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There and back again: What the Cold War for Southeast Asia can teach us about Sino-US competition in the region today

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Abstract

This essay examines how the history of the Cold War in Southeast Asia has shaped, and will likely continue to shape, the current Sino-US rivalry in the region. Expert commentary today typically focuses on the agendas and actions of the two big powers, the United States and China, which actually risks missing the bigger picture. During the Cold War, leaders of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) played a critical role in containing Chinese influence, shaping the terms of Sino-US competition and rapprochement, and deepening the US presence in Southeast Asia. The legacy of ASEAN's foreign relations during and since the Cold War imposes constraints on Chinese regional ambitions today, which militates against the popular notion that Chinese hegemony in East and Southeast Asia is inevitable. This essay underscores that current analyses of the brewing crisis in and around the South China Sea must routinely look beyond the two superpowers to the under-appreciated agency of small- and middle-sized ASEAN actors who, in reality, are the ones who hold the fate of the region in their hands.

Keywords

Sino-US rivalry, Cold War, Southeast Asia, United States foreign policy, Chinese foreign policy, South China Sea, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

A *New York Times* editorial cartoon by Patrick Chappatte from November 2018 depicts US President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China as world-straddling colossi, towering over a map of the

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Southeast Asian states. Trump's t-shirt bears the phrase "U.S. Bully," while Xi's indicates that he is the "Chinese Bully." The Southeast Asians in the cartoon, represented by a man and woman whose backs are turned to us, stand about a quarter the size of Trump and Xi, cowering under a word bubble spoken by both "bullies" that booms: "Pick a Side!"¹

Chappatte's portrayal of Sino-US competition in the sub-region echoes much of what experts and regional leaders have to say about the escalating tensions in and around the South China Sea. One specialist has written of how "Trump's America and Xi's China" cast a "shadow" over the states of ASEAN; another that the US-China trade war cannot but push ASEAN toward an "ideological crossroads"; one ASEAN leader has even expressed worry publicly that the "smaller nations" of the sub-region will be "forced to choose" between the United States or China in a "Cold War-style conflict."²

These notions prevail in large part because many experts and national leaders do foresee a "new Cold War" in Asia—they believe it will arise from the Sino-US economic rivalry, Xi's barely veiled threats against Taiwan (whose security the United States has guaranteed for decades), Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea, and Washington's aggressive counters in those troubled waters.³ Certainly, US vice president Mike Pence has not helped matters by warning that it is entirely "up to China to avoid a cold war."⁴ Indeed, Chappatte's cartoon invokes what are likely popular memories of the Cold War for Southeast Asia, wherein the superpowers must have dominated the destiny of the sub-region, while Southeast Asian peoples—their agency severely limited—were consigned for the most part to walk the treacherous paths wrought by giants.

1. Patrick Chappatte, "Trapped between two bullies: Will Southeast Asian countries have to choose a side?" *The New York Times*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/26/opinion/trapped-between-two-bullies.html> (accessed 23 January 2019).
2. Ja Ian Chong, "A fraught and frightening future? Southeast Asia under the shadow of Trump's America and Xi's China," *Asia Dialogue*, 14 January 2019, <http://theasiadialogue.com/2019/01/14/a-fraught-and-frightening-future-southeast-asia-under-the-shadow-of-trumps-america-and-xis-china> (accessed 23 January 2019); Derwin Pereira, "How the U.S.-China trade war will make or break ASEAN," *South China Morning Post*, 16 November 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/asia/article/2173343/how-us-china-trade-war-will-make-or-break-asean> (accessed 23 January 2019); Michelle Jamrisko, Jason Koutsoukis, and Toluse Olorunnipa, "Singapore PM says ASEAN may need to choose between U.S. and China," *Bloomberg*, 16 November 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-15/singapore-fears-asean-may-need-to-choose-between-u-s-china> (accessed 23 January 2019).
3. Gary Clyde Hufbauer, "The unfolding of a New Cold War," *East Asia Forum*, 18 November 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/11/18/the-unfolding-of-a-new-cold-war> (accessed 23 January 2019); Peter Apps, "Will China go to war over Taiwan?," *Reuters*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-apps-taiwan-commentary/commentary-will-china-go-to-war-over-taiwan-idUSKCN1P11IT> (accessed 20 February 2019); Ankit Panda, "U.S. calls on China to remove missiles from South China Sea artificial islands," *The Diplomat*, 10 November 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/us-calls-on-china-to-remove-missiles-from-south-china-sea-artificial-islands/> (accessed 23 January 2019).
4. Josh Rogin, "Pence: It's up to China to avoid a Cold War," *The Washington Post*, 13 November 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/11/13/pence-its-up-to-china-to-avoid-a-cold-war/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d447c3e066ae (accessed 29 April 2019).

There are broad, if imperfect, parallels between Southeast Asia's current and Cold War crises. For one, China's influence in Cold War Southeast Asia was also considerable, despite it not possessing the economic or military clout it wields today. The Chinese communist revolution was a profound inspiration for most Southeast Asian communist parties, and many of these parties looked to Beijing for guidance and support throughout the Cold War. China's leaders, for their part, wooed the millions-strong Chinese diaspora of Southeast Asia, flooding most of the region's Chinese-language schools and Chinese cultural organizations with communist propaganda. In Indonesia, Beijing's efforts to this end even saw large numbers of ethnic Chinese join China's civil service, many of them becoming diplomats and cadre members of the Chinese Communist Party.⁵ In addition, Beijing cultivated the indigenous communists of Southeast Asia, in particular the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party), the largest communist party outside the USSR and China. As such, Beijing held significant sway in the sub-region from the mid 1950s into the early 1960s, when Sukarno's left-leaning regime in Indonesia courted the PKI and decidedly tilted what was then the world's fifth largest country toward China. US leaders so feared this particular development that in the late 1950s, together with Britain, regional allies in Malaya, and West-friendly factions in Indonesia, they launched a vain attempt to topple Sukarno. Years later, in 1965, when Major General Suharto's right-wing coup marginalized Sukarno and, with US assistance, saw to the purge of the PKI, Beijing and Washington alike understood that the United States had gained the upper hand in the Sino-US rivalry.

On the surface, therefore, it does appear that Cold War Southeast Asia was, like the sub-region today, driven primarily by the twists and turns of Sino-US competition. For even the insignia of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), created in 1962 by American leaders to supervise US military aid to South Vietnam, seems to convey just that: it depicts the sword of the US military splitting apart a wall, symbolizing that the war against Vietnamese communism was at base an assault on (the Great Wall of) China.

Regrettably, discovering these simple equivalents will only encourage those eager to peddle dubious lessons from the past. One such takeaway clothes itself in faux sophistication, making gestures at the professional historian's concern with studying "change over time." Here, the apparent lesson is that the United States barely clinched victory in the Cold War for Southeast Asia, but now things have changed, and China today is much stronger while US decline is truly underway. Superficially, this sounds right. The irony of US defeat in Vietnam is that most nations in the broader region remained aligned with Washington and the capitalist West even as speculations proliferated worldwide that the United States was gravely diminished. Also, China's present economic and military heft is, objectively speaking, immense and expanding. Many experts predict China's imminent

5. See Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, The United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), chapter 1; and Taomo Zhou, "Ambivalent alliance: Chinese policy toward Indonesia, 1960–1965," *The China Quarterly* 221 (March 2015): 208–228.

regional and global predominance—that it will supplant the United States at the apex of the international system. This conclusion requires little effort to reach, given perceptible dips in some indicators of US economic strength, and, crucially, the Trump administration’s showy but fruitless diplomatic displays (read: The Trump–Kim summit in Singapore on 12 June 2018) and the president’s wild, destructive swings at the international norms and institutions that have upheld the global order and US world power. In this vein, Washington’s military retorts to Beijing in the South China Sea are but the protestations of a fading empire, only dimly aware of its inexorable slide into second place.⁶

This prediction, masquerading as a lesson from the past, should worry all who understand that history’s contingencies militate against the argument for determinism. But, like it or not, the narrative of China’s inevitable ascent is popular and pervasive. The notion even makes an appearance on the silver screen. *Crazy Rich Asians*, the high-profile 2018 romantic comedy based on a bestselling novel (its story set in Singapore), opens with a line often attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte: “Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will wake the world.” Whether Napoleon actually spoke or wrote this is doubtful. More to the point, much of the film’s cast is of East Asian descent. Most of its characters are gaudily prosperous and giddy from conspicuous consumption, which loosely and awkwardly identifies a win for Asian American representation in Hollywood with China’s surge to world power status. It is a blithe and uncritical celebration of China’s rise that disregards Beijing’s mounting assertiveness in the South China Sea, an assertiveness enabled precisely by its “crazy rich” wherewithal.

It remains anyone’s guess whether, and when, China’s influence will eclipse that of the United States in Southeast Asia and the wider region. (More on this issue below.) Most importantly, fixating on these two titans and believing, as some do, that Chinese hegemony is inevitable will distort historical interpretations of the Cold War in Southeast Asia and obscure the valuable lessons we can learn from the region’s past.

Consider the example of Sino-US rapprochement—best represented by the landmark Shanghai Communiqué of February 1972—with only the big powers as our predominant concern. Per the Communiqué, China and the United States agreed that neither country would pursue hegemony in East and Southeast Asia, and that both would oppose any third party (a reference to the USSR) expanding into the region. The Sino-US amity that emerged from this turn of events in the Cold War promised to undermine the Soviet position in Southeast Asia, and, crucially, enable

6. Mark Valencia Jr., “The South China Sea and the decline of U.S. influence,” *The Diplomat*, 31 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/09/world/asia/china-us-asia-rivalry.html> (accessed 1 June 2019); Max Fisher and Audrey Carlson, “How China is challenging American dominance in Asia,” *The New York Times*, 9 March 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-ship-sails-near-disputed-south-china-sea-islands-in-challenge-to-beijing-11546838050> (accessed 23 January 2019); Gordon Lubold and Jeremy Page, “U.S. ship sails near disputed South China Sea Islands in challenge to Beijing,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-ship-sails-near-disputed-south-china-sea-islands-in-challenge-to-beijing-11546838050> (accessed 24 January 2019).

US withdrawal from its costly commitment to the Vietnam War. Focusing on the actions of leading US and Chinese officials allows us to trace how Washington and Beijing paved their way toward détente after two decades of mutual antipathy, and suggests that, in one bold stroke, both nations had transformed the Cold War system in Asia.

To be sure, news headlines from the time would attest that history is indeed wrought by great men, the papers' front pages featuring the momentous encounters between self-styled grand strategists like Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Zhou Enlai, and Mao Zedong. A cursory glance at how US allies in Southeast Asia responded to Sino-US rapprochement, too, seems to affirm that the big powers' agendas and manoeuvres mattered above all. The US-friendly states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—that had been supportive of US involvement in Vietnam and resistant to Chinese influence now had no choice but to end their antagonism toward China and follow the US lead. According to this line of reasoning, it is easy to reuse Chappatte's 2018 cartoon to depict the historic events of 1972, superimposing Mao's face on Xi's and Nixon's face on Trump's. There seems no need to alter Chappatte's depiction of the Southeast Asians, dwarfed by China and the United States today as during the Cold War—still trapped between two behemoths.

However, that would be the wrong lesson to derive from history, based as it is upon an incomplete interpretation of Southeast Asia's past. A closer reading of the region's history, one attendant to the considerable agency of ASEAN statesmen, yields a quite different story. In fact, ASEAN diplomacy in the Cold War exerted far more impact upon the Sino-US rivalry and rapprochement than is commonly believed. By the late 1960s, though US military efforts in Vietnam slouched toward a humiliating denouement, and as predictions of US decline gathered momentum at home and abroad, the ASEAN states' earlier determination to align themselves with the United States from the late 1940s through the 1960s had already undergirded US hegemony in the region.

In effect, the anticommunist ASEAN states formed a geostrategic arc of US allies around the South China Sea, enclosing Vietnam and its Chinese backer. The majority of Southeast Asia's peoples and resources therefore resided under these conservative regimes, which, of their own volition and for their own benefit, had tethered their fates to US predominance. The Philippines, with its gigantic US military bases and traditional ties to the United States and the American economy, had been a US ally from the end of World War II. Thailand's anticommunist military elites were eager for US military and economic patronage, believing it would preserve their political authority at home, and thus aligned Bangkok with Washington from 1950. Malaysia and Singapore, rising to independence as Britain exited Southeast Asia, deliberately moved into the US orbit between the late 1950s and mid 1960s to reinforce their links with the capitalist West and build the economic and political strength to consolidate their domestic control. Indonesian right-wing military leaders who had seized the reins of government in 1965, long

suspicious of Beijing's intentions, broke the diplomatic relations with China that had been nurtured by Sukarno and the PKI. By the mid 1960s, all the anticommunist governments of ASEAN had routed their homegrown left-wing movements and incarcerated, brutalized, or deported the ethnic Chinese in their population who—in reality or allegedly—took instructions from Beijing.⁷ China's policy-makers would not attempt to cultivate Chinese diasporic networks in Southeast Asia or anywhere else until the early twenty-first century.⁸

ASEAN leaders had not acted in concert, but the cumulative effect of their anticommunist policies set Southeast Asia on a decidedly pro-US trajectory. And though the leaders of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia would insist for years that they remained nonaligned in the Cold War, and that they sympathized with the developing nations of the Global South who were wary of Western capitalism, it was impossible to ignore ASEAN's decisive support for US intervention in Vietnam and friendliness to US and Western European trade and investment. More to the point, the actions of ASEAN statesmen had effectively contained the communist revolutions of Indochina, which made a deep impression on Zhou Enlai, the man most responsible for the day-to-day decisions concerning Chinese foreign policy.⁹

US intelligence officials would learn in early 1969 that Zhou himself had expressed great annoyance that China was “encircled” and “isolated” in regional, and perhaps even global, affairs. In truth, Chinese leaders had not sought a direct confrontation with the United States in Southeast Asia, preferring to whittle away at US power in the region via proxy in Vietnam. But Chinese (and Soviet) contributions to Hanoi's war-making capacity and US failures in Vietnam had not advanced the cause of communism into wider Southeast Asia. Instead, ASEAN statesmen—again, not in concert—had rapidly linked their foreign policy positions and security to several anticommunist pacts across the region. These included the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), formed in 1966, with members such as Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, South Vietnam, and Thailand; the Australia, New Zealand, United States (ANZUS) Security Pact; and the pro-US Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). When Sino-US rapprochement was finally unfolding in the early 1970s, Zhou would candidly share with Kissinger his view that the institutions for containing China in Southeast Asia were “more numerous than in any other area in the world.” In combination with the internal turmoil from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the burgeoning Sino-Soviet conflict, the efforts of ASEAN statesmen had severely weakened Beijing's prospects for enlarging its regional influence. As historians of Chinese foreign policy point out, by the time

7. Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapters 3 to 5.

8. Anthony Kuhn, “China tries to woo a sprawling Chinese diaspora,” *National Public Radio*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/29/659938461/china-tries-to-woo-a-sprawling-global-chinese-diaspora> (accessed 20 February 2019).

9. Wen-Qing Ngoei, “‘A wide anticommunist arc’: Britain, ASEAN and Nixon's triangular diplomacy,” *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 5 (2017): 916–924.

US officials made overtures to Beijing for rapprochement—overtures that included the United States ending its opposition to China's entry into the UN Security Council (officially replacing Taiwan in 1971)—Chinese leaders had become desperate for opportunities for their country to be recognized as a world power worth negotiating with, and most fearful of losing any more influence in the international system.¹⁰

Here, the point is not that the United States and its regional allies won the Cold War in Southeast Asia. Obsessing about which side won the global Cold War is, at any rate, a dangerous distraction.¹¹ Nor is it an effort to comfort thinkers and observers holding to a pro-US persuasion. Rather, the lesson is that we must pay heed to the under-appreciated agency of ASEAN's small- and middle-sized states. While in the 1960s they lacked firepower and treasure, were still new to international diplomacy, and were under great pressure to accommodate to Chinese hegemony as the United States retreated from Vietnam, their manoeuvres fundamentally shaped Southeast Asian affairs. One cannot overstate how, behind the attention-grabbing struggle of giants and the popular guesswork of pundits and scholars about the rise and fall of great powers, the choices of the small players did (and may again) unleash outsized consequences.

Of course, political cartoons and experts today do not suggest that Southeast Asians have no choices, only that their choices are limited to a world made either in the image of China or the United States. Again, the lessons of history are instructive, and counsel a different view. The salient features of Sino-US détente were actually derived from an ASEAN initiative for neutralizing Southeast Asia that was spearheaded by Malaysia. Nixon's 1971 announcement that he would visit China had not truly shocked his ASEAN allies; most had been skeptical of US commitment to Vietnam from as early as 1968, only three years into the full-scale deployment of American combat troops to the conflict. As Nixon commenced the Vietnamization of the war at the start of his presidency in 1969, Malaysian leaders concurrently designed a plan to have the Cold War powers collectively guarantee that the sub-region remained "free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers." The proposal was entitled ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality), and between 1970 and 1971, Malaysian diplomats fervently promoted the concept at numerous international forums, from the gatherings of non-aligned nations to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, to the United Nations (twice). There was no ASEAN unity about ZOPFAN, however. Most ASEAN leaders doubted that the superpowers would ever accede to the Malaysian plan, and held to conflicting notions of what neutralization even entailed. Nevertheless, the ASEAN leaders signed the declaration of ZOPFAN's principles in November 1971, and, except for the Indonesians, promoted the

10. Ibid, 922–924. See also Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) and Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

11. Odd Arne Westad, "The Cold War and America's delusion of victory," *The New York Times*, 28 August 2017.

neutralization concept directly to Zhou well ahead of Nixon's visit to China. Zhou only disclosed this nugget of information to Kissinger some months after the US president's historic trip.¹²

Crucially, Zhou was most taken with the ZOPFAN concept, especially since it treated China as an equal superpower to the United States, buoying China's status even though US hegemony in the Asia Pacific was the hard reality. One might venture that, ironically, while the ASEAN statesmen had confined Beijing's influence within Indochina by casting their lot with the West, they had also through ZOPFAN invited China back into contention with the United States. In US transcripts of Zhou's discussions with Nixon about formalizing the wording of the Shanghai Communiqué in February 1972, Zhou assiduously prodded Nixon to accept that the United States and China should together keep Southeast Asia "an area of *peace and neutrality*," offering phrases and ideas lifted straight out of the ZOPFAN plan. When Nixon assented to precisely Zhou's calls for a "neutralized area" guaranteed by both powers, Zhou indicated there and then that these principles were equivalent to the Shanghai Communiqué's trademark statement that neither the United States nor China "seeks hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region," and that both would prevent another power from attempting to "establish such hegemony."¹³

ASEAN statesmen had profoundly influenced the principles of Sino-US détente, even if they were not fully cognizant of the fact. The United States and China may have wielded great power during the Cold War, but they were not the exclusive arbiters of Southeast Asia's affairs. Size was not all that mattered. We must therefore keep in mind the diplomacy of ASEAN officials that unfolds nearly out of sight, no thanks to the grand moves of the big powers. As ASEAN's Cold War experience suggests, the region's fate will be borne not merely of Southeast Asians picking a side in the Sino-US rivalry, but also from the designs and initiatives of Southeast Asians.

Even so, it would not do to simply propose that Southeast Asia's Cold War history will repeat itself in the coming years. All the parties entangled in this present crisis have undergone changes in the four decades since the normalization of Sino-US relations, none more dramatically than China. It is no surprise, then, and bears repeating, that as most eyes and minds fixate on Beijing's newfound power, the argument for China's inescapable predominance in the near-future radiates great appeal for casual and informed observers, seeming to diminish the case for Southeast Asian agency. Indeed, there is no ignoring the gulf between China's economic and military power during the Cold War and the massive capacity it presently commands. Surely it is reasonable for many, and tempting for most, to see China's great leap since the 1970s as an awakening of sorts—a state of affairs approaching what Napoleon purportedly warned of China, a fateful turn in world history now finally at hand.

12. Ngoei, "Wide anticommunist arc," 924–927.

13. Ibid, 928–930. Italics added.

Setting aside whether China's aggressive Cold War policy—particularly its fierce rivalry with the USSR for primacy in the communist world—even counts as slumber, it is worth examining what hay ASEAN made while China supposedly slept. Over the forty-odd years since the end of the Vietnam War, Southeast Asia has not somehow turned into a level playing field for Washington and Beijing. The US–ASEAN relationship is deep and wide-ranging, and in this century alone these transpacific ties have thickened considerably. As the US–ASEAN Business Council notes, ASEAN is the “number one destination for US investment in Asia,” welcoming “almost \$274 billion in cumulative investment from the United States,” an amount that is “more than what the US has directed to China, India, Japan and South Korea combined.” As of 2015, more than 3,000 US companies conduct their business in ASEAN, “including 70% of the 130 U.S. multinational enterprises (MNEs) listed in the Global Fortune 500.” The relationship moves in the opposite direction as well, for ASEAN has remained a steady investor in US stocks since the early 2000s, annually putting almost twice as much into that market as China has done.¹⁴ In addition, the US military has been an intimate partner in ASEAN's many multilateral exercises, some of which have run for decades.¹⁵ From the ongoing US efforts to reinforce these partnerships with ASEAN to recent challenges to China in the South China Sea, it is clear that the United States does not plan to retreat from the region.¹⁶ By contrast, China has only of late begun forging substantial defence ties with ASEAN, touting its security concept as an “Asia for Asians.”¹⁷ We can only imagine what ASEAN military officials think of this all-too-familiar phrase, its troubling similarity to the Japanese Empire's wartime slogan of “Asia for Asiatics” and the (unintended) messages China has clumsily conveyed about its designs on the region.

Given the decades-old US–ASEAN relationship, a relationship that predates the so-called rise of China, perhaps the question of how soon Beijing will achieve hegemony in Southeast Asia is less pertinent. Instead, it may be apropos to ask: If China was figuratively asleep, to what reality has it now awoken? It is a reality in which the region's history positions China as an outsider and the United States as an old ally. To be sure, Southeast Asians in government, business, media, and civil society today (as in the last days of the Vietnam War) entertain doubts about US commitment to the region, according to the findings of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singapore-based think tank. More importantly, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak's

14. U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, “Investment,” <https://www.usasean.org/why-asean/investment> (accessed 12 February 2019).

15. U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, “The United States & ASEAN,” <https://www.usasean.org/why-asean/united-states-and-asean> (accessed 12 February 2019).

16. Prashanth Parameswaran, “What's in the new US-ASEAN maritime exercise?,” *The Diplomat*, 24 October 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/whats-in-the-new-us-asean-maritime-exercise/> (accessed 14 February 2019); Ryan Browne, “U.S. warships again challenge Beijing's claims in South China Sea,” *CNN Politics*, 11 February 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/10/politics/us-ships-south-china-sea/index.html> (accessed 14 February 2019).

17. Prashanth Parameswaran, “China to hold first meeting with ASEAN defense ministers in Beijing,” *The Diplomat*, 3 June 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/china-to-hold-first-meeting-with-asean-defense-ministers-in-beijing/> (accessed 12 February 2019).

surveys reveal that “fewer than one in 10 [respondents] saw China as a ‘benign and benevolent power,’” and respondents deplored Beijing’s thinly veiled bent toward absorbing ASEAN into its orbit. A majority of respondents urged their leaders to be skeptical of President Xi’s “hallmark policy” for China–ASEAN economic integration, the Belt and Road Initiative. These Chinese projects, in the opinion of Southeast Asians, “lacked transparency,” and seemed like gateways to “unsustainable financial debts with China.”¹⁸

ASEAN is certainly not flinging open its arms to Chinese influence—a few regional leaders do indicate readiness to accommodate to China, but most proceed with utmost caution. This wariness of, and resistance to, China is not new, but is a product of the region’s history. At the height of the Cold War, Southeast Asian elites persistently viewed China with distrust, believing that Chinese communism sought to strangle indigenous nationalism in the cradle. Indeed, Beijing’s support for Hanoi’s war with the United States only confirmed these views, for the pro-US elites of Southeast Asia feared that North Vietnam’s surprising tenacity might reanimate the severely weakened communist factions outside of Indochina. US leaders learned this directly and repeatedly from their Southeast Asian allies in the 1960s.¹⁹ At any rate, the communist factions of the sub-region that during the Cold War aspired to emulate Beijing are long gone. Thus, the current strength of the Chinese economy has not bought Beijing the kind of widespread admiration and ideological devotion its revolutionary success did in the Cold War, only renewed suspicion of Chinese motives and machinations. While not insurmountable, these remain formidable obstacles to the significant and speedy expansion of China’s sphere of influence.

Since Southeast Asia’s Cold War history means its peoples and leaders are not easily charmed by China’s newly deep pockets, then Beijing’s decision to pump its monies into militarizing the South China Sea takes on new meaning. China’s artificial islands in these waters, armed to the teeth, intimidating passing naval vessels of rivals and the odd fishing boat, are as much displays of China’s power as betrayals of its inadequacies. Sabre-rattling so extravagant and conspicuous is likely the resort of those without genuine political capital, of those mindful that they cannot simply purchase loyalties. Equally, Beijing’s choice in this regard speaks loudly of its limited repertoire of tools to reshape the region. Mao Zedong might have approved of such tactics given his oft-quoted statement that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” But opting for coercion at this scale wins no friends, and smacks of imperialistic behaviour. Empires have crashed

18. “Southeast Asia wary on China, Belt and Road Initiative: Survey,” *Al Jazeera*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/southeast-asia-wary-china-belt-road-initiative-survey-190107030233089.html> (accessed 13 February 2019).

19. Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address on Vietnam before the National Legislative Conference, San Antonio, Texas,” 29 September 1967, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/237536> (accessed 13 February 2019); Richard M. Nixon, “A conversation with the president about foreign policy,” 1 July 1970, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239969> (accessed 13 February 2019). Also see Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapter 5.

and burned on similar decisions in Southeast Asia—Japan in the Second World War, the United States in Vietnam. These are cautionary tales of thwarted imperial ambitions and horrific carnage. If China's ambitions possess corresponding dimensions, it must swim against the tides of history.

The enduring consequences of the Chinese Cold War encounter with Southeast Asia suggest that Chinese hegemony in the region is anything but inevitable. Regardless, many in the punditocracy will keep harping on the inevitability of Chinese predominance in hopes of foretelling the next seismic shift in world affairs. Determinism is an appealing but ahistorical mindset. We should be, like all good students of history, guarded against such pat conclusions while remaining on the lookout for unexpected turns of events and significant historical actors who have received less attention. In this way, the critical lessons of the past become clear: A tight focus on the big powers, the United States and China, actually means missing the big picture. ASEAN statesmen, their agency unfairly downplayed in popular thought, had a critical role in containing China during the Cold War, shaped the terms of Sino-US détente, and deepened US influence in Southeast Asia. Today, China's determination to brandish its military muscle signals that the history of ASEAN's foreign relations has imposed serious constraints on Chinese influence. Indeed, the many artificial Chinese islands in the South China Sea reveal Beijing's frustration with ASEAN leaders' reluctance to wholeheartedly embrace the Belt and Road Initiative; with ordinary Southeast Asians who remain impervious to Beijing's charm offensive (insofar as China's "Asia for Asians" concept is charming); and with the lasting economic and military cooperation between ASEAN and the United States.

Perhaps, then, it is worth revising Patrick Chappatte's rendition of the sub-region's current geostrategic dilemma. With apologies to the artist, we might instead shift Trump and Xi to the front of the picture, their faces now turned away from us, their national flags on their backs for identification. The two leaders still stand on a map of Southeast Asia that stretches toward the back of the picture, and they face down the man and woman supposed to represent ASEAN. In this rendering, however, the two Southeast Asians are not much smaller than Trump and Xi, and we can now see their faces (they do not look friendly to Xi). Above all, the Southeast Asians, not the big powers, have uttered a word bubble that looms over everyone—it contains their declaration: "No fate but what we make."

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