



The Pluralization and Diversification of Security Cooperation

Variations of Hedging among Southeast Asian States

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Chapter 6

Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Defense Ministers' Meeting (Photo: Kyodo News)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

ASEAN was founded during the Cold War with the aim of ensuring regional security, and it pursued neutrality as a means of managing the influence of extra-regional great powers. In the post-Cold War period, ASEAN incorporated major external powers into multilateral cooperation frameworks and established its centrality. As U.S.-China rivalry has intensified, however, the function of institutional hedging has weakened, and Southeast Asian states have responded by pluralizing and diversifying their security cooperation. The Philippines has placed its alliances at the core, while Vietnam and Indonesia have anchored their approaches in non-alignment. Cambodia and Malaysia, for their part, have sought to calibrate their distance from the United States and China. These varied responses reflect not only external factors such as the presence or absence of an alliance, geopolitical considerations, and the historical trajectory of relations with China, but also domestic factors, including leaders' worldviews and public sentiment.

Introduction

Great-power competition centered on U.S.-China rivalry has intensified, drawing states across the world into a contestation that extends beyond the military domain to trade, strategic resources, advanced technology, and a wide range of other fields. The states of Southeast Asia find themselves in the eye of this storm. The region carries multifaceted significance for both the United States and China. Viewed as a whole through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), for example, ASEAN and China are each other's largest trading partners, and their economic relationship is deep and continues to deepen year by year. From a security standpoint, mainland Southeast Asia borders southern China, and the region encompasses sea areas of vital importance to China, including the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca. The United States, for its part, is the largest investor in ASEAN and holds substantial economic interests in the region. Strategically, securing this region, which lies at the junction of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, is indispensable to the operations of U.S. forces, particularly the Navy.

Because the region matters so greatly to both powers, Southeast Asia has become the target of a "scramble for influence." Faced with assertive overtures from both great powers, Southeast Asian states have skillfully avoided being forced into a binary choice between Washington and Beijing, instead pursuing cooperative relations with each: economic cooperation with China, and security cooperation with the United States.

This pattern of compartmentalized, selective cooperation has, however, become increasingly difficult to sustain. As U.S.-China rivalry takes on an increasingly structural character, both sides have intensified their efforts to draw Southeast Asian states into their respective camps, leaving less room for the decoupling of cooperative tracks. As great-power competition has sharpened, the multilateralism-centered regional security system that ASEAN constructed precisely to avoid binary choices has fallen into dysfunction.

The advent of the second Donald Trump administration has further complicated the picture. With the emergence of a United States that downplays multilateralism and presses every state, including small ones, into bilateral deals, the strategic environment surrounding Southeast Asian countries has grown more opaque, and their strategic calculations have become correspondingly more complex. The ideological and regime-based dimensions of great-power competition have faded, while uncertainty and fluidity in the balance of power have grown. The United States, long regarded

as the steward of an international order grounded in liberal values and the rule of law, has under the Trump administration introduced tariff policies that seemingly repudiate the free trade regime, while China, conversely, has positioned itself as a defender of the World Trade Organization (WTO) system. The boundaries of ideology and political values are dissolving. Amid this turbulence, how are the states of Southeast Asia navigating the path to secure their survival and prosperity? This chapter focuses on the pluralization and diversification of security cooperation to examine the survival strategies of Southeast Asian states under conditions of great-power competition.

A useful concept for explaining the behavior of Southeast Asian states amid great-power competition is hedging. Hedging refers to a state's pursuit, under conditions of high uncertainty and risk, of multiple policy options designed to produce mutually offsetting effects, thereby reducing those uncertainties and risks.¹ Much of the existing scholarship that applies the concept of hedging to Southeast Asia has focused on the diversification of external relations, especially with the United States and China, and on how regional states pursue diplomatic balance.² While drawing on the insights refined through this body of work, this chapter directs attention not only to external partners but also to the diversity of forms of cooperation. By treating the pluralization and diversification of Southeast Asian states' security cooperation as variations of hedging, the chapter seeks to develop an integrated understanding of the diversity among these states.

Section 1 traces the historical evolution of Southeast Asian states' behavior in the context of great-power competition, from the establishment of ASEAN during the Cold War to the rise of multilateralism in the post-Cold War period. Section 2 describes how the intensification and structuralization of U.S.-China rivalry has gradually rendered ASEAN's security system dysfunctional. Section 3 then examines the hedging postures that Southeast Asian states have adopted in response to great-power competition, organizing them into three variations.

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- 1) Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (August 2008): 163.
 - 2) See, for example, Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States' Alignment Behavior towards China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 500-514; Jürgen Haacke, "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 375-417.

1. ASEAN as an Apparatus for Maintaining Security: From Neutrality to Centrality³

(1) The Pursuit of Neutrality: The Cold War Era

In August 1967, the foreign ministers of five countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—gathered in Bangkok and proclaimed the establishment of ASEAN. Their motivation for pursuing regional cooperation lay in the need for regional stability, which would enable each state to focus on nation-building after independence.

In the early 1960s, the newly independent states of maritime Southeast Asia harbored sources of friction among themselves. Malaysia stood at the center of these tensions: Indonesia adopted a policy of *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) against the country, while the Philippines asserted a claim to Sabah on the island of Borneo. Singapore, then part of Malaysia, was at odds with Kuala Lumpur over the latter's vision of a Malay-centered state.

In 1965, a series of historical contingencies swept these issues away. In Indonesia, power passed from Sukarno to Suharto in the wake of the September 30 Movement; in the Philippines, a presidential election produced a change of administration; and Singapore separated from Malaysia. These states sought to overcome their interstate disputes and to secure the stable environment each needed to concentrate on nation-building and economic development. Combined with energetic mediation diplomacy by Thailand, the five countries reached agreement on the establishment of a new regional cooperation organization. The original motivation for ASEAN's establishment, in short, was regional security.

Yet at the time, achieving regional security in Southeast Asia through region-level cooperation alone was difficult. The region's security had a three-tier structure of external, regional, and domestic, with significant interaction among the three layers. Externally, the Cold War had erupted into a "hot war" on Vietnamese soil. U.S. military bases were located in the Philippines and Thailand, both of which supported U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, and the flames of the Vietnam War were reaching the very edges of ASEAN. Each member government also faced communist guerrilla threats at home and harbored particularly strong wariness of Mao Zedong's China, which advocated support for revolutionary movements across Asia.

3) This chapter is a substantially revised and expanded version of Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN no anzen hoshō: Churitsusei kara chushinsei e" [Security of ASEAN: From Neutrality to Centrality], *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security & Strategy] 3, no. 2 (March 2023): 105-121.

For these reasons, ASEAN's security required controlling the influence of extra-regional powers and securing regional autonomy. As a means of managing external influence, the idea of non-alignment exerted considerable influence on Southeast Asia, and on Indonesia in particular. Indonesia advocated the concept of "national resilience": the notion that national security could be advanced through each state's establishment of its political system, promotion of economic development, and pursuit of social stability so as to weaken anti-regime elements. The logic extended outward: as each state strengthened its national resilience, "regional resilience" would be realized, enabling the region to repel interference by extra-regional powers. In this way, the concept linked the three levels of security—domestic, regional, and external.⁴ The ideas of Indonesia, a regional power, influenced other states, and a shared awareness of the problem emerged within ASEAN about how to reduce the influence of extra-regional powers.

While other member states broadly shared Indonesia's view, security cooperation with extra-regional great powers, including former colonial rulers, remained indispensable to their national security as a practical matter. The Philippines and Thailand maintained their alliances with the United States, while Malaysia and Singapore wished to continue their cooperation with the United Kingdom.⁵

For ASEAN, therefore, the means of achieving regional security was not military but political cooperation, and its form was not a military alliance but "collective political defense." Indonesia, after all, espoused non-alignment as a guiding principle, and the member states had only just emerged from severe interstate disputes. They lacked the mutual trust required to commit military forces against a third country, and as a practical matter their militaries remained weak.⁶ Security premised on military power would be realized through the alliances and cooperative arrangements that individual member states maintained with external powers; in this sense, ASEAN and the military cooperation networks that ran through both the region and beyond stood in a complementary relationship.

With respect to the threat of communism from outside the region, foregrounding military cooperation centered on collective defense would have been excessively provocative toward the socialist bloc. The pursuit

4) Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia* (London: Routledge, 1989), 4-5.

5) Shaun Narine, *Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 14-15.

6) *Ibid.*, 15.

of regional security through loose political cooperation rested on the logic that one's own security was best advanced by avoiding undue provocation and by not arousing the wariness of others; this was, in effect, a strategy for avoiding the "security dilemma."⁷ In this way, ASEAN's security cooperation was demilitarized.

After ASEAN's founding, the external environment surrounding its members grew more demanding. First, the United States and the United Kingdom, which had backed ASEAN states' security through bilateral cooperation, both signaled their intention to reduce their military presence. In January 1968, the United Kingdom announced an acceleration of its withdrawal from East of Suez, including the removal of bases from Malaysia and Singapore. In July 1969, the United States announced the so-called Nixon Doctrine, declaring its intention to scale back its military presence in Southeast Asia, including withdrawal from Vietnam. China and the Soviet Union, sensing the vacuum of power left by U.S. and British retrenchment, signaled an intent to expand their influence in East Asia, including Southeast Asia.⁸

These external shifts compelled ASEAN to reconsider its security policy. Malaysia took the initiative, advocating a distinctly Southeast Asian conception of neutrality grounded in regional autonomy. The Malaysian proposal for the neutralization of Southeast Asia had a two-tier structure, regional and external. At the regional level, it called for agreement among regional states on principles such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, exclusion of the influence of extra-regional powers, and collective expression of will on important security issues. At the external level, it sought the agreement of extra-regional powers to treat Southeast Asia as a neutral region and to undertake the supervisory measures needed to guarantee that status.⁹

The Malaysian proposal initially encountered reservations from member states. Thailand and the Philippines, both U.S. allies, were reluctant; Singapore, with its complex relations with neighbors, regarded the engagement of external powers, including the United States, as essential. Indonesia, by contrast, was opposed to involvement by extra-regional powers

7) Kuroyanagi Yoneji, *ASEAN 35 nen no kiseki: "ASEAN Way" no koyo to genkai* [ASEAN's 35-year Path: Effectiveness and Limitations of the "ASEAN Way"] (Tokyo: Yushindo, 2003), 40-41.

8) Heiner Hänggi, *ASEAN and the ZOPFAN Concept*, Pacific Strategic Papers (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991), 12.

9) *Ibid.*, 14-15.

and resisted having Southeast Asia's neutrality guaranteed by them. The U.S.-China rapprochement symbolized by Nixon's visit to China, however, together with the transfer of the permanent seat on the UN Security Council from Taiwan to China, forced ASEAN to reconsider its response, particularly its policy toward China, and accelerated debate within ASEAN.¹⁰

In November 1971, a special meeting of the foreign ministers of the ASEAN states convened in Kuala Lumpur, where they issued the Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The ZOPFAN Declaration consisted of two strikingly concise points: that "Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand are determined to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, South East Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers"; and that "Southeast Asian countries should make concerted efforts to broaden the areas of cooperation which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship."¹¹

To make ZOPFAN effective, ASEAN sought to expand its geographic application. At the time the ZOPFAN Declaration was issued, there was no realistic prospect of obtaining the consent of extra-regional powers to treat Southeast Asia as a neutral zone. ASEAN therefore initially set its sights on North Vietnam, and later on a unified Vietnam (the Socialist Republic of Vietnam), and sought to win that country's agreement to the principles of ZOPFAN.¹²

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and its subsequent occupation, however, dispelled any atmosphere of cooperation and coexistence between ASEAN and Vietnam, and the two sides fell into severe rivalry throughout the 1980s. A "security complex" took shape in Southeast Asia, in which the structure of opposition between ASEAN and the Vietnamese "bloc" (Laos and the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia) became fixed, and ASEAN's security entered a strategic impasse.¹³

ASEAN applied diplomatic pressure through the United Nations, but Vietnam did not withdraw its forces in response. As the situation dragged on, differences emerged within ASEAN: Indonesia and Malaysia adopted a more conciliatory posture toward Vietnam, while Thailand and Singapore

10) Ibid., 15-16.

11) ASEAN, "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration," November 27, 1971.

12) Jürgen Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2003), 62.

13) Barry Buzan, "The Southeast Asian Security Complex," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 10, no. 1 (June 1988): 4.

maintained a hard line.¹⁴ What ultimately compelled Vietnam to withdraw was pressure from China and the Soviet Union. After Vietnam completed its withdrawal in September 1989, peace negotiations proceeded under the leadership of the UN Security Council, culminating in the Paris Peace Accords of October 1991. The Cambodia issue thus laid bare the limits of ASEAN's collective diplomatic capacity and of security pursued through political means alone. Yet the pursuit of neutrality throughout the Cold War became the seed from which centrality would later grow in the post-Cold War period.

(2) The Invention of Centrality: The Post-Cold War Era

The end of the Cold War brought ASEAN's enlargement and its transformation into "ASEAN equals Southeast Asia." It also fundamentally altered the strategic environment surrounding the organization, both within the region and beyond. The most significant factor of change was the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the accompanying decline in the U.S. military presence. During the Cold War, the United States had backed ASEAN's security with its own military power; in the early 1990s, however, against the backdrop of an intensifying base controversy in the Philippines, U.S. forces withdrew from that country. The withdrawal of U.S. forces created a power vacuum in the region, and ASEAN feared that China (and Japan) would expand to fill it. Indeed, China was accelerating its advance into the South China Sea during this period, and ASEAN's concerns were becoming reality.¹⁵

ASEAN was compelled to respond to a fluid strategic environment, particularly to the uncertainty arising from shifts in the balance of power among great powers. ASEAN exercised its own agency to construct a new regional order in the Asia-Pacific and to secure its own future security. The method it adopted was multilateralism. In July 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established as an outgrowth of the existing ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC). The ARF brought together major powers, including Japan, the United States, and China, around an ASEAN core, with the aim of improving the regional security environment through dialogue and cooperation.

14) Mely Caballero-Anthony, *Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 89-90.

15) Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture*, 71-72.

The ARF was the Asia-Pacific's first multilateral security cooperation framework and a mechanism of cooperative security. It was designed to focus on cooperation on non-traditional issues for the purpose of confidence-building, and to avoid rigid organization or institutionalization, so that regional states with diverse and at times conflicting strategic interests and security perceptions could participate broadly. The ARF was intended to complement, rather than replace, the U.S.-centered network of bilateral alliances, and was expected to mitigate the negative effects that unbridled balance-of-power competition among great powers would have on the regional security environment.¹⁶

The 2000s saw the establishment of further multilateral cooperation frameworks in rapid succession. The first was the East Asia Summit (EAS). The EAS was inaugurated as a venue in which the leaders of Asia-Pacific states could discuss issues facing the region, with the first meeting held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005. The initial sixteen participants comprised the ten ASEAN states plus Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand, with the United States and Russia formally joining in 2011. In the security domain, the EAS dealt primarily with non-traditional issues such as countering avian influenza, which was a salient concern at the time, and energy security.¹⁷

The next was the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), inaugurated in May 2006. The ADMM was established to enable ASEAN defense ministers to discuss regional security issues, share perceptions, and build confidence. It was conceived as a flexible and open framework, with the active engagement of ASEAN's dialogue partners and friendly states anticipated from the outset.¹⁸ As noted earlier, in ASEAN's early years, the lack of trust among member states had ruled out cooperation between their militaries. The fact that genuine cooperation among defense authorities finally began some 40 years after ASEAN's founding reflected the deepening of confidence among member states.

Building on the openness of the ADMM, the ADMM-Plus was launched in October 2010. Membership of the "Plus" was limited to ASEAN's

16) Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2014), 167-168.

17) Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN seiji anzen hosho kyodotai: Takokukan kyoryoku wakugumi no hatten to kadaï" [ASEAN Political Security Community: Development of Multilateral Cooperative Frameworks and Further Challenges], *Anzen Hosho Senryaku Kenkyu* [Security and Strategy] 2, no. 2 (March 2022): 129.

18) *Ibid.*, 130.

formal dialogue partners: Japan, the United States, China, the Republic of Korea, India, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand. One distinctive feature of the ADMM-Plus is its pursuit of practical security cooperation. At the inaugural meeting, the participating states agreed to establish Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) to conduct cooperation in five non-traditional fields: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR), Maritime Security, Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), Counter-Terrorism, and Military Medicine. Each EWG would be co-chaired by an ASEAN member state and a dialogue partner. The number of EWGs has since grown to seven, with the addition of demining and cybersecurity, and the groups conduct joint exercises and develop common standard operating procedures (SOPs).¹⁹

As ASEAN-centered multilateral frameworks were thus assembled in a layered fashion, the concept of ASEAN centrality took shape. Centrality, which began appearing in ASEAN's official documents from 2007, refers to ASEAN's role as the central actor within each multilateral framework and as the driving force behind their evolution in line with ASEAN norms. Concrete institutions and practices that anchor ASEAN's central role include the convention by which the ASEAN chair country hosts and chairs meetings of these multilateral frameworks, controlling the agenda and the conduct of discussion.²⁰

ASEAN centrality does not rest on the chair country mechanism alone; it also requires that major external powers respect ASEAN and engage actively with ASEAN-centered frameworks. Recognizing that external powers would find it difficult to take the lead individually in shaping the regional order in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN sought to play, in effect, a "glue" role, thereby making regional order formation possible.²¹ As the operation of multilateral frameworks based on ASEAN centrality became established practice, the very concept of centrality came to be accepted as a norm both within and beyond ASEAN.

During the Cold War, ASEAN had sought to exclude the influence of

19) Ibid., 130-133.

20) Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN no 'chushinsei': Iki-nai, iki-gai kankei no shiten kara" [ASEAN Centrality: From the Viewpoint of Intra-/Extra-regional Relations], *Boei Kenkyusho Kiyo* [NIDS Security Studies] 17, no. 1 (October 2014): 107-109.

21) Oba Mie, "ASEAN gaiko to ASEAN shokoku gaiko no aida: 'Chushinsei,' 'ittaisei' to Minamishinakai mondai" [Between ASEAN Diplomacy and the Diplomacy of ASEAN Member States: "Centrality," "Unity," and the South China Sea Issue], in *Higashi Ajia no katachi: Chitsujo keisei to togo wo meguru Nichi-Bei-Chu-ASEAN no kosa* [The Making of East Asia: Order, Integration and Stakeholders], ed. Oba Mie (Tokyo: Chikura Shobo, 2016), 28-29.

extra-regional powers as much as possible. In the post-Cold War era, that posture shifted to one of drawing out their engagement to the maximum extent. In this sense, the invention of centrality represented the realization of the recognition by extra-regional powers that ASEAN had sought through ZOPFAN, achieved only after the passage of time and within a strategic environment that had changed dramatically. ASEAN's neutrality, one might say, found a new mode of realization through multilateralism. Even as the era shifted from Cold War to post-Cold War, the basic form of ASEAN's security remained constant: the pursuit of regional autonomy through proper management of external relations centered on extra-regional powers, with political cooperation as the instrument for realizing it.

2. Drivers of Pluralization under Great-Power Competition

(1) Southeast Asian States' Hedging Strategies: The Two Levels of Hedging

From the latter half of the 2010s, great-power competition entered a phase of intensification and structuralization. One catalyst was the first Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy and the trade war it launched against China. In June 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released the "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," which adopted the slogan of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and explicitly defined China as a revisionist power.²²

One focal point of great-power competition was the South China Sea. After China's maritime expansion accelerated around 2010 and the territorial disputes over the South China Sea reignited, the United States took a strong strategic interest in the issue and maintained political engagement, treating the relevant waters as an area in which U.S. interests were at stake. China's reclamation and militarization of maritime features triggered rising military tensions between the two powers, and the Trump administration intensified freedom of navigation operations in these waters.²³

Confronted with intensifying great-power competition and with their

22) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," June 1, 2019, 3-4, 7.

23) Shoji Tomotaka, "'Minamishinakai no ryoyuken mondai' saiho: Beichu tairitsu no naka no Tonan Ajia" ["Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea" Revisited: Southeast Asia amid U.S.-China Rivalry], *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security and Strategy] 4, no. 2 (March 2024): 98.

region as one of its theaters, Southeast Asian states pursued hedging strategies on both multilateral and bilateral fronts. ASEAN's basic stance toward great-power competition was articulated in the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) of June 2019. In the AOIP, ASEAN declared its aim of "an Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation rather than rivalry" and its commitment to "remaining an honest broker within the strategic environment of competing interests," and positioned ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. As the platform for dialogue and implementation, it cited ASEAN's multilateral cooperation frameworks, particularly the EAS. On the South China Sea, the AOIP framed the issue as part of maritime cooperation more broadly, upholding freedom of navigation while emphasizing the cooperative dimension.²⁴

The approach articulated in the AOIP was one of "selective adaptation": refusing to lean toward either the United States or China, cooperating with whichever policies aligned with ASEAN's values and interests, and avoiding engagement with those that did not.²⁵ In other words, it constituted ASEAN's institutional hedging. Institutional hedging uses multilateral frameworks as a vehicle for collective action by multiple states to mitigate and offset broad, shared risks. Such frameworks therefore presuppose impartiality and inclusivity.²⁶ ASEAN incorporated all major external powers comprehensively into the EAS, the ADMM-Plus, and other multilateral frameworks, and sought to manage the balance of power between itself and external powers, as well as among external powers, through these frameworks.

At the level of individual states, however, the modes of hedging vary considerably. China is the largest trading partner for most ASEAN states, and its economic importance gives them all a common motivation to stabilize their relations with Beijing. At the same time, the assertive posture China displays in the South China Sea has generated serious concerns for the security of Southeast Asia as a whole.²⁷ Yet not all ASEAN members find

24) ASEAN, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," 1-5.

25) Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN to Beichu tairitsu: Yuragu chiiki chitsujo" [ASEAN and U.S.-China Rivalry: A Wavering Regional Order], in *Beichu tairitsu to kokusai chitsujo no yukue: Kosa suru sekai to chiiki* [U.S.-China Rivalry and the International Order: Intersecting Regional and Global Dynamics], eds. Igarashi Takayuki and Osawa Suguru (Tokyo: Toshindo, 2024), 45.

26) Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022): 363-364.

27) Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge?," 511.

vital interests at stake in the South China Sea; the depth of their concern varies. So too do their relations with the United States: while some states, such as the Philippines, are close treaty allies, others, such as Laos and Myanmar, have historically had thin or even tense relationships with Washington. As a result, the modes of hedging at the national level vary across ASEAN, and individual states' hedging postures are themselves variable, shifting with changes in domestic and external circumstances.

(2) The “Untrustworthy” China: Positive and Negative Effects on Southeast Asia

ASEAN sought to weather great-power competition through institutional hedging, but the great powers themselves are under no obligation to defer to ASEAN's preferences at every turn. China, intent on expanding its influence in Southeast Asia and consolidating its position there, has aggressively pushed both bilateral and multilateral approaches with economic cooperation as a lever.

The foundation of economic cooperation between ASEAN and China was a free trade agreement concluded in the early 2000s. In 2002, the two sides signed a “Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation,” which contained concrete measures including tariff reductions, and the effects were dramatic. Trade between the two expanded rapidly, growing at an average annual rate of nearly 30% from 2000 to 2008, with total trade volume increasing sixfold over that period. Since 2009, China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner.²⁸

The economic ties between ASEAN and China thus deepened rapidly during the 2000s, and this trend accelerated further in the 2010s. At the heart of this development was China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI's emphasis on infrastructure assistance to Southeast Asian states reflected not only economic objectives such as the stable supply of energy and resources, but also the aim of enhancing China's political influence in recipient countries through economic cooperation, ultimately tilting Southeast Asia as a whole in a “pro-China” direction. Eager for infrastructure financing, ASEAN states responded actively to Chinese overtures. In November 2019, ASEAN and China issued a “Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” with ASEAN as a

28) Shoji, “ASEAN to Beichu tairitsu,” 36-37.

body lending its formal endorsement to the BRI.²⁹

The BRI is, fundamentally, a collection of bilateral projects between China and individual countries. Southeast Asian states have planned, executed, and completed a long succession of infrastructure development projects with China. Such large-scale development carries political as well as economic significance: economic growth driven by major development projects is widely seen as enhancing the political legitimacy of the authoritarian rulers of Southeast Asian states.³⁰ Chinese investment is unevenly distributed across Southeast Asia, depending largely on the disposition of national leaders, with particularly high project concentrations in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia. These countries have formed especially close relationships with China through the BRI.

The COVID-19 pandemic further strengthened the economic ties between ASEAN and China. ASEAN needed Chinese support to recover from the economic damage of the pandemic, while China sought ASEAN as an ally in breaking through Western “containment.” China had been ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009; in 2020, ASEAN replaced the European Union (EU) to become China’s largest trading partner as well. China had long been an important economic partner for ASEAN; in recent years, however, the economic importance of ASEAN to China has likewise grown.³¹

If economic cooperation has been a positive factor in ASEAN’s relations with China, the South China Sea is the negative one. The roots of the disputes between ASEAN states and China over sovereignty in the South China Sea go back to the Cold War era, but the issue had quieted for a time during the 2000s. From around 2010, however, China resumed its active maritime expansion, and its posture toward ASEAN claimant states became more assertive and provocative. Today, against the backdrop of U.S.-China rivalry, the issue has expanded and grown more complex.

In dealing with the South China Sea issue, or more accurately, in dealing with China over that issue, ASEAN has consistently pursued a Code of Conduct (COC). Its aim has been to conclude a COC with China that would prevent escalation and provide for proper management of incidents when they occur. China, however, reluctant to be bound by legally constraining rules, has repeatedly delayed negotiations. ASEAN itself has also struggled

29) *Ibid.*, 37.

30) *Ibid.*, 38.

31) *Ibid.*, 39.

to reach agreement on the geographic scope of the code, and consultations have therefore tended to stagnate.³²

In the meantime, China has primarily relied on its economic clout to strengthen bilateral leverage, working to ensure that ASEAN does not coalesce as a unified front against it. In 2012, for example, when Cambodia held the ASEAN chair, China stepped up its economic assistance to Phnom Penh and pressured it to ensure that ASEAN would not adopt a position critical of China on the South China Sea. The strategy succeeded. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July of that year became deadlocked over the issue, and ASEAN failed for the first time in its history to issue a joint communiqué.³³ When Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia have held the chair, ASEAN's posture has likewise been conciliatory. China has also disrupted ASEAN by asserting the existence of agreements that did not in fact exist, such as a purported understanding with ASEAN not to internationalize the South China Sea issue.³⁴

In Southeast Asia, China has strengthened its influence in economic terms, while in security it has avoided directly engaging the demands of regional states, instead seeking to use political maneuvering to shape circumstances to its advantage. This conduct has produced a complex image of China in Southeast Asia. A 2025 opinion survey released by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore found that in response to the question, “In your view, which country/regional organisation is the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia?” 56% of respondents named China as the most economically influential actor in Southeast Asia (against 15% for the United States), while 38% identified China as the most politically and strategically influential actor (against 31% for the United States).³⁵ Across political, economic, and security dimensions, Southeast Asian states currently perceive China as exerting the greatest influence over them.

At the same time, concerns about China's regional rise are deeply rooted. In the same survey, 62% of respondents expressed concern about

32) Shoji Tomotaka, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu: Chuetsu funso kara takokukan tairitsu e* [Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Approaches of ASEAN, Vietnam, and the Philippines] (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai [The University of Nagoya Press], 2022), 235.

33) *Ibid.*, 173.

34) Donald K. Emmerson, “The Deer and the Dragon: Asymmetry Versus Autonomy,” in *The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*, ed. Donald K. Emmerson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 15.

35) ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, “The State of Southeast Asia 2025: Survey Report,” April 3, 2025, 32-35.

the expansion of China's economic influence, and 69% expressed concern in the political and strategic domains. Asked whether they trust China, 37% responded "trust" and 41% responded "distrust."³⁶ Closely tied to China though Southeast Asia is, it has not fully come to trust China.

(3) The "Unreliable" United States: A Diminishing Presence in Southeast Asia

To hedge against a rising China, ASEAN has placed considerable importance on strengthening relations with the United States. As the survey cited above indicates, while ASEAN acknowledges China's overwhelming influence over the region, it does not necessarily want a Chinese-dominated regional order. Particularly in the security domain, ASEAN regards U.S. engagement as the only effective counterweight to China's expanding military presence, centered on the South China Sea.

The United States, however, is "unreliable."³⁷ U.S. policy toward ASEAN shifts dramatically with each administration in terms of policy priorities and approach, including the basic question of how much the administration values relations with Southeast Asia in the first place. ASEAN has found itself buffeted by these wide swings, in stark contrast to China, which has consistently strengthened its relations with ASEAN on a foundation of economic cooperation and steadily expanded its regional influence.³⁸

Many of the ASEAN-related policies pursued by the first Trump administration were the opposite of what ASEAN states had hoped for. President Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) shortly after taking office, making clear that he had no intention of engaging with multilateral economic frameworks. He also showed no interest in ASEAN multilateralism, never once attending the EAS, and adopted a posture of confrontation with China. While the United States' role in checking a rising China was reassuring to ASEAN in some respects, the overheated rivalry epitomized by the trade war destabilized ASEAN's positioning and heightened anxieties that the region might be forced into a binary choice between the United States and China.³⁹

When the Joe Biden administration took office in January 2021,

36) Ibid., 58.

37) Amitav Acharya, *ASEAN and Regional Order: Revisiting Security Community in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), 80.

38) Shoji, "ASEAN to Beichu tairitsu," 41.

39) Ibid., 42-43.

ASEAN recalled the “honeymoon” it had enjoyed with the United States under Barack Obama and developed high expectations for President Biden’s policies. The Obama administration had emphasized ASEAN multilateralism and had taken the lead on multilateral economic linkages through the TPP, and similar hopes were attached to Biden, who had served as Obama’s vice president.

The Biden administration initially met those expectations. The *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, released in February 2022, expressed support for ASEAN multilateralism and centrality and explicitly affirmed the strengthening of U.S.-ASEAN cooperation. In May of that year, a U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit was held in Washington, marking the second time that ASEAN leaders had been invited to the United States for a face-to-face meeting since the summit hosted by President Obama in February 2016. The two sides agreed to cooperate on a range of issues, including maritime security, COVID-19 response, economic cooperation and connectivity, people-to-people exchanges, science and technology, and climate change. ASEAN welcomed this comprehensive cooperation, which was not narrowly confined to security.⁴⁰

The Biden administration’s policies, however, gradually drifted from ASEAN’s expectations. In its later phase, the administration shifted away from ASEAN multilateralism and began clearly emphasizing the strengthening of bilateral relations with individual Southeast Asian states, with an eye toward checking China. The most symbolic example came in September 2023, when, on his return from India after attending the G20, President Biden visited Vietnam rather than Indonesia, where the EAS was being held. During that visit, the United States and Vietnam upgraded their bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership.⁴¹ Against the backdrop of the structuralization of U.S.-China rivalry, U.S. policy toward China no longer shifted substantially across Republican and Democratic administrations. The emphasis was on strongly checking China in security and economic terms, and in Southeast Asia this orientation manifested as the strengthening of bilateral cooperation with countries seen as important from the standpoint of countering China.

Then, in January 2025, the second Trump administration took office.

40) Ibid., 43.

41) [U.S.] White House, “Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” September 10, 2023.

As Southeast Asian states (and indeed the wider world) had feared, the administration vigorously advanced its “America First” policies, and in April announced steep tariffs on a range of countries, including those in Southeast Asia. On the security front, the administration sought to lighten the U.S. burden and demanded that allies and partners shoulder more. At the 22nd IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) in 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth observed pointedly that, in the face of these threats, many countries were tempted by the idea of seeking both economic cooperation with China and defense cooperation with the United States, and warned Southeast Asian states that maintaining such a convenient posture would prove difficult.⁴²

(4) The Dysfunction of ASEAN Multilateralism

ASEAN multilateralism has been shaken by the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry and now faces a crisis of dysfunction. Within the multilateral frameworks, the cooperative atmosphere has dissipated and U.S.-China friction has become conspicuous. With the addition of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the major external powers have split into two groupings: Japan, the United States (and Europe) on one side, and China and Russia on the other. At the EAS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held in Cambodia in August 2022, exchanges of mutual recrimination over Ukraine and Taiwan continued throughout the proceedings.⁴³ ASEAN has continued to invite all external members, including Russia, in order to preserve inclusivity, but advancing cooperative discussions in these meetings has become increasingly difficult.

ASEAN’s room for maneuver on the South China Sea has likewise narrowed. Negotiations on the COC stalled sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online consultations made little headway, and even after in-person consultations resumed, progress has been limited. ASEAN and China have agreed on a single negotiating draft, and three readings of the draft have been completed thus far.⁴⁴ Yet there is no clear sense of how many further readings will be required, nor whether an effective code of conduct will emerge at the end of the process.

42) Pete Hegseth, “United States’ New Ambitions for Indo-Pacific Security,” First Plenary Session, 22nd Asia Security Summit, the Shangri-La Dialogue, May 31, 2025.

43) *Kyodo News*, August 6, 2022.

44) ASEAN, “Press Statement by the Chair of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Retreat,” January 19, 2025, 2.

3. Three Patterns of Pluralization and Diversification: An Alliance Anchor, a Non-Alignment Anchor, and Calibrating Distance from the United States and China

As discussed above, Southeast Asian states have responded to China's rise and the sharpening of U.S.-China rivalry through ASEAN's institutional (multilateral) hedging and through hedging at the level of individual states (bilateral). With ASEAN's institutional hedging gradually losing functionality, however, individual states have had no choice but to rely on the latter. They have therefore been compelled to strengthen national-level hedging, and as a result their security cooperation has become pluralized and diversified. The patterns vary with each country's circumstances. This section examines pluralization and diversification anchored in alliance, anchored in non-alignment, and centered on calibrating their distance from the United States and China.

(1) The Philippines: Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Alliance

The Philippines is advancing the pluralization and networking of security cooperation built on its alliance with the United States. The primary motivation for pluralization is the intensifying conflict with China in the South China Sea. Tensions between the Philippines and China have continued unabated since China's assertive posture in the South China Sea became pronounced around 2010, and in recent years the dispute over Second Thomas Shoal, west of Palawan, has grown particularly acute. The Philippines maintains the shoal under its administration and conducts regular resupply operations there with its navy and coast guard, but obstruction by the China Coast Guard has escalated. In February 2023, an incident occurred in which a China Coast Guard vessel directed a military-grade laser at a Philippine Coast Guard ship operating near the shoal.⁴⁵ Subsequent incidents have included dangerous close approaches against Philippine government vessels, the firing of water cannons, the gathering of large numbers of fishing boats believed to be maritime militia, the installation of floating barriers, and ramming by coast guard vessels.

In facing China in the South China Sea, the Philippines is supported by the United States. U.S. backing rests on the underlying alliance and on the

45) [Philippines] Department of Foreign Affairs, "PH Protests CN Coast Guard Use of Military-grade Laser, Dangerous Maneuvers against PCG near Ayungin," February 14, 2023.

gravity of the South China Sea issue, and is reinforced by tensions across the Taiwan Strait. For the United States, the geopolitical position of the Philippines, which faces the South China Sea and adjacent to Taiwan, is doubly strategic, and its importance is rising.

When President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. visited the United States in September 2022 to attend the UN General Assembly, a summit meeting with President Biden took place. At the meeting, President Biden reaffirmed the United States' ironclad commitment to the defense of the Philippines. The two leaders also reaffirmed the importance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance and emphasized their support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the peaceful resolution of disputes.⁴⁶

Under the leaders' agreement, U.S.-Philippines military cooperation advanced rapidly. At the defense ministers' meeting in February 2023, the U.S. side declared that the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines applies to Philippine armed forces, public vessels, and aircraft anywhere in the South China Sea. The two countries also resumed joint patrols in the South China Sea, and under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), they agreed to add four bases of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to the five sites previously available for U.S. forces' use.⁴⁷ Two of the four new sites are located in northern Luzon, facing Taiwan.

In April 2023, the third U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue was held for the first time in seven years, with the two countries agreeing to modernize the alliance, deepen interoperability, and accelerate capability development. In May, the Bilateral Defense Guidelines based on the 2+2 agreement were released.⁴⁸ Building on the agreement to strengthen information sharing contained in the guidelines, a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was concluded between the two countries in November 2024.⁴⁹

The Philippines has simultaneously strengthened cooperation with other

46) [U.S.] White House, "Readout of President Biden's Meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.," September 22, 2022.

47) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Meeting with Philippine Senior Undersecretary and Officer in Charge of the Department of Defense Carlito Galvez," February 2, 2023; "Philippines, U.S. Announce Four New EDCA Sites," February 1, 2023.

48) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Fact Sheet: U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," April 11, 2023; "Fact Sheet: U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines," May 3, 2023.

49) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Austin Caps Two-Day Visit to Philippines with Showcase of Growing Defense Cooperation," November 19, 2024.

U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia. In July 2024, it concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan, designed to facilitate the smooth conduct of joint exercises and improve interoperability between forces.⁵⁰ At the Japan-Philippines summit in April 2025, the two sides agreed to begin negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) to further strengthen operational cooperation and decided to consider an information protection agreement as well.⁵¹ With Australia, the two countries concluded a Strategic Partnership during Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's visit to the Philippines in September 2023, and agreed to hold annual defense ministers' meetings.⁵²

Underlying the Philippines' push to strengthen cooperation with Japan, the United States, and Australia is President Marcos's own active posture. Former President Rodrigo Duterte, by personal preference, did not seek cooperation with the United States, and U.S.-Philippines relations stagnated as a result. The personal disposition of the president carries strong influence in the Philippines' basic foreign and security policy, with the result that diplomatic and military cooperation can shift markedly from one administration to the next.⁵³ The swings are particularly large with respect to where the Philippines positions itself between the United States and China, and the Marcos administration's alignment with the United States and confrontation with China can be understood as a swing back from its predecessor. From another angle, public resentment of China's continuing harassment of the Philippines in the South China Sea also plays a role: President Marcos, attentive to public sentiment and seeking to consolidate domestic support, has maintained a firm stance toward China.

Building on the U.S. alliance network, the Philippines is pluralizing its security cooperation. In August 2023, for example, Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines conducted their first quadrilateral maritime exercise in the seas and airspace around Manila.⁵⁴ In April 2024, Australian forces participated in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise for the first time, with Japan participating as an observer; in 2025, the Self-Defense

50) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Signing of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement," July 8, 2024.

51) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan-Philippines Summit Meeting," April 29, 2025.

52) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership between the Republic of the Philippines and the Commonwealth of Australia," September 8, 2023.

53) Shoji, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu*, 230.

54) *USNI News*, August 27, 2023.

Forces participated in Balikatan in earnest, deploying equipment.⁵⁵

Pluralization is also advancing in the political domain. In April 2024, the first Japan-U.S.-Philippines summit was held in Washington, and the three countries agreed to further promote maritime security cooperation in a quadrilateral format including Australia.⁵⁶ In May, a Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines defense ministers' meeting was held in Hawaii, where they jointly expressed concern over Chinese interference with Philippine resupply operations at Second Thomas Shoal. In November, a five-country defense ministers' meeting was held with the addition of the Republic of Korea.⁵⁷

The Marcos administration has reaffirmed a firm alliance with the second Trump administration as well, and continues to pluralize cooperation built on the U.S.-Philippines alliance. When Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth visited the Philippines in March 2025, the two countries underscored the unshakable strength of the U.S.-Philippines alliance and reaffirmed its importance to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. They also reaffirmed that the Mutual Defense Treaty applies to armed attacks against the armed forces, aircraft, and public vessels (including Coast Guard vessels) of either country anywhere in the South China Sea.⁵⁸ In addition, the Marcos administration adeptly concluded its tariff negotiations under the Trump administration. As a capstone, when President



U.S.-Philippines summit (Photo: Daniel Torok/White House/Planet Pix via ZUMA Press Wire/Kyodo News Images)

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- 55) U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, "Philippines, U.S. Troops to Kick Off Exercise Balikatan 2024," April 17, 2024; [Japan] Joint Staff Office, "Bei-hi shusai takokukan kyodo kunren Balikatan 25 e no sanko ni tsuite" [Announcement: the U.S.-Philippines-led Multilateral Joint Exercise Balikatan 25], April 11, 2025.
 - 56) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States," April 11, 2024.
 - 57) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Joint Readout from Australia-Japan-Philippines-United States Defense Ministers' Meeting," May 3, 2024; "Joint Readout from Australia-Japan-Philippines-Republic of Korea-United States Defense Ministers' Meeting November 21, 2024," November 21, 2024.
 - 58) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "United States-Philippines Joint Statement on Secretary Hegseth's Inaugural Visit to the Philippines," March 28, 2025.

Marcos visited the United States in July, he secured President Trump's support for "President Marcos' freedom to act in the best interest of the Philippines."⁵⁹

(2) Vietnam and Indonesia: Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Non-Alignment

The core of Vietnam's security cooperation is non-alignment, but underpinning this posture is its overarching foreign policy of omnidirectional diplomacy. In the latter half of the 1980s, Vietnam launched the *Doi Moi* (renovation) policy, the central elements of which were the introduction of a market economy and integration into the international division of labor. To advance the latter goal, Vietnam shifted its diplomacy from an ideologically driven posture to a pragmatic one oriented toward economic development. Out of this shift came omnidirectional diplomacy, which since being formalized at the Seventh Party Congress in 1991 has been the basic principle of Vietnamese foreign policy.⁶⁰

In pursuing omnidirectional diplomacy, Vietnam has built on ASEAN as its foundation. Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995, and by being incorporated into ASEAN's multilateral mechanisms spanning politics, economics, and security, it was able to achieve economic development and to enhance its international standing and credibility, while at the same time placing its own security on a more secure footing. With respect to China in particular, ASEAN enabled Vietnam to deal with its giant northern neighbor not in a one-on-one encounter but through a framework involving the collective of Southeast Asian states.⁶¹

While actively engaging in ASEAN multilateralism, Vietnam has also vigorously pursued bilateral partnership diplomacy. Under this scheme, the highest tier of bilateral relations, aside from the "special relationships" with Laos and Cambodia, is the "comprehensive strategic partnership," followed by "strategic partnership" and "comprehensive partnership." Consistent

59) [Philippines] Presidential Communications Office, "Trump to PBBM: 'Make the Philippines Great Again,'" July 23, 2025.

60) Shoji Tomotaka, "Vietnam no 'take gaiko': Taikokukan kyoso de no seizon senryaku" [Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy": A Survival Strategy amid Great Power Competition], *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security and Strategy] 5, no. 2 (March 2025): 79.

61) Ralf Emmers and Huong Le Thu, "Vietnam and the Search for Security Leadership in ASEAN," *Asian Security* 17, no. 1 (2021): 67-69.

with the spirit of omnidirectional diplomacy, which seeks friendly and cooperative relations with all states, the diversification and broadening of partnerships through the conclusion of comprehensive strategic partnerships with as many countries as possible has become a driving force of Vietnamese diplomacy.⁶²

In the early years of *Doi Moi*, in tandem with the shift in basic foreign policy, Vietnam's view of security shifted from a narrowly military to a comprehensive conception. The comprehensive view rested on the recognition that military power alone could not effectively maintain or advance Vietnam's strategic interests, and that diplomatic, economic, and other instruments needed to be used in combination with military force in addressing security.⁶³ When confronted with security challenges, therefore, Vietnam came to mobilize military, diplomatic, and economic instruments together, prioritizing the peaceful resolution of issues.

Building on this premise, Vietnam has articulated the "four no's" policy, meaning no military alliances; no siding with one country against another; no foreign military bases and no using Vietnamese territory to oppose other countries; and no using force or threatening to use force in international relations.⁶⁴ These principles concisely express Vietnam's basic posture of non-alignment and peaceful resolution of disputes.⁶⁵

The South China Sea is the most important security issue for Vietnam, and in addressing it the country has pursued "omnidirectional security cooperation": the security analogue of omnidirectional diplomacy, which, anchored in non-alignment, strengthens security cooperation with diverse partners across multiple directions. While advancing cooperation with major partners such as the United States, Vietnam has at the same time cooperated with China where cooperation is possible.⁶⁶

The intensification and structuralization of U.S.-China rivalry, combined with the weakening of ASEAN's functions, has demanded ever finer balance from Vietnam in walking the tightrope between Washington and Beijing. Vietnam's strategic importance to both powers has grown: the United States

62) Shoji, "Vietnam no 'take gaiko,'" 80.

63) Nguyen Vu Tung, "Vietnam's New Concept of Security in the Context of *Doi-Moi*," in *Comprehensive Security in Asia: Views from Asia and the West on a Changing Security Environment*, ed. Kurt W. Radtke and Raymond Feddema (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 408.

64) Shoji, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu*, 243.

65) Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Alliance Politics in the South China Sea," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, no. 6 (2015), 5.

66) Shoji, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu*, 126-129.

regards Vietnam as a powerful potential partner for effectively checking China on the South China Sea issue, while China seeks to keep its neighbor within its sphere of influence rather than allow it to drift to the U.S. side. Vietnam's response is to advance security cooperation with the United States cautiously, maintaining export-driven economic relations with Washington, while clearly signaling that no other country occupies a more important place in its foreign relations than China.

Nowhere was this Vietnamese style more clearly on display than in the visits of President Biden and President Xi Jinping to Vietnam in 2023. When President Biden visited Vietnam in September of that year, the two countries announced that they had concluded a comprehensive strategic partnership. The agreement marked the tenth anniversary of the comprehensive partnership concluded in 2013, but it was an unusual two-tier upgrade that bypassed the strategic partnership level.⁶⁷

Three months after President Biden's visit, President Xi Jinping visited Vietnam in December 2023. The joint statement issued during Xi's official visit was titled "Joint Statement concerning Continued Deepening of the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership to Build a Vietnam-China Community with a Shared Future that Carries Strategic Significance," and on the fifteenth anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership concluded in 2008, Vietnam thus elevated its relationship with China by one further notch.⁶⁸ Immediately after upgrading its partnership with the United States, Vietnam upgraded its partnership with China to an even higher level, signaling that its relationship with China was paramount.

Against the backdrop of great-power competition with the United States, China is moving to draw Vietnam closer. China's pressure in the South China Sea has accordingly been concentrated on the Philippines, and recent incidents involving Vietnam in those waters have been comparatively few. Reading China's intent to bring it closer, Vietnam has pursued near-term stabilization of its relations with Beijing. China's restraint in pressuring Vietnam in the South China Sea, paired with Vietnam's accommodating conduct toward Beijing's preferences, has produced an equilibrium, expanding the room for Vietnam to deepen cooperation with China in the political and economic domains.

67) [U.S.] White House, "Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," September 10, 2023.

68) Shoji Tomotaka, "Vietnam's China Policy: Deference and Check," *International Information Network Analysis IIN4*, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, February 5, 2024.

In April 2025, President Trump announced his country-by-country tariff rates, and Vietnam was hit with a 46% rate. Vietnam responded immediately, dispatching a negotiating team headed by the Minister of Industry and Trade to Washington shortly after the announcement and conducting energetic negotiations. As a result, Vietnam became the second country after the United Kingdom to conclude a tariff agreement with the United States, securing a reduction of the rate to 20%.⁶⁹

In late April 2025, just after the announcement of the Trump tariffs, President Xi Jinping visited Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. As noted above, Xi had visited Vietnam only in December 2023, but in light of President Trump's unilateral imposition of high tariffs on Southeast Asian states, China moved to draw the region's countries, including Vietnam, closer. Regarding the top-level meeting with General Secretary Tô Lâm, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicized Xi's criticism of the Trump administration: that "as beneficiaries of economic globalization, both China and Viet Nam should strengthen strategic resolve, jointly oppose unilateral, bullying acts, uphold the global free trade system, and keep global industrial and supply chains stable." Vietnam's Communist Party organ *Nhan Dan*, however, did not report this remark by Xi. China sought to bring Vietnam into a coalition critical of the United States, but while maintaining a posture of cooperation with Beijing, Vietnam refrained from openly criticizing Washington.⁷⁰

While maintaining a delicate balance between the United States and China, Vietnam is advancing the multilateralization of its external relations as part of its hedging strategy. This dynamic is reflected in the dramatic expansion of countries with which Vietnam has concluded comprehensive strategic partnerships. Until 2020, Vietnam had concluded comprehensive strategic partnerships with only three countries: China, Russia, and India. Since then, it has added the Republic of Korea (2022); the United States and Japan (2023); Australia, France, and Malaysia (2024); and New Zealand, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the United Kingdom (2025). The number of countries occupying the highest tier of Vietnam's external relations has thus swelled to fourteen. As the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry renders Vietnam's external environment more uncertain, the country

69) Reuters, July 3, 2025.

70) Shoji Tomotaka, "Bei-chu tairitsu no naka no Tonan Ajia: Shu Kinpei kokka shuseki Tonan Ajia rekiho no imi" [Southeast Asia amid U.S.-China Rivalry: The Significance of President Xi Jinping's Southeast Asia Tour], *NIDS Commentary*, April 25, 2025.

is increasingly active in “taking out insurance” through external relations.

Like Vietnam, Indonesia advances the pluralization of its security cooperation on a foundation of non-alignment. Indonesia’s basic foreign policy is the “free and active” approach, with “free” carrying the meaning of non-alignment in particular.⁷¹ Indonesia’s non-alignment orientation is a tradition rooted in the country’s founding. The country’s vast territory and population, the comparable scale of its economy and abundance of resources, its overall national power, its equidistance from extra-regional great powers, and its geographic advantage of lying at the junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans together make this policy possible.

Non-alignment also implies, conversely, the building of equally cooperative relations with all major external powers. With the United States and China, as well as Japan, Australia, India, and Russia, Indonesia has been approached primarily by the other side and has advanced its relationships accordingly. Indonesia’s strong position in external relations enables it to compartmentalize its relationships with each country, deepening security relations primarily with the United States and economic relations primarily with China.⁷² The Prabowo Subianto administration, which took office in October 2024, has fundamentally inherited this approach. The president has set out a “good neighbor” policy that aims to build external relations contributing to Indonesia’s growing national power and development.⁷³

Indonesia’s non-alignment policy and diplomatic independence at times allow it to take approaches in foreign relations that do not align with U.S. preferences. Joining BRICS, and skipping the G7 summit in June 2025 to visit Russia for the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, where President Prabowo met with Vladimir Putin, are part of Indonesia’s broader hedging effort to strengthen ties with the China-Russia bloc, distance itself from the West, and rebalance its external relations. The Prabowo administration in particular places a high priority on strengthening relations with China; the president visited China both in April 2024, after his election and before taking office, and in November 2024 after assuming office, holding meetings with President Xi Jinping. He also attended the military parade held in China in September 2025, despite domestic turmoil at home.

Indonesia advanced the diversification of its economic partnerships in

71) Vibhanshu Shekhar, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: Rise of an Indo-Pacific Power* (London: Routledge, 2018), 2-3.

72) *Ibid.*, 215.

73) Adhi Priamarizki, “Prabowo’s Post-election Diplomacy: Domestic-driven International Activism,” Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) Paper, no. 84, October 15, 2024.

response to the Trump tariffs, including reaching political agreement on a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with the EU. This can be seen as a hedging move against the uncertainty produced by the Trump administration. Yet the U.S. economic relationship is critical to Indonesia in terms of investment and trade, and Indonesia conducted intensive negotiations to lower the 32% tariff rate announced in April, ultimately settling at 19% in July.⁷⁴

While previously skeptical of “minilateral” arrangements centered on extra-regional powers such as the Quad and AUKUS, regarding them as challenges to ASEAN centrality, Indonesia has begun experimenting with its own minilateral initiatives. In June 2025, senior officials from Indonesia, Australia, and India gathered in Canberra to discuss the possibility of cooperation on maritime security.⁷⁵ Indonesia, however, does not yet share a common understanding with the other two countries on whether to view China as a security challenge, and the conditions are not yet in place for substantive consultations or cooperation. At present, the trilateral effort remains at an exploratory stage.⁷⁶ At the same time, Indonesia is advancing its bilateral security cooperation with Australia. In November 2025, during President Prabowo’s visit to Australia, the two countries announced their intention to conclude a treaty on common security. The treaty stipulates that, if either or both countries’ security is threatened, the parties will consult and consider what measures may be taken either individually or jointly to address those threats.⁷⁷

(3) Cambodia and Malaysia: Calibrating Distance from the United States and China

Cambodia has long been seen as pro-China, and that positioning has not fundamentally changed. Since the 2010s, China has been Cambodia’s largest investor, a major provider of official development assistance, and an

74) Iis Gindarsah, “Trump-Prabowo’s Trade Deal: Lingering Uncertainty and Looming Risks,” IDSS Paper, no. 73, July 23, 2025.

75) University of Melbourne, “Australia India Indonesia Strategic Dialogue Held in Canberra,” June 24, 2025.

76) Emirza Adi Syailendra, “Indonesia, Australia, and India: Overcoming Barriers to Trilateral Partnership,” Lowy Institute, July 1, 2025.

77) [Australia] Prime Minister of Australia, “Joint Media Statement,” November 12, 2025.

important trading partner.⁷⁸ Leveraging this economic cooperation, China exercises substantial political and security influence over the country. During President Xi Jinping's visit in April 2025, the two countries again reaffirmed their unwavering friendship.⁷⁹

At the same time, the strengthening of relations with China carries risks for Cambodia's autonomy and threatens to damage relations with other major external powers that stand in strategic competition with China. Cambodia therefore also pursues diversification in its external relations to mitigate the latent risks arising from its close ties with Beijing.⁸⁰

Cambodia's relationship with the United States, however, has been strained by the heavy-handed tactics and suppression of opposition that characterized the nearly four decades of the Hun Sen government. In recent years, Cambodia's tilt toward China, in particular its renovation of the Ream Naval Base with Chinese assistance, has raised U.S. concerns that a Chinese military base might be established on Cambodian soil. To dispel these suspicions, Cambodia invited a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel to call at the base.⁸¹ By emphasizing defense cooperation with Japan, Cambodia sought to demonstrate that it was not exclusively oriented toward China.

Cambodia has not joined BRICS, nor has it become a partner country, which would carry the significance of associate membership. There have been overtures from China, but Cambodia's reliance on the U.S. dollar in its economic structure and the importance of exports to the United States suggest a calculation that joining BRICS would jeopardize relations with Washington.⁸² In its own way, Cambodia is thus attempting to balance security and economic considerations.

Cambodia was initially hit with a tariff of 49% by President Trump but, through energetic negotiations, succeeded in lowering the rate to 19%. The U.S. handling of the tariff issue also benefited Cambodia in an unexpected

78) Vannarith Chheang and Heng Pheakdey, "Cambodian Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative," *NIDS ASEAN Workshop 2019: China's BRI and ASEAN*, NIDS Joint Research Series, no. 17 (2019), 7.

79) [Cambodia] Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "Outcomes of the State Visit of His Excellency Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, to the Kingdom of Cambodia from 17 to 18 April 2025," April 18, 2025.

80) Chanborey Cheunboran, *Cambodia's China Strategy: Security Dilemmas of Embracing the Dragon* (London: Routledge, 2021), 143.

81) [Japan] Maritime Staff Office, "Nichi-Kanbojia shinzen kunren ni tsuite" [Concerning the Japan-Cambodia Goodwill Exercise], April 23, 2025.

82) *South China Morning Post*, October 31, 2024.

way. In July 2025, when an armed clash broke out between Cambodia and Thailand over a border dispute, President Trump took the initiative to mediate, applying pressure with the warning that the U.S. would suspend ongoing tariff negotiations with both countries if the fighting did not cease. The president's statement exerted significant diplomatic pressure on Thailand, which had been refusing third-country involvement in the bilateral dispute. Thailand consequently agreed to ceasefire talks, and a ceasefire agreement was subsequently brokered through the mediation of the United States, China, and the ASEAN chair country, Malaysia. From its position of relative weakness, Cambodia had strongly sought the involvement of ASEAN and major external powers in its dispute with Thailand, and in the end it was the United States rather than China that played the leading role in securing the ceasefire. Prime Minister Hun Manet of Cambodia, as a token of gratitude to the United States, nominated President Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize.⁸³

Like the Philippines and Vietnam, Malaysia is a claimant in the South China Sea sovereignty disputes and stands in latent tension with China. For Malaysia, however, maintaining friendly cooperative relations with China, centered on the economy, is the overriding premise, and the country has handled the South China Sea issue cautiously to avoid spillover effects on its bilateral relationship as a whole. The prioritization of economic considerations over security in policy toward China has been broadly consistent since the Mahathir Mohamad government in the 1980s. The current administration of Anwar Ibrahim is likewise seeking to minimize the impact of the South China Sea issue so as not to damage cooperative relations with China.⁸⁴

Political and diplomatic relations with the United States, by contrast, have been stalled by the Gaza issue. Many Malaysians, especially Muslim Malays, have intensified their resentment of the U.S. role in supporting Israel during the Gaza conflict, and public sentiment toward the United States has deteriorated. Mindful of public sentiment, the Anwar government has hesitated to advance relations with Washington.

Amid intensifying great-power competition, Southeast Asian states grapple with how to maintain relations with both the United States and

83) Reuters, August 8, 2025.

84) Shoji Tomotaka, "Minamishinakai mondai to Marechia: Tairitsu no kaihi to onbin na taio" [The South China Sea Issue and Malaysia: Avoiding Rivalry and a Measured Response], *NIDS Research & Analysis* 1 (August 2025): 5-7.

China. In this respect, Malaysia currently has limited room for choice. As relations with the United States remain stalled, Malaysia's tilt toward China has become particularly pronounced in recent years. In June 2024, Malaysia hosted Premier Li Qiang in Kuala Lumpur for a grand celebration marking the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations.⁸⁵ That same month, Prime Minister Anwar announced that Malaysia had decided to apply for BRICS membership.⁸⁶

In the broader context of Malaysia's tilt toward the China-Russia bloc, including BRICS, the strengthening of bilateral relations with Russia has likewise been notable. In May 2025, during Anwar's second visit to Russia as prime minister, the two countries agreed at the summit with President Putin to further develop bilateral relations in investment and trade.⁸⁷

In the list of Trump tariffs announced in April 2025, Malaysia faced a rate of 24% (subsequently raised to 25%). The Anwar government's response combined working-level negotiations with the United States with a politically pronounced tilt toward China. A symbolic illustration was Prime Minister Anwar's speech at the welcome banquet for President Xi Jinping during Xi's visit to Malaysia that same month. Without naming the United States, Anwar criticized it in unmistakable terms: "today, at a time when multilateralism is under tremendous strain—when some nations abandon the principle of shared responsibility and others question long-standing commitments," and "in some quarters, the rules-based order has been turned on its head—dialogue has yielded to demands, tariffs are imposed without restraint, and the language of cooperation is drowned beneath the noise of threats and coercion." He praised China by contrast as a defender of the free trade regime: "In these trying times, the world yearns for steadiness, reliability and purpose. We see this in China's conduct."⁸⁸

Yet Malaysia's relations with the United States have not stagnated entirely. In tariff negotiations, the country engaged competently with the U.S. side, and in the end Prime Minister Anwar negotiated directly

85) [Malaysia] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership towards China-Malaysia Community with a Shared Future," June 18, 2024.

86) David Han Guo Xiong, "Malaysia's Bid for Membership of BRICS: Optimism and Uncertainties," IDSS Paper, no. 79, October 3, 2024.

87) *Bernama*, May 14, 2025.

88) [Malaysia] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Speech by the Honorable Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia at the State Banquet in Honor of His Excellency Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China," April 16, 2025.

with President Trump to reduce the tariff rate from 25% to 19%.⁸⁹ As ASEAN chair, moreover, Malaysia succeeded in securing President Trump's attendance. In October 2025, President Trump attended the signing ceremony of the peace agreement between Thailand and Cambodia in Kuala Lumpur, casting himself as a "peacemaker," and also participated in the U.S.-ASEAN Summit.



Signing ceremony of the Thailand-Cambodia peace agreement, with President Trump (AFP / Jiji Press)

The five countries discussed thus far do not exhaust the picture; the remaining six ASEAN members likewise show various patterns of cooperation. In broad terms, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, and Timor-Leste continue to place significant weight on ASEAN's institutional hedging while pursuing the conventional hedging method of looking to China for economic ties and the United States for security. Laos and the Myanmar military regime, by contrast, have thin or strained relations with the United States to begin with, leaving little room for hedging between Washington and Beijing; both therefore balance between China and Russia. The variations of hedging among Southeast Asian states can be summarized as follows.

Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Alliance		The Philippines
Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Non-alignment		Vietnam, Indonesia
Calibrating Distance from the United States and China	Toward the United States	Cambodia
	Toward China	Malaysia
Simultaneous Pursuit of Institutional and National-level Hedging		Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste
Hedging between China and Russia		Laos, the Myanmar military regime

89) *The Straits Times*, July 31, 2025.

Conclusion

ASEAN was founded during the Cold War with the aim of ensuring regional security. As shifting external circumstances buffeted the region, the central task of managing the influence of extra-regional great powers came into ever sharper focus, and ASEAN sought to address it through its own pursuit of neutrality. In the dramatically transformed strategic environment of the post-Cold War period, the response to the same task became one of incorporating major external powers into ASEAN-centered multilateral cooperation frameworks. As ASEAN's multilateralism-based security system took shape, the concept of centrality crystallized. Although the strategic environment surrounding ASEAN changed greatly between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, and although ASEAN's method shifted from neutrality to centrality, the underlying objective of properly managing relations with major external powers remained constant.

The intensification and structuralization of great-power competition centered on U.S.-China rivalry has impeded the functioning of the multilateral security system that ASEAN built, and ASEAN's institutional hedging has gradually lost effectiveness. As a result, Southeast Asian states have strengthened their hedging at the national level, and in the process have pluralized and diversified their security cooperation.

The modes of pluralization and diversification among Southeast Asian states are varied. This chapter has examined three patterns: pluralization anchored in alliance (the Philippines), pluralization anchored in non-alignment (Vietnam and Indonesia), and the calibration of their distance from the United States and China (Cambodia toward the United States, and Malaysia toward China). Although pluralization and diversification are driven primarily by external factors such as the presence or absence of an alliance, geopolitical considerations, and the trajectory of relations with China, domestic factors also play a role. It is important to attend to dynamics in which the personal worldviews and preferences of presidents, as in the Philippines and Indonesia, exert significant influence on foreign policy, and in which leaders shift their external policies in response to popular sentiment and nationalism, illustrating the dynamics between domestic politics and foreign policy.

Southeast Asian states have been buffeted by great-power competition centered on U.S.-China rivalry. At the same time, however, each has steadily expanded its national power and international presence through sustained economic growth, and the United States and China themselves have come

to recognize the strategic importance of Southeast Asia. If ASEAN can deepen its cohesion, the region need not merely be unilaterally buffeted by great-power competition; it may also enhance its own diplomatic leverage. As discussed in this chapter, ASEAN multilateralism currently stands at a crossroads. The accession of Timor-Leste, however, is welcome news. Whether an ASEAN that has once again realized regional inclusivity can use flexible and innovative approaches to enhance its strategic autonomy bears close watching.

