the US-Southeast Asia relationship is facing strong headwinds. It is one of the frontlines of Trump's second-term tariff policy.

This report reviews the international politics of Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era through a specific lens — the policies of the great powers (the United States and China), two regional powers (Australia and Japan), and two returning powers (Russia and the United Kingdom). At the same time, Southeast Asian states exercise significant regional agency in this story, and this report also examines their interactions with these powers. The upshot is that Southeast Asia faces a new era of complex challenges, and with it, a different set of risks and opportunities. These shifting power dynamics have significant implications for New Zealand. The report concludes with a section that examines these implications. It explains how, like Southeast Asia, New Zealand can exercise its agency in navigating these changes.

The signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok on 8 August 1967 by five foreign ministers, marking the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).Source Wikimedia Commons/ASEAN.

A (still) relevant power: The United States and Southeast Asia

IN THIS SECTION

Introduction

The US relationship with Southeast Asia is a complicated one. The same power that gave the region the Cold War era 'domino theory' and escalated the Second Indo-China War or 'Viet Nam War' (1965–75) has been the critical player in the region's integration into the world economy.[7] Without Washington's political decision to open its markets to Southeast Asian exports, the region would not be enjoying its current level of prosperity.[8]

FAST FORWARD TO the post-Cold War era and Southeast Asia's relations with the United States have gone through two distinct phases. A sense of drift prevailed during the first phase, from 1991 to 2007, with active agency exercised by both sides. High-profile differences over topics as varied as human rights, liberal democracy, and policy toward China received a very public and contentious airing. At the same time, and rather less publicly, the ASEAN states cooperated on the US GWOT, and remained deeply interested in a US regional presence, both as an economic partner, and as a contributor to regional stability.

The second phase has been marked by the onset of increasingly intense US-China rivalry after 2008–09. Serious disputes have characterised relations between China and four of the ten ASEAN states — Malaysia, the Philippines, Viet Nam, and more recently, Indonesia. And since it takes a great power to balance a great power, this has increased the value of the US role in Southeast Asia.

Throughout the post-Cold War era, the central dilemma facing the ASEAN states has remained: How can they secure US commitment to stability in a region that is increasingly divided on its relationship with China? This question has become more complicated with the arrival of strategic competition between the United States and China in 2017 and the second Trump administration's (2025–present) adoption of economic sanctions as a policy tool to rectify US economic challenges.

Responding to the Cold War's end

Following the end of the Cold War, the ASEAN states watched with concern at the intense US domestic debate on the question of reaping a 'peace dividend' through retrenchment from Asia and Europe.

THE ORGANISATION'S RESPONSE was to create a formal institution to facilitate continued US engagement in Southeast Asia. Thus arose the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which first met in Bangkok in July 1994, and continues to the present.[9] Interestingly, in this period, all the five original ASEAN members (as well as the sixth, Brunei), entered into formal agreements to permit the United States military access to their facilities.[10]

While ASEAN-US military cooperation and strategic dialogue slowly developed, frictions arose in other spheres. For the better part of the 1990s, issues of human rights and liberal democracy were a lightning rod in relations. Here, the Tiananmen protests and ensuing Chinese crackdown in 1989 spilled over into US-ASEAN relations. The ASEAN states were eager for the United States to see the bigger strategic picture on China and deemphasise 'values' issues. Unlike the United States, the ASEAN states viewed China's response to internal protests as an internal affair and placed an emphasis on stability.[11]

To the organisation's general satisfaction, their viewpoint initially resonated with the president at the time of the Tiananmen crisis, George H W Bush (1989–1992). Bush was a former US chief liaison officer to the People's Republic of China (1974–75) and director of the Central Intelligence Agency (1976–77). His inclination was to contain the damage to US-China relations, rather than impose the heavier sanctions that many in the American polity were calling for.

This played no small part in mitigating the serious slide in US-China relations but did not help Bush in the 1992 US presidential elections. His rival, Bill Clinton, criticised Bush for "coddling dictators" and for his "indifference to democracy".[12] Clinton was elected in an election that was principally focused on domestic issues.

The ASEAN leaders looked on in dismay as the most important external bilateral relationship determining Southeast Asia's stability went into a tailspin. US-China relations lurched from one crisis to the next. Assured of a Democratic Party majority in both Houses of Congress from 1993 to 1994, Clinton devised a China policy that established a linkage between trade and human rights — in order to pressure the Chinese to reform their human rights practices.[13] In what was an education in international politics for the Clinton administration, the Chinese balked. In May 1994, Clinton capitulated with no meaningful Chinese concessions.

A second lesson came quickly, with a crisis over Taiwan.[14] Following heavy lobbying by pro-Taiwanese interests, members of Congress in both houses voted in favour of Taiwanese President Lee Tenghui delivering the commencement speech at his alma matter Cornell University in June 1995.[15] In issuing a visa for the visit, the Clinton administration backtracked on a previous assurance to Beijing. The result was the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis.[16] Belated US intervention brought the crisis to a halt as ASEAN watched from the sidelines. Escalation brought clarity to Beijing and Washington on the need for a more stable relationship. This was symbolised in the exchange of state visits between President Clinton and President Jiang Zemin between 1997 and 1998.

If prominent Southeast Asians sought to advise the United States to deemphasise liberal democratic values in relations with China, some of their leaders were inclined to emphasise non-liberal values in relations with the United States in the form of "Asian values".[17] This was the "Asian values" debate, led by the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir, and a bevy of Southeast Asian public intellectuals.[18] The 'debate' centred on the role of East Asia's combination of political illiberalism operating in the context of a capitalist developmental state-led economy.[19] This was the formula that had facilitated rapid economic development by a number of East Asian states during the Cold War.

While the discourse had an intellectual patina to it, its origins were deeply political and had significant practical foreign and domestic policy implications. Indeed, the timing of the debate's occurrence is critical to understanding its fundamentally political nature.

At the end of the Cold War, the liberal democratic model's allure was at its zenith.[20]

In that context, the Southeast Asian concern was that the United States would seek to export its political model. This view was buttressed the Clinton administration's robust rhetorical support for democracy promotion and assertive use of economic power to seek political changes in China through a policy of linking the granting of most favoured nation (MFN) trade status in 1993–94 and the subsequent Taiwan Straits crisis from 1995–96.[21]

For some prominent Southeast Asian leaders and officials, this held out the prospect of ideological imperatives destabilising the critical bilateral relationship on which Asian security and prosperity rested. It also held out the possibility of a similar US policy being adopted toward the Southeast Asian states.

It took a particularly powerful empirical shock to settle this divisive debate.[22] The deep-seated Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 shattered Asian confidence, raising powerful questions. Proponents of Asian values were at a loss to explain the economic turmoil. If, as was claimed, Asian values were responsible for Asia's economic success, did the obvious economic catastrophe mean that Asian values had somehow changed in a short period of time? This was implausible. Or, was it a case that it was specific economic policies that accounted for the empirical record? The latter explanation seemed more persuasive and the debate ended on that note.[23] The tables were turned in the ASEAN-US relationship. Just as claims for the superiority of Asian values grated on American ears, so too did American calls for Southeast Asians to root out 'crony capitalism.'[24] Both sides wanted to move on. They had reason to.

Cooperating in the Global War on Terror as China's rise accelerates

If the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis highlighted the malign financial aspect of globalisation, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 represented a deadly fusion of religion and globalisation.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of the ASEAN states, the 9/11 attacks yielded the troubling revelation that Southeast Asia was an important battlefield in the GWOT.[25] The concern was that Southeast Asia, with its significant Muslim population, would become a "second front" in the GWOT. The broad terms of ASEAN-US GWOT co-operation were set out in an official document signed in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei in August 2002.[26]

The second front designation was not an exaggeration. In the course of their operations in Afghanistan, US coalition special forces discovered a videotape containing surveillance conducted by a hitherto unknown Al Qaeda affiliate in Southeast Asia called Jemaah Islamiah (JI). Footage indicated plans to attack US targets and Western embassies in Singapore. The JI was subsequently responsible for a series of bombings across Indonesia. These included the Bali nightclub bombings of 12 October 2002, which killed 202 people; the 5 August 2003 attack on the J W Marriott Hotel; the bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta on 9 September 2004; and the Bali restaurant bombings of 1 October 2005.

US cooperation with specific ASEAN states took precedence over ASEAN-level multilateral cooperation.[27] Thailand, like the Philippines, is a Major Non-NATO US ally and has close links with the United States through the Joint Counter Terrorism Intelligence Centre at the US Pacific Command Joint Intelligence Centre in Hawaii. A joint US-Thai operation in August 2003 secured the arrest in Bangkok of the strategic coordinator of Al-Qaeda activity in Southeast Asia, Riduan 'Hambali' Isamuddin.[28] In the Philippines, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–2010) effectively employed GWOT rhetoric to build closer ties with the United States. Arroyo's pledge to fight terrorism secured a military aid package for the more forceful prosecution of the longstanding internal problem of Islamic-inspired Moro National Liberation Front separatism in the southern province of Mindanao. Strong cooperation continued with her successor Benigno Aquino.

In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir utilised the GWOT to establish a firmer foundation for cooperation with the United States.[29] In May 2002, a memorandum of understanding was signed, enhancing law enforcement and intelligence cooperation. Mahathir's immediate successors Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–2009) and Najib Razak (2009–2018) continued cooperation. US ties with the Indonesian police force developed through Indonesia's counterterrorist unit, Detasemen Khusus 88 (Detachment 88). In March 2011, a US-Singapore agreement on combating transnational crime was signed. Singapore's Joint Counter Terrorism Centre regularly shares information with its US counterpart referenced above. In the context of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) rise, both sides renewed their anti-terrorism cooperation in early 2015.[30] In sum, the GWOT is a positive example of how overlapping interests in dealing with a common threat have enhanced cooperation.

Turning point

Even as ASEAN-US GWOT cooperation evolved, substantial increases in the benefits of economic exchange with China were accompanied by very real and high-profile territorial disputes between Beijing and certain ASEAN states.

THIS HAS ELEVATED a regional security issue into one of global significance. As discussed below, the core principles of ASEAN centrality, the peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for territorial sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states have been routinely challenged and even violated. China has effectively disrupted ASEAN's ability to construct a consensus position by leveraging its influence over Cambodia and Laos. The consequence of this development has been that for a number of the ASEAN states, there is a renewed awareness of the United States's importance as a counterbalance to China.

While the South China Sea dispute has been in existence since the start of the Cold War, its rise to global prominence is associated with China's increasingly assertive policy on this issue since 1991 (and is covered in greater detail in the next section on China-Southeast Asian relations).[31] Our focus here is on the US role in the issue. US interest in the South China Sea is a logical effect of the Obama administration's announcement of a rebalancing to Asia policy in November 2011.[32]

While the United States never 'left' Southeast Asia, the administration's declaration underlined its recognition of the Indo-Pacific region's importance to Washington. The rebalancing policy coincided with the adoption of a much more assertive regional policy by Beijing.

The issue came to a head with a more targeted American intervention. At the annual International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-la meeting on 1 June 2014, US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel gave voice to regional concerns by directly critiquing Chinese policy.[33] Hagel noted that "the US will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged".[34] The Chinese response was unequivocal. The Chinese representative, Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong, deputy chief of general staff of the People's Liberation Army strongly contested Hagel's views.[35] In May 2015, Ashton Carter, Hagel's successor as secretary of defence, made the most sustained and explicit critique of China's activities in the South China Sea by any official serving in the Obama administration's two terms.[36] Four US freedom of navigation operations (FON or FONOPS) occurred from 2015 to 2016.[37] The administration also supported the Philippines' resort to a legal route to challenge Chinese claims in the South China Sea.[38] On 12 July 2016, the Arbitral Tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague issued a unanimous judgment on the South China Sea, ruling clearly on the side of the Philippines' claims against China. Beijing rejected the ruling.[39]

US-China rivalry during the Trump administration crystalised in late 2017 in the form of a shift in official US policy from 'engagement' to 'strategic competition'.[40] At the outset, a blow to US regional credibility was delivered by Trump's announcement that the US was pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership which the Obama administration strongly supported. Nevertheless, throughout the 2018–2020 period, the US significantly outranked China as a source of foreign direct investment (FDI) and remained a significant export destination for Southeast Asian goods.[41] The non-economic dimension of US policy was most visibly reflected in two linked arenas — US naval activity in the South China Sea and the US-Philippines alliance. The Trump administration regularised and expanded the Obama era naval activity to match China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. The number of FONOPS increased from four in 2017, to five in 2018, and ten in both 2019 and 2020.[42] But as discussed below, it is in the US-Philippines alliance that US policy had its most dramatic impact.

Duterte's realignment attempt

Filippino President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022) — whose term spanned the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations — was intent on resetting Manila's relationship with Washington and Beijing, with a decided tilt to the latter.

IN LATE SEPTEMBER 2016, Duterte declared that joint US-Philippines military exercises in Luzon scheduled to begin on 4 October would be the last between the two countries.[43] In early October, he announced that "I will be reconfiguring my foreign policy," and at some point, "I will break up with America".[44] While on a visit to Beijing from 18 to 21 October 2016, Duterte claimed that "I announce my separation from the United States … both in military … but economics also. America has lost".[45] At another event in China, Duterte stated that it is "time to say goodbye [to] my friend [the US]".[46] At the tactical level, the policy shift was reflected in two tracks. The first track was reflected in accommodation by the Duterte administration to Chinese claims in the South China Sea that fall within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone.[47] The second track lay in the termination of the Visiting US-Philippines Forces Agreement (VFA) that was signed in 1998. In February 2020, Duterte gave formal notice of his intent to terminate the VFA.[48] This was to take effect after 180 days.[49]

The rapprochement with China was hamstrung by the fact that Beijing made no compromises that fundamentally altered its stance in the South China Sea. Indeed, China even took measures that patently compromised Filippino security. In particular, on 22 January 2021, China's National People's Congress passed legislation authorising China Coast Guard vessels to use military force to enforce its claims in the South China Sea.[50] Beijing's posture had a direct impact on Duterte's policy stance on the VFA. In the face of China's unwavering posture, Duterte's resolve eventually buckled. He suspended the VFA termination three times before announcing an intention to restore the agreement on 12 February 2021, at the start of the Biden administration.[51]

At the bilateral level, the US alliance with the Philippines was given a boost by the election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr to the presidency in May 2022. Substantive policy changes followed. On 3 April 2023, the number of sites that US forces were allowed to access under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was expanded from five to nine.[52] Subject to permission being granted by Manila, US capabilities deployed in these sites will be within striking range of mainland China.[53] In May 2023, revised Bilateral Defense Guidelines were issued to strengthen alliance cooperation.[54] In April 2024, Biden hosted the first-ever US-Japan-Philippines Leaders' Summit. At the summit, Biden declared that "any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels or armed forces in the South China Sea would invoke our mutual defense treaty".[55] This was a reiteration of the statement made in Manila in February 2019 by Michael Pompeo, the Trump administration secretary of state.[56] That said, the Biden administration deemphasised US FONOPS in the South China Sea.[57]

Chinese dissatisfaction with these developments was reflected in a more robust stance in the South China Sea.[58] Incidents involving Chinese efforts to prevent the logistical resupply to the Philippines' Sierra Madre vessel in the Second Thomas Shoal section of the South China Sea have been a more frequent occurrence. This was to escalate into physical violence. On 31 May 2024, at the question-and-answer session following his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Marcos warned China that any Filipino deaths due to Chinese actions would be considered an "act of war".[59] Beijing nevertheless chose to escalate. In mid-June 2024, China Coast Guard personnel boarded a resupply ship and physically attacked Filippino Navy SEALS.[60]

Biden's alliance and partnership policy and Trump's tariff policy

The Biden administration's emphasis on the US-Philippines alliance reflected a more general policy focus on the strengthening of Washington's regional alliances with Canberra, Seoul and Tokyo.

THIS WAS PAIRED with a renewed focus on partnerships, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD),[61] and the establishment of two new partnership initiatives, the trilateral AUKUS technology agreement initiated by the Morrison government in Australia (2021), and the Partners in the Blue Pacific (2022) agreement in the Pacific Islands region.[62] In Southeast Asia, the United States elevated its relationship with ASEAN to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". Five US-ASEAN Summits occurred during the administration, including a US-ASEAN Special Summit in May 2022 in Washington DC.

No analysis of the US relationship with Southeast Asia would be complete without comment on the Trump administration's adoption of tariffs as a policy instrument to effect change in its economic relationships. Southeast Asia's deep integration in the global economy has now become an unexpected liability. At the time of writing, negotiations are under way between the Trump administration and the various ASEAN states. Viet Nam, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia face some of the highest reciprocal tariff rates at 46 percent, 36 percent, 32 percent and 24 percent respectively.[63] The contradictions in the Trump administration's tariff policy are not insignificant.[64] The Trump administration eventually imposed tariffs that ranged between 10 to 40 percent, with most between 19 and 20 percent.[65] These took effect on 7 August. The Trump tariffs represent a severe economic and strategic challenge for Southeast Asia. Moreover, whatever benefits Southeast Asia obtained by the diversion of trade from China to Southeast Asia during the first Trump administration are now captured and offset by Trump's 2025 tariff policy.

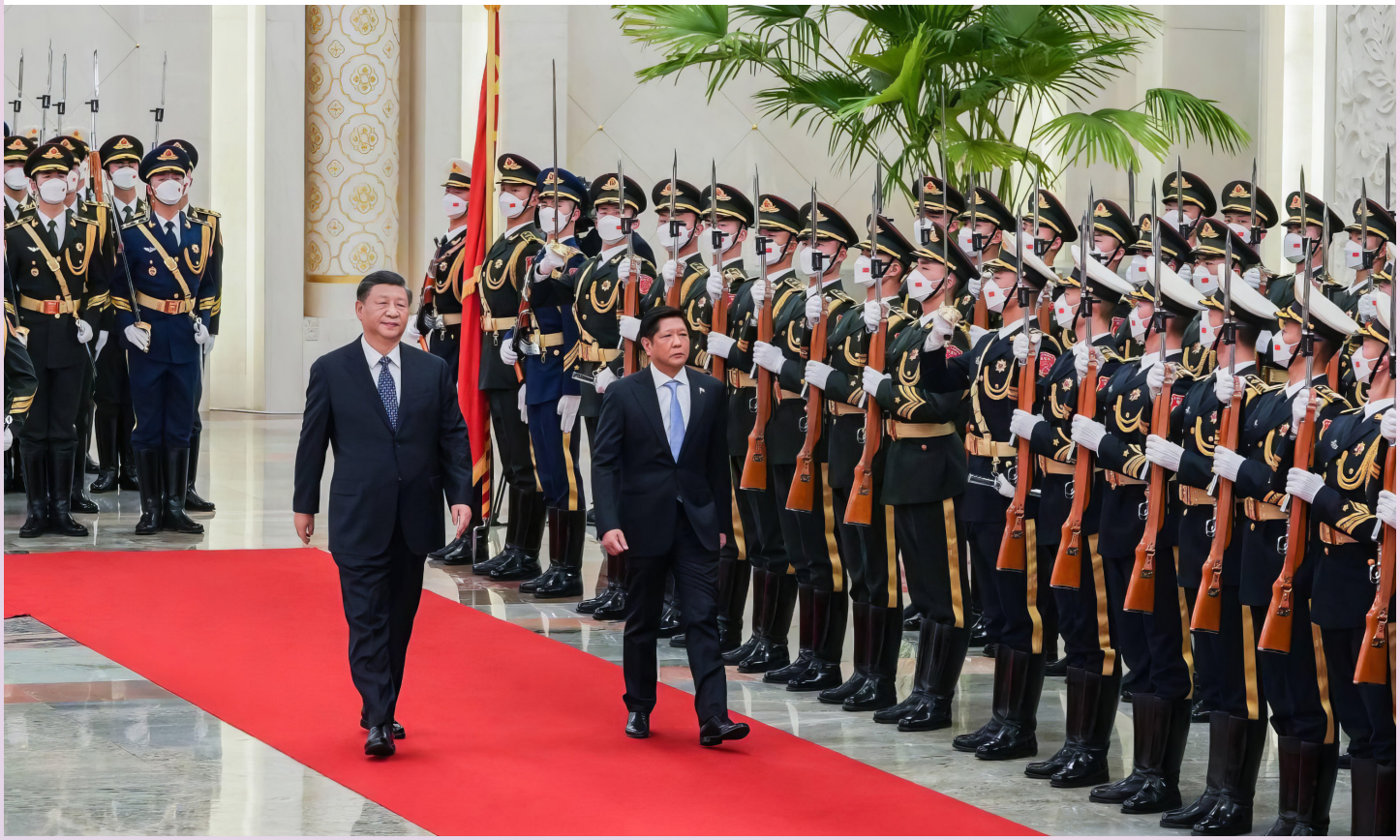
As with the first Trump administration's decision in 2017 not to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the 2025 tariffs damage US regional standing. In the short run, there is little choice for the ASEAN states but to couple negotiations with the Trump administration while deepening economic integration within ASEAN and with regional and extra-regional states.[66] That said, the ASEAN states have a degree of strategic pragmatism, patience, and resources built up over decades that they can tap into. Former Singaporean official Bilahari Kausikan is surely correct that the ASEAN states are "more accustomed to Trump's transactionalism" than the United States' European allies, and comfortable with conducting relations "on the basis of common interests rather than common values".[67] Looking beyond the short run, the future is brighter for the ASEAN states. The US has functioned as an extra-regional actor that plays a balancing role in dealing with China's rising power in Southeast Asia. That structural role will still be true after the second Trump administration. And when that time comes, the United States will still need Southeast Asian cooperation for its China policy and larger Indo-Pacific policy to work effectively.

A permanent feature: China and Southeast Asia

IN THIS SECTION

Introduction

While geographical distance represents a challenge in ASEAN's relations with the United States, it is geographical proximity that is the challenge in China's relations with the ASEAN states. It is a well-established principle in international relations that states sharing the same region tend to interact more intensively with each other.[68] It is equally true that rising great powers — which China clearly is — are disposed to seek spheres of influence in their periphery. Thus, any assessment of China's relations with Southeast Asia has to balance the reality that its largest economic partner is also its major security concern, epitomised in the intractable frictions with rival ASEAN claimant states in the South China Sea.



Chinese leader Xi Jinping hosts Philippine president Bongbong Marcos on a state visit to Beijing on January 4, 2023. Source Wikimedia Commons/Office of the Press Secretary.

Economic and military nexus

During the Cold War, ASEAN's economic relations with China were unimpressive, with only Singapore ranking among China's top ten trading partners.[69]

IN THE POST-COLD WAR period, economic relations have been transformed. At the ASEAN-China Summit in November 2000, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji proposed the creation of a China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. This was achieved via a two-staged process from 2010 to 2015.[70] At the 13th ASEAN-China Summit in Hanoi in October 2010, China pledged to realise, a two-way trade volume of USD 500 billion and Chinese direct investment of USD 10 billion by 2015. By 2016, China was ASEAN's top trading partner by region, constituting 14.5 percent of ASEAN's trade,[71] and a top five trading partner of every ASEAN state.[72] That said, Chinese FDI in Southeast Asia clearly lagged behind its trade. In 2013, China only accounted for 2.3 percent of ASEAN's total FDI stock.[73] Of this, Singapore received a disproportionate amount of total Chinese FDI to ASEAN (41 percent) and accounted for approximately 80 percent of ASEAN's FDI in China (and six percent of China's total FDI).[74]

There have been further changes. In 2023, total trade between China and ASEAN was USD 702 billion, marking the 15th consecutive year that China was ASEAN's largest trading partner.[75] In terms of China's trade with specific ASEAN states, in 2023, Beijing's top trade partners were (in descending order): Viet Nam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines.[76] The remaining four ASEAN states — Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar — constituted just five percent of ASEAN's trade with China. Indeed, the compelling logic of economic interdependence has created an imperative for the ASEAN states that have conflicting territorial disputes with China to decouple their economic interactions from military tensions. The same generalisation applies to China. The Philippines and Viet Nam, the states with the most severe territorial disputes with China, enjoy a highly economic interdependent relationship with Beijing.

China's economic rise has had strategic effects, represented by a significant increase in its military power capabilities. As a share of GDP, China's military expenditure has remained in the 1.72 to 2.2 percent range over the 2001–23 period.[77] The official Chinese defence budget for 2023 was the second highest in the world at USD 296 billion, an increase from USD 130 billion in 2013.[78] The true figure is likely to be higher. China constitutes 44 percent of total defence spending among Asian states.[79] Southeast Asian states are simply not in the same league as Beijing. The closest Southeast Asian state is Singapore, at a mere 2.8 percent.[80] Indonesia, and Viet Nam each constitute 2 and 1.5 percent of total Asian defence spending.[81] This asymmetry explains the ASEAN states' view that the involvement of external actors is a necessary requirement to prevent military dominance by China. This brings us to the disputes in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea issue: From regional to global security issue

China's rise has transformed the South China Sea conflict from a regional issue into a global one.

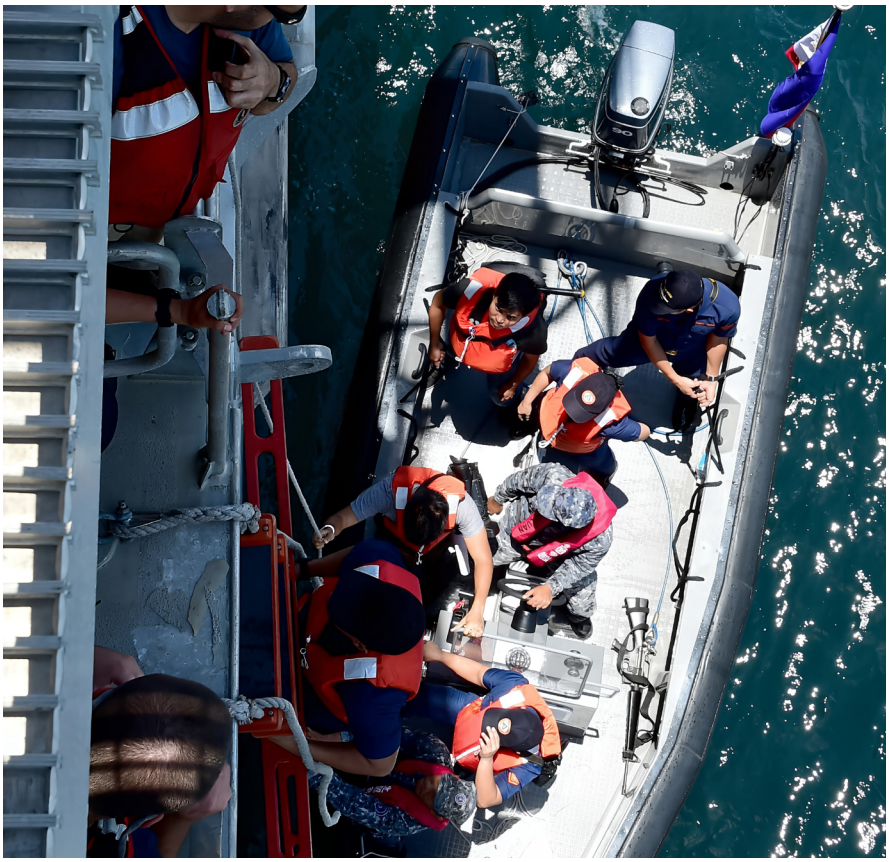
BEIJING HAS A long-standing claim to the territories in the South China Sea, dating back to the early years of the Cold War. Force has been used by China on a number of occasions, most notably against South Viet Nam in 1974, and against a unified Viet Nam in 1988. In 1982, Beijing signed the UN Law Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the post-Cold War era, the issue has taken on a new twist. In December 1992, Beijing passed the Law on Territorial Sea and its Contiguous Zone which by virtue of its nine-dashed line, appears to make sweeping sovereignty claims over the South China Sea.[82] The period from late 1994 to 1995 saw China occupying the contested Mischief Reef area, building structures in an area claimed by the Philippines.

A variety of actors, ranging from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Viet Nam, have maintained counterclaims to China's, adding to the intractability of the issue. Against this backdrop, ASEAN has sought to deal with the issue through multilateral dialogue and socialisation practices, epitomised in the concept of the 'ASEAN Way'.[83] In 1996, China ratified the UNCLOS but opted out of its dispute settlement mechanism in 2006.[84] In June 1998, Beijing passed legislation pertaining to China's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.[85]

After a period of relative calm following China's signing of the ASEAN's Declaration of Conduct (DOC) on the South China Sea in November 2002, the South China dispute has emerged as an even more serious security issue. In 2008, an agreement signed by China, the Philippines and Viet Nam to conduct a joint seismic survey of disputed areas in the South China Sea lapsed. In May 2009, Malaysia and Viet Nam made a joint submission to UNCLOS on their territorial claims in the South China Sea.

In response, China submitted a map to UNCLOS that appeared to assert Chinese sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, including not only land features, but also the waters inside the line.[86]

This escalation focused attention on the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi. At the meeting, the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, called for the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes based on UNCLOS.[87] In response, China's foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, responded with what one US official who was at the meeting described as "a twenty-five-minute stem-winder that shook the meeting."[88] Yang countered that Clinton's comments "were, in effect, an attack on China"[89] and declared that "China is a big country. Bigger than any other countries here".[90]



Members of the Philippine Coast Guard Special Operations Group participating in the Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS) Subject Matter Expert Exchange during Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) 2017 in Subic Bay, Philippines. Source Wikipedia Commons/DVIDS; The appearance of US Department of Defense (DoW) visual information does not imply or constitute DoW endorsement.

China's relations with the Philippines and Viet Nam

Beijing's disputes with Hanoi and Manila have been particularly intense.

AT THE ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM) Plus Eight Meeting in Hanoi in mid-October 2010, Viet Nam placed the issue of the South China Sea territorial disputes on the agenda for discussion. While no actual progress was achieved at the meeting, this act was a direct challenge to China. In March 2011, a standoff occurred when a Filipino vessel was conducting a seismic survey in the natural gas-rich Reed Bank in the Spratly Islands. Manila claimed that four similar skirmishes occurred between April and May. The Aquino government subsequently began referring to the South China Sea as the 'West Philippine Sea'.[91]

In July 2011, ASEAN and China agreed to a set of guidelines for implementing the 2002 Sino-ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea. On 6 September 2011, the Chinese government released a white paper that suggested further moderation in its approach to disputed waters. The document reaffirmed Deng Xiaoping's well-known guidance on "setting aside disputes to pursue joint development".[92] In January 2012, a Sino-ASEAN meeting led to the establishment of four working groups to explore marine environmental co-operation, marine scientific research, search and rescue operations, and ways to combat transnational crime.

While Beijing appeared to embrace a more accommodating stance, it was also prepared to respond robustly to defend its interests. A stand-off occurred between Chinese and Filipino naval vessels over the Scarborough Shoal in the Spratly Island chain from April to May 2012. China outmanoeuvred the Philippines. With a typhoon approaching, both sides agreed to withdraw from the area. The Chinese quickly returned to occupy the shoal in June, claiming ownership without firing a shot.

Meanwhile, China protested Viet Nam's passage of a June 2012 maritime law declaring sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. In that same month, China unilaterally established a municipality called Sansha (three sandbanks in Chinese) in the South China Sea, with Yongxing (Woody) Island serving as the administrative hub. According to the official Chinese Xinhua news agency, Sansha's jurisdiction extends over 13 square kilometres of land and 2 million square kilometres of surrounding water, effectively establishing Chinese control over much of the South China Sea.[93] In a direct challenge to Viet Nam, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) invited bids for a new batch of oil exploration blocks, some of which were within the 200-mile limit that Viet Nam claims as its exclusive economic zone.

A Challenge to ASEAN centrality

China has had notable success in driving a wedge between the ASEAN states, forestalling a unified regional response to its South China Sea policy.

AT ASEAN'S JUNE 2012 summit, held in Phnom Penh, ASEAN members failed even to agree on a diplomatic statement to address overlapping claims in the South China Sea. For the first time in its 45-year history, the association failed to agree on a post-summit communiqué. This was because Cambodia refused to include a reference to the South China Sea disputes in the final communiqué. One Filipino official claimed that Cambodia used its position to exercise a de facto veto over proceedings.[94] The Singaporean foreign minister, Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam, went further. Reflecting on the damage inflicted on ASEAN's credibility, he observed that: "To put it bluntly, it is a severe dent on ASEAN's credibility".[95] At the November East Asian Summit, also held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and China again tried to neutralise debate over the South China Sea dispute. Chairing the summit once more, Cambodia unilaterally announced that ASEAN had agreed with China that "they would not internationalise the South China Sea," and would focus instead on "the existing ASEAN-China mechanisms".[96]

The ability of ASEAN and China to reach an accommodation on the South China Sea disputes has declined since Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the presidency over the late-2012 and early-2013 period. Just ahead of the 24th ASEAN Summit in mid-May 2014, and immediately after a 22-29 April regional visit by President Obama which included visits to Hanoi and Manila, regional stability took a turn for the worse. Tensions in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship escalated. Beginning on 1 May, the Chinese state-owned CNOOC towed in a giant 40 storey tall drilling rig to a potential drilling site in the Paracel Islands. These islands are claimed by both China and Viet Nam but have been occupied by China since 1974. The rig was accompanied by a Chinese convoy.

It is unclear which side started the ramming, but in the ensuing scuffle, both sides' ships were subject to assault.[97] Vietnamese anger spilled over into physical attacks on Chinese workers in Viet Nam. More than three thousand Chinese workers were evacuated by the Chinese embassy in Hanoi and its consulate in Ho Chi Minh City.[98] Unconfirmed reports suggest that four people (at least one of whom was a Chinese national) were killed and 135 were wounded.[99]

A mix of developments followed this uptick in tensions. In a widely cited speech delivered at a Central Work Conference on Foreign Relations, Chinese leader Xi Jinping appeared to indicate an emphasis on co-operation in its regional policy.[100] Xi underlined the importance of "neighbourhood diplomacy".[101] Balanced against these positive developments was the reality that inter-state competition over the South China Sea remained alive and well.

In late-January 2015, satellite imagery revealed that China had been hard at work creating artificial islands across various reefs in the South China Sea. This included dredging activity at the following reefs: Cuarteron, Fiery Cross, Gaven, Hughes, Subi, and the Union reefs (Johnson South and Johnson North reefs).[102] As a consequence of this activity, estimates suggest that from May 2014 to April 2015, Chinese territory in the South China Sea expanded somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 acres.[103] For example, dredging activity at Hughes Reef, a shoal in the Spratly Islands, has led to the construction of a 90,000 square yard island, complete with airplane runway, a helicopter pad, and a radar facility.[104] Significantly, a satellite photo of the same location, taken in March 2014, revealed only a small concrete platform at high tide.

Contesting perceptions

The most prominent ASEAN claimant states — Malaysia, the Philippines, Viet Nam — clearly interpret Chinese actions as malign and their own actions as non-malign.

IN A SPEECH in Los Angeles in February 2016, Filippino President Benigno Aquino articulated his country's perceptions on the South China Sea issue. Aquino noted that the Philippines faces "very aggressive actions by our big neighbor to our west and north, the world's largest economy, and a nuclear power at that".[105] He elaborated: "We have no plans of trying to come up with some sort of deterrents against the military might of that superpower [China] … Yet like all nations, we need to defend our rights".[106]

Statements by high-ranking Vietnamese officials are harder to come by, but even here one can see a strong self-perception of non-malign intentions, which is then contrasted with China's. In an interview on 25 May 2016, Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc commented: "Viet Nam has no policy of militarization, but we have necessary measures together with other countries … to maintain peace, freedom of navigation, over-flight and trade in the South China Sea. I repeat, no conflict, to ensure peace for our people".[107] Hanoi has repeatedly juxtaposed its restraint against that displayed by China. Speaking at the Asia Society in New York on 28 September 2015, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang singled out Chinese policy as violating international law, and operating as a source of regional maritime instability.[108]

In his view, Vietnamese concerns "are obviously easy to understand because the acts by China seriously affect maritime security and security in the East Sea [the Vietnamese name for the South China Sea]".[109]

China frames its actions in the South China Sea as self-defensive and focused on stabilising the region. During a 16–17 May 2015 trip to Beijing, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, explained to the US secretary of state, John Kerry, that: "China's determination to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity is as firm as a rock and is unshakable … but we also hope to maintain peace and stability in the region and are committed to international freedom of navigation".[110] Beijing has taken a dim view of Hanoi and Manila's opposition to China's South China Sea claims, and is more than a little wary of the US. Thus, one Chinese analyst characterised Beijing's motivation for its South China Sea policy in the following terms: "The main reason for the [Chinese] construction is to tell other countries to stop their provocations, because if they continue to push, we have the capability to push back".[111]

Indeed, even before the onset of US-China strategic competition in 2017, it was suggested by Chinese officials and academics that whether intentional or not, the US's intervention in the South China Sea issue has been central in regional states' willingness to challenge China.[112] Thus, Xu Bu, the Chinese ambassador to ASEAN stated that the "US's rebalancing strategy has blinded some claimant countries with illusions," and it is "no coincidence that the changes in US policy have been followed by some Southeast Asian countries making changes to their policies on the South China Sea issue".[113]

Huang Huikuang, China's ambassador to Malaysia was more explicit. Huang noted that "in recent years, [the Philippines'] President Aquino … relied on a superpower to hype up the disputes in the South China Sea, and insisted on confronting China".[114]

A significant development in the trajectory of the South China issue occurred on 12 July 2016, when the Arbitral Tribunal of the PCA in the Hague issued a unanimous judgment supporting the Philippines' claims against China.[115] Just before the ruling, the Chinese foreign ministry had indicated that the tribunal had "no jurisdiction over the case and the relevant subject matter, and that it should not have heard the case or rendered the award".[116] The Chinese response to the ruling was therefore no surprise.[117] On 13 July, China's State Council published a White Paper rejecting the PCA's decision.[118] On the same day, Liu Zhenmin, vice foreign minister, and Guo Weimin, deputy director of the State Council Information Office, held a press briefing on the South China Sea dispute.[119] In the subsequent question and answer session, Liu and Guo critiqued the tribunal's decision, at times in caustic language.[120]

The South China Sea issue in the era of US-China strategic competition

Since 2017, in a direct challenge to Beijing's preference for dealing with South China Sea disputes bilaterally, the dispute has been internationalised in a number of ways.

FIRST, ASEAN CLAIMANT states have adopted a variety of strategies to cope with China's South China Sea policy. As discussed below, the Philippines attempted a rapprochement with China during the Duterte administration (2016–2022), before reverting to a posture of resistance during the Marcos administration (2022–present) that relies on Manilla's alliance with the US. And as will be discussed below, Viet Nam and Malaysia have consolidated their sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, albeit it in different ways.

Hanoi has confronted Beijing when necessary, while Kuala Lumpur has adopted a much more restrained approach. More recently, Beijing's attention has turned to the Natuna Islands region of the South China Sea, which falls within Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This has led to friction. In their own way, all three are seeking to deny China control of their EEZs.

Second, the United States has increasingly viewed this issue through the prism of great power competition. As discussed above, following Beijing's repudiation of the 2016 PCA ruling, the Trump and Biden administrations have actively assisted the Philippines against Chinese claims. These efforts reflect US opposition to China's attempts to complicate, and potentially, deny US ship, submarine, and aircraft access to the South China Sea space.

Third, following the intensification of Sino-Japanese tensions in the East China Sea — as discussed below in the section of Japan's relations with ASEAN — Japan has taken an active posture in the South China Sea issue.

President Rodrigo Duterte shakes hands with Japanese Ambassador to the Philippines Kazuhide Ishikawa during the commissioning of Barko ng Republika ng Pilipinas (BRP) Tubbataha at the 115th anniversary celebration of the Philippine Coast Guard in Port Area, Manila, 2016. Source Wikimedia Commons/REY BANIQUET/Presidential Photo.

The Philippines, Viet Nam, Malaysia, and Indonesia

As discussed above, Rodrigo Duterte implemented a rapprochement with China that ultimately failed. Beginning with personal insults to President Obama, Duterte engaged in a series of increasingly serious statements that if effected, would fundamentally realign the Philippines' foreign policy.[121]

DURING DUTERTE'S OCTOBER 2016 China visit, Chinese Vice Premier Liu Zhenmin noted that China and the Philippines "agreed that they will … pursue bilateral dialogue and consultation in seeking a proper settlement of the South China Sea issue".[122] Agreement was reached on the establishment of a joint committee on maritime cooperation and that the July PCA tribunal decision would "take a back seat".[123]

Nevertheless, it must be underlined that at no point during his presidency did Duterte concede on the principle of territorial sovereignty. When commenting on the PCA tribunal's 2016 decision in favour of the Philippines, Duterte stated that "we will not give up anything there [in the South China Sea]. It's an entitlement".[124] Indeed, Beijing's policy has further compromised Filippino security. This has led to an escalation of the Sino-Filippino dispute over the South China Sea during the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Jr (2022–present), and a strengthening of the US-Philippines alliance.

Hanoi has adopted a proactive stance in the Spratly Islands section of the South China Sea, focusing on two aims: expanding the territory under its control and increasing its military capabilities.[125] In respect to expanding territory under their control, through a process of dredging, Viet Nam has created approximately 3,319 acres of land in the South China Sea, a figure which represents 71 percent of China's total of 4,650 acres.[126] Since 2021, Hanoi has expanded the scope of its dredging and landfill in the Spratly Islands. Between July 2024 and March 2025, Hanoi created 641 acres of land, slightly less than the 692 acres of land created between November 2023 and June 2024.[127]

In respect to increasing its military presence, Hanoi has created eight new dredged harbours (up from four in 2021). Harbours permit Hanoi "to operate (in the maritime domain) in greater number and for longer periods of time before returning to shore — the same logistical advantage that China has used to maintain year-round patrols in the Spratlys".[128]

Equally significant is the completion in fall 2024 of Viet Nam's second and most developed runway at Barque Canada Reef in the Spratly Islands — which at 2,400-metres long is twice the length of its other runway on Spratly Island and can accommodate large scale military aircraft.[129]

Malaysia has adopted a less high-profile posture in dealing with China. Putrajaya's emphasis is on diplomacy; international law, specifically UNCLOS; the ASEAN DOC of Parties in the South China Sea signed in 2002; and a commitment to defending its sovereignty. These are characteristics highlighted in an 8 April 2023 statement issued by the Malaysian government.[130] In practice, Malaysia's willingness to downplay the territorial dispute has been coupled with an imperative to defend Malaysian sovereignty.

There has been no shortage of incidents in recent years. In April 2020, a Chinese seismic ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 was detected just inside the outer edge of Malaysia's EEZ. On 31 May 2021, 16 People's Liberation Army transport planes entered Malaysian airspace over its EEZ, causing the Malaysian Air Force to scramble a squadron of fighter jets.[131] The next day, the Malaysian Foreign Ministry issued a particularly robust statement.[132] This was followed in July 2022 with an unusually blunt Malaysian submission to the UN Commission on Limits to the Continental Shelf. The submission stated that "Malaysia rejects China's claims to historic rights, or other sovereign rights and jurisdiction, with respect to the maritime areas of the South China Sea encompassed by the relevant part of the [Chinese] 'nine-dashed line'".[133]

To be sure, Beijing finds the Malaysian approach more palatable than other ASEAN claimants. This is reflected in an opinion written by Huang Huikang, the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia (2014–17) that positively contrasted Malaysia's policy on the South China Sea issue with that of the Philippines.[134]

An important example of the internationalisation of the South China Sea issue is reflected in Indonesia's increasing embroilment in China's 'nine-dashed-lines' claims in the South China Sea.[135]

In 2014, coinciding with the discovery of commercially viable oil fields in the 'Tuna Block' section of the Natuna Islands region in Indonesia's EEZ, the Chinese government included the Natuna Islands in Chinese government maps.[136] China's claims overlap with some of Indonesia's richest fisheries and its largest offshore natural gas area.[137] Increased illegal fishing activity by Chinese fishermen in these waters has followed, often supported by Chinese state vessels that lurk in the vicinity.[138] Warning shots have been fired by the Indonesian navy, which has also seized fishing vessels engaged in illegal activities. In 2017, Jakarta renamed its section of the South China Sea the North Natuna Sea.[139] This follows the Philippines renaming its part of the South China Sea as the "West Philippine Sea", while Viet Nam refers to its area as the "East Sea".

Since 2017, Indonesia has strengthened its naval, air, and infantry forces in the Natuna Islands area. This activity has been closely monitored by China. In the second-half of 2021, China Coast Guard vessels took turns 'shadowing' Indonesian government approved drilling in the 'Tuna Block' area.[140] In 2023, when Jakarta approved the drilling of an exploration well in the area, the Chinese navy deployed naval vessels to monitor the activity.[141]

More recent action by the newly-elected Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto has appeared to reflect a clear departure from longstanding policy. A joint statement released at the end of Prabowo's visit to Beijing on 9 November 2024 stated that the two sides had reached an "important understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping claims and agreed to establish an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee to explore and advance relevant cooperation".[142] Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs subsequently firmly denied that the joint statement implies any concession on Indonesian sovereignty.[143] The upshot is made clear in a recent study by three Indonesian academics. In their view, "China's superior [maritime] capabilities in both conventional and unconventional domains have enabled it to continuously challenge Indonesia's legitimate claims under UNCLOS in the waters near the Natuna Islands".[144]

Japan and Southeast Asia: The rise of complex interdependence

IN THIS SECTION

Introduction

Japan and the ASEAN states share two compelling strategic realities. First, China is Japan and Southeast Asia's top trade partner. Second, as China's relative maritime power has grown, both have experienced increasing maritime sovereignty disputes with Beijing.

JAPAN HAS OFFERED two key claimant states — the Philippines and Viet Nam — assistance in securing their sovereignty in the face of persistent challenges by China. Tokyo has utilised the following approaches in engaging with Hanoi and Manila:

(1) unilateral policy changes (notably, the revision of significant Japanese legislation on arms exports in 2014 and Official Security Assistance (OSA) in 2022);

(2) bilateralism (provision of bilateral Japanese assistance involving the transfer of coast guard boats; radar systems; and other forms of military-related assistance to defend the Philippines and Viet Nam's sovereignty);

(3) multilateralism (seen in calls for international law, specifically, the 1982 UNCLOS, to be respected; support for the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal decision on the South China Sea; and participation in multilateral military exercises in the South China Sea).

The three approaches reinforce each other and are part of an overall strategy to internationalise the response to China's South China Sea policy.

27th ASEAN-Japan Summit leaders' family photo. Source Wikimedia Commons/Philippines Presidential Communications Office.

Balancing competing imperatives

Japan's Southeast Asia policy seeks to balance competing imperatives. Tokyo understands the reality of China's growing economic engagement with Southeast Asia, even as it seeks to deny its historical rival China uncontested control of Southeast Asia's maritime domain. [145]

THIS APPROACH WAS clearly reflected in Shinzo Abe's second tenure as prime minister (2012–20). It has continued through the Yoshihide Suga (2020–21), Fumio Kishisa (2021–24), and Shigeru Ishiba (2024–present) administrations.

In line with the escalation of Sino-Japanese maritime disputes from 2010 onwards, the Abe administration viewed the regional maritime sphere as increasingly interconnected, thus creating an imperative for a more active Japanese policy in the South China Sea.[146] This was reflected in the emphasis on cooperation with ASEAN states in Japan's December 2013 National Security Strategy.[147] In December 2013, the Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project (MSCIP) involving Japanese loans to enhance the Philippine Coast Guard's capabilities to defend maritime sovereignty was signed.

The first phase involved providing the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) with ten 44-metre *Parola*-class multi-role responsive vessels (MRRVs), conducting joint exercises, and assisting the PCG with training.[148] Abe also emphasised cooperation with Viet Nam. Hanoi was the first stop on his January 2013 Southeast Asia tour.[149] Three other visits to Southeast Asia occurred in May, July, and October 2013, completing visits to all the Southeast Asian countries.[150]

Abe's sense that Japan had a role to play in the region was soon confirmed by events. A major crisis in Sino-Vietnamese relations occurred during a six-week period beginning on 1 May 2014. As previously discussed above, the catalyst was the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) towing a 40-storey tall drilling rig, the HSY981, to an exploration site in the western edge of the Paracel Islands located in Vietnam's EEZ. The rig was accompanied by a Chinese convoy. At the peak of the standoff, the number of Chinese vessels numbered 140.[151] China maintained that Viet Nam had deployed 63 vessels by 7 June.[152] Both sides' ships were subject to assault. Protests escalated into nationwide riots on Vietnamese territory by Vietnamese citizens.[153]

A significant conceptual change in Japan's foreign policy occurred in Japan's first National Security Strategy, referenced above, which paved the way for a significant revision of Japan's "Three Principles" on arms exports that were established in 1967 to restrict the overseas transfer of weapons and defence equipment.[154] The Three Principles were revised to permit arms exports under specific conditions.[155]

This context is necessary in interpreting Abe's speech at the annual IISS Shangri-La meeting in late May 2014, where he stated Japan's intention to play "an even greater and proactive role" in sustaining peace in Asia.[156] In this regard, Abe announced that Tokyo would "offer its utmost support for ASEAN member countries to ensure the security of seas and skies and rigorously maintain freedom of navigation and overflight".[157] In July 2014, Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida visited Viet Nam.

An agreement was reached to provide Hanoi with six second-hand patrol vessels, in a package totalling 500 million yen.[158] This aid was dispensed through Japan's official development assistance (ODA) programme.[159]

On 29–31 January 2015, at a meeting between Secretary of Defence Nakatani and his Filipino counterpart, Voltaire Gazmin, both sides committed to regular defence dialogues. Subsequently, on 4 June 2015, in direct opposition to Chinese calls, Japan signed an agreement to provide naval patrol vessels to the Philippines.[160] On 12 May, joint naval drills were conducted in the South China Sea by the Filippino and Japanese navies.[161] In late June, a Japanese PC-3 Orion surveillance plane (with three Filipino guest crew on board) conducted surveillance over Reed Bank, an area claimed by both China and the Philippines.[162] Commenting on the uptick of Japanese activity in tensions in the South China Sea, an official Japanese source was quoted off the record that "we have to show China that it doesn't own the sea".[163]

In August 2016, Abe reintroduced the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) that he had first mooted in 2007.[164]

This was an attempt to offer an alternative to China's growing influence in the region. In early August 2016, Japan's then-foreign minister Fumiko Kishida met the newly-elected Rodrigo Duterte and his foreign minister, Perfecto Yasay.[165] Yasay highlighted both states' "same experience in the East China Sea and South China Sea … with respect to certain actions that use force, intimidation, provocation in order to assert one's claim over particular territory".[166]

In October 2016, the second phase of the Maritime Safety Capacity Improvement Project (MSCIP) occurred, with the transfer of ten patrol vessels to the Philippines. These were purchased at the cost of 12.7 billion yen and were launched in 2016 and 2018.[167] In mid-September 2018, Japan conducted its first independent naval exercise in the South China Sea. The exercise involved a submarine, two destroyers and a helicopter carrier, with the submarine making a port call at Viet Nam's Cam Ranh Bay.[168] In 2018, the Mitsubishi Electric Corporation signed a contract with the Philippine Department of National Defence to purchase four radar systems.[169] In May 2019, joint patrols in the South China Sea involving the US, Japan, India and the Philippines occurred.[170] In July 2020, Japan agreed to the sale of six Aso-class naval vessels to Viet Nam, for delivery by 2025.[171]

Major changes in Japan's Southeast Asia policy

In the post-Abe era, two major changes in Japanese policy have occurred that are relevant to Tokyo's Southeast Asia policy.

FIRST, JAPAN'S 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) contained an important revision, also reflected in its December 2022 "Official Security Assistance (OSA)" initiative.[172] The OSA permits Tokyo to provide assistance in areas including surveillance, transport, search and rescue, and minesweeping. Second, on 22 December 2023, the Fumio government further loosened restrictions on Japanese arms exports, with a revision of the 2014 Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology and their implementation guidelines.[173]

These changes set the context for an increase in Japanese regional engagement. In February 2023, Tokyo and Manilla signed an agreement permitting the Japan Self-Defence Forces to access the Philippines during humanitarian and disaster relief operations. From 1–7 June 2023, the Japan Coast Guard held its first ever joint multilateral maritime exercises with the Philippines and the US Coast Guard near the Chinese-occupied Scarborough Shoal.[174] In October 2023, a fixed radar system was delivered to the Philippine Air Force and supplemented in March 2024 with delivery of a mobile radar system.[175] These radar capabilities were deployed at the Ernest Ogbinar naval station and are the first transfer of finished defence equipment by Japan to a foreign government since the 2014 announcement of the updated Three Principles.

In June 2024, the third phase of the MSCIP kicked in, with five additional *Teresa Magbanua*-class MRRVs provided to Manila.[176] These are the largest, most advanced vessels in the Filippino Coast Guard fleet. On 8 April 2024, the Reciprocal Access Agreement was signed. Japan's defence minister, Minoru Kihara, described it as a "groundbreaking" deal that would "enhance cooperation" between the Japan Self-Defense Forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines.[177] This was followed by the first trilateral US-Japan-Philippines summit in Washington on 11 April 2024. During April 2024, four of the Philippines' Japanese-built *Parola*-class MRRVs participated in the US-Philippines' annual *Balikatan* exercise, also involving Australia and France.[178]

These transfers of Japanese technology were to see frontline action. On 19 August 2024, one of the PCG *Teresa Magbanua* class vessels provided by Japan was involved in a collision with a China Coast Guard ship near the Spratly Islands region.[179] The Japanese Foreign Ministry subsequently issued a statement on "repeated actions in recent days that increase regional tensions in the South China Sea" between the Philippines and China, emphasising that the issue is "directly related to the peace and stability of the region and is a legitimate concern of the international community."[180] Tokyo opposed "any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force as well as any actions that increase tensions in the South China Sea."[181]

In September 2024, naval exercises involving the Philippines, US, Australia, Japan and — for the first time — New Zealand occurred in Manila's EEZ.[182] In January 2025, during a visit to Manila, Japanese foreign minister, Iwaya Takeshi, stated that Tokyo was "gravely concerned" about the escalating tensions in the South China Sea, describing it as a "legitimate concern for the international community because it directly links to the regional peace and stability".[183] In February 2025, Japanese defence minister Gen Nakatani reached agreement with his Philippine counterpart to expand defence equipment and technology cooperation.[184]

Australia and Southeast Asia: A complex engagement

"Australia has never had to manage a relationship of this complexity before … China is also an important player in every major international institution whose outcomes Australia wants to influence, from the United Nations and G20, to APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum."

Allan Gyngell, Australian national security official

Like Japan, Australia's geographical proximity creates an imperative for engagement with Southeast Asia. This has been a complex engagement.[185] Australian policy toward Southeast Asia has gone through three phases. In phase one, which is represented by much of the Cold War era, Southeast Asia was largely economically underdeveloped and a site of internal and foreign policy instability. During this period Canberra relied on its alliance with the United States to deter a communist threat in Southeast Asia. Australian involvement in the Korean and Viet Nam wars was symptomatic of the era's basic characteristics. That said, in 1974, Australia became ASEAN's first dialogue partner. As ASEAN's more trade-oriented states experienced increasing economic success, Canberra began to see the region as promising economic opportunity.[186]

PHASE TWO INVOLVED an era of post-Cold War stability from 1991 to 2016. Canberra's relations with ASEAN expanded and deepened through entry into ASEAN organisations including the ASEAN Regional Forum; the ASEAN-Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus; and the ASEAN led-East Asian Summit. It was an era of burgeoning regionalism and globalisation. But even at this time, there were issues. Australia participated in the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) that began in March 1992 and culminated in elections in May 1993.[187] UNTAC assumed control of key sectors of the country's administration to allow for the smooth conduct of national elections. Oversight spanned the key areas of foreign affairs, defence, security, finance and communications.

Not long after, instability in East Timor led to the intervention by Australian and New Zealand forces under the umbrella of the United Nations.[188] A 30 August 1999 vote in East Timor sanctioned by Jakarta saw an overwhelming majority vote for independence. Mayhem ensued as pro-Indonesian local militia in East Timor resorted to violence. Australian troops were the largest participating component in the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) that was deployed from 20 September 1999 through to 28 February 2000.

The presence of Australian troops in East Timor lasted from 1999 to 2013 as the United Nations' presence continued on the basis of successive mandates. It should be noted that Australia's role in restoring order has remained a decreasing — if far from forgotten — source of friction in relations between Canberra and Jakarta.

In phase three, which focused on the post–2017 era of US-China strategic competition, the Southeast Asian region is necessarily seen by Canberra not just on its own terms but also in the context of China's rise. In this respect, there is a merging of the dominant themes of the two previous era — the military view of the Cold War and the economic focus of the globalisation era from 1991 to 2016. In one important respect, Southeast Asia and Australia share a similar challenge in dealing with China. As the late Australian national security official Allan Gyngell pointed out in 2017 before the marked downturn in Sino-Australian relations from 2020–2023, "Australia has never had to manage a relationship of this complexity before … China is also an important player in every major international institution whose outcomes Australia wants to influence, from the United Nations and G20, to APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum".[189] The vast majority of Southeast Asian states would share that view.

Southeast Asia is now an even more central factor in Australian policy. On one hand, the logic of engagement is straight-forward. Seven of the Southeast Asian states are among Australia's top 20 trade partners.[190] On the other hand, the terms of engagement occur in the context of post-2017 increased security competition in Southeast Asia that has followed the transformation of the US-China relationship from 'engagement' to 'strategic competition'. As the 2024 Australian National Defence Strategy makes clear: "Australia faces its most complex and challenging strategic environment since the Second World War",[191] where the requirement to "maintain a favorable regional strategic balance is as important for Australia's economy as it is for our security".[192]

In facing these challenges, Australia brings an understanding of Southeast Asia that has been deepened through decades of post-1975 immigration following the liberalisation of Australia's immigration policy.

This change in Australian policy is personified in Penny Wong, the current Australian foreign minister. Wong, who was born in Malaysia and emigrated to Australia at a young age, has been described as the most influential foreign minister from the Australian Labor Party in the post-Cold War era.[193] As foreign minister, Wong was pivotal in the hosting of the ASEAN-Australian Summit of 2024. The summit saw the approval of the Melbourne Declaration, marking a more mature Australian-ASEAN relationship.[194] More generally, Wong's central role in both the Labor Party and in Australian foreign policy ensures that there is a deep understanding of the core dynamics in Southeast Asia in the Australian establishment.

Along these lines, and sensitive to the Southeast Asian understanding that security is multi-dimensional and cannot be siloed, an Australian strategy for the expansion of two-way trade was released in 2023.[195] And since any developing security relationship has to be reciprocal, when Australia embarked on its most major security development in decades — the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and United States) trilateral technology partnership — its diplomats toured Southeast Asia to brief regional governments. They met with a range of responses. Malaysia and Indonesia expressed concerns, even if deeper investigation suggests a more nuanced perspective.[196] The Philippines, Singapore, and Viet Nam were more accepting, while there was no response from the US alliance partner Thailand.[197] In a sign that a more mature relationship has developed, when asked to rank the Australia's "strategic relevance" to ASEAN, respondents in the Institute of Southeast Asia's annual survey of the State of Southeast Asia 2025 State of Southeast Asia report placed it in fifth place (out of 11 countries).[198]

Russia's partial return to Southeast Asia

"... despite its aggression on Ukraine, Russia has claimed the eighth place [in the ISEAS 2024 report registering top geopolitical concerns] ahead of India, Canada, and New Zealand. This demonstrates Russia's perceived strategic relevance among ASEAN countries, particularly for Laos (third place), Viet Nam (fifth place), Indonesia and Thailand (both in sixth place)."

ISEAS 2024 report

Russia's Southeast Asia policy in the post-Cold War era reflects the interaction of the factors of power, history, geography and history. In Southeast Asia, Moscow is a declining extra-regional power with weak economic engagement, and whose physical military presence (as distinct from arms sales) does not tilt the regional strategic balance. There is only one Southeast Asian state (Viet Nam, in 15th place) in Russia's list of top 20 trading partners, and only three in the top 30 (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam).[199]

IN HISTORICAL TERMS, Russia's limited impact on Southeast Asian security is a return to a norm of geographically conditioned relative disengagement and corresponding prioritisation of the European sphere. The point can be succinctly summed up in the starkly differing role that the United States and Russia — once functionally similar global rivals during the Cold War — play in contemporary Southeast Asia's trajectory. Whereas Washington is indispensable in any analysis of Southeast Asia's international relations, to the extent that Moscow matters to Southeast Asian states today, it is in its role as an arms exporter and in its symbolic role as a counter to the Western-dominated international order.

Since 1991, ASEAN has welcomed Russia as a dialogue partner. Moscow is involved in the various ASEAN multilateral institutions.[200] These range from the ASEAN Regional Forum to the ASEAN Defence Ministers Dialogue and the East Asia Summit. Even in the institutional interaction space, the peripheral impact point applies. This can be underlined by an example. As Korolev points out, "since Russia's official accession to the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2011, Russian President Vladimir Putin has attended it only once, in 2018 in Singapore, when it coincided in time and place with a Russia-ASEAN summit where the parties elevated their relations to the strategic level".[201]

Ultimately, at the organisation level, it is Russia's overall example as a state that is sceptical of the existing Western-centric international order that resonates with most (but not all) members. The ISEAS 2024 report registers the war in Ukraine as among the ASEAN respondents' top three geopolitical concerns.[202] There have been a diversity of responses to the war among ASEAN member states, ranging from Singapore's condemnation to Myanmar's support for Russia.[203] The ISEAS 2024 report also notes that "despite its aggression on Ukraine, Russia has claimed the eighth place ahead of India, Canada, and New Zealand. This demonstrates Russia's perceived strategic relevance among ASEAN countries, particularly for Laos (third place), Viet Nam (fifth place), Indonesia and Thailand (both in sixth place)".[204] Since the start of the war, with the exception of the Brunei, the Philippines, and Singapore, the other seven ASEAN leaders have met with President Putin in person.[205]

In 2023, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Viet Nam were invited to become BRICS members during Russia's term as chair.[206] They became members over the 2024/2025 period. And as one observer has pointed out "in July 2024 the two sides celebrated Russia's accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, despite the fact that Russia's attack on Ukraine was an egregious violation of all the treaty's core principles". [207]

At the bilateral level, Russia's most influential interaction with the ASEAN states has been in the realm of military technology sales.

From 2000 to 2019, Russia was the top exporter of arms sales to Southeast Asia, outranking the US in second spot.[208] Moscow has particularly strong arms sales to Viet Nam, Laos and Myanmar.[209] That said, it is in the Russia-Viet Nam relationship that Moscow's influence in Southeast Asia has its strongest manifestation. The Russian-Vietnamese relationship has deep roots stretching back to the Cold War.[210] Simply stated, there is a mutual recognition that Hanoi and Moscow provide each other alternatives in a contested international environment. This is highlighted in Russian leader Vladimir Putin's 2024 visit to Viet Nam.[211] Moscow retains its spot as Hanoi's top source of military imports,[212] even if there is clear evidence of a desire to seek diversification in the aftermath of Russia's war in Ukraine.[213]

The United Kingdom and Southeast Asia: A post-Brexit return

"... the Indo-Pacific region matters to the United Kingdom: it is critical to our economy, our security and our global ambition."

2021 Integrated Review

Any discussion of the United Kingdom's role in Southeast Asia has to start from the historical reality that it was once a colonial power in the region. And as imperialism waned after World War II, British power in Southeast Asia experienced a precipitous decline. The onset of the Cold War marked the beginning of a process of British military and economic retrenchment that culminated in the withdrawal of British forces "East of the Suez" in 1971. While the United Kingdom never completely left Southeast Asia — it retained a post-1971 security role with the Five Power Defence Agreements, involving the UK, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore — it is a simple historical fact that the present British position in Southeast Asia is far less influential than it once was.[214]

THIS IS THE reality facing London as a post-Brexit United Kingdom seeks to enhance its relationships in the Indo-Pacific. The British relationship with Euro-Atlantic area remains the 'geographic' priority.[215] That said, given the Indo-Pacific's position as the centre of global strategic and economic gravity, London understandably seeks a role in the regional order. That much is clear from the 2021 Integrated Review, which declared that "the Indo-Pacific region matters to the United Kingdom: it is critical to our economy, our security and our global ambition".[216] As part of this 'tilt', the United Kingdom will "adapt to the regional balance of power and respect the interests of others" whilst seeking "to work with existing structures such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations".[217]

There is significant scope for the United Kingdom to expand its regional partnerships and role in Southeast in the post-Brexit era. In this quest, soft power is a useful complement but not a substitute for the investment in hard economic and military power in Southeast Asia. For trade, only two Southeast Asian states — Singapore and Viet Nam — occupy positions in the United Kingdom's top 20 list, while five are in the top 50.[218] A United Kingdom-ASEAN free agreement remains a goal for the future. On the security front, when asked to rank the United Kingdom in respect of its "strategic relevance" to ASEAN, respondents in the ISEAS State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report place it in eighth place (out of 11 countries).[219]

In one respect, this is a situation that London is already actively addressing. The United Kingdom is now a member in two significant regional security and economic partnerships that condition ASEAN's strategic environment: the AUKUS security partnership that was announced in 2021, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2024.[220] There are ongoing British discussions with France to establish "a permanent European maritime presence" in the Indo-Pacific through "coordinated aircraft carrier deployments".[221] Ultimately, the United Kingdom's step up in regional engagement will hinge on its willingness to fund a multi-decade and multi-dimensional refocusing of investment toward the Indo-Pacific even as it confronts severe challenges in Europe.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy at the ASEAN summit in Malaysia. Source Wikimedia Commons/ UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

The Southeast Asian experience with extra-regional powers: Implications for New Zealand

IN THIS SECTION

Southeast Asia is one of the 'frontline' regions in world politics. It is simultaneously all of the following: (1) a vital link in the supply chain for the global economy; (2) at the centre of a major international security dispute (the South China Sea); (3) a case study for bilateral alignment dynamics in the current era of US-China strategic competition; (4) a test case in the efficacy of multilateral rules-based legal approaches to foreign policy; (5) the source of a spectrum of examples in the management of religious and political diversity in an increasingly polarised era of information-driven technology; and (6) an example of state and regional adaptation in an era of fraying globalisation.

IN SHORT, SOUTHEAST Asia is a major actor in a wider regional and global order that is currently experiencing a process of structural adjustment. This is why the South China Sea issue has moved from a regional conflict to an increasingly global concern, even as Southeast Asian states are simultaneously front and centre of negotiations with the Trump administration over its tariff policy,[222] and the focus of China's diplomatic attention with President Xi visiting Cambodia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam.[223] Southeast Asia's challenges are more similar than dissimilar to those of New Zealand.

Wellington has much to learn from close observation of how Southeast Asia is responding to these changes, and in taking on board the appropriate lessons to be learnt (or not learnt, as the case may be).

There are some clear implications for New Zealand from the analysis discussed in this report.

Leaders of ASEAN member countries, alongside Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the United States, attending the 18th East Asia Summit, 2023. Source Wikimedia Commons/BPMI Sekretariat Presiden/Muchlis Jr.

1. Contending with a new era of strategic competition and great power rivalry

New Zealand and the ASEAN states face a shared strategic environment, in the form of an extended era of great power rivalry.

US-CHINA RIVALRY, WHICH began in 2017 with the transition in US policy toward China from one of 'engagement' to 'strategic competition', is now a permanent, structural feature in world politics. This shift in US policy represents a bipartisan US consensus which both the Trump (2017–2020, 2025–present) and Biden (2021–2024) administrations' policies reflects.

For its part, the leadership in China understands that its main strategic rival is the United States. At a major Chinese government meeting in 2023, Xi Jinping stated clearly: "Western countries led by the US, which have implemented all round containment, encirclement, and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development".[224] This point is confirmed by the second Trump administration's tariff sanctions policy.[225]

Beijing and Washington's interests are directly engaged in Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and the wider Indo-Pacific, which represents the most strategically significant and economically vibrant area in world politics.[226]

2. Recognising New Zealand's agency in the era of 'strategic competition'

Successive New Zealand governments in this era of strategic competition have recognised the transformed international context. The Ardern (2017–23), Hipkins (2023), and Luxon (2023–present) administrations initiated and/or supported a variety of authoritative and clear-eyed government reports released in 2023.[227] These reports chart the deteriorating international security environment, which includes various issues in the Indo-Pacific, including Southeast Asia. There is an increasing recognition in Wellington that New Zealand's security environment is increasingly multi-dimensional and integrated.[228] This fundamental understanding is reflected in Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's statement in Tokyo during a 2024 visit that New Zealand's "prosperity is only possible with security".[229]

The challenge facing New Zealand is to move from a cognitive understanding of this transformed and deteriorating security environment to the practical resourcing and policy adjustments.

IN THIS RESPECT, a positive first step has occurred with the publication of the New Zealand government's Defence Capability Plan (DCP) in April 2025.[230] The DCP needs to be resourced over successive years and increased as the strategic environment evolves. Since defence is only one part of foreign policy, as discussed below, further resourcing is required in other spheres of policy — encompassing both foreign and domestic policy.

That said, a general observation can be made on New Zealand's foreign policy. Though it may be possible — through strategic decisions — to avoid direct entanglement in specific instances of global instability, including in the Indo-Pacific, it is unrealistic to expect that New Zealand will be able to avoid some degree of collateral entanglement risks. Specifically, New Zealand's alliance with Australia is a bedrock of our security. As Canberra takes on a more frontline role in regional security and politics, entanglement risks will inevitably rise. In this respect, the politically-conditioned imposition of wide-ranging sanctions by China on Australia from 2020 to 2023 is instructive.[231]

There is of course, an alternative policy position which eliminates entanglement risks. That involves a significant deemphasis of the Australian-New Zealand alliance, opening up the possibility of a weakening and eventual abrogation of the alliance.[232] Precisely because it is hard to see how, on balance, this alternative policy will increase New Zealand's security, the onus is on those who may favour a deemphasis, or even a termination of the alliance to specify how exactly they would provide for the country's security in its absence. In other words, the opportunity costs of a New Zealand foreign policy without an alliance in an era of strategic competition need to be clearly articulated by critics. This is for the obvious reason that a New Zealand without an alliance in an increasingly contested environment will still require substantial investment in defence.

3. Exercising New Zealand's agency in a contested environment

Southeast Asia and its neighbouring region of North Asia serve as a 'canary in the coalmine' for New Zealand. Similar tactics have been deployed by extra-regional powers in both these sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific region. These are identified and outlined below in the form of: disregard for international law; politicisation of economic interdependence; the militarisation of regional security; and the utilisation of fait accompli strategies. Moreover, as referenced below, there is evidence of these trends appearing in New Zealand's home region of the South Pacific. To avoid a significant revision of the regional status quo in the South Pacific, a premium must be placed on a proactive posture being adopted by New Zealand, including working with our treaty ally Australia.

Disregard for international law

A CLEAR POINT can be drawn from the international politics of the South China Sea issue, where respect for international law has been a serious casualty. In 2016, following the International Criminal Court's decision in favour of the Philippines, China unambiguously rejected the decision of an international court's decision on the sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea.[233] Despite there being no credible legal basis for China's claims for sovereignty under UNCLOS, Beijing has doubled down on its position, even at the risk of damaging its relationships with some ASEAN states. For example, from late 2016 through 2017, Singapore was singled out by China for its strong stand on international law.[234] On the issue of international law, it should be noted that the US's critique of China's South China Sea policy is blunted by the fact that is not a signatory to UNCLOS.[235]

Politicisation of economic interdependence

As China's economic power has risen, Beijing has also deployed economic sanctions to achieve political objectives in a number of its disputes with regional and non-regional states.

THERE ARE TWO aspects to the politicisation of economic interdependence. It is possible for a state that exercises asymmetrical economic power to determine outcomes in an indirect but effective way that operates 'under the shadow' of actual direct deployment. When Cambodia and Laos were hosts of the annual meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, China leaned on these states to either block or delay the release of the standard communique until revisions were made that accommodate China's version of events. The first dynamic occurred in Cambodia in 2012 and the second occurred in Laos in 2016.[236]

At other times, the politicisation of economic interdependence is more overt. We can see this with some non-Southeast Asian examples that involve the United States and China. From 1993 to 1994, the US imposed economic sanctions on China by linking the renewal of most favoured nation (MFN) trade status to improvements in Beijing's human rights and democratic political practices. Fast forward to 2025, and in a different context, a global tariff sanctions policy has been imposed by the US on its trading partners.[237] Shortly after tariffs were announced by the United States, and even as a baseline ten percent tariff was in operation, a three-month reprieve on further tariffs was declared to allow negotiations to occur. US allies have not been spared from the tariffs, with Trump acting on his longstanding critique that allies have taken advantage of the United States by under-spending on defence and "free-riding" on the security provided by Washington's global network.[238] The exception to this reprieve is China, which currently faces tariffs of 145 percent.[239]

In respect to the deployment of economic sanctions against regional states, in 2016–17, China-South Korean relations deteriorated over Seoul's decision to allow the US to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) missile defence battery on its territory to counter North Korea's missile threat. Lotte, the South Korean conglomerate which owns the land on which the THAAD site will be based, increasingly encountered threats of retaliation to its economic interests in China.[240] On 31 October 2017, after extensive negotiations, China and South Korea agreed to "normalise exchanges" with Seoul.[241] These include the stipulation that Seoul agrees that there will be no further installation of anti-ballistic missile systems in Korea on top of those that had already been installed; no joining of a region-wide US missile defence system; and not to develop South Korean-Japanese-US military cooperation into a trilateral military alliance.[242] In respect to disputes with non-regional states, when the Nobel Prize Committee in Norway awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese citizen and critic of the Chinese Communist Party, China placed sanctions on Norway for six years. These were eventually lifted after Norway issued a joint statement with China stating that it "attaches high importance to China's core interests and major concerns, will not support actions that undermine them, and will do its best to avoid any future damage to the bilateral relationship".[243]

Militarisation of regional security

AS IN THE South China Sea, there has been a rise in activity that further militarises regional dynamics. On 25 September 2024, China tested an intercontinental range missile (ICBM) that terminated in the South Pacific, just outside French Polynesia's EEZ. The test represents a militarisation of New Zealand's South Pacific home region and has the ancillary effect of contradicting the spirit of Wellington's principles on the non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Treaty of Rarotonga, which New Zealand and 12 other regional countries (including Australia) signed in 1985, established a nuclear-free zone that prohibits nuclear testing in the South Pacific region. The ICBM that China tested is designed to be fitted with nuclear warheads, and in that respect, violates the spirit of this taboo.

More recently, from 21 to 22 February 2025, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted naval exercises in the Tasman Sea, off the coast of Eastern Australia.[244]

The exercises were small, involving three Chinese vessels — a cruiser, a frigate, and a replenishment tanker.[245] That said, the political and strategic implications of the exercises are significant. The drills occurred just prior to the Australia-China strategic dialogue on 17 February in Beijing,[246] and ahead of New Zealand foreign minister Winston Peters' 26 February trip to Beijing.[247] China's ambassador to Australia portrayed this exercise in military and diplomatic signalling as "normal".[248] That said, the exercises involved two live fire drills where notification was not provided to warn commercial aircraft in the vicinity. There is no previously recorded event of PLA exercises so close to Australia's coast.

Fait accompli strategies

IN REVISING THE regional status quo in the South China Sea, China has adopted a clear preference for fait accompli strategies. Its success depends on two factors:

(1) the cooperation of partner states that profit from China's involvement and investment in the region, and

(2) lack of transparency which limits the ability of other regional actors to obviate the fait accompli.

This strategy is being replicated in the Pacific Islands region. In March 2022, a draft of a security agreement involving China and the Solomon Islands was leaked.[249] The leaked five-year agreement, which was signed in Beijing in May that year, states that "China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of the Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistics replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in the Solomon Islands".[250]

From New Zealand's perspective, the China-Solomon Islands agreement is an example of a powerful external power entering into a security relationship with a smaller state, in a region where New Zealand and its sole treaty ally Australia have deep interests. These interests have previously led New Zealand to deploy police and military forces to stabilise the situation in the Solomon Islands. This occurred with the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017, and Operation Solomon Islands from 2021 to 2024.

The fait accompli strategy was repeated when the Cook Islands announced in early February 2025 that its prime minister, Mark Brown, had reached agreement on two agreements without first consulting with New Zealand.

Such consultation is required as the Cook Islands has a "free association" relationship with New Zealand.[251] Cook Islanders hold New Zealand passports and there is a legal obligation for the two to consult on issues that affect mutual defence and security. Winston Peters expressed specific dissatisfaction with the lack of consultation by the Cook Islands prior to the agreements being signed, calling the development "a matter of significant concern".[252] Two agreements were subsequently reached during Brown's meeting in Beijing in mid-February 2025.[253] This included a five-year action plan[254] and the Memorandum of Understanding on Economic Cooperation.[255] The action plan contained specific provisions for cooperation in infrastructure and seabed mineral mining.

4. Educating New Zealand and Southeast Asia in the era of strategic competition: The role of universities

It stands to reason that in retooling New Zealand's foreign policy for this era of strategic competition, that greater funding needs to be allocated to facilitate a 'whole of government' response. This will necessarily entail the provision of training on both Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region in which it is located. Some New Zealand government ministries are more outward facing, while others are necessarily more domestic-focused. Regardless, there is an inextricable interconnection between the foreign and domestic policy space, reflected in the increasingly cross-border nature of opportunities and threats highlighted in the important government reports on national security, defence, and intelligence released in 2023.[256]

New Zealand's universities continue to offer a deep well of resource in supporting this 'whole of government' response.

BOTH GENERAL AND specialist knowledge on Asia-related topics and non-Asia related technical fields is available to the New Zealand government, which will simultaneously profit from investment, creating a virtuous cycle. This point applies to the Southeast Asian security issues discussed in this report, and in the closely connected area of Northeast Asian security. It also applies to expertise in the regional economies, languages, and domestic political systems in the Indo-Pacific. Relatedly, a concerted effort should also be made to offer greater opportunities for Southeast Asian students to study in New Zealand universities through the provision of scholarships to regional governments. In the first instance, this will ideally take the form of postgraduate study. Equally, there is scope for New Zealand students to study in Southeast Asian countries, which warrant further exploration from policymakers and institutions.

Conclusion

The question of how to interpret the Southeast Asian experience since ASEAN's formation in 1967 is a contested one.

TWO PERSPECTIVES HAVE been central in the evolution of the scholarship on ASEAN.[257] In one interpretation, the Southeast Asian states represent an "aspirant security community"[258] and a model for transcending inter-state rivalry through co-operative security and conflict resolution.[259]

An alternative view highlights the critical role of external powers in ASEAN's development. On this point, and reflecting on ASEAN's role in regional security, the late Michael Leifer observed that as ASEAN's post-Cold War era diplomatic role has expanded, "the balance of power is alive and well in Southeast Asia".[260] In an important respect, these perspectives represent two sides of the same coin and are not necessarily contradictory. But the tensions between the two interpretations are minimised at the cost of a severe misunderstanding of regional dynamics.

This report has sought to demonstrate the centrality of the polices of extra-regional powers in influencing the Southeast Asian region's complex security environment. Varying levels of state agency have been explored.[261] While the US and China are clearly the most influential in shaping the trajectory of Southeast Asia's international politics, as outlined in this report, in various distinct ways, Japan, Australia, Russia, and the United Kingdom play important and specific roles in regional affairs. This reality has led researcher Thomas Parks to make the case that Southeast Asia's future is best understood as being significantly influenced by external powers in their role as participants in an emerging regional multipolarity.[262] That said, Southeast Asia's future is not necessarily one of reduced agency. Far from it. The ASEAN states' agency is a variable. Through considered policies, there may actually be increased state agency on the part of some Southeast Asian states. Conversely, states that do not succeed in exercising effective agency will find themselves making decisions they would otherwise not wish to make. As one regional diplomat has argued, "to be forced to choose is to have failed".[263] This statement captures the ASEAN states' core challenge as they move forward. It is also the core lesson that New Zealand can learn from the Southeast Asian region at the present time.

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Endnotes

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