

What the US-China Struggle for Regional Dominance Means for Southeast Asia

How are Southeast Asian countries responding to growing tensions between the two powers?

By Mark J. Valencia
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This week China will undertake live-fire exercises in the Taiwan Straits. This provocative action comes on the heels of simultaneous major U.S. and Chinese naval exercises in the South China Sea. While the situation is not as dire as it may seem, competition between the United States and China for dominance in the region is indeed intensifying. Faced with this burgeoning soft and thinly veiled hard power struggle for their political hearts and minds, Southeast Asian countries are doing what they can and must to maintain their relative independence and security in this roiling political cauldron. Indeed, neither China nor the United States should be under any illusions that any particular Southeast Asian country is supporting them in general or in a particular policy or action because it believes in their vision of the ideal world order.

Some are so far skillfully negotiating this political tight rope and benefiting from both sides' largesse in the process. Indeed, most Southeast Asian countries are not blatantly choosing sides but are instead demonstrating that the matter of political choice between the two is not "either-or" but a continuum. According to Max Fisher and Audrey Carlsen, [writing in the *New York Times*](#), there are three groups at various stages in this ever evolving continuum — "counteracting" China, "shifting toward" China, and "playing both sides".

Let's look at some individual countries' situations and current positions regarding this U.S.-China struggle.

U.S. "strategic partner" Singapore and U.S. ally the Philippines are thought by some (though not the *NYT* feature) to be in the U.S. camp of "counteracting" China. But this is misleading.

Singapore does seem more ideologically aligned with the United States and even provides temporary basing for U.S. Navy warships and aircraft collecting intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance regarding China. But Singapore also seems to be hedging if not waffling. Perhaps Singapore's current role as both ASEAN interlocutor with China and ASEAN chair has resulted in it taking a more neutral position between the two. For example, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong seemed cool when asked recently about the U.S. proposed Quad — a potential security arrangement between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States — [saying](#), "We do not want to end up with rival blocs forming."

The Philippines is an example of a country clearly "playing both sides" — and so far successfully so. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's abrupt pivot from staunch U.S. military ally to a more independent and neutral stance between the United States and China has startled those analysts and policy makers that assumed Manila was firmly in the U.S. camp. So far the Philippines has benefited from its better relationship with China while maintaining its military relationship — if a less robust one — with the United States.

Other Southeast Asian state — like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and perhaps nominal U.S. ally Thailand — appear to be moving toward China, preferring China's economic incentives over the benefits of U.S. military "protection."

Brunei may also be shifting its position. Although a claimant to part of the disputed area of the South China Sea, it has been relatively silent regarding both the disputes and the U.S.-China struggle for influence. Brunei and China apparently have overlapping claims in the South China Sea and Brunei may be using its claim as leverage to keep

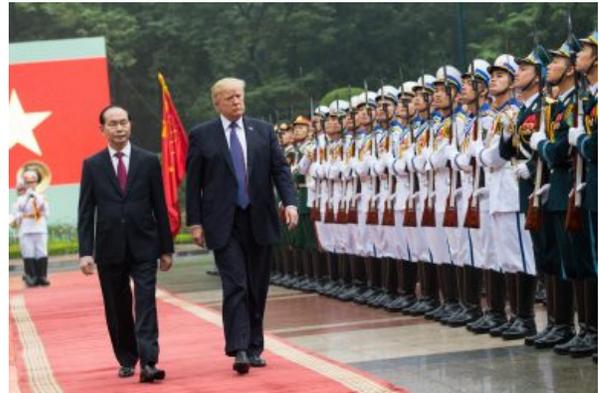


Image Credit: [Official White House photo by Shealah Craighead](#)

badly needed Chinese investment flowing. But this is a two-way street. Beijing may try to use its economic ties with Brunei to help prevent a consensus within ASEAN regarding decisions or statements on the South China Sea.

Indonesia has sharp differences with China regarding the area of the South China Sea north and east of the Indonesia-owned Natuna Islands, where their claims may overlap. The Trump administration is trying to take advantage of this to reinvigorate U.S.-Indonesia military relations. But nonaligned Indonesia and the United States have very different world perspectives. They differ sharply regarding U.S. policies and actions in the Middle East — especially the recent move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. While the United States sees ASEAN as a useful bulwark against China, Indonesia's current interest in leading ASEAN and in regionalism itself seem to have faded in favor of domestic concerns. Foremost among these are development projects in which China's investment and aid can be critical. Plus, U.S.-Indonesian military ties have a troubled past. In the late 1990s they were suspended due to alleged human rights abuses by the Indonesian military. More important, many Indonesians in high places remain suspicious of U.S. motives and worried about the potential regional destabilizing effect of the US-China competition. Indonesia's Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu **has suggested that** "if regional countries can manage the South China Sea on their own, there is no need to involve others."

Vietnam also has sharp differences with China regarding the South China Sea. Vietnam has a policy of "diversification and multilateralization" of relations with the major powers, and the United States has tried to take advantage of this as well as Vietnam's concerns with China. But Vietnam is steadfastly nonaligned. Indeed, its long-standing policy is the "three nos" — no participation in military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no reliance on one country to fight against another. Meanwhile it continues to have strong economic relations with China and seems to have reached an unsteady *modus vivendi* with China regarding the South China Sea disputes. While Vietnam's position may seem to be anti-China, pro-U.S., this should not be taken for granted.

One thing is fairly certain — China –U.S. balancing will become increasingly important and difficult for Southeast Asian countries. It will also undermine ASEAN unity and weaken its "centrality" and influence in security matters in the region — both collectively and for its individual members. ASEAN's divisions on South China Sea issues currently advantage China.

This unfolding political drama could well turn out very badly for Southeast Asian nations that are unable or unwilling to successfully hedge and waffle. Indeed, there is a yawning chasm filled with adverse implications beneath this political tight rope if a country should lose its balance and fall to one side or the other. But for clever, self-confident, and bold leaders, this dilemma presents an opportunity that could prove a boon to those skillful enough to safely navigate these treacherous political waters.

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