



ONLINE LIBRARY

(www.onekhmer.org/onlinelibrary)

Title: Southeast Asian Responses to Sino-US Rivalry: A Cambodian Perspective

Name of Author Cheunboran Chanborey

Name of University Australian National University

Country of Study Australia

Major International Political and Strategic Studies

Degree PhD

Course Title International Political and Strategic Studies

Type of Document Commentary-Contributor to Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS)

Year 2016

ISSUE 05- August 01, 2016

Southeast Asian Responses to Sino-US Rivalry: A Cambodian Perspective

Cheunboran Chanborey

The Asian strategic landscape is being overturned by a radical shift in the distribution of wealth and power between the major powers, a corresponding shift in their strategic expectations, as well as the responses from lesser powers to those shifts.

China, the US and the relationship between the two countries constitute the most important factor of the changing strategic environment. Recent developments in Sino-US relations have heightened a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability regarding the future of Asia.

Sino-US Competition: The Thucydides Trap?

Over the last three decades, China has consistently sustained impressive economic growth. It is set to overtake the US as the world's largest economy. Along with its economic development, China's military capability has also improved significantly and thus quickly eroded America's capacity to project its naval power in the region. China's ambitions have grown with its power and it no longer accepts the subordination to US primacy. Prominent Australian strategist Hugh White argues that Beijing is now seeking a new model of great power relations in which it enjoys "at least equality" with the US in regional leadership, and "possibly something more".¹

As China challenges the status quo, the US has been compelled to maintain and ensure its political primacy, economic interests, and military preponderance in Asia. The Obama administration has made it clear and loud that the US is determined to preserve its leadership in Asia in what that has been known as 'pivot to Asia'. The US has noticeably strengthened its security and defence relations with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Sino-US Strategic competition over maritime access, supremacy and dominance in the South China Sea – dubbed by The Economist as the 'Seas of Trouble'² – has been particularly apparent. Recently, the US has intensified its military activities in the South China Sea in response to China's coerciveness in the region.

These developments might lead to what Harvard University Professor Graham Allison has referred to as the "Thucydides Trap": a situation in which a rising power causes fear in an established power, which eventually escalates towards war.³ Not a few gurus in the realist school of thought, including John Mearsheimer, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert Ross, and Aaron Friedberg, share this concern and argue that the clash of the two powers is hardly evitable.⁴

¹ Hugh White, "US-China Rivalry: Does Asia Have to Choose?" Available at: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/02/09/us-china-rivalry-does-asia-have-to-choose/>

² The Economist, "The South China: Sea of Troubles", Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21650122-disputed-sea-growing-security-nightmare-and-increasingly-ecological-one-sea-troubles>

³ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?", Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

⁴ See Zbigniew Brzezinski and John Mearsheimer, "Clash of the Titans", Foreign Policy 146(Jan/Feb 2005), Robert Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia", Security Studies 3(2006): 355-395, Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia", International Security 3(1993): 89-131.

Implications for Southeast Asia

Whether the prediction of an inevitable Sino-US clash is correct or not, competition between the two powers has already generated immense pressure on Southeast Asia. Firstly, countries in the region find themselves facing new and unfamiliar policy challenges as they try to manage and balance their relations with the competing powers that both are crucially important for the region. Clearly, while the US remains the most important security player in the region, China has emerged as the most important trading partner.

Secondly, the Sino-US strategic rivalry has a potential to polarise ASEAN, turning the region once again into a battleground of great power competition. This will put ASEAN's unity at risk due to the lack of a common strategic vision.

Thirdly, if ASEAN becomes polarised amid the growing rivalry between the US and China, ASEAN's convening power as a 'manager of regional order' would become marginalised. In turn, it would put ASEAN's centrality under serious stress and strain.

ASEAN's Responses to Sino-US Rivalry

In fact, Southeast Asian countries ardently desire not to choose between the US and China. They have, to different extents and with different objectives, taken a hedging strategy. Evelyn Goh, Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University, defines hedging as "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality".⁵ In other words, a state seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, in a situation of high uncertainties and high stakes.

Indonesia is a good example. While China has become a more important economic partner of Indonesia, Jakarta's relationship with the US is more substantive on security issues. However, Indonesia has long been sceptical of great powers' intent. Indonesia also continues to feel that it deserves to exercise a leading role in shaping the future course of ASEAN and regional politics. Therefore, according to well-known scholar and current Indonesian ambassador to the UK Rizal Sukma, Jakarta is undertaking a hedging strategy, aimed at moderating the "potentially negative implications of the rise of China" for regional order and simultaneously reducing "America's dominance as a hegemonic power in the region".⁶

Similarly, China's increasing political, economic, and military power has far-reaching implication for Singapore's economic and strategic prospects. Although Singapore does not perceive the rise of China in terms of a military threat, it harbours concerns about China's future role and place in the region and how it will affect the regional security architecture. Therefore, Singapore sees the necessity of enmeshing the US in Asia.⁷

Vietnam is a special case in terms of its hedging strategy towards China.⁸ On the one hand, Vietnam is balancing against the Chinese threat in the South China Sea through self-help by developing its own sufficient military capacity and strengthening its defence cooperation with the US and other major powers, in order to deter China from using force in the maritime disputes. On the other hand, Vietnam has been utilizing high-level party and state visits as well as developing a dense network of bilateral engagement in order to codify its relations with China. It has also managed to continuously promote economic ties with China and enhance greater economic interdependence, which may act as a cushion to absorb tensions arising from the South China Sea dispute.

⁵ Evelyn Goh, "Meeting the China Challenge: The US in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies", *East-West Centre Policy Studies* 16(2005)

⁶ Rizal Sukma, "Indonesia and the Emerging Sino-US Rivalry in Southeast Asia", Available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR015/SR015-SEAsia-Sukma-.pdf>

⁷ See Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 2(2008): 159-85.

⁸ See Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 3(2013): 333-68; and Carlyle Thayer, "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea", Available at: http://www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/Vietnam_Strategies_China_Thayer.pdf

Broadly, individual countries in the region might choose different toolkits in their hedging strategy against the Sino-US rivalry, based on their geography, historical experience, and overall threat assessment. However, Southeast Asian countries share a common approach, which is the enmeshment of both China and the US into regional multilateral mechanisms, especially in ASEAN and its forums – including the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the East Asia Summit.

This approach enables Southeast Asian nations to address potential threats from the great powers by socializing them with norms and rules and, when needed, impose collective pressure that can constrain their behaviour. Moreover, ASEAN also engages other major powers such as Japan, South Korea, India, the EU, Russia, and Australia in order to create a 'dynamic equilibrium' in Southeast Asia. The active engagement of these major powers creates push-and-pull effects that provide Southeast Asian countries greater freedom and flexibility.

Is Hedging also a Choice for Cambodia?

Cambodia – along with Laos and, to an even greater extent, Myanmar – seems not to privilege strategic manoeuvrability due to its imbalance in relations with China and the US. For Cambodia, China is the kingdom's largest foreign investor and economic

benefactor. Moreover, in the eyes of foreign policy makers in Phnom Penh, China is not a threat, but a protector of Cambodia's territorial integrity: Chinese top leaders have, in many occasions, assured their support for Cambodia.

As for Cambodia-US relations, although bilateral ties have been improved in the aftermath of the Obama administration's declaration of its 'pivot to Asia', there are many hurdles to overcome. These are due to a trust deficit between the two countries' leaders, issues of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cambodia, and Phnom Penh's perception that the US cannot be liable when it comes to Cambodia's security and survival.

A good piece of news for Cambodia, however, is that the current security environment in Asia is very much different from that during the Cold War. Staying neutral was then almost impossible due to spillovers of the Vietnam War and pressure exercised by the two rival camps. Nowadays, besides taking sides for either of the two great powers – China and the US – alternatives are available for Cambodia. Those include actively engaging in regional multilateral arrangements, particularly ASEAN, and strengthening Cambodia's relations with other major powers. By so doing, Cambodia will enjoy more room for manoeuvre. These approaches help Cambodia hedge against risks arising from Sino-US competition as well as potential coerciveness from Beijing.

Cheunboran Chanborey is a PhD candidate in International Political and Strategic Studies at the Australian National University. He is also a research fellow at the Cambodian Institution for Strategic Studies and a lecture at the Department of International Studies, Royal University of Phnom Penh.