

The diplomatic dance of South-east Asia

Bilahari Kausikan

It is hardly possible today to talk about China in South-east Asia without talking about the United States as well in South-east Asia. But too many discussions of China's relations with South-east Asia – including by some South-east Asians who ought to know better – seem to assume that our region is inhabited by morons incapable of counting beyond two and that the choices facing us are only binary. This is a fundamental misreading of South-east Asia. Only the simple-minded or the partisan assume that one must necessarily “win” and the other “lose”, as if the complex international relations of the region could be reduced to a two-horse race.

As a contiguous big country, China is always going to be influential in South-east Asia. For the same reason, because it is a contiguous big country, China is always going to evoke concerns in South-east Asia. In this apparent contradiction lies the essence of the relationship. China's rise is a geopolitical fact that cannot be ignored. China's rise is challenging but replete with opportunity; China is undoubtedly influential but distrusted.

Big countries, if their intentions are indeed benign, have a duty to reassure small countries on their periphery. This is a duty that China in recent years has failed to perform. On the contrary, Beijing has behaved aggressively in pursuit of its interests. There is a certain cultural autism in Chinese diplomacy under President Xi Jinping – manifest primarily but not solely in China's attitude towards the overseas Chinese – that has accentuated the anxieties.

Chinese diplomats and officials sometimes seem to think that all they need do is offer generous aid, trade and investment and all will be well. The economic factor is indeed crucial. But not all South-east Asians are for sale, or if bought, are going to stay bought. China is beginning to learn that even the venal and corrupt can be nationalists. Nationalism leads South-east Asia to regard both China and the US with scepticism.

The US too is a geopolitical fact that cannot be ignored but is not particularly trusted either. An “off-shore balancer” is always going to be regarded warily – its friends and allies constantly oscillating between fears of abandonment and fears of entanglement. These fears have been accentuated by the Trump administration, but President

Donald Trump did not invent them, and Mr Joe Biden, if he is elected, is not going to erase them.

The porridge of an offshore balancer is always going to be too hot or too cold, and no administration in my experience has ever got the temperature exactly right.

Former president Barack Obama made elegant speeches but clearly had little stomach for the strategic rivalry that is an inescapable reality of major power relations in any system of sovereign states. Whatever you may think of Mr Trump's robust approach towards China, it cannot be accurately described as the “retreat” that a prevalent trope would have us believe.

As the strategic crossroads connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, South-east Asia has always been where the interests of major powers have intersected and sometimes collided. Significant influence is therefore not exclusive influence or dominant influence. Faced with major powers that cannot be ignored but are not trusted, the countries of South-east Asia are responding as they have responded since time immemorial: by dancing. And the steps of this diplomatic dance are intricate.

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“band-wagoning” are alternative strategies. But the diplomatic instinct of South-east Asia, evolved over centuries of living in the midst of major power rivalry, is to do all three simultaneously. This is facilitated by the natural multipolarity of a diverse Indo-Pacific in which a diverse South-east Asia is the linchpin.

The US and China are not the only powers that matter – Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, Russia, Indonesia and Vietnam are not inconsiderable strategic actors in regional politics. A few European countries have the potential to join them.

After the Cold War, Asean encouraged the natural multipolarity of the region through the establishment of forums such as the Asean Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and the Asean Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. They anchor all the major powers in South-east Asia by providing them with legitimate and institutionalised means of engaging the region.

It is often said that South-east Asia does not want to choose between the US and China and wants to be neutral in their disputes. This is true. But not choosing does not mean laying low and hoping for the best. We should not be neutral with regard to our

own interests. The region's multipolarity creates agency to pursue our own interests because it widens the space and opportunity for manoeuvre. Of course, whether we have the wit to recognise our agency and the courage and agility to use it, is another matter. But in principle, agency exists.

The multipolarity of South-east Asia and the Indo-Pacific is not to be understood as a static condition in which all poles are of equal strategic weight. It is asymmetrical and dynamic. US-China relations will form the central axis around which other countries big and small will continually arrange and rearrange themselves in fluid combinations, sometimes tilting one way, sometimes another, as their interests in different domains dictate. A static alignment across all domains is improbable. This century will not be defined by any single country.

• Bilahari Kausikan is a former Singapore diplomat.

• This is an excerpt from a speech he gave at the launch of a book, *In The Dragon's Shadow: South-east Asia In China's Century* (Yale University Press, 2020), by Sebastian Strangio. The launch event was organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.