

ASEAN'S PIVOTAL ROLE FOR REGIONAL STABILITY: A REALIST PERSPECTIVE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF US-CHINA RIVALRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

The Southeast Asian region, positioned at the crossroads of evolving geopolitical dynamics, presents a landscape rich in opportunities and risks. Its strategic geographical location, serving as a nexus for the global East-West Sea Lane of Communication (SLOC), coupled with abundant natural resources on land and sea, has elevated it to a focal point of geopolitical rivalries. China is taking an assertive stance in the region reminiscent of Cold War dynamics, thereby occupying the gap left by the now defunct the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This shift raises concerns as China flexes its military and economic influence, appearing poised to reshape the existing international order. Such actions signify a potential decline in reliance on the United States (US) within the region and provoke questions about the future balance of power in the region's security environment. The fundamental problem in this study centres on whether China's strategic manoeuvres significantly contribute to the weakening of United States-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (US-ASEAN) relations, thereby influencing the overall balance of power in the region. Therefore, this paper explores the significant role of ASEAN as a pivotal mechanism for regional stability. This study adopts qualitative methods with a mix of descriptive and analytical approaches and studies based on in-depth information and data from case studies. The findings emphasise ASEAN's crucial role in unifying Southeast Asian nations, fostering positive international cooperation, and forming strategic partnerships to counter disruptive forces through peaceful means. Furthermore, ASEAN deploys hedging and enmeshment strategies as a multilateral platform and through bilateral policies. These strategies provide dynamic alignment options, facilitating adjustments amidst the great power manoeuvres. In conclusion, the study strongly asserts that ASEAN holds the key to managing and influencing the current Sino-US rivalry, emerging as a pivotal mechanism for maintaining regional stability.

Keywords: ASEAN centrality, enmeshment, pivotal mechanism, regional stability, South China Sea

Introduction

The Southeast Asian region offers a mix of opportunities and risks with continuously evolving geopolitical constructs. Populated by people of various ethnicity, cultures, and religions, the Southeast Asian region are, moreover, not of the equal state of governance, levels of geopolitical construct, or pace of economic growth. Nevertheless, in recent years, regional internal conflicts are not of critical significance. At present, factors that threaten the security construct of the region is significantly interrelated to South China Sea (SCS) issues whereby numerous non-traditional security threats ranging from piracy to drug smuggling and human trafficking, among others, have become major concerns (Murphy, 2007; Liss, 2011; Freedman & Murphy, 2018; Caballero-Anthony & Gong, 2020). With increasing reliance on fossil fuels to supply the economic growth of the Asia Pacific regions, associated security issues have become more complicated. The region's location in a major Sea line of communication (SLOC) and abundant natural resources (particularly fossil fuel) propagated the region's increasing prominence as a potential arena for geopolitical rivalry (Wan Hassan, 2002; Heritage & Lee, 2020; Shambaugh, 2021; Anh, 2023). As such, the role of ASEAN as a united and formal grouping to consolidate resources collectively for addressing the issues mentioned above has become more prominent in the last few decades.

Aside from the above, the US and Chinese power rivalry has gained momentum since the beginning of the new century (Heritage & Lee, 2020; Mahbubani, 2020; Wood, 2021). The end of the Cold War created the opportunity for the rapid emergence of China as a major global military and economic (Allison, 2020). Associated tensions are escalating with China's growing economic, foreign policy, and regional strategic interests. Furthermore, the propagation of Chinese influence through the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) (Zhao, 2019; Gong, 2020) has rapidly transformed and reshaped the Asian region's geopolitical environment. Through the BRI, China deployed soft power diplomacy to ensure the expansion of its sphere of influence worldwide. On the other hand, the increasing presence of Chinese warships within ASEAN member states (AMS)' waters highlight Beijing's continuous use of hard power approaches, indicating its growing attempts to unilaterally change the regional status quo. Increased mistrust from the global community on China's continuous and aggressive military presence in regional waters have become a major concern to ASEAN, leading to discourse on the possible manifestation of a global scale conflict (Senese, 2005; Shambaugh, 2021). In short, China is noted to have used its military might and economic influence to erode the existing international order.

As such, ASEAN's role as a unifying mechanism for Southeast Asian nations needs to be poised as a prominent factor for propagating positive international cooperation and strategic partnerships - it has the construct to become a pivotal element for balancing disruptive forces in the region through peaceful means. US-ASEAN relations have always been strong – the alliance is complementary in form and benefits all associated parties economically and strategically. Although the alliance is not military in form, the notion of superpower support carries weight in influencing regional power dynamics. China is somewhat poised to pursue the same partnership with ASEAN and is more than capable of strategically eroding US-ASEAN ties for the said purpose (Shambaugh, 2004).

The US and China's ambition to protect their regional strategic interests prompted the race to strengthen relations. As the only formal regional body, ASEAN is relevant to both superpowers as the centre of significance in trade and economic agenda. In this sense, US-China rivalry is centric on ASEAN concerns – member states are, in fact, largely aligning themselves with either China or the US, possibly strategically hedging (Kuik, 2021; Anh, 2023) to keep options open to ensure economic and geopolitical advantages. For instance, the Philippines and even Malaysia have in some way knowingly developed strong ties with China in recent decades, possibly partly to ensure leverage over territorial disputes in the SCS. On the other hand, smaller or weaker member states are more anxious about threats from immediate neighbouring states. Therefore, they are willing to compromise ASEAN centrality and ensure leverage through strong ties with great condescending power. In short, each member country has its strategic interests in mind, conforming to the realist notion of "self-preservation".

In such a manner, the heightening US-China rivalry in the region is forcing gaps between AMS, particularly when issues associated with state sovereignty are significant. Moreover, the superpower rivalry in the region has also significantly affected ASEAN's integrity as a formal and united regional organisation. Consensus on decisions as a united front is another major focus of international discourse. Bilateral relations of member countries with either the US or China, disrupts ASEAN's multilateral platform for realising its regionalism agenda as a united international organisation. As such, this possibility is observed to not only be a strong indicator signifying the decline of reliance on the US hegemony in the region but raises questions concerning the balance of the future security environment of the region.

This paper highlights ASEAN's significance as a pivotal mechanism for regional stability; the current discourse on US-China rivalry in the region and the

consistent interest by the rivalling superpowers to vie for strong ASEAN engagement or support are analysed to be the prevalent indicative factors.

Research Methods

The interpretivist approach which is based on critical analysis and qualitative investigation on issues relating to international relations in the Southeast Asian region requires data collection, and investigation of academic literature inclusive of archival materials and database. As such, a wide range of material related to the political interactions of countries, societies, and organisations involved would be analysed to comprehend better the geopolitical dynamics of the regions concerning US relations. In-depth reading of reports and assessments published by international bodies and government agencies concerning the subject matters will also be a vital part of the investigation (ie. current reports and general geopolitical history). Resources for the said data is mainly expected from secondary sources.

Theoretical Framework: A Realist Perspective

The objective of this study is mainly to investigate the geopolitical significance of ASEAN as a pivotal mechanism to stabilise power rivalry in the Southeast Asian region. China's increased naval presence in the SCS is seen as aggressive acts to destabilise the security status quo of the region. The US and China are major powers currently engulfed in global geopolitical power rivalry. Both powers are aggressively protecting their worldwide interest and have different perspectives on the international system, affecting the strategic goals they have chosen to pursue (Heritage & Lee, 2020; F. Zhang, 2020; Wood, 2021). The countries analysed in this study, be they superpowers or developing member states of ASEAN, define their respective strategic goals differently. Each nation considers their strategic objectives in terms of how they are perceived to serve national interests best. This notion denotes that the individual state actor's different perspectives and methods of achieving these strategic goals can deter cooperative arrangements to ensure the general stability and prosperity of the region. The impact may propagate beyond the immediate region and affect the international community in general.

International politics is the struggle for power and the best technique for managing power is via balance of power approach (Peou, 2021). The realist theory suggests that anarchy exists in the international environment and the state must relate to the fact that survival is always central to state intention and that potential

adversaries will use their capabilities against the state concerned in order to achieve the same goal of survival (Waltz, 1979). The anarchic nature of the international system implies that there are often underlying survival factors motivating the state to establish cooperative efforts, albeit without declaring the obvious. The subject matter studied for this paper can be analysed in such a manner – ASEAN may be keen to establish strategic partnerships with the US or China for strategic and economic gains. On the other hand, there may be the possibility of strategic hedging by all the states investigated in this research work – all with the intent of strengthening their own sphere of influence outside the traditional area of interest in addition to ensuring security counterbalance towards each other.

Meanwhile, the balance of power theory takes international cooperation into perspective, supporting the concept that some states can cooperate when dealing with a common interest of defeating a common threat (Sheehan, 1996). Nevertheless, insecurity due to the uncertainty about each other's future intentions and actions that work against their cooperation may manifest and thus, a state may worry about a division of gains that favour the other more than itself. However, the state may worry less when it is dependent on other states through trade or cooperation, having the option to limit its cooperation with these states if circumstances are unfavourable. Therefore, the balance of power can also be used to explain ASEAN's strategic need to maintain strong ties with the US which can effectively balance against China's assertiveness in the region (Kuik, 2021). For instance, during the Cold War, ASEAN remained to be non-aligned but was linked with the US to balance threats from Communist domination; ASEAN was actively establishing strategic partnerships with nations of common interests and threats at the time.

In a nutshell, analysis of the proposed research subject matter through the realism theoretical framework is suitable and favourable. A similar posture is adopted by China when actively establishing bilateral ties with SCS littoral states to extend its naval capabilities in response to US naval dominance in the region. In essence, the study of US and China's foreign policies relates directly to their behaviour in the international system, thus denoting that the theory of realism as a practical approach considering its suitability for describing state behaviour; the balance of power theory supports the behaviour of all states to be analysed in this study.

The US-ASEAN Relation: Dilemma or Powerplay?

Key American concerns within Southeast Asian nations encompass maritime security, counterterrorism, addressing transnational organised criminal activities,

fostering democracy, upholding human rights and ecological conservation, and promoting liberalized trade, among various other interests (Shambaugh, 2021). However, the US-ASEAN relation has never been straightforward or one dimensional in form – before ASEAN was created, most of its member states had engaged with the US in one way or another. As a bloc, the US relationship with ASEAN has manifested itself as an “inconvenient disruption” to respective bilateral engagements (Congressional Research Service, 2010). Bilateral ties with respective member nations of ASEAN are more relevant to the US in terms of projecting its authoritative role in the region – in this respect, the US has provided numerous assistances to Southeast Asian states (*i.e.* security and economic-based bilateral initiatives) (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

However, a multilateral based platform such as ASEAN presented difficulties for realising US ambition in the region – within the context of ASEAN’s consensus-based decision-making mechanism, the US deemed the organisation to be ineffective as a channel for dialogues on solutions to regional issues (Lee, 2018).. This aspect is further substantiated by the fact that AMS include states that span from democratic or highly developed economic centres to impoverished dictatorships; as such, there would be considerable implications on the organisation’s effectiveness to act united in reality. In fact, conflict of national interests among member states are unavoidable; the realist theme prevails in this case (McGlinchey, Walters, & Scheinpflug, 2017). Nonetheless, in an attempt to unify the grouping, a new Charter was enacted in 2007 (Seah, 2009) to mitigate the predicaments, although it still maintained the principles of consensus and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. It is without doubt presented as a great challenge to all parties.

Despite the above, ASEAN countries believe that the US is lacking on commitments towards multilateral engagement with ASEAN or Southeast Asia as a region and had thus considered this aspect a factor affecting bilateral relations negatively (Tobing, 2018). Significant initiatives in 2009 indicated US “compliance” towards this end; the Obama Administration was more open to multilateral platforms – ASEAN was one of them. Washington DC expressed keen intent to work more closely with multilateral organisations, particularly ASEAN - the first US-ASEAN summit attended by President Obama in 2009, for instance, was lauded as “a historic new level of engagement for the United States with ASEAN” (U.S. Mission to ASEAN, n.d.). Other initiatives soon followed and were also substantiated by succeeding US leaders. Nevertheless, the US had episodic engagements with ASEAN during Trump’s administration.

ASEAN is fully aware of US military and economic might in Southeast Asia and its intent to remain a significant power in the region through soft power

diplomacy - the above-mentioned diplomatic gesture of goodwill is an example. The US needs to maintain strong ties with formal groups such as ASEAN to become its strong and committed regional platform to maintain the status quo.

As host to several security and trade-related initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region, ASEAN is pivotal in its role as a significant factor in balancing regional powers and beyond. The US cannot afford the risk of becoming insignificant to such a prominent organisation (Shambaugh, 2020). The impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy has also highlighted the significance of Chinese influence on ASEAN leaders (Maude, 2020).

Enter The Dragon or Revisit the old Neighbourhood?

China's formal relationship with Southeast Asian states can be traced back several centuries ago (Stuart-Fox, 2014), even before the current international boundaries were in place. The Straits of Malacca and littoral states (SCS) in the Southeast Asian region were central and among the most important trading ports of call for the global SLOC, then and now. China's ties with this region are deep-rooted, from economy to culture. Earlier Chinese dynasties had expanded their sphere of influence throughout the region but had halted during the turbulent period of the Qing Dynasty at the turn of the 20th century. However, China has emerged as a strong contender to the US (Lee, 2020). Soft power rivalry between the US and China is at play in the region apart from other powers showing renewed or increasing interest in the region, such as Japan and India. Even the new US president has acknowledged this reality (Churchill, 2021).

At present, China's reasons for strengthening ties with ASEAN are multi-dimensional in nature (Astarita, 2008; Kipgen, 2018), but through the multilateral Southeast Asian grouping, an obvious aim would be primarily to defuse security tensions in the SCS. Initiatives that promote economic integration and infrastructure development are means for Beijing to cultivate diplomatic influence and support from member states in other international arenas, too (Zhou & Bermingham, 2020). China's regional soft power approach is commonly staggered with demonstrations of aggressive military posture (Wu, 2021). A common geopolitical discourse on China's strategy concludes that declining US engagement with ASEAN has opened the floodgates for escalated multilateral efforts from Beijing to pursue its aspiration to secure hegemony in the region (Zhou & Bermingham, 2020).

The turn of the new century witnessed many China-ASEAN initiatives to mitigate SCS and non-traditional security issues in the region jointly. Formal cooperation relating to economic and agricultural initiatives were also pursued

fervently. China's active involvement in the ASEAN Plus Three and ASEAN-China FTA (ACFTA) is generally of concern to the US – the US is not included in these regional groupings and thus may be advantageous for realising Chinese agendas. The BRI is another concern for the US' relevant discourse concerning this initiative, pointing to China's use of economic strength to ensure the expansion of its sphere of influence. As such, some Southeast Asian countries cautiously engage with China while hedging actively against its rise (Parameswaran, 2020). Nevertheless, recent commitment from Beijing towards improving multilateral engagement as the approach for mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may further sway support from ASEAN (Albert, 2021).

US-China rivalry: Impact on the Southeast Asian region

The COVID-19 pandemic has shrouded the whole world with anxiety, and unfortunately, to some extremity, some governments have adopted defeatist attitudes towards handling the crisis. Despite the need to completely close ranks and consolidate universal efforts to ensure the continuance of humanity, geopolitical tensions between two superpowers, namely the US and China, have clearly heightened rather than subsided - competition has escalated to near confrontation in recent times, particularly intensified since Trump's administration (Feng, 2020; see also Burgess, 2016). The domestic crisis in Myanmar centric to the US-China rivalry (Ng, 2021) illustrates this point. – While the US has “suspended all engagement with Myanmar under a 2013 trade and investment agreement until the return of a democratically elected government”, Beijing “has refrained from condemning the coup, which has seen over 500 protesters killed, leading to rising anti-China sentiment and complaints in Myanmar that it is siding with the military junta”. Indonesia has prompted ASEAN to “encourage a negotiated solution despite a long-standing policy of not commenting on each other's domestic problems”. In contrast, Brunei, the current chair of ASEAN, has promptly supported a call for the meeting of the member states' leaders to discuss and resolve the escalating domestic tensions in Myanmar.

This recent development reflects ASEAN's readiness to act collectively for the sake of regional well-being, despite the organisation's longstanding commitments towards the policy of 'non-interference' in domestic affairs of member states. China, in turn, supported ASEAN's initiative demonstrating in some way the recognition of ASEAN's credibility and capability as a collective regional body to resolve regional affairs on the one hand, and on the other hand, in some way reflects ASEAN's role as a pivotal platform to facilitate 'middle way' solutions to regional issues centric to US-China rivalry. Meanwhile, the US has

only imposed a suspension of relations with Myanmar since 2013 without obvious association with any ASEAN initiatives.

The Sino-American rivalry has intensified since Trump's administration (Feng, 2020), and the two superpowers are irreversibly locked into such extreme rivalry that both countries' allies and partners need to consistently manoeuvre in order to avoid choosing sides (Stromseth, 2019). Washington and Beijing's relationship varies between complicated, positive and highly negative – economic ties in the 80s began to flourish, albeit rivalry over the Pacific region has never ceased, each suspicious over the other's geopolitical agenda (Woon, 2018). China was denoted a "strategic competitor" by Trump's Administration in 2017 (Trump, 2017) and subsequently launched a trade war against China. By mid-2020 continuously deteriorated, with both sides accusing the other of causing the COVID-19 pandemic (O'Keeffe, Bender, & Wong, 2020) - the rhetoric relayed by US politicians or citizens condemned China as the culprit for the pandemic.

Washington has continued its increased military manoeuvres to balance Beijing's hard power assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, highlighting its consistent intention of keeping the region free from Chinese dominance (Poling, 2022). The bilateral tension and show of force continued as both sides cannot afford to appear weak to the world albeit the COVID-19 pandemic. The Far East region, particularly the SCS and Taiwan Strait, have been pressured to align between one side or the other, forcing the world to accommodate to the two rivalling superpowers. As such ASEAN is the formal regional grouping that can potentially represent the face of Southeast Asia and become the pivotal mechanism to resolve the predicaments caused by the two competing superpowers – through close collaboration among member nations and other like-minded middle powers.

ASEAN: Pivotal Mechanism for Regional Stability

The SCS is an inherent maritime territory of the SEA region and has always been the object of global power play. It is a critical SLOC for a significant volume of the world's goods are shipped through this territory. As such, the SCS is also the hotbed of complex maritime territorial disputes or tensions potentially devastating if not diplomatically contained or defused (Samuels, 2005). The security construct of the SEA region, particularly that associated with the SCS (i.e. eight out of ten AMS are SCS littoral states), may implicate various global issues - the Sino-US rivalry has further emphasised this fact. As central to the US-initiated Indo-Pacific strategy, issues associated with the SCS have consistently become an inherent aspect of current global geopolitical discourse. With that in mind,

ASEAN, being the collective platform to represent members in the said region, has taken the initiative to become the “voice of regional stability” (R. Zhang, 2020).

Most AMS, particularly SCS littoral states themselves, remain cautious of relations with both rivalling superpowers to date; however, they still welcome US presence while at the same time strengthening ties with its competition (i.e., China). The demise of the Cold War order benefitted the whole world. Painful lessons learned from past conflicts caused by ideological differences during the Cold War indicate that another Cold War era would be detrimental to most developing countries. It may also set back progress to the global economy apart from stunting the growth of a civilised and progressive international society based on prosperity for all humanities. The issues of contention may have evolved, but the potentially devastating implications from intense power rivalry remain the risk of being burdened on non-participating state actors.

The people of SEA have experienced first-hand the detrimental effects of deadly conflicts initiated by competing powers – from ancient empires of the past to superpower rivalries in the modern era. Citizens of ASEAN countries are “products” of the suffering mentioned above. The “ASEAN way” approach can be deemed to be a culmination of good practices from past experiences handed down from leaders of the earlier generations to address the implications of great power rivalry. At some point in history, AMS had been colonies of great powers, be they from the East or the West. In such a way, ASEAN, recognised as an essential regional platform by relevance to the Indo-Pacific agenda, indicates its suitability and ability to engage both competing superpowers productively. AMS’s collective experience and commitment to achieving regional prosperity and peace (ASEAN Charter) are also contributing factors.

The geopolitical foundation of ASEAN is associated with its commitment towards strengthening dialogue relations and the creation of broader ASEAN-led economic and strategic initiatives denoting aspirations to ASEAN Centrality (Acharya, 2017). Thus, the notion of ASEAN Centrality itself reveals the conscious positioning of ASEAN as a pivotal mechanism for addressing great power competition in the region. From a realist perspective, Chinese maritime assertiveness has allowed the US to regain regional trust to sustain its geopolitical goals, particularly in the security domain. Washington’s attraction to the region is in the security domain, which is inherent because of the need to protect its interests. By way of the intrinsic nature of security issues that mutually benefit regional state actors, individual ASEAN members or ASEAN as a collective body is united to favour US presence. On the other hand, in the same mutually beneficial way, economic advantages motivate a united ASEAN front to support Chinese ties in bilateral or multilateral terms.

The current global pandemic has opened another opportunity for rivaling powers to regain and motivate regional trust – by way of vaccine diplomacy (Ma, 2021), which is instrumental for soft power strategic manoeuvring. Nevertheless, geopolitical advantages would only be realisable with careful management of their approaches. Under the Biden administration, the US had quickly further exploited the opportunity to regain regional confidence through vaccine diplomacy when issues concerning Chinese vaccines began emerging. Trump's presidency had increased the ASEAN trust deficit in the US and had given China a head-start in strategic soft power manoeuvring (Mishra, 2019). Nevertheless, foreign policies can only become sources of soft power only if there are no other policies that “appear to be hypocritical, arrogant, indifferent to the opinion of others, or based on a narrow approach to national interests” (Nye, 2005, p. 14). China has failed to observe that its employment of vaccine diplomacy is seriously negated by its assertiveness in the SCS, i.e., its soft power efforts are undermined by its evident hard power approach in handling maritime territorial disputes. Biden, however, is aware of the waning US legitimacy in the SEA geopolitical construct and has revised associated policy to quickly re-engage in multilateral platforms through vaccine diplomacy to regain confidence in the region (Poling & Hudes, 2021).

All AMS are demonstrating realist notions of self-preservation – for survival and autonomy. Except for Cambodia and Laos (entrenched Chinese interests), all are free to choose sides based on bilateral or multilateral considerations. Hence, ASEAN as a collective body is intuitive with its response to the rapid increases in the scale of China's economic influence in the region, reacting by way of enmeshment to ensure that some multilateral mechanisms are in place for limiting China's sphere of influence from dominating and becoming a threat to SEA. Machiavellianism-based practices through ASEAN are evident, not in terms of gaining power as an outcome, but by leveraging existing powers that compete for its support through enmeshment and hedging strategies. As a united front, ASEAN can become a collective entity of great significance in the regional geopolitical construct. The present and foreseeable future looks bright for a united ASEAN to pose collectively as a middle power (Stromseth, 2021) – albeit its pivotal role can only be of substance if all member states are united in their stand against the competing superpowers. Middle powers have the geopolitical leverage to increase influence as great power competition intensifies – opportunities to strategically manoeuvre and manage the outcome of the rivalry in their favour.

In sum, ASEAN's leadership capability is argued to be demonstrative of its pivotal role in influencing superpower rivalry in the Southeast Asian region. Findings from relevant analysis strongly support the arguments that the current Sino-US rivalry in the Southeast Asian region can be managed and influenced by

ASEAN, as such answering how ASEAN is a significant stabilising factor in view of heightening US-China rivalry, which is seen to be restructuring the geopolitical balance in the region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

China's strategic approach in the SCS comprises a complex mix of soft and hard power diplomacy, fuelling continuous debates on threats to regional economic sovereignty. Thus, in effect, it has emphasised the need for regional state actors to seek an equilibrium of economic gains and sovereign security - the necessity of retaining US support as a balancing factor. The arguments pursued in this paper are indicative of Southeast Asian resilience against foreign intervention and are tactful in the way they deal with dominating regional powers. Lessons learnt from the past aided regions or enhanced each country's strategic approaches for maintaining autonomy of states while maintaining mutually beneficial ties with competing powers in the region.

The realist approach for survival clearly dictates how diplomatic relations are shaped - the ASEAN way of non-interference accommodates conformance by all member states, hence the uniqueness of the approach for ensuring a united front for dealing with issues that require collective initiatives - the Omnienmeshment approach when dealing with the US and China has typically become the common strategy. ASEAN as a collective agent has directly or indirectly benefited its members from this approach, shaping a regional power distribution outcome that retains a US security leadership role while integrating China's robust geo-economics support. Although individual state interests dominate bilateral or multilateral relations, ASEAN consistently relies on "common grounds" to reign in and unite its members. As such, through ASEAN, constructive and comprehensive engagements are prioritised rather than solely aligning with the US to isolate or "contain" China. A zero-sum power equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific is thus a common objective.

It is also noted that in reality, the current ASEAN-centric geopolitical development in the region, the current US administration has somewhat renewed commitments towards increasing Southeast Asian confidence through ASEAN in order to regain regional significance. By banking on its FOIP strategy, Washington "has gone on the diplomatic offensive in Southeast Asia after years of passive U.S. engagement" for this purpose. Therefore, it is sufficient to conclude that the enmeshment strategy remains to be popularly deployed by ASEAN as a multilateral platform or by member states through individual bilateral policies - "strategic hedging through enmeshment ensures dynamic alignment options in

order to facilitate the ease of adjustment when strategic opportunities arise resulting from the rivalling great powers manoeuvres”.

The Sino-US competition in the Indo-Pacific, with SCS issues central to the contentions, has inadvertently emphasised ASEAN's role as a collective middle power base for handling competing powers. As individual states, ASEAN member countries, particularly SCS littoral states themselves, remain cautious of relations with both rival superpowers, nevertheless still welcoming US presence while at the same time strengthening ties with its rival. Through ASEAN or the notion of ASEAN centrality, member states can leverage accordingly to engage both competing superpowers productively – it is also argued that ASEAN members' collective experience, in addition to their commitment towards achieving regional prosperity and peace, are also contributing factors.

ASEAN leadership is demonstrated through its willingness to lead or host strategic initiatives and dialogues – the conscious positioning of ASEAN as a pivotal mechanism for addressing issues arising from great power rivalry in the region manifests member states' commitments towards ASEAN centrality. All member nations are demonstrating realist notions of self-preservation - for survival and autonomy. Even in times of the pandemic, ASEAN as a multilateral mechanism is intuitive with its response to the rapid increases in the scale of external power influence in the region, wielding extraordinary political will to neutralise threats to the stability construct of the region. A united ASEAN posed collectively as a middle power base serves to benefit its member states provided that its common goal is set for peace and prosperity for all, whilst prone to leveraging to out-manoeuvre dominating intentions by external powers.

Within this scope, ASEAN has to proactively leverage its positioning to promote peace in the region. ASEAN cohesiveness will be the determining factor. With a united front, ASEAN will have a stronger voice amid superpower rivalry in the region, which will benefit the AMS overall. Therefore, ASEAN has a choice of either 'hanging together' or facing the consequences of 'hanging separately' and subjugating by the region's superpower rivalry. Maintaining the central role of ASEAN with one voice and one vision is vital for forging and shaping regional peace, prosperity and stability.

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