Looking Back on ASEAN and Sino-US Rivalry in the Cold War

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In discussions of the current Sino-US rivalry, talk of China eclipsing America as the world's foremost power is popular. Analysts seeking signs of US decline can certainly muster suitable evidence with which to argue this case. Indeed, the expectations of many observers that China's economy must ultimately overtake America's have been met with new projections that that moment will arrive within this decade. Furthermore, I have pointed out that it must have been easy to perceive US weakness and desperation in recent years when the Trump administration intermittently made naval and rhetorical challenges to Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea. Certainly, in Southeast Asia, a major theatre of Sino-US competition for influence, trade and security ties, there are serious concerns over which of the two powers will end up predominant in regional affairs. A survey of Southeast Asia's policymakers, businesspeople, journalists and pundits released in early 2020 by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute of Singapore underscored that elite regional opinion was increasingly convinced China wielded the 'biggest clout' in Southeast Asia, a view accompanied by sagging confidence in America as a strategic partner of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

America and its Southeast Asian allies faced a similar, though not identical, challenge in the Cold War. In some respects, the situation in the past was more dire. My recent book,*Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Cornell), shows that by the late 1960s ASEAN allies' doubts about US power and commitment to the region had spiked. America's vaunted war machine had continually failed to rout the communist forces of Vietnam and, more importantly, US President Richard Nixon had declared in 1969 while in Guam that he planned to withdraw US forces from Vietnam as well as have America's nontreaty allies take responsibility for defending themselves militarily. Put another way, the contemplation of US decline and retreat from Asia had seemingly progressed beyond mere talk into reality.

As I have noted in my earlier writing, most retellings of how US-ASEAN relations proceeded thereafter contend that Nixon's pursuit of détente with China both halted the slide of America's influence and blindsided the US-friendly, anticommunist ASEAN states that had supported US military intervention in Vietnam as part of the broader American containment of China's regional ambitions. Per this popular and scholarly narrative, when Nixon announced in 1971 that he would visit China and thaw the frosty Cold War relations between the US and the People's Republic, shocked ASEAN elites had little choice but to dilute their anticommunist stances and grudgingly make nice with Beijing despite years of distrusting China and its Southeast Asian diaspora.

ASEAN and the Containment of China

Though widely held, the abovementioned take on US-ASEAN relations from the late 1960s through early 1970s is misleading at best. The research I conducted for *Arc of Containment* reveals that the agency of ASEAN statesmen—in particular the influence they exerted upon Sino-US relations—was considerable, even profound. Not only did the anticommunist elites of ASEAN contribute to the susceptibility of Beijing to Nixon's overtures, but they also shaped the salient principles of Sino-US détente. Far from being bystanders to Nixon's diplomatic flourishes, ASEAN leaders played critical roles in this momentous turn of the Cold War. Our understanding of US and Chinese competition in Cold War Southeast Asia remains incomplete without a careful study of the smaller regional actors

who, regrettably, have been marginalized by the outsize attention that scholars, journalists and pundits shower upon the agendas and actions of big powers.

It is worth noting that the ASEAN statesmen of the 1960s had come of age in the mid-twentieth century, an era of rapid and titanic shifts in world politics and the regional order of Southeast Asia. In the initial stages of the Pacific War, Imperial Japan completely overturned the colonial system by casting the seemingly invincible western powers out of Southeast Asia. After 1945, decolonization and revolutionary nationalism gripped the wider region, a tumult of some two decades during which almost all the former colonies in Southeast Asia rose to national independence of varying degrees, often through internal power struggles intertwined with the global Cold War. Having witnessed all these, how could the ASEAN elites—the leaders of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand—not have drawn their own conclusions about how to stabilize their regimes and the region while also preparing for future disruptions?

For better or worse, it seems that one lesson these ASEAN leaders took away from their experiences was to cast their lot with a powerful new patron. This patron should be one that readily endorsed their conservative regimes, furnished their governments with the resources to crush the homegrown revolutionary factions which had been inspired and aided by China and the USSR, and committed to restraining any expansionist moves that the communist powers themselves undertook in Southeast Asia. That patron should have of course the capacity to support Southeast Asia's economic growth. Unsurprisingly, that patron of choice was the ascendant United States, the richest nation and most formidable military power in the world.

From the end of World War Two through the mid-1960s, the states which would eventually establish ASEAN in 1967 quite conspicuously strove to deepen their ties with the United States, and often they did so with an eye on trying to inoculate their regimes against China and its brand of revolutionary communism. Thailand's military leaders, concerned about the threat that communist China represented, adopted a decidedly anticommunist, pro-US foreign policy in 1950, supporting US efforts in Korea and Vietnam, and benefiting from the economic and military aid that America offered to reinforce its reliable Thai ally. Between the late 1950s and mid-1960s, Malaya and Singapore would move in the same direction, maneuvering into the US orbit, away from their British patron as London's influence declined in Asia. Their motives were similar to that of the Thai elites, both having emerged from violent struggles against Chinese-influenced communist forces. Indonesia, once the rightwing military had seized power in 1965, gravitated toward America, too. Jakarta, now deeply suspicious of China's foreign policy and designs on Southeast Asia, broke its diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1967 and sent Chinese diplomats packing. To be clear, in the case of the Philippines, the legacy of US colonialism already meant that Manila would maintain an intimate relationship with Washington even after independence, enabling America to project its presence into Asia from US military bases in the Philippines. US support would prove somewhat helpful to the Philippines' successful defeat of the communist Hukbalahap rebellion in the 1950s, but far more important to entrenching the power of west-friendly elites in Philippine politics for decades to come.

Beyond Vietnam, then, the Southeast Asian regimes that presided over the majority of the region's peoples and resources were on a decidedly pro-US trajectory by the time that President Lyndon Johnson Americanized the Vietnam conflict. In fact, these regimes formed what I have described as an 'arc of containment' that encircled both Vietnam and China, substantially limiting Beijing's tilt toward supporting worldwide revolution in the 1960s. As I show in my article, 'A Wide Anticommunist Arc,' Nixon already recognized this in 1967 while preparing to run for the presidency. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* that same year, he argued that 'all around the rim of China,' the pro-West nations of Southeast Asia resembled a geostrategic arc that connected 'Japan to India,' was anchored by Australia and New Zealand, and 'linked by the sea' to America. He contended this arc would eventually 'become so strong' that Beijing would see it had been effectively contained and, thereby, seek 'dialogue' with Washington to avoid further isolation from world affairs. This vision would directly inform his pursuit of détente with China, a maneuver he executed not from a position of weakness as most scholars have assumed but de facto American hegemony in Southeast Asia, thanks to the pro-US ASEAN states.

As Nixon assumed, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai was indeed cognizant of Beijing's strategic disadvantages in the region vis-à-vis the United States. He recognized that China faced longstanding distrust from the ASEAN elites, most

of whom hailed from the indigenous communities of each country. Furthermore, the ASEAN states had also integrated themselves into a sprawling web of Asia Pacific security networks with anticommunist states such as South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Little wonder then, that US intelligence learned of Zhou openly acknowledging in 1969 that China was 'encircled… and isolated on most key policy issues.' For not only did China confront an escalating rivalry with the Soviet Union, but also found its influence in Southeast Asia largely confined within Indochina by the US and its ASEAN allies. Zhou even admitted later to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that the institutions for containing China in 'Southeast Asia are more numerous than in any other area in the world.' Thus, as historian Arne Westad has noted, Nixon's overtures to Beijing were a 'true godsend' for a big power with little to show after decades of courting the ill-fated communist factions of Southeast Asia. Chinese leaders concluded that détente with America might at least confer Beijing the appearance of a world power roughly equal to the United States, even if the reality was far from it. It bears repeating that the ASEAN states had been critical to this state of affairs.

The ASEAN Neutralization Plan and Sino-US Détente

It is no small irony that ASEAN leaders apparently failed to recognize how their pro-US, anticommunist policies had fortified American predominance and severely undermined China's strategic position in the region. Or, after experiencing decades of rapid and drastic changes to the regional order, they were simply conditioned to always anticipate instability and formulate alternative schemes. At any rate, even before Nixon's pronouncements in Guam, ASEAN leaders began doubting that Washington had the stomach to see its campaign against Vietnam's communists to its bitter end. And, pondering Southeast Asia's post-American future, they expected that the Chinese and the Soviets would eagerly fill the power vacuum and compete for dominance by pressing Southeast Asians into bloody proxy struggles. To be sure, the ASEAN leaders did keep trying to persuade their US ally to remain committed to the region from the mid- to late-1960s. However, a number also made contingency plans. The Malaysian plan to neutralize Southeast Asia as a theatre for the Cold War conflict, titled the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), was of special significance.

The ZOPFAN proposal was to have the three major powers, the US, China and the USSR, guarantee the 'neutralization not only of the Indochina area but also the entire region of Southeast Asia.' For almost two years before all ASEAN leaders officially signed the proposal in November 1971, Malaysian statesmen relentlessly advocated for the principles of ZOPFAN at summits of the nonaligned nations, meetings of the Commonwealth Heads of Government, as well as sessions of the United Nations General Assembly. And even though the leaders of other ASEAN nations viewed ZOPFAN with some skepticism, groused about the ambiguity of what neutralization meant, most (save the Indonesians) actually opened channels to Beijing to discuss the tenets of the Malaysian plan.

In fact, US records of the Kissinger-Zhou discussions in 1972 reveal that, according to Zhou, ASEAN leaders had proposed that Southeast Asia 'embark on a road of neutrality' to Beijing, and well ahead of Nixon's visit at that. Importantly, the ZOPFAN plan seems to have captured Zhou's imagination—he welcomed it as an unexpected concession from America's allies. From a position of strength that they may not have fully appreciated, ASEAN leaders had in effect offered China a way to endure being contained without being completely isolated from world affairs. At base, Zhou saw in ZOPFAN a minor boost to China's status. It implied that America would recognize China as a worthy guarantor of Southeast Asian neutrality, as an equal superpower. Appearances mattered most when the truth was inconvenient. Thus, in the Nixon-Zhou talks of February 1972, Zhou strove to insert the tenets of ZOPFAN into the foundations of Sino-US détente, into the Shanghai Communique.

My analysis of these historic discussions shows that Zhou borrowed phrases from ZOPFAN repeatedly, expressing his fervor for neutralizing Southeast Asia until Nixon finally responded that he, too, 'would accept the idea [Zhou] referred to as a neutralized area' so long as China upheld the 'deal' in concert with the United States. In a follow-up discussion between the two leaders, Zhou stated that the US and China must together support the Southeast Asian attempts to 'bring about an area of peace and neutrality,' the very essence of ZOPFAN, and Nixon agreed. Zhou then insisted that this goal must feature in the most prominent declaration of the joint communique, to which Nixon assented. At this point, Zhou proceeded to read aloud from a section of the draft communique that he intended to intertwine with ZOPFAN's neutralization principles: 'neither [China nor the US] should seek hegemony in the Asia-

Pacific region' and both must oppose others that attempted to 'establish such hegemony.' In effect, ASEAN's actions and agenda had profoundly shaped international history during the Cold War, influencing the direct dealings of the big powers. Once Sino-US détente was off and rolling, the path was clear for the next phases of Nixon's triangular diplomacy: rapprochement with a USSR now outflanked by the nascent amity between China and the US.

A Lesson from ASEAN's Cold War Past

The impact of ASEAN Cold War diplomacy, when ASEAN states were newly independent, still finding their feet economically and politically, was undeniably significant. Today, ASEAN countries again have front row seats to the Sino-US rivalry, though perhaps their say in regional affairs has now increased. True, much has changed since the 1970s, not least the expansion of China's politico-military and economic heft. Yet, US-Southeast Asia relations in terms of political and security cooperation as well as trade links have only deepened across four decades. Not that Beijing has neglected to cultivate similar networks and joint security exercises with the ASEAN nations. But, even so, the newest ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey, released in February 2021, registers a massive uptick in ASEAN elites' confidence in the US as a 'strategic partner and provider of regional security,' perhaps expecting that the Biden administration will 'elevate American engagement of the region.'

Crucially, the survey underscores that ASEAN policymakers, businesspeople and journalists view China's strategic clout with 'considerable anxiety' and an upward trending 'trust deficit.' After all, what do China's artificial islands in the South China Sea, armed to the teeth, really symbolize? Are they proof of Beijing's irresistible strength, its imminent predominance in the region at the expense of America? Or are they manifestations of China's lasting unpopularity as a potential regional power in Southeast Asia (indeed, ASEAN elites actually prefer Japan, a former colonizer)? Are they, in effect, indications that Chinese charm offensives have fallen flat with most ASEAN elites, that Beijing has had to resort to crass saber-rattling because there is no ready welcome mat? It is certainly debatable. And none of this is to say definitively that China will not eventually eclipse America in Southeast Asia, nor that ASEAN states will not at some point change their tune. Rather, our lesson from ASEAN's past—a history driven in sizable measure by Southeast Asians—should be that the Southeast Asians above all must and will decide their own future.

About the author:

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