



Weighing the Rebalance Policy Brief Series
October 2015

U.S.-China Relations and Regional Security Architecture: A View from Southeast Asia

Joseph Chinyong Liow

Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies, Brookings Institution

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- China and the United States must be explicit about their strategies and strategic interests in order to make clear that accommodations are not indicative of weakness or decline, and that resistance is not necessarily a sign of containment or exclusion.
- China and the United States must operationalize and deepen cooperation in areas where there is convergence of interests, such as non-traditional security areas like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, in order to overcome mistrust.
- China and the United States should not side-line ASEAN and should use the full suite of regional multilateral mechanisms to enhance bilateral relations and demonstrate commitment to regional stability and prosperity.
- ASEAN states must prioritize integration and unity.

Weighing the Rebalance is a Wilson Center initiative that brings a series of experts to Washington to analyze the Chinese and American roles in the Asia-Pacific from the viewpoints of countries whose futures will be shaped by Sino-U.S. competition and cooperation in the region. This paper was presented at the fourth event of the series: "Cautious and Conflicted: Singapore, Malaysia, and the U.S. Rebalance to Asia" on September 8, 2015.

With the impending finalization of the ASEAN Economic Community and completion of several Mekong Delta development projects as well as the potential ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and anticipated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank investments, Southeast Asia is poised to sustain its economic dynamism and growth for the foreseeable future. At the same time, creeping militarization in the South China Sea and the absence of concrete mechanisms and political will among disputants to restrain their activities have introduced an element of uncertainty to the regional geostrategic environment that threatens to upend the regional economy. The regional security architecture needs to evolve to capitalize on the potential that recent multilateral trade and economic initiatives portend, while minimizing the risks of instability. At the core of this architecture lies the U.S.-China relationship.

THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA IN ASIA-PACIFIC

Regardless of the variation in their political systems and foreign policy outlooks, Southeast Asian states share a consensus view that stable U.S.-China relations underpin the regional security architecture. Despite the fact that there are more avenues for bilateral interaction and exchange between the United States and China today, mutual distrust remains acute.

This paradox remains a matter of concern for regional states. Beneath this strategic mistrust between the United States and China lie real divergences of interests. Even where there is a convergence of interests, there remain differences at the policy level on how to cooperate and proceed.



While the Obama administration's so-called "rebalance" to Asia is welcomed by Southeast Asian nations, the diplomatic language of the "pivot" itself belies the absence of a U.S. strategy towards Southeast Asia. Beyond the customary references to growing trade figures and freedom of navigation, it remains unclear in the minds of

many Southeast Asian policy makers what American interests in Southeast Asia really are.

Regional anxieties are exacerbated by the realities of geography (the United States may be a Pacific power, but it is not a residential power), politics (U.S. domestic politics has posed obstacles to regional engagement, such as the threat of sequestration, cancellation of major visits because of political gridlock, etc.), and history (regional states are mindful that domestic exigencies and shifting strategic priorities have diminished U.S. interest and presence in the region before). Hence, to allay Southeast Asian anxieties, it is crucial that American commitment in the region not only be palpable, but sustainable; it must be guided by a clear strategy to maximize U.S. influence and capability in the region over the long-term.

The absence of a clear strategy is also evident from Chinese behaviour. President Xi Jinping has introduced the idea of a new type of major power relationship with the United States that is different from the Cold War bipolar structure, and suggests that this can anchor regional security. Nevertheless, the tangible elements of this new major power relationship remain ambiguous, nor has the concept itself been accompanied by blueprints that hint at how it may be operationalized. Yet while Chinese strategy towards Southeast Asia is no clearer than that of the United States, its interest in the region, arguably, are. While China's immediate preoccupation is with domestic political stability and economic development, on the foreign policy front there should be little doubt that China views Southeast Asia as its backyard, where it is (or should be) the dominant actor.

China has demonstrated its readiness to pursue this interest through seemingly contradictory measures that involve economic inducements (which regional states welcome with some discomfort about risks of dependency), and the flexing of military muscle. It is through this optic that the Obama administration's move to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia has been a source of consternation for China.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN MULTILATERALISM

Regional states are under no illusion that they can individually or even collectively shape how U.S.-China relations evolve. It is nevertheless imperative that both powers recognize the potential efficacy of regional multilateral mechanisms established by Southeast Asian states to contribute to the strengthening of the regional security architecture. To that end, ASEAN claims of centrality speak to the utility of ASEAN-driven multilateral processes in providing useful and neutral, if imperfect, platforms for major power engagement. Indeed, it is this logic that underlines regional architecture experiments such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Plus Three.

To play this role however, ASEAN must demonstrate unity and coherence among its members. With the major powers, ASEAN must also demonstrate an ability to manage major power dynamics rather than to reflect or be overwhelmed by them. These remain major challenges for ASEAN on account of struggles to foster unity on matters pertaining to South China Sea disputes and residual bilateral tensions between regional states.

Dr. Joseph Chinyong Liow is Dean and Professor of Comparative and International Politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He concurrently holds the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies at the Brookings Institution, Washington DC, where he is also a Senior Fellow.

