

Strategic Hedging in ASEAN: A Response to the Rise of (Beijing and) Washington

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Abstract

This article problematizes three predominant narratives surrounding the behavior of ASEAN member states and the rivalry between Beijing and Washington in the context of ASEAN's political security. This qualitative research is developed through a mixed assessment of documents, archive, and literature reviews combined with behavioral and contextual observations. *Firstly*, it questions the narrative of the 'assertiveness' of China as a rising power. With close trading relations dating back to the first dynasties, this Paper argues that the notion of China's assertiveness and aggression is misplaced. As a key regional trade partner, China was never a threat to ASEAN countries. This narrative developed with the growing interest of the United States to contain the region from China over the years. As such, there lies a gap in the literature, which leads to the singling out of narratives that better explain the holistic relation between ASEAN states and China. *Secondly*, this article surfaces the lack of consistent commitment of the US to the Asia Pacific (also referred to as the 'Asia Pivot'), other than to signify its interest in aggressively preventing China from dominating the Indo-Pacific. In this sense, the US' behavior is viewed less as a great power but more as a greatly reactive one. *Lastly*, hedging is analyzed here as a necessary response to the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific arena and not a manner of indecisiveness among member states, often claimed as 'small states' in the face of the rivalry taking place in its backyard.

Keywords: ASEAN, assertiveness, China, hedging, strategy

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas tiga narasi utama seputar perilaku ASEAN dan rivalitas Beijing dan Washington dalam konteks politik-keamanan ASEAN. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui metode analisis dokumen, arsip, dan penelitian terdahulu, dipadukan dengan observasi perilaku dan kontekstual. Pertama, tulisan ini mempertanyakan klaim atas Tiongkok yang 'asertif'. Dengan sejarah perdagangan yang tercipta sejak dinasti Tiongkok yang pertama, 'asertivitas' dan agresifitas Tiongkok adalah pembacaan yang tidak sepenuhnya tepat. Ada pergeseran makna atas Tiongkok yang memiliki sejarah panjang berdagang dengan dan di wilayah Asia Tenggara. Narasi 'asertivitas' ini berkembang seiring dengan meningkatnya minat Amerika Serikat untuk membendung Tiongkok dari Asia. Oleh karena itu, tulisan ini berpendapat bahwa terdapat kesenjangan literatur yang tidak dapat menjelaskan hubungan antara anggota ASEAN dan Tiongkok secara holistik. Kedua, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa strategi Amerika Serikat untuk membangun komitmen di wilayah Asia Pasifik (atau juga disebut sebagai 'Pivot Asia') tidak selalu konsisten. Minat AS secara konsisten adalah untuk mencegah dominasi Tiongkok di Indo-Pasifik secara agresif yang sering diinterpretasikan sebagai bentuk komitmen kerjasama politik-keamanan. Dengan demikian, perilaku AS di sini tidak dipandang sebagai sebuah great power, namun sebagai kekuatan yang reaksioner. Terakhir, hedging yang menjadi strategi ASEAN untuk menghadapi dinamika politik keamanan di wilayahnya, dianalisis disini sebagai respons yang diperlukan dan bukan sebagai bentuk ketidak tegasan diantara negara-negara anggota. Ini sekaligus respons terhadap yang sering kali diklaim sebagai 'negara kecil' dalam menghadapi persaingan yang terjadi

di halaman belakang mereka.

Kata kunci: ASEAN, asertivitas, Cina, hedging, strategi

INTRODUCTION

There is a widely accepted narrative across the literature that studies the behavior of ASEAN states in their positions and responses towards China and the US (Acharya, 2021; Goh, 2015; Kwik, 2021; Goh, 2014). Both are now inseparable units within the study of contemporary political security and are attracting the attention and responses of world leaders. In acknowledgment of the potential of polarization, the understanding of China's power today is owed to its historical trading activities in and with Southeast Asia, most of which are now ASEAN member states. In serving as a historical hub for trade between South Asia and China, ASEAN countries are important and critical trading partners for China. This narrative lacks discussion across references to the political security realm of ASEAN. It is often left out or switched around by observers (i.e., China being the critical partner for ASEAN), creating what Goh (2015) refers to as an 'overestimation' of China's power, and is illustrated by Acharya (2021) as follows:

"Those fearful of the Chinese tributary system redux should be reminded that the 'maritime Silk Road' is at best historical fiction — Indian cotton, Southeast Asian spices, and Hindu-Buddhist religious ideas and objects transiting between India and East Asia, rather than silk, were the main trading items in the Indian Ocean East Asia Forum" (para. 17).

As Guan and Kwang (2023) illustrate, Srivijaya's dominance of the trade was sufficient to threaten the south

Indian Chola kingdom for its king to mount a major naval expedition in 1025 against Srivijaya and its subsidiary ports along the Straits of Malacca. This prominence was due to Srivijaya being one of the leading sources of spices brought in by local traders and other products for the Chinese market. The coastal state of Malacca, with a spectacular maritime past as one of the most important trade centers in the early modern global economy, carries a past that placed it in the same league with Venice, Cairo, and Canton (Vann, 2014). There is a long list of key trading hubs for China across the Southeast Asian communities. These communities also shared practical knowledge of sailing on monsoon winds, building ocean-going ships, and determining the sea routes connecting the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean (Guan & Kwang, 2023; Vann, 2014). This is a testament to the role of serving as a cultural melting pot into which the civilisational influences of the South Asia subcontinent, West Asia and East Asia poured to make what defines Southeast Asia as a distinctive region today (Guan & Kwang, 2023).

Therefore, to place ASEAN member states as being 'vis a vis,' overshadowed by (Lubina, 2017) or 'asymmetric' (He, 2018) in modern-day politics is to diminish the critical role it played in the advancement of civilization in Asia as a whole. Some scholars even use the metaphor of 'Gulliver and the Lilliputians' to compare China and the ASEAN states in world politics, hoping that the Lilliputians can somehow tie up

Gulliver if they work together (He, 2018). It is in the interest of Southeast Asian leaders, therefore, to understand this crucial history to exert greater influence in the region (Guan & Kwang, 2023).

Certainly, this is not to dismiss the uneasy relationship between ASEAN and China in other aspects, such as the ethnic and ideological disputes and occasional cross-border or maritime tensions throughout the years (Renwick, 2016). However, there are many notions that are misunderstood which need to be addressed. The main question of this article, therefore, is *which political-security behavior of ASEAN is misperceived? Why is this persistent across literature?*

Literature Review

This research has found that there are three most prominent debate on the Indo-Pacific and the role of ASEAN revolves around three notions: the 'growing assertiveness' of China, how the US containment is increasing China's 'assertiveness' and hedging from the perspective of ASEAN. For the US, China is a rising power that needs to be contained. This is affirmed by the rapid developments in the Indo-Pacific which prompted the formulation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. Despite this, China does not have a particular national objective to displace the US as a preponderant power in Asia and beyond (Kim, 2015). This is puzzling for many as QUAD and AUKUS has rapidly developed strategies that aims to counter China, specifically. Further, this article affirms the argument that ASEAN member states hedge as a behavior to contain potential risks (Kwik, 2021; Goh, 2014) but offers an alternative explanation of the cause of its behavior towards Beijing

and Washington. This article problematizes predominant arguments surrounding China and US intentions in Southeast Asia. It offers an alternative construct to capture how ASEAN member states strategically position themselves in the contemporary world of political security.

The term strategic hedging here is viewed as a counter narrative to the 'western' discourse on ASEAN's domestic matters. Strategic hedging, is often seen as a 'response' to uncertainty and not a 'strategy' in its literal sense. The term strategic, therefore, refers to calculated responses towards external developments to preserve domestic interests which are reflected in their national and foreign policies (Kwik, 2021; Goh, 2014; Yuzhu, 2021). This is different to the 'western' understanding of hedging which focuses on the power of the 'west', where hedging here stresses on the pursuit of national interest of the ASEAN member states.

Research Methods

This qualitative research is developed through a mixed assessment of documents, archive, and literature reviews combined with behavioral and contextual observations. As this research is mainly to identify, among the many, the most misunderstood notions in one of the most critically assessed pillars of ASEAN, the data is analysed by searching for similarities across literature and then arranged to form a pattern.

Using a critical postcolonial lens, this article attempts to reaffirm the link between power and discourse and is organized as follows. The article will start with a problematized US Pivot to Asia. It investigates the pattern, or lack, of the US intentions to commit to allying with the region. This is followed by a problemati-

zation of the claim of an ‘assertive’ China and how this assertiveness influences ‘small states’ in the ASEAN region. Lastly, this article will further view hedging as a necessary response. The displayed behavior of ASEAN states is strategic, which is why the article uses the term ‘strategic hedging’ to describe this behavior.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Problematizing the ‘Pivot’ in the “Pivot To Asia”

Since 2011, the US has practiced its “Pivot to Asia” and emphasized its military and economic dominance worldwide (Li, 2017). Scholars also use the term ‘Asia Pacific rebalancing’ (Steffens, 2013) to highlight how China plays a pivotal role in this strategy. But instead of forging closer ties and cooperation, this strategy has quickly intensified in the form of competition with its rival China (Li, 2017). Although its ‘pivot’ is interpreted by observers as a response to the rising significance of the Asia Pacific region, this is not the first time the US has employed this strategy

(Wardhana, 2018). There was a high expectation that this strategy would be continued with heavy investments in military and security jargon, including the ‘Global War on Terror’ greatly popularized by Bush (Bentley, 2013).

Obama would later on also increase its presence in the Asia Pacific in three ways: firstly, a wider distribution of its military troops to cover more regions in the Asia Pacific (including the Malacca Straits, Perth, Darwin, Japan, South Korea, Guam, and the Philippines), flexible placements of troops, and enhancing partnerships through empowering capabilities (Wardhana, 2018). Hence, it comes as little surprise to see Obama increase the number of visits to the East and Asia Pacific region through Secretary of State Clinton. In its first three years in term, Clinton made 36 visits, twice the number of visits as Rice did in the first three years of serving (Manyin et al., 2012). This effectively became the starting point for a more structural change through the strategic shifting of the US’ attention towards the Asia Pacific, including the Indo-Pacific.

Region	Clinton Total, First Three Years	Clinton First Three Years, %	Rice Total, First Three Years	Rice First Three Years, %	Powell Total, First Three Years	Powell First Three Years, %	Allbright Total, First Three Years	Allbright First Three Years, %
Africa	13	7.1%	4	2.2%	14	9.0%	14	7.1%
East Asia & Pacific	36	19.7%	18	9.8%	21	13.5%	26	13.2%
Europe & Eurasia	54	29.5%	64	35.0%	48	31.0%	100	50.8%
Near East	30	16.4%	63	34.4%	41	26.5%	39	19.8%
South & Central Asia <i>of which India</i>	17 <i>1</i>	9.3%	13 <i>4</i>	7.1%	11 <i>1</i>	7.1%	2 <i>1</i>	1.0%
Western Hemisphere	33	18.0%	21	11.5%	20	12.9%	16	8.1%
Totals	183	100.0%	183	100.0%	155	100.0%	197	100.0%

Table 1.

Secretaries of State Visits to Foreign Countries by Region

Source: Manyin et al., 2012.

However, there is a need to understand the intentions of the US as this article argues that it is linked to the behavior of ASEAN states as members of the Indo-Pacific arena. There is an inconsistency of US stances towards ASEAN throughout the regimes. As Stepanov (2022) phrases, "Each US administration has attempted to formulate its unique approach to Southeast Asia." While President Obama increased attention to ASEAN, the Trump administration has given the region less consideration (Singh, 2021). Under Trump, the US somewhat moved away from the Southeast Asian region compared to the period of Obama's presidency, which prompted some countries to strengthen their relations with China (Stepanov, 2022). This illustrates the varying degree of US commitment in the Asia Pacific, which differs across regimes.

Although Stepanov (2022) argues that the involvement of the United States in the affairs of Southeast Asia remains 'high,' this is based mainly on the US being the second largest trading partner of Southeast Asia and also measured from the large number of American UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed his fear of:

"the possibility of a great fracture: the world splitting in two, with the two largest economies on earth, creating two separate and competing worlds, each with their dominant currency, trade, and financial rules, their Internet and artificial intelligence capacities, and their own zero-sum geopolitical and military strategies" (Xuetong, 2020: 313).

This statement was made during the UN General Assembly's 74th General

Debate in September 2019, which called for world leaders to maintain a 'multipolar world' with respect for international law and multilateral institutions (United Nations, 2019). The debate occurred against a nexus of conflicts, including the China-US trade war. The US-China Trade War, which began in July 2018 when the US government led by President Donald Trump implemented its first round of tariffs and other trade barriers on China, has further impacted Asian countries whose supply chains have been closely linked to Chinese industries and are dependent on the US market as a significant export destination (Ong-Webb, 2020). This trade war is one of the many feuds between Washington and Beijing that observers watch closely today.

Amidst the variety of polarized tensions in the Indo-Pacific, the role of ASEAN is argued to be at the center of the debate. Trends in 2018 indicated that ASEAN regionalism was under pressure, putting into question the grouping's role and function (Ong-Webb, 2020). Though this is often the case, this article argues that it is only true in a restricted sense. China was accorded the 'full Dialogue Partner' status at the 29th AMM in July 1996 in Jakarta, Indonesia (Limsira, 2015). However, ASEAN states and China relations date back to the 16th century through 'maritime interactions' consisting of a network of exchanges (i.e., politics, religion, etc.) and ultimately created the areas surrounding today's highly-debated South China Sea (Sen, 2014). Through its strategic position, Southeast Asia became a crucial trading hub for the advancements in South Asia and China (Sen, 2014). In other words, the influence is mostly materialistic. The

United States has consistently used the issue of freedom of navigation as its primary reason for showing interest in the South China Sea (SCS) (Sinaga, 2015).

Singh (2021), however, views Southeast Asia as a mere playground for economic and political purposes. ASEAN countries serve as “an epicenter” of escalating US-China competition and are likely “becoming increasing objects of this competition” (Singh, 2021). The SCS is the epicenter of seaborne trade and commerce for the new center of the global economy, and it holds lifelines of energy security for many of America’s closest allies (Steffens, 2013). Therefore, although the US will never neglect ASEAN countries completely, as its sea routes through it are critical to America’s most important Asian ally, Japan (Singh, 2021), it is argued that this strategy does not equal alignment nor interest towards ASEAN.

ASEAN’s geographical position in the world is inherent to making it a valuable partner for the US. Still, there is little to suggest that the US foreign policy will consistently concentrate on its relations with Southeast Asia outside of this factor. Singh (2021: 37-38) further predicts that:

“Given the vast geographical area of the Indo-Pacific and the presence of other actors like Japan, India, Australia, and ASEAN, over the longer 38 terms, neither the US nor China is likely to have dominance, and a rough balance of power is more likely to emerge there. However, it is uncertain if a balance will be attainable in Southeast Asia because of China’s advantages in areas closer to it. It is still not clear whether the US will be prepared to commit the necessary resources to counteract China’s influence in Southeast Asia

in a comprehensive way.”

This indicates that not only is the interest of the US in ASEAN dependent on its foreign policy, but it is also conditional on how it perceives China. What does China mean for the US? What response is the US prepared to give in the event of a China-led aggression in the South China Sea? Where is ASEAN amid this sharpening of strategies? There is no solid answer to these critical questions. Biden shows a lack of interest in participating in any multilateral economic agreements, which suggests that the United States could lose its former position in the economic structure of the Asia-Pacific region (Stepanov, 2022). Like Trump, Biden is more focused on its ‘perceptual’ rivalry with China as the U.S. does not tolerate peer competitors (Chen et al., 2013). China’s rapid rise is leading many elites from neighboring states and those far away to overestimate the present influence of China and the perceived corresponding need to adjust to this influence (Cook, 2014).

This approach is starkly different from that of China’s. Every Asian country trades more with China, often by a factor of two to one, an imbalance that is only growing as China’s economic growth outpaces that of the US (Fisher & Carlsen, 2018). According to a Report by Renwick (2016), China has been much more proactive and innovative, rooted in the new diplomacy of China’s ‘neighborhood policy’. Further, China’s approach to international development (or ‘foreign aid’) is relatively new and still evolving, but it differs substantially from traditional donors. Countries that purchase American weapons bind their militaries and foreign policies to the United States, illustrating the classical imbalance that

reflects the extent of American military relationships in Asia, dating back to World War II (Fisher & Carlsen, 2018).

Problematizing the 'Assertiveness' in the 'Assertive China'

This leads us to a debate central to the US and other Western countries: 'China being the principal threat' (Kwik, 2021). There is a significant body of literature that appoints China as an 'assertive power' (Liao, 2016; Sinaga, 2015) rather than its more preferred charisma as the 'peaceful rise' and 'charm offensive' (Scobell & Harold, 2013). Media, pundits, and politicians regularly use this term, yet little scholarly work would clarify the concept's meaning (Turcsanyi, 2017). Those who have made this attempt include Goh (2014) and Kwik (2021), who argue that this is due to an overestimation of the definition of power and, to that extent, the overestimation of the power of China.

In the wake of the Tiananmen incident, Deng Xiaoping suggested the role of a 'responsible stakeholder' to counter the growing 'China threat' perception (Cheng, 2013). But the latter is seemingly still the perception of today. With a lack of attention to how the Chinese 'assertion' is being employed to influence and create the suggested effects on ASEAN, this article furthers Goh's (2014) argument that it is being inflated. Goh (2014) differentiates 'power' from 'influence'. It is suggested (2014) that power does not necessarily translate into influence and that influence may come in a number of forms, namely 'preference multiplier', 'persuasion', and 'ability to prevail', with the first two types of influence being most relevant to explain its relationship with Southeast Asia.

Undoubtedly, China is carefully

strategizing its critical role in the Indo-Pacific region. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a stark reminder of its intentions. China conducts military exercises in the South China Sea (SCS), sends patrol boats and aircraft carriers to the area, and has even built military posts and airstrips on some islands (Sinaga, 2015). Empirical findings also show that Southeast Asia is slowly conducting a military build-up to contain the expansionist nature of China's military build-up (Karim & Chairil, 2016).

However, this is not to be confused with the traditional understanding of 'assertive' behavior. This article challenges the notion of 'assertiveness', which Chen et al. (2013) claims are often confused with 'offensive assertion', where 'the use of coercion is to expand its interest and influence without provocation from other countries'. In the case of significant territorial conflict, China has not only failed to cause other states to change their behavior but has spurred internationalization, multilateralization, and focus on regional codes and international law that it has tried to steer rival claimants away (Goh, 2014).

From the US perspective, the pivot represents an attempt to reassure its allies and other countries while dissuading China from using military means to solve its disputes with its neighbors, such as squabbles over maritime territory in the South and East China Seas (Chen et al., 2013). However, from the Chinese perspective, such moves appear to attempt to contain China's development in the region and divide China from its neighbors (Chen et al., 2013). This could encourage China to become more determined to develop protectionist capabilities (Chen et al.,

2013). Rapid external developments have driven China to adopt an adaptive position in the SCS (Sinaga, 2015). Hence, the counter-narratives include the view of China's assertion as 'advantageous' or 'defensive' as it is only exercised in territorial disputes and is a reaction to unwelcome and unforeseen events often initiated by other countries in the region capabilities (Johnston, 2013; Chen et al., 2013), can easily be missed altogether.

Furthermore, if China were to be claimed as 'assertive', an explanation would be needed to counter why it is the interest of most Southeast Asian countries to emphasize Chinese involvement in their security and political economies by playing the 'China card' and put pressure on other partners such as the U.S (Goh, 2014). The Chinese 'assertiveness,' in part, is the result of Beijing's previously more moderate position, which failed to effectively protect China's sovereignty and maritime interests against intensified disruption by other claimants (Sinaga, 2015). In this sense, ASEAN is actively utilizing the opportunity presented by China to assert its position within global politics, individually and collectively. Although this behavior may not seem too obvious, it exists as an 'indirect balancing' (Karim & Chairil, 2016). This behavior may not be pleasing to Western literature. But it tells us that, from the perspective of Southeast Asia, there is a reason to believe that China's power, nor influence, was never seen as a threat.

From this deconstruction, this article argues that a more obvious form of behavior from both ASEAN and China may never materialize so long as there are no significant dynamics between the two. And rightly so. This article argues that almost all references offer analyses

using the Cold War as its starting point. Realist, liberalist, and constructivist interpretations from the vast majority of literature available provide more than a handful of ways to understand who, why, and what is at play in the modern political realm. Little attention is paid to the history of Southeast Asia and the larger Asia, including China. Using a different starting point to analyze the behavior of China, ASEAN, and the US, we capture a richer understanding of these actors.

Despite its expansionist agenda, traced back to the earliest Dynasty of Qin, China was never a colonizer of Southeast Asia. It never disrupted in the same way the Dutch had traded slaves, institutionalized racism across the many races living in the East Indies (now Indonesia), and forced plantations for shipping back to Europe (Minasny, 2020). It never 'occupied' and 'territorially possessed' the same way the British did in Malaya for its rubber (now Malaysia), as Yamada (1971) examples with great detail. The Chinese were traders in nature. This virtue would later birth important notions in modern-day political economy, such as the Silk Road, which would later be refined as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In employing a post-colonial background to this discussion, it is easier to understand why Southeast Asia is inclined to view China the same way they would the US. This inclination would continue to become a characteristic of Southeast Asian politics, often misinterpreted by Western literature.

As Yamamoto (2014) argued, unlike in Northeast Asia, where the 'Washington System' shaped international politics in the 1920s, Southeast Asia had no official framework to deal with regional issues. Many attempts were made to form a framework (i.e., ASA,

MAPHILINDO, etc.). Still, it was not until ASEAN materialized that it became the pinnacle of regionalism for these newly independent countries (excluding Thailand). The formation of ASEAN in 1967 was against the backdrop of the heightened Cold War between the US and Russia. Now, more than fifty years later, we find ourselves against the backdrop of a similar polarization, with one same actor: the US. There is a need to rethink the notion of China's assertiveness as it is difficult to validate it within the mainstream timeframe (post-Cold War). Contrasting this proposed narrative of China against the US, we can see an uneven relationship between ASEAN and each of the rivaling countries.

ASEAN's Narrative of 'Strategic Hedging'

Having problematized the dominant narratives of China and the US, we look towards the unique behavior of ASEAN states in response to the dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. The concept of hedging is most frequently used to describe the behavior of ASEAN towards great power rivalry and is defined in a number of ways. Kwik, Goh, and Yuzhu are early researchers on hedging as a behavior employed by ASEAN states amid political security dynamics. Their views serve as the basis of this section.

Goh (2014) places ASEAN in a position of avoidance, where its hedging strategies are a 'proactive strategy to meet a challenge with passivity' aimed at avoiding a number of risk scenarios. The unimaginable risks for ASEAN range from forming a Chinese hegemony, US withdrawal from Asia/Southeast Asia, or an unstable regional order. Goh (2014) argues that ASEAN avoids this risk through indirect or soft balancing,

complex engagement, or an enmeshment policy with great(er) powers. As such, the effort to stand in the middle while proactively maintaining relations is what makes ASEAN hedging uniquely strategic, as successful hedging will avoid ASEAN from the uncomfortable situation of taking sides.

Goh (2014) believes, however, that ASEAN hedging strategies will vary depending on the state's capacity to influence security in the region. Therefore, different ASEAN countries will hedge in different manners, and reaching a unified ASEAN position through hedging would be seemingly complex. For the Western world, this is frustrating as there is an interest in mapping the position of Indo-Pacific actors. For ASEAN, it serves as a sanctuary for all parties to take part in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

Similar to Goh (2014), Kuik (2021) discusses ASEAN hedging as a calculative manner where "a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects under the situation of high uncertainties and high stakes". Hedging here is a more active form of engagement that works towards the best possible outcome and simultaneously blocks the potential of unwelcome risks. This very careful strategy requires a high degree of attentiveness and precaution. This also requires ASEAN states to switch seamlessly from a 'sovereign state' to a member state, which may refer to ASEAN's mechanism. Further, Kuik (2021) deems that hedging to be actualized is contingent on three conditions being fulfilled: the absence of an immediate threat, any ideological fault lines, and an all-out Great Power rivalry. This article argues that, at the moment,

the only immediate threat that all ASEAN member states can agree on is the threat of a polarized world, which is becoming more apparent in the sphere of the Indo-Pacific.

The difference between Kuik (2021) and Goh (2021) in this sense is how they perceive the aforementioned 'threat' and where hedging stands among behaviors of 'balancing' and 'bandwagoning'. Kwik (2021) identifies five constituent components that lie between balancing and bandwagoning, namely: economic pragmatism being at the neutrality point, toward an increasing degree of power rejection stand indirect-balancing and dominance-denial, and toward a rising degree of power acceptance are binding engagement and limited bandwagoning. Taking some or all of these options simultaneously is called 'hedging'. Further, Kwik (2021) regards it as an expediency when the hedger still has room for maneuvering, and once the threat is imminent, hedging will be replaced by balancing. For Goh (2014), hedging is not a strategy that lies between the stark alternatives of balancing and bandwagoning. Hedging has long been used as a descriptive term to refer to foreign policy choices that fall between the stark alignment choices of balancing and bandwagoning and is more focused on the uncertainty produced by structural change that makes hedging a rational choice (Murphy, 2017).

However, Kuik (2021) and Goh (2014) share one similarity: viewing ASEAN as a group of 'small states'. In terms of size, China and the US compare significantly to most ASEAN countries. But, some countries with larger populations and land areas (e.g., Indonesia) are regarded as small states in terms of hedging because these countries

are not powerful enough to affect the international system, and they also remain open to the rise of great powers (Yuzhu, 2021). However, the 'small states' in most narratives of ASEAN regional security are not small in an objective sense and, therefore, are difficult to define through the lens of realism, where comparisons are always welcomed (Yuzhu, 2021). Yuzhu (2021) explains that in the conception of hedging, small states are referred to as the recipients of order subjectively and objectively. This article furthers this argument by stating that ASEAN is, in fact, a recipient of the great power rivalry. But are also calculative actors employing strategic hedging to maintain regional order and stability.

"In the West, much of the present commentary on ASEAN has focused on its various shortcomings regarding human rights, the South China Sea, etc. Many of these are valid, but It is hard to understand and appreciate ASEAN when sitting in Washington, D.C., New York, London, Paris, Brussels, or Beijing (Strangio, 2021. para. 4-5)".

In this statement above, Amitav Acharya (in Strangio, 2021) illustrates the common misconception of ASEAN and the frustration of the West. For instance, in Western countries, the dispute between China and Japan over Diaoyu Island is more of a legal issue. But to the Chinese people, it is an issue charged with emotion as it recalls the Chinese memory of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 (Chen et al., 2013). Sugihara (2022) also offers a historical reading of this narrative; the economic history of the Asian and African continents has always been seen as an 'integration' into that of the 'rest of the world.' This

narrative diminishes the distinctive agency each nation has in shaping its history. Sugihara (2022) offers this because many major ports were oriented towards regional trade rather than long-distance trade. Another factor that may be attributed to the rising importance of the direct trade routes between China and South Asia in the early eighteenth century was matched by the growing importance of direct trade between China and Europe (Holroyd, 2021).

What needs to be placed at the heart of the debate is that hedging is a necessary response for ASEAN as a regional grouping. The degree of hedging will vary for the individual members, but it is essentially a strategy. The ASEAN strategic hedging is not to be confused with 'indecisiveness' or a 'lack of skill'. Strategic hedging as a behavior is about collectively safeguarding and carefully maintaining balance in the region. At the same time, it is also a form of risk mitigation that prepares its members for a change of balance and power. This means that any potential disagreement between ASEAN member countries is unfavorable for regional security (Sinaga, 2015). Hedging strategies are helpful because regional countries can promote their ties with the United States and China without raising eyebrows (Tinh, 2019). In its own right, ASEAN's strategic hedging should be seen as a form of diplomacy, and have learned to overcome being sidelined by the rivalry taking place in its own backyard.

US military bases across ASEAN countries and neighboring states may have been welcomed for decades. However, according to Goh (2020), China has always stood by the smaller states, both figuratively and geographically. Geographically, China is the closest of the

major competing powers of the world, including the US, Japan, and India, to ASEAN states. It claims borders with seven of the ten states and is likely to have the most regional influence and engagement in the future (Cook, 2014). After the 2008 global financial crisis, China's assertive diplomacy in the South China Sea caused some worries and suspicions in the region. Still, the overall relationship between China and the ASEAN states has not fundamentally changed (He, 2018). This has been a crucial factor for China in securing its alignment with ASEAN, as they have never abandoned nor ignored the small states (Cook, 2014).

Some claim that hedging involves the task of taming China into accepting the status quo of international order. In contrast, others argue that hedging is about biding one's time to make a choice, but they all tend to assume that once China becomes aggressive, these countries will retreat to the US for security (Yuzhu, 2021). Apparently, this view is preconceived, and conceptually, it is about bandwagoning with the established power—the US, not balancing against the rising power—China (Yuzhu, 2021).

As to the question of whether China wants to be an offensive country and a hegemon in the Asia-Pacific, the answer is negative (Chen, 2013). However, as its power and status in the international system continue to grow, China will become increasingly responsive (Chen et al., 2013). China has demonstrated self-restraint and a willingness to be constrained by others through increased involvement in many international organizations and institutions since the 1980s (Chen, 2013). It has been working hard to secure a peaceful international

environment in which to concentrate on its development; the aspects of development have always been given top priority (Cheng, 2013). Both rivaling powers are asserting their influence in ASEAN. However, this article believes that the US is one to 'pivot' back and forth. At the same time, China is consistent in its 'defensive assertiveness' and a loyal supporter of ASEAN through the early formation of ASEAN. This means that the rise of Beijing is a given, whereas the US, exerts its influence through its AUKUS and QUAD multilateralism.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued three matters. Firstly, the US interest in ASEAN mainly pivots on Beijing's next move. The US-ASEAN trade and military relations may be strong, but ASEAN would benefit very little from any of these trades and military if not for its main interest, ruling its tight competition with China. Therefore, putting the numbers of mutual trade and military bases aside, ASEAN is a convenient playground for Washington.

Secondly, there is an exaggerated estimation of the influence of China in ASEAN. This is not to say that the Chinese influence is minimal. If anything, China has significantly influenced the typologies of behaviors of ASEAN states. However, the predominant narrative lacks two matters: the analysis of the ASEAN agency, which diminishes the ability of its member states to calculate, measure, and adapt swiftly, and the actual power of China as a rising power in the world. China and its relationship with ASEAN can be seen from a non-Western point of view. This would channel the unique social influence both entities have on each other, as opposed to the legal formal Western view, which would often

pitch the 'weak states' as recipients of political influence and power against the 'major powers'.

In correlation to this, and as the last point, strategic hedging is a necessary response to the dynamic in the Southeast Asian region. While the debate will vary on why ASEAN states hedge and in what form, this article views strategic hedging as mitigation if the US pivots and directs its ambitions closer to China. The Southeast Asian region is one of the most prone to geopolitical conflicts. With this understanding, there is a need to counter-scrutinize how the argued 'small states' have been employed by the conflicting interests of Beijing and Washington and, to a further extent, all major regional powers. The dynamics in Southeast Asia and among ASEAN member states should serve as a reminder and test for the great power most committed to ensuring global peace and security.

This article furthers the view of Alistair Johnston in his article, *How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?*. There is a need to use an appropriate lens when viewing state actors. Research affects narratives. Narratives affect policies and global agenda-setting. This, in turn, contributes to the way the world works. With more attention being shed on this rivalry, the outcome of this competition is also increasingly affecting the lives of ordinary people. Hence, new analytical frameworks are urgently needed to view state behaviors towards each other adequately. All things considered, while the US pledged various pivot attempts towards Asia, China never really left.

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