

South China Sea contestations: Southeast Asia's regional identity and ASEAN's sustainability

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ABSTRACT—Current global news is focused on China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and the ensuing clash with the United States over the "freedom of marine navigation." Against this background of territorial claims lies the complex history of old Asian civilizations which undergird no easy resolution of such territorial issues. This paper interrogates the region's cultural identity paradigm arising from China's territorial claims, the US-China hegemonic global contestation, the US-China trade war and ASEAN's responses to the changing geopolitics and extension of China's geography. It argues that both domestic changes and externalities are affecting ASEAN's regional cohesion.

Keywords: South China Sea, regional identity, Chinese diaspora, code of conduct

Introduction

As if to rebut Obama's "pivot" to Asia and "rebalancing" policies, China's current leadership has added muscle and militarization to its bold and daring South China Sea claims. These underscore the territorial claims to this area on China's 1947 nine-dash map, an issue that remains politically sacrosanct for Beijing but legally unacceptable to the global community. Such geographical expansionism is most worrying for countries in Southeast Asia with which China shares both land and maritime borders. The sheer size of the colonized takeover of 90 per cent (or 3,150,000 sq. km.) of this sea has sent out shock waves internationally and evoked political unease amongst Southeast Asian states. The nationalization of the South China Sea has meant China has unilaterally invited itself into the region and the reality for ASEAN members is that they have to live with an elephant in their room.

The rebuttal of these claims came internationally and legally when the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in The Hague on July 12, 2016 flatly rejected China's territorial claims to the South China Sea and to its many islets, shoals, rocks and reefs. Having earlier stated it is not party to the Tribunal, China was neither moved nor concerned about the verdict. Beijing believes the international legal order is stacked against it and if it becomes the global hegemon, it will want to change this. But by ignoring the global legal order, the world community's opinions and the region's perspectives, China is undermining its own acceptance as a responsible global player. The subtext to China's belief of big powers matching one another and speaking to one another minus the noise of small states is worrying for small states in ASEAN. To avoid having the South China Sea ruled by the law of the jungle, ASEAN members feel it is imperative to put in place an international legal order.

The onus of preventing the law of the jungle determining territorial issues has fallen on the United States and other powers (Japan, India and the European Union). Enter Trump, the surprise American President, and the whole global geopolitical system has become topsy-turvy. Unlike his predecessors, President Donald Trump has his own ideas and agenda about the global political and economic system. He is incensed by the way in which America has been taken advantage of by its allies, the senseless expenditure on wars and the deteriorating American economy. Trump has come at a time when the supposed Thucydides trap is unfolding: the new power change is a rising China and a declining American hegemon (Allison 2017). It remains to be seen whether Trump can arrest the US decline as a global power. He seems to be throwing everything at China to stop its global rise. His imposition of 25 percent trade tariffs on US\$200 billion Chinese goods in May 2019 after the breakdown of US-China trade talks led to a quick retaliatory response from the Chinese that has sent global markets into free fall. The US-China deteriorating relations are difficult enough to contain much less address because their two leaders, Trump and Xi, are staunch nationalists, with egoistic and strong personalities, are willing to take bold decisions, and are interested in maintaining their global power advantage (Wolff 2018; Luce 2017; Allison 2017). While currently the

US has the advantage in military might, the Chinese are seen as being ahead in technology, particularly in 5G technology.

At the center of the US-China technology competition is China's Huawei Technologies and ZTE Corp, which have perfected a 5G technology that the Trump administration believes can be used in spying activities. In August 2018, the Trump administration put into force a ban on the government using equipment from Huawei and ZTE Corp. President Trump further increased pressure on Huawei when, on 16 May 2019, he blacklisted the firm's imports into the US. Essentially, Huawei's equipment will be banned from sale in the US (Lim 2019: 1). The collateral damage to Huawei from Trump's actions is widening the trade war between China and the US. In contravention of explicit warnings from the US against Huawei, many Western countries are engaging Huawei to gain access to 5G capabilities. The US and China are more evenly matched in global economic competition and, unfortunately, that is where the global and regional impact will be pronounced and long drawn out as each hegemon tries to outdo the other economically. The current economic stalemate between the two countries will decide once and for all the speculation as to which economy is stronger. Given President Trump's criticism of past US administrations' extravagant expenditure on wars (US\$ 6 trillion since 2001) and his personal aversion to wars it seems unlikely that Trump will want to engage in a war with China in the South China Sea.

Given the unpredictability of Donald Trump, his nationalistic "America First" ideology, domestic economic interests and a distrust of multilateral pacts, ASEAN states have been left in a political quandary. ASEAN states have suddenly become divided over foreign policy, with some taking positions on both sides and the remaining states becoming fence-sitters, biding their time to see how to align themselves with the future powers in the region. For the first time in the fifty years of its existence (1967-2017), ASEAN is at a major geopolitical crossroad. The question is whether the cultural glue that has held it together for fifty years has been eroded. The "ASEAN Way," the operational system of settling disputes and negotiating problems through *gotong royong* (a congenial way of reaching agreement and common understanding)

and consensus building has been challenged by the assertive China factor. For ASEAN states, the sudden rise of China as a global hegemon is difficult to embrace, given its decades-long acceptance of the US strategic umbrella, its dependence on Japanese economic backing and its comfort with Western cultural norms due to colonialism.

The focus of this paper is about the future of ASEAN as a regional organization, with China's bold claims to 90 per cent of the South China Sea and its many islets, shoals and reefs. While China might apply its own national logic to the South China Sea, the states in ASEAN also feel committed to defending their maritime turf, their geopolitical backyard, their own national territories and their socio-cultural traditions. The question that academics, business people and political leaders have to face is how these claims of China's will impact the future of ASEAN and the region's identity and cultural commonalities. Will the new rising hegemon change the regional equation? Will China's unilateral territorial expansion into the region disrupt the hitherto peaceful cooperation amongst states in ASEAN? Will China's and President Trump's avowed bilateral diplomacy undermine the cohesiveness of the region and divide ASEAN as a regional organization? In response to the answers to these questions, one needs to resurrect Professor Wang Gungwu's query whether the heritage "of fear and suspicion of China is still justified"? Based on the 105 papers in Yang Razali's (2017) edited book on *The South China Sea Disputes*, one can tentatively conclude that wariness of China is still palpable in the region.

Southeast Asia's regional identity

Southeast Asia's identity remains a nebulous issue. Academically, scholars continue to argue and debate over the identity of the Southeast Asian region. One school of thought believes the region does not have a regional identity or commonality of culture as propounded by its most ardent proponent, the American political scientist, Donald Emmerson (1984). The other school of thought believes the region has a commonality of culture and hence a clear regional identity (Jumsai 1997), best articulated by the British historian, Oliver Wolters (1999), and the American anthropologist, Wilhelm Solheim II (1985).

In prehistory, archaeologists debate this issue in a similar fashion. The “long daters” belong to the regional identity school which asserts that many innovations (socketed axes; agricultural origins, the domestication of animals and plants; Dongson drums; blow pipes, outrigger boats) originated in the region and diffused outwards to other regions. The “short daters” believe that much of the region’s material prehistoric culture was diffused into the region from other cultural areas (China, India) and became part of the region’s culture. Hence Southeast Asian prehistoric culture is seen as a “borrowed tradition.”

Geographers divide regions into two types in regional geography: the “formal region” (regional identity and commonality of culture) and the “functional region” (a region based on common functions). In Southeast Asia, one might see these “regional” concepts as an integration of a basic “regional identity” (the cultural bedrock of the region) overlaid by a functional regional organization of ASEAN. Hence while the region might appear “congenitally untidy and unwieldy” according to Thai public intellectual, Thitinan Pongsudhirak (2017: 13), for regional geographers, Southeast Asia exudes a “character” and “personality” of its own.

Essentially, the two schools of thought reflect two methods by which innovations are said to be found in the region. One area of thinking belongs to the “diffusion school” with the Austrian prehistorian, Robert Heine-Geldern, proposing his famous eight-wave migration theory of Chinese migration into the region with each succeeding migrant group bringing (or diffusing) into the region its material culture, social systems and ideational beliefs. Hence according to Heine-Geldern’s wave migration theory, all Southeast Asians are by-products of early Chinese migration waves in the region.

Other academics believe Indian culture and religions diffused and fertilized the region. Historians like George Coedès (1968) discussed the strong Indian cultural diffusion in the region based on his Indianization thesis. Sheldon Pollock (2006) took the Indianization of the region one step further by arguing that the Sanskritization of the region unfolded as a continuing process in the same way as in India. The region and India were thus viewed as one macro-region and not as two distinct regions but divided by many kingdoms within. The historical geographer Paul Wheatley argued that Indianization lifted the region from culture to civilization.

Other academic thinkers are critical of Heine-Geldern's theory of migration and believe in the "indigenous origins" of cultural artifacts, social systems and economic production systems. Hence the region produced its own cultural elements from communities who were domiciled within varied ecosystems in the region. The foremost advocate of this indigenous cultural origins thinking for over 40 years has been anthropologist, Geoffrey Benjamin (2002), a long-time faculty member of the National University of Singapore (NUS) and now, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Not only did the region create different modes of production and cultural systems to fit their ecological regimes (hunters and gatherers; swidden cultivators and sedentary sawah cultivators) according to Benjamin (2002), the region was also the cultural origin of the diffusion of communities in the Pacific (Micronesia, Polynesia) and Indian (Malagasy) Oceans (Bellwood 1985; Solheim 1970).

The Southeast Asian regional identity is torn between two defining systems. The idea of a "formal" region based on the commonality of culture and history has not been accepted by social scientists. The idea of a functional region based on economic-political relations has come into existence with the formation of ASEAN. In 1967, when the five founding members of ASEAN were initiating the regional organization, they invited Sri Lanka to join them but the Sri Lankan government declined. ASEAN's founding fathers were clearly thinking of the region in "functional" terms (states cooperating towards practical, functional objectives). Two decades later, in the 1980s, Sri Lanka under President J.R. Jayawardene asked to join ASEAN and was politely turned down. ASEAN members had changed their minds and became cognizant that the region was culturally different from the South Asian culture to which Sri Lankans belonged. Fast forward and we have Timor Leste (East Timor) asking to join ASEAN. Some members have objected. Once again, the ASEAN community had become aware that the Timorese were closer racially (Australoids) and culturally to Melanesian culture than Southeast Asians (Mongoloids) and culture (Austronesian; Mon-Thai). ASEAN's political leaders are beginning to accept cultural commonality in the region which forms the bedrock of the region's bonds and the ASEAN Way of engaging in dialogue and settling disputes.

Over fifty years ASEAN has developed into a successful regional organization generating national development and defending regional peace. The Vietnam War (1968-1975) was an externality, a product of the Cold War. Amongst its member states, ASEAN has remained quite cohesive and cooperative. ASEAN states accept a modern functional system: hence they have chosen to settle disputes legally and accepted the verdicts of the International Court of Justice, whether between Indonesia and Malaysia over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands; Singapore and Malaysia over Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Putih; and between Cambodia and Thailand over the 11th-century Preah Vihear temple. These successful bi-lateral legal settlements underscore ASEAN's interest in creating a code-of-conduct with China over the South China Sea.

The internal cultural fragmentation of ASEAN has come from various issues. Firstly, the expansion of ASEAN brought in mainland states which added to the political and cultural complexity for the regional organization to handle. The four new states of ASEAN, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam were not at the same economic level as the six former ASEAN states and put a strain on the economic cohesiveness of the organization. The disparity of per capita GDP between countries is almost one to twenty-five: Singapore's US \$87,000 compared to Cambodia's US\$3,700. Despite its requests, Timor Leste's inclusion into ASEAN had been declined: some ASEAN members having felt that the country would have put more economic strain on the organization. Secondly, the new states and their socialistic political leanings were also not in keeping with the more democratic-capitalistic regimes of ASEAN's original members. Political accommodation needed to be created to ensure the organization spoke with one voice. This meant more political dilution in decision-making. It took several decades (the Manila ASEAN meeting under Aquino) for ASEAN leaders to adopt a more modern approach to decision-making, by majority vote, rather than the old system of complete consensus by heads of governments.

Thirdly, the long colonial experience in the region fostered divisions amongst states, where state borders impeded the former traditional ease of peoples moving within the region. Many ethnic groups, especially hill peoples, found themselves contained within several independent states. Thus the Hmong were fragmented across Thailand, Laos,

Cambodia, Vietnam and even China. As Philip Bowring (2019: xvii) in his *Empire of the Winds* observes “Western imperialism, has added new divisions to older ones” and hence the same sense of “cultural identity” no longer exists in the region as in India and China. Former BBC correspondent Humphrey Hawksley (2018: 59) argues that, compared to the European, Middle Eastern and Latin American regions, the Southeast Asian region “has no predominant culture, way of life or standard of living.” The colonial period also allowed Asian migrants (mainly Chinese, Indians and Arabs) into colonies which remain sticking points in nationalism today. The most serious political vibrations are continually played out in states: the Vietnamese Chinese ‘boat people,’ anti-Chinese riots in Jakarta in 1998, the Malay-Chinese tensions in Malaysia since the May 1969 racial riots and, currently, the intractable Rohingya problem in Myanmar. The purge of South Asians from Myanmar is not new, Indian Chettiers were removed in 1948 as they were seen to be dominating the rural economy. Though Myanmar might be next door to the South Asian region, the government leaders exhibit highly nationalistic beliefs underscoring primordial attachments. Fourthly, the sweeping tide of Islamic “fundamentalism” in Brunei, the southern Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia threatens the cohesiveness of the multi-racial fabric in many ASEAN states. The rise of Islamic identity in the region has been exploited by external terrorist groups which have periodically caused mayhem in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and southern Thailand. If one can use the recent Islamic terrorist bombings in Sri Lanka as an example, it is evident that if states let their security guard down, the externally inspired terrorists will strike with devastating impact. The unfortunate reality is that no ASEAN state with a sizable Muslim population will be spared from Islamic terrorism; the intent is to cause political chaos, undermine inter-religious and inter-racial harmony in the state and to embolden Islamic identity at the expense of national identity.

Historical verification of the South China Sea: What's in a name?

History has no course. It thrashes and staggers, swivels and twists, but never heads one way for long. Humans who get caught up in it try to give it destinations. But we all pull in different directions, heading for different targets, and tend to cancel each other's influence out. (Fernandez-Armesto 2010: 311)

This interesting quotation from the celebrated British historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto says something about historians, leaders and states trying to make meaning out of historical developments. When historical issues are used for formal documentation, they become debatable in many of today's geopolitical issues, territorial claims, colonization and maritime disputes. Worse still, when historical interpretations are taken as legal facts, they can be contentious and become the cause of conflicts among states.

Ironically, because Asia is home to some of the oldest civilizations, history is often used as a bedrock by societies to interpret and understand current situations. China's use of historical documentation for its air and maritime claims over the South China Sea needs to be considered in relation to other factors, since the Southeast Asian communities have relied on an oral tradition for most of their history.

Firstly, the long duration of continuous civilization over 4,500 years gives China superiority in defining the history of its states and surrounding areas. China is resurrecting its past imperial history to lay claim over islands and seas defined under rather general and tenuous geopolitical circumstances. It wants to resurrect colonialism in the 21st century. Essentially Beijing's claims are two-fold: a) it is claiming a major marine highway, the South China Sea, which has been used for millennia in shipping traffic between East and West, between the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as regional marine traffic; and b) it is also claiming many islets, shoals and reefs in this large sea, which are subject also to counter claims by littoral states, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as Taiwan.

The Chinese use of recorded history disadvantages Southeast Asian states who can be best portrayed, in Eric Wolf's (1982) terminology, as "peoples without history." But when civilized Europeans met uncivilized communities "without history" it was still a two-way exchange of knowledge and ideas. China's claim, based on its dynastic records, shows a disregard for the region's non-literate communities who have a rich record of folk culture, oral history, celestial mapping and indigenous science of navigation and migration of the seas in the region (Bellwood 1979).

Secondly, historical writing tends to be based on subjective interpretations. Many territorial borders in the region were defined by colonial powers and not the indigenous state delineations of the former Indianized and Islamic empires. With their access to cartographic abilities, colonial states were created by cartographic means as Benedict Anderson (1991) argues. While the islands of the South China Sea are claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia as their territories, they were originally based on the colonial territories of France, Spain and Britain. Even Thailand, a country never colonized, learnt the colonial method and defined its state in the 19th century by cartographical means, thereby creating the geo-body of the Thai state as Thongchai Winichakul (1994) states. These arbitrary definitions of states by cartography do not take into consideration the cultural and primordial attachments of indigenous peoples in former defined states.

Thirdly, the Chinese references to reefs, islets and shoals in the South China Sea were probably navigational markers for their mariners plying the sea; they were not territorial claims of their emperors. China's traders and mariners plied the South China Sea for spices, gastronomical delights and natural resources in the region and not for territorial conquest (Brook 2015). For centuries, China was a terrestrial empire and hence more concerned with keeping out marauding invaders from the West by building the Great Wall of China than demarcating borders in the sea. The notion of walls as borders is so embedded in Chinese culture that even its most popular game, *mahjong* is based on "walls" in front of each of the four players. Despite the long period of Chinese dynastic rule, only certain dynasties (Han, Tang, Song, Yuan and Qing) were well developed and had some level of territorial legitimacy. There

were many periods in its history where the historical continuity of its civilization was questionable, when outsiders (Manchus and Mongols) were interlopers in its political system. Beijing's emboldened territorial claims can be seen in terms of Prasenjit Duara's (2004) "contingent history." Its current rising global status has shaped its historical narrative.

Fourthly, just because Southeast Asian societies did not keep written records of place names in the South China Sea does not mean that such communities did not know of these islets, shoals and reefs. Southeast Asians have a long history as maritime peoples—the sea nomads or orang laut plied these seas for centuries (Sopher 1977). Indigenous seafarers and fishermen certainly had names for the many marine landmarks in the area. Take the name of the rock outcrops, Pedra Branca, south east of Singapore. It really became known and significant in the 16th century because Portuguese seafarers translated the native name Batu Putih into Portuguese as Pedra Branca ("white rock"). Certainly Philip Bowring's (2019) excellent book on the region's Nusantaria demonstrates the archipelago has fostered many maritime kingdoms, was the source of intra- and international regional trade and created one of the most dynamic maritime regions in the world. Given that the region's seas, island world, mangroves and coastal ecotones were a way of life, genre de vie and source of economic activity, it is difficult for the Chinese authorities to believe the region's population had no claims over the South China Sea. At the end of the day, one cannot discount that indigenous names prevailed before Indian, Arab and Chinese traders, pilgrims, sailors and entrepreneurs came to the region. The region has already gone through a period of decolonization in place names. If China's claims are legitimized, then all the islets, reefs and shoals in the South China Sea will be recolonized again with Chinese place names replacing indigenous place names, thereby changing Southeast Asia's regional identity. While currently, the global community accepts the South China Sea toponym (place name), over history, this sea has been referred to by other names: Bahr Sankhai or Spice Sea, and the Philippine Sea.

If one goes back to prehistory, one can assume the Austronesians (4,000 years ago) developed communities within this maritime region. The Austronesians fertilized the regional culture and gave birth to a long tradition of sea-faring across Oceania and the Indian Ocean to Malagasy

(Bellwood 1979). Given that they were illiterate for centuries, they could not legitimize in writing the territorial ecologies that they lived in. But in their spoken languages they had much knowledge of the seas they fished, travelled, swam and mined for natural resources. The indigenous Southeast Asians especially from the *Alam Melayu* (Chams in Vietnam and Cambodia; the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia) were the original inhabitants and voyagers of the South China Sea. Unlike the Southeast Asian thalassic kingdoms (Funan, Sulu Sultanate, Brunei, Bugis, Srivijaya Empire, Malacca, Temasek-Singapura) which were maritime powers (Bowring 2019), China was for most of its history a land-based civilization. Apart from the blip in history when Admiral Zheng He traversed the region's seas, the Celestial Empire was never seen to be a maritime power though many thalassic kingdoms in the region, periodically, gave it tributes.

Finally, historically and from an international legal perspective, despite the territorial grab and colonization of lands, the seas remained open areas of non-territorial claims. This idea emanated from the Mediterranean seas. Despite the fact that the Roman Empire called the Mediterranean Sea *Mare Nostrum* or "Our Sea," in terms of classical jurisprudence the seas were the property of all people and a "global commons" (Paine 2014: 388). This international practice to keep seas international, open and the global commons is something the international community adheres to informally. Hence China's claims over the South China Sea, which has traditionally been an international highway of trade, commerce, commodity shipments and personal travel is controversial to the international community. China needs to accept sharing the "regional commons," in which all parties have a stake in the South China Sea without monopolization. Given the importance of this sea to regional and global navigation, there is a need for all big and small states to cooperate and coordinate efforts to keep it open, secure, peaceful and treated respectfully as a regional "commons."

For ASEAN states, it is difficult to see how an external party like China can claim the South China Sea as part of its territory when the region's states (Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia) encase the South China Sea and have used it for centuries as a passageway for navigation and travel. It should be kept open to all

parties in a pragmatic and cooperative manner and as part of China's bigger project of a One Belt, One Road system. In this way ASEAN can extend its "functional regionalism" to include other parties including Japan, Australia, India and South Korea. The South China Sea is 1,600 km away from China's borders but ASEAN countries would welcome China's active participation in trade, travel and development. China is already engaged in development in all ten ASEAN countries, so why is there a need to territorialize the South China Sea? Furthermore, Chinese militarization of this sea unnecessarily increases regional tension which bears no common good for all parties who use it for peaceful trade and economic activities. China's overt militarization of the South China Sea contradicts its assurance to states of its policy of its "peaceful rise" and "peaceful development." China's Belt-Road Initiative, while seemingly demonstrating its inclusiveness, provides many rough-rod short-cuts to providing a security scaffolding, economic network and political control over its numerous small state neighbors.

China's externalities in the region

Seen from a strategic and geopolitical perspective, Beijing's quest to legitimize the South China Sea as its national territory can be interpreted as a product of geopolitical externalities and much less of national interest. In the historical context, China has always been an insular civilization, introverted and self-contained, for two reasons. On the one hand, it has had arrogant emperors and elites who always believed they were culturally superior to their neighbors. Hence China believed they were the Middle Kingdom as "center of the world" and their neighbors were all barbarians. Given its pivotal ego-state perspective, for centuries, its emperors never saw any interest in expanding its territorial domain to culturally inferior neighbors. Both China and Japan have strong cultural superiority beliefs in their national ethos. The rise of Japan since World War II reinforced her superiority over other Asians and now the rise of China as a global power has given Chinese leaders and her nationals a renewed endorsement of her historical "center of the world" status.

On the other hand, China's emperors feared the Mongols and other barbarians of the West and built the Great Wall of China to

protect themselves and insulate themselves. Beijing's current foreign relations gambit to extend its national marine territory east is a tour de force compared with any other previous administration in history. Hence this paper asserts that China is motivated by other factors or externalities into claiming the South China Sea.

Firstly, the new concern with its maritime areas underscores China's ascending role as a global power. It has become the second largest economy in the world. It has been the factory of the world. If the Beijing power elites have read John Hobson's (2004) book on the Eastern Origins of Western Civilization, they will feel more empowered in their nationalistic justification as a global hegemon. We are also reminded by Robert Kaplan (2012: 88) that in geopolitics, the "competition for 'space' is eternal." China seems to be in a hurry to challenge the US for its right to exist on the global landscape as both an economic competitor and a global political power. It wants to expand its presence in global space. Wang Gungwu argues that control of the seaways was a feature of all world hegemonies and superpowers (Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British and American) and hence Beijing realizes it needs to have marine access and dominance to be a global power (Ooi 2015).

The territorial assertions (both in marine and air space) in the South China Sea are a bold and daring move. President Xi Jinping could not have picked a more opportune time to seek to expand jurisdiction over this area, with the US going through a presidential transition and US domestic politics becoming highly volatile. Beijing seems prepared to use the South China Sea as a testbed for its military prowess, especially its naval ability. For Southeast Asian states, such a military showdown will impact the region greatly, especially the region's economy. Unfortunately Xi did not foresee the election of Trump and his bold willingness to check Xi's political, strategic and economic expansion.

To undergird its national geography argument, the Chinese leaders keep reiterating that the South China Sea claims are "core national" issues and hence non-negotiable. The most impertinent challenge to China's marine claims was the referral by then Philippine President Benigno Aquino's of these claims to the International Tribunal at The Hague. The negative verdict was a massive blow to China's claims in international eyes and from a global legal perspective.

Secondly, given its own domestic economic problems, its widening income disparities and its restless political situation, this flexing of Beijing's military might is one way of deflecting domestic attention to external arenas and enhancing nationalistic sentiments. The government has control of all media sources and hence its ability to shape public perception on foreign issues is immense and highly biased. Such claims are an externality that the leadership needs to drum up to gather national support and divert public attention from China's many domestic problems.

Thirdly, China is demonstrating to the US and the global community that it considers Southeast Asia to be its geopolitical turf and it is warning the US to lay off interfering in these territorial claims. China's most trenchant rebuff to US interference in the region is that it does not recognize America's Pacific power claims. Beijing realizes that superpowers all have regional turf they command: the US is actively engaged in Latin America; Europe has involvement in Africa and Russia uses Eastern Europe as a buffer. China's claim within Southeast Asia is a tacit emulation of the US 1823 Monroe Doctrine over Latin America. President Monroe dictated that any attempt to influence the western hemisphere would be "dangerous to our peace and security." The Americans, till today, still uphold the Monroe Doctrine by requesting that Putin butt out of Venezuela. The Chinese likewise are increasingly taking the position that Southeast Asia falls within their geopolitical sphere and demanding the US, Japan, India, Britain and Australia stay out of their national territory. Re-issuing the Japanese "Asian Co-Prosperity" rhetoric the Chinese authorities, targeting the Americans, have informed ASEAN states that the region is for Asians to handle and manage. Given that since World War II, the US has been establishing military bases in the region (South Korea, Japan, Guam, the Philippines and Thailand), the Chinese are increasingly uncomfortable with the US ring fencing them with military bases. The Chinese South China Sea claim thus serves multiple strategic, defense and economic purposes

China wants command over Southeast Asia as a show of hegemonic power and it could not have asked for a better region as an ally. Of all the world's developing regions, this is the most economically dynamic, politically stable and resource rich, and moreover, has the most coherent

regional organization in ASEAN. Given China's dense population and over-crowded and polluted cities, Southeast Asia is an attractive alternative with a relatively sparse population. With its borders so porous, migrants from China are already descending on Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. Bilaterally, Beijing is wooing political leaders and governments in the region, trying to wean them away from the US security umbrella and economic orbit.

Fourthly, those South China Sea claims are of applied military importance. While the Obama administration recognized the need to "rebalance" US defense in Asia, it will be remain to be seen how the Trump administration will interpret this rebalance and, specifically, how far the US will go to neutralize China's claims with regard to the South China Sea. In his first address to Congress on 28 February 2017, Trump made it clear his military budget would be increased considerably, presumably to fight ISIS on the one hand and, possibly, to deter China's increasing militarization, on the other.

The Chinese leadership realizes that it is hemmed in by the US military presence on its eastern maritime frontier with US military bases and support stations in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Guam, Singapore and Australia. Without the South China Sea, China has little maritime maneuverability. This strategic concern has been exacerbated by Obama's "pivot" and later, the "rebalancing" strategy in Asia. Kurt Campbell's (2016) book, *The Pivot*, provides a comprehensive and forward-looking strategic US statement on the subject. He cites the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's argument on this: "Asia is the future and our diplomacy must reflect this in a much more fundamental way" (Campbell 2016: xxi). She goes on to say: "China is the big story, no doubt. But for us to be successful, we're going to have to work with others more effectively. We've got to embed our China policy in a larger Asia strategy" (Campbell 2016: xxi). One might state the subtext of Clinton's statement as the US realization that the rise of China is threatening, that its challenge to US global power is imminent, and that there is the fear of US global supremacy ebbing. One might see that both the US and China might be engaged in misperceptions of one another and get fixed into a political knot of misrepresentations. History has shown that many wars were based on such misrepresentations by adversaries.

China has never been comfortable with Singapore allowing the US Navy to use the city-state as a bunkering point and naval station in the region after the Philippines ousted the US military from Subic Bay. Beijing has referred to the US naval presence in Singapore as their “Malacca problem” given that 80 percent of China’s energy and other commodities pass through the Straits. Beijing is worried since annually 80,000 vessels pass through the Malacca Straits, many of them carrying China’s imports and exports. Strategically, one can see China’s South China Sea claims as a counterpoint to the US presence in the Malacca Straits. China’s military presence is meant to counter the US naval presence. China sees the South China Sea as the “throat of the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans” according to Kaplan (2014). Both China and the US might be engaged in misperceptions of each other that might lead to an impending conflagration in the South China Sea. This brings up the proverbial African saying that when the elephants fight, the grass suffers. It seems evident that China is willing to sacrifice Singapore, if its leadership does not play ball with the “mother country.” Despite its majority Chinese population, Singapore is an irritating small pawn that President Xi feels is impeding China’s broader national, geopolitical and global objectives.

Fifthly, China wants this territory as a ready reservoir for natural resources. The unpredictability of foreign oil and gas imports has made the Chinese authorities nervous about the future energy supplies to boost its economic drive. Two areas are pertinent to the region. In continental Southeast Asia, despite being part of the Greater Mekong grouping, China has already unilaterally built six dams in Yunnan for its own energy requirements, with little concern about how these dams are going to affect water flow and biodiversity in the lower course of the river. In addition, it wants the province of Yunnan to be its bridge point for the region, thereby directing all the region’s creation of gas and oil pipelines (from Myanmar), rail systems, road highways and trading relationships to Yunnan. China uses the Mekong for transporting all sorts of trading commodities as well as oil transport into Yunnan. Resources from its backdoor ASEAN region is clearly uppermost in Beijing’s policies.

Over the last five years, China has expanded enforcement activity in the South China Sea, using “combat-ready” patrol ships to escort

its fishing boats (Zhao 2014: 3). Given the unpredictability of the oil and energy supply from the Middle East, China is also looking to diversify its energy supplies. Following in the footsteps of ASEAN states Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, it is hoping to explore for oil and gas in the South China Sea and banking on deriving one million barrels per day of oil equivalent from this area by 2020 (Zhao 2014: 7). In short, while Beijing resorts to resource diplomacy for mainland Southeast Asian states, it applies high-handed military muscle for the acquisition of resources in the South China Sea.

Ramifications within asean and beyond

Much has been written about the rise of China, the Asia-Pacific Century, Easternization, and the remaking of Asia in the global landscape (Allison 2017; Mishra 2012; Rachman 2016). Change always creates new uncertainties, risks and new political alignments. These changes have the most political, economic and social bearing on Southeast Asia. China's rise certainly is creating a recalibration of defense strategies and alliances and renewed expenditure in defense spending amongst Asian states (Hawksley 2018). The current global situation is becoming more fluid, less predictable and more open to costly mistakes and belligerent flare-ups. In my opinion, there are five significant developments pertinent to China's claims. These involve: domestic adaptations; changes in foreign policy involving bilateral and economic relationships; ASEAN's response; the *hua qiao* or overseas Chinese; and China's overseas initiatives.

Domestic adaptations

As a result of these aggressive maritime claims, China's neighboring maritime states have stepped up national policies in two ways: imposing stricter laws and policing of their maritime areas; and increasing defense budgets. Countries in Southeast Asia and further afield are taking drastic steps against foreign fishing vessels intruding into their territorial waters. Thai fishing trawlers have been blown up in Indonesian waters; and Taiwanese fishing boats, in the waters off Palau. Suddenly the seas have become the new frontier for territorial wars. Indonesia

under President Joko Widodo is pursuing an active policy of his “Global Maritime Fulcrum” (*Poros Maritim Dunia*) doctrine to crack down on illegal fishing vessels (as many as 5,000 a day) in its territorial waters and to restore Indonesia’s maritime historical glory. There is a debate over what the Global Maritime Fulcrum or Axis is all about (Yohanes 2017; Keoni 2017) but one can speculate that China’s South China Sea claims have certainly triggered the Indonesian government’s maritime counter response. The President for example has boosted naval and coastguard budgets and doubled spending on defense to 1.5 percent of GDP over the next five years (*The Economist* 2015: 23–24).

One positive outcome of the recent spat with China is that the main opposition party (the Workers Party) in Singapore has declared its backing for the government’s stand on China. Workers Party leader Low Thia Kiang, a member of parliament, has warned of the danger of Singapore being too dependent on China’s economy and of China’s impact on the Republic: “Singapore not only risks becoming economically vulnerable to any strategic foreign policy shaped by China, the multiracial and multicultural character of our society will also come under pressure” (Nur Asyiqin 2017: B5).

Foreign policy: Bilateral relationships

Given China’s unilateral changes in the South China Sea and its Mekong waterway, ASEAN seems more divided than cohesive as a regional grouping. The Philippines has followed an ambivalent China policy. President Duterte began by cozying up to the rising dragon then ditching it later for US protection; Malaysia under the former PM Najib wholeheartedly accepted China’s generous aid, trade and investments, but under the current PM, Tun Dr Mahathir, relationships are cooling. Vietnam is befriending its one-time enemy, America, with military cooperation but keeping the China door open. India is beefing up its military arsenal and making overtures to ASEAN. Myanmar and Thailand maintain good relations with China but accept America’s political wooing. Singapore and Indonesia are deepening their defense relationships with Australia within the ambit of similar US strategic thinking. Cambodia and Laos are relying more on China for economic aid and are too weak to maintain an independent policy from their strong neighbor.

Beijing has tried several strategies to engage the regional states bilaterally. Firstly, over the last ten years, it has done deals with all eleven states in the region by underwriting large infrastructural projects (major government buildings in Timor-Leste, Cambodia), creating a trading supermarket in Thailand, developing bridges in Indonesia, making Singapore a Yuan trading center, building gas and oil pipelines in Myanmar and bankrolling Cambodian and Laotian developments. Secondly, China has tried to move away from any agreements with ASEAN as a regional group because it knows this will lessen its political clout in the region. One can theorize that the Chinese leadership wants to avoid ASEAN's regional decision-making so as to have advantageous bilateral relationships with individual states.

China has won better friendships and economic alliances with Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. The Philippines and Malaysia after a pro-China stand have become more cautious while Indonesia is trying to remain neutral. The orientation has tilted in China's favor for three reasons: a) It is geographically closer to the region than the US, with shared borders and common terrestrial and maritime connections; b) It has used its huge economic largesse as a carrot for investments and trading relationships with countries in the region; and iii) It is viewed by regional leaders as the future global hegemon that needs to be courted and fêted. This view is further endorsed by President Trump's negation of Obama's Trans Pacific Partnership and his ambivalence towards US "rebalancing" policies. Clearly these South China Sea forays and the unilateral Mekong hydropower dam developments in Yunnan are far from giving Southeast Asian countries a sense of stability, comfort and peace. Yet no state in the region wants to be on the wrong side of China after its leaders have already demonstrated their wrath at Singapore for not towing the Beijing line. While Singapore's PM Lee Hsien Long was invited to the Second Belt Road Initiative meeting in 2019, the official photo-taking session showed the Chinese leadership was still displeased with the city-state; the Singapore PM was put in the back left hand corner of the group photo, while other ASEAN state leaders (Cambodia, Brunei and Malaysia) were in the front row.

The Malaysia-China relationship demonstrates the extent to which the rising dragon is willing to go to change the geopolitical dynamics

of the region. It courted the former Malaysian prime minister, Datuk Sri Najib Razak who allowed the rising dragon to severely delimit trade passing through Singapore. China is attempting to circumvent the use of the Melaka Straits and to bypass Singapore's port by investing in Peninsular Malaysia in three ways: a) it is expanding Port Klang by building up Pulau Carey (S\$64 billion project) as part of China's One Belt One Road initiative and to safeguard China's trade flow; b) China has a stake in Kuantan Port and is interested in building an East Coast Rail Line linking Port Klang with the Kuantan Port that would effectively transport goods across the Peninsula bypassing Singapore; and c) China is building an international port in Malacca called the Kuala Linggi International Port which will store 1.5 million cubic meters of oil and provide bunkering services. If these Chinese developments in Malaysia are finally put in place, they will undermine Singapore-Malaysia relationships in future and create quizzical political attention in Indonesia, Thailand and other ASEAN states. Chinese interest in Malaysia and the Straits of Malacca however will revive the historic importance of the Malacca Straits when two thalassic kingdoms dominated regional and international trade: the Sri Vijayan Empire in Sumatra and the Malacca Sultanate in Malaya. However the surprise election win of the Malaysian opposition party in 2018 and the toppling of UMNO from power has left the China-Malaysia relations in a less rosy situation. The current Malaysian PM, Tun Dr Mahathir, angered the Chinese leadership when he noted a new form of colonialism was taking shape under the Belt Road Initiative. Dr Mahathir has delayed the Chinese developments in Malaysia and renegotiated its former huge financial package. While the Chinese are wooing the Malaysian leadership, there are strong indications that Chinese private enterprises with government backing are going ahead with the Kra Isthmus project. Chinese leader Xi sees their global hegemonic role as a high stakes game. This development will radically change the strategic geopolitics of the region, and perhaps end Singapore's pivotal trading and entrepot position regionally and globally.

Given the importance of Singapore in ASEAN, its strong relationship with the US and the rise of the unpredictable President Trump, China's power elites are trying to neutralize the rough 2016-17 diplomatic patch with the city-state with an endorsement of four agreements in

2017. By buying into China's national economy, Singapore hopes its external economic flank will be sustained successfully. A high-powered Singapore delegation was in Beijing in February 2017 for the 13th round of the Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC). Unlike other ASEAN countries where China is investing in ports, industrial towns, and infrastructure, Singapore is the only ASEAN country that is involved in investing and building satellite towns in China: Suzhou Industrial Park, Tianjin Eco-City and the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative. A fourth agreement was signed to facilitate the Guangzhou Knowledge City. These projects are what Kent Calder (2017: 151-156) calls China's "urban learning" from Singapore. In Singapore, however, public chatter is speculating whether the Lion City is deriving any substantive economic benefit from these investments besides nurturing political goodwill with the rising dragon. On the other hand, some observers feel the Singapore government is bank-rolling billions of dollars in Chinese projects to win back favour with the Chinese leaders.

ASEAN's responses

Chinese territorial interventions in maritime Southeast Asia are an affront to ASEAN's long-standing desire to keep the region a zone of freedom and neutrality. If the Chinese government does indeed have a "deep and abiding fear of luan (chaos)," according to Lee Kuan Yew (2000: 550), then such forays in the South China Sea seem to be an aberration. The current Chinese leaders must realize that these claims are highly risky and will not be acceptable to the global community

Regionally, ASEAN countries cannot plead neutrality in the island disputes and allow China to claim 90 percent of the South China Sea and its many islets and reefs. At the ASEAN foreign ministers' retreat in Boracay (Aklan) in February 2017, it seems that ASEAN became emboldened to express "concern" over China's claims and its "militarization of the region." Specifically, the ministers expressed the following: "They have noticed, very unsettlingly, that China has installed weapons systems in these facilities that they have established, and they have expressed strong concern about this" (Dancel 2017: A12). The foreign ministers also articulated the need for China and the United States to work together to ensure peace and stability in the region. Mindful that China's

economic clout is too important for ASEAN countries to ignore, ASEAN states are treading carefully on its claims. On the other hand, President Trump's unpredictable behavior is also worrying regional leaders who fear a military flashpoint becoming more imminent. The China-US trade war was initiated fully in May 2019 and the region is now braced for long economic uncertainty. On the other hand, will ASEAN states benefit from American companies redirecting their Chinese investments into the region?

Beijing wants to reassert its relationships to ASEAN both bilaterally and regionally at the expense of foreign power interference such as from the US. China's statements to ASEAN leaders are reminders of former scenarios of colonial master (the United States) and subservient satellite states and they play the race card by trying to win over ASEAN members because we are all "Asians." This rhetoric underscores Edward Said's (1994; 1979) orientalism thesis in a reverse way by dividing "us" (Asians) from the "others" (Westerners). The United States asserts its Asia-Pacific geopolitical involvement by stating that it is a Pacific country with historical ties to the region especially through its former colony and ally, the Philippines. Based on economic factors, the US is definitely not going to walk away from the region. Its companies have US\$226 billion invested here, more than the combined investments of Japan, China and South Korea. Under Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, the American relationship was severed but brought back under the old security agreement after China continued to encroach into Filipino territorial waters. Filipinos still prefer the Americans to the Chinese. The Filipino love for Americans is underscored in this statement: "Yankees go home! And take me with you."

While ASEAN states are wary of Beijing's "Asian" brotherhood rhetoric, they have little choice. China has yet to prove it is a benign superpower that will observe international rules and accept smaller states on equal terms. Currently Beijing does not accept an equality of states. In recent statements, its officials follow a "pecking order" (more like a Beijing order) of states classified as big powers, middle and small states. Hence, they repeatedly tell Singapore officials to pipe down when this "small state" tries to uphold a "principled" ASEAN position on the South China Sea. The Celestial Empire leaders are most antagonized by

ASEAN leaders reminding them to maintain an international principled code of conduct with regard to the South China Sea. Specifically, the periodic reference to the “rule of law” by Singaporean leaders grates on the nerves of Chinese leaders. The Chinese government do not buy the current international codes of legal conduct because they believe they were created by Western countries and skewed to Occidental requirements.

ASEAN foreign ministers at the 2017 Boracay retreat however pressed ahead with the “code of conduct” on maritime disputes. In defending this initiative, Singapore’s foreign minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, noted: “We cannot control the agenda of the superpowers. But we do need to make sure, to the best extent possible, that we maintain an oasis of peace and stability in this part of the world” (Dancel 2017: A12a). The talks between China and ASEAN have been slow because China insists the “code of conduct” should not hinder its naval patrols.

The hua qiao or overseas Chinese dilemma

The biggest political gamble for Southeast Asian states is how China’s claims will affect the overseas Chinese in the region. At the intra-national levels in ASEAN, ethnic Chinese minority populations are likely to face national difficulties in national accommodation and ethnic assimilation if China assumes a belligerent posture towards the region. Beijing hopes to woo Singapore and the overseas Chinese to its side but the founding father of Singapore has made it clear that his country’s loyalties lie with the Southeast Asian region. In reply to Deng’s geopolitical statements, Lee (2000: 642–43), in his book, *From Third World to First*, stated categorically: “History brought together Chinese, Malays and Indians in Singapore. We are proud of our own heritage. Sharing a common experience, we are developing a distinctive way of life. By geography, our future will be more closely interlinked with those of our neighbors in Southeast Asia.” China is openly wooing its Chinese diaspora to invest in its motherland and to maintain ties with China. Only Israel has strong relations with its global diaspora, and the Chinese want to emulate this Jewish model. But for ASEAN states where the Chinese minority population already faces distrust and discrimination, this China policy will only exacerbate the tense situation.

It is unfortunate that the Chinese diaspora is a target for discrimination despite the fact the hua qiao or overseas Chinese are third- and fourth-generation nationals in Southeast Asian states. Over the centuries and more recently there have been reminders in the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia of anti-Chinese riots and massacres. These incidents do not augur well for the Nanyang community. China's current policy of "rejuvenation" which incorporates overseas Chinese puts Singapore's predominantly Chinese population in a difficult position in the region in two ways: as a Chinese cultural aberration (Third China) in a Malay socio-cultural world; and as a symbol of "Israel" within a dominant Muslim sea.

Despite Singapore having a majority Chinese population, it is proving to be a thorn in China's South China Sea gambit and territorial claims. From a Singapore perspective, the government and business community are sensitive to China's claims of the South China Sea given the city-state's dependence on trade; the city-state has the highest ratio (326 percent) of trade to GDP in the world. The 2016-2017 diplomatic turbulence between Singaporean and Chinese bureaucrats, news editors, diplomats and leaders over a series of issues demonstrated that China wanted to teach its "small neighbor" a lesson about who was the global hegemon in the region. The culmination of the diplomatic spat was the detention in Hong Kong's port of nine Singapore military armored trucks (Terrex vehicles) that had been in transit from Taiwan to Singapore. Their detention for more than two months demonstrated China's displeasure over Singapore's continued use of Taiwan as a training ground for its military even though tacit permission had been granted by previous Chinese administrations. This was meant to show other ASEAN nations what actions China was capable of when displeased.

China's overseas Initiatives

China has had a long relationship—not always peaceful—with many kingdoms in the region. The Mongol invasion of Burma by Kublai Khan was not successful but it sent shockwaves through the region. Later, the explorations of the Chinese eunuch-admiral Zheng He in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean were a means of "flag showing" and "to some extent, about power or, at least, prestige" (Fernandez-Armesto

2010: 223). Other historians have viewed these expeditions as a sign of Chinese imperialism that was less than benign. Fernandez-Armesto (2010: 226) is of the opinion that Zheng He's expeditions included "political intervention" and that he set up a puppet regime of a bandit chief, Parameswara in Malacca to "control the trade of the Straits of Malacca." In doing so Parameswara went to China to pay tribute to the emperor and developed a "client relationship" with Chinese imperial patronage. Malaysia thus sees its current strong China-Malaysia ties as a product of enduring historical relationships. Between the US and China, Muslim states in Asia tend to be pro-China and anti-American. Of all the external powers, China reigned supreme for many centuries before Portugal conquered Malacca in 1511. Many kingdoms in both insular and mainland Southeast Asia gave tribute to the Chinese emperor to ensure peace and harmony. Different scholars have viewed these city-state relationships in various terms—Robert Heine-Geldern (1944) called them cosmic relationships and Stanley Tambiah (1985) viewed the China-Southeast Asia relationships as a "galactic polity."

China's claim to the South China Sea through its nine-dash cartographical demarcation is no different from 19th-century colonial territorial claims through cartographical demarcations. China is resurrecting what western colonialists did in the 19th century by claiming territory through cartographical methods as Benedict Anderson (1991) has demonstrated. Beijing has tried to reinvent China's "Middle Kingdom" status as the center of the world through functional, applied geopolitical methods. It has done so in three ways:

Established in June 2015, the US\$100 billion Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has 50 countries as founding members, including US allies such as Australia, Germany and Britain. As of March 2017, the AIIB had 70 members. In 2016 the AIIB finally supported nine projects in seven countries worth US\$1.76 billion (Chong 2017: A12). This shows clearly that the economic tide is turning in favor of China. Through the AIIB, it hopes to counter the financial influence of the Manila-based, US-Japan Asian Development Bank (ADB) and wean Southeast Asian states away from the ADB's economic influence. Despite its deep pockets, China cannot take infrastructure investments in the region for granted. Laos, for example, has stalled the US\$7 billion

Chinese rail project because of unhappiness over the terms of the deal and friendly overtures from Vietnam, which wants infrastructure development to move from west to east, rather than south to north.

China established its own trading bloc, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership as a counter to what it sees as the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership. But with Donald Trump abandoning US membership to the TPP, China hopes to consolidate its regional economic clout. Four ASEAN states are members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership . For poor ASEAN states (Laos and Cambodia), China's economic clout looms more favorably than the US.

China established its "One Belt, One Road" trading architecture which also covers terrestrial and maritime areas around China. Launching the maritime policy in 2013, President Xi Jinping envisioned that the "One Belt, One Road" program would spur development in 65 countries, including ASEAN states. To date, China has announced that Chinese companies have signed US\$126 billion worth of contracts with 61 countries and the government in 2016 directly invested US\$14.53 billion in 53 countries (Lim 2017: A12). This ambitious proposal undergirds China's "Middle Kingdom" centrality and evokes the land and sea Silk Roads of the past (Miksic 2013). In effect, China has put in place a functional geography of belts, roads and maritime highways. Its Belt Road Initiative proposal is a major global catalyst for trade, transport and tourism and the infrastructural concept is mind-boggling, bold and a real breath of fresh air for a global economy divided by nationalistic tendencies.

All the three initiatives are supported by ASEAN states and governments. These are positive Chinese developments which will enhance development in the region, provide land and sea communications, and facilitate trade. Chinese leaders do not believe it can replace the US as the dominant global power at the moment. While China might be a large market, the region's states cannot see all their trade being channeled only to China. Monopolization of the South China Sea by China will undermine ASEAN's free trade initiative and circumvent current trading relations ASEAN states have with the rest of the world. China's BRI proposition must be facilitated by freedom of transport

and trade in the South China Sea, if not, ASEAN countries will feel China's proposal is circumspect, insincere and laced with hidden national agendas. Given the negative outcomes of Chinese investments in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and several African and Central Asian states as well as developed countries, many governments are becoming more wary of the Chinese rhetoric of fostering "win-win" economic relationships. In the long term, China's reckless and cavalier investment practices will undermine trust and responsibility in its satellite states.

Reflections

Two major factors are undermining the region's identity and commonality of culture, and ASEAN's viability as a cohesive regional organization: one is internal, and the other, external. The domestic challenge in the region stems from the rise of religious fundamentalism (Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and Hindu) which threatens to undermine the multi-religious character of Southeast Asia. For centuries world religions were bonded to the substratum of indigenous animistic beliefs providing syncretic religious practices which harmonized peoples of varying faiths. In Myanmar, the problem with the Muslim Rohingyas underscored Buddhist intolerance to the Rohingyas who are of a different race and religion. That Malaysia's prime minister led Muslim groups in public demonstrations and protests against Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingyas showed that ASEAN's informal code of political non-interference in domestic politics had been breached. It also showed that the Muslim Ummah (Muslim community) had a stronger political bond than regional relationships.

In Indonesia and Malaysia, the rise of Islamic fundamental groups threatens to tear apart the multi-racial and multi-religious fabric of these states. Some Malaysian Muslims want to impose Hudud and Shariah laws and punishment on everyone, which could lead to major racial-religious riots. In Brunei, the Sultan is taking a more Islamic stand on laws and punishments. The worry is that the trend towards Islamic orthodoxy and fundamentalism provides an open door to more radical ISIS involvement and regional ISIS clones. Unlike Christianity, which separates Church from State, Islam integrates the state with religion (e.g., Saudi Arabia) and hence the region's identity of racial-religious tolerance, its accommodation of heterogeneous culture and religious pluralisms will be severely eroded.

Externally, China's claims to the South China Sea and its militarization of the marine area threaten the region's cohesiveness. This is an externality which will play itself out over the next few decades and change the geopolitical dynamics of the region and undermine the viability of ASEAN. The states, leaders and citizens of ASEAN are all participants in this unfolding drama and they need to make their voices heard.

As the economic competition between China and the US heats up, Southeast Asian countries are left in a difficult situation between the two hegemonies. Between the military and economic options, Trump believes the economic pressures are likely to undermine China's rise, unsettle its domestic social cohesion and weaken its economic competition. The Trump economic tariffs are meant to hurt China even though it might inconvenience Americans. On the one hand, both President Xi and Trump are willing partners in the trade war as a likely convenient excuse to cover their impending poor national economic performances. On the other hand, this high stakes poker seems like a test of personal wills and global economic power. This is a new dimension in Allison's (2017) *Thucydides War*, an economic war played out to see which state crumbles domestically.

While Western politicians, academics and the press harp on Huntington's (1996) "clash of civilizations" thesis unfolding between the US and China, Chinese President Xi Jinping speaking publicly on May 15, 2019, denounced the idea by taking the upper moral hand by stating that China's developments were meant as contributions to build a better world: "Today's China is not just China's China, it is Asia's China, the world's China" (Cheong 2019: 1). President Xi's thinking underscores the British historian Arnold Toynbee's idea that all regional civilizations are contributions to human civilization or a world civilization. In a veiled attack on Trump's insular policies, President Xi has provided enlightened thinking when he states: "If countries choose to close their doors and hide behind them, human civilization will be cut off from each other and lose all vitality" (Cheong 2019: 1). What state governments in the world wonder is whether China practices what she preaches. But at the operational level, the US trade war with China and the US-China military competition over the South China Sea creates deep uncertainty for small states in ASEAN. As Singapore's former ambassador to

Indonesia, Ashok Kumar Mirpuri stated: “Nobody in Southeast Asia wants to choose between the US and China.”

On one hand, the Singaporean power elite believe it is too early to write off America; Singapore leaders accept the US has still a shelf life as a superpower of about 40 years. The former US Ambassador in Singapore Kurt Wagar in an informal speech argued that America’s strong Asian community will contribute to global innovation and keep American global power alive. He argued that it is not the Chinese or Indians in China or India that will lead the world in innovation but the Chinese and Indian migrant populations in America that will be global leaders in science, technology and business. The other school of thought, led by Kishore Mahbubani (2008), believes China will overtake the US and become the number one global power. China, after all, has taken the world by storm economically and will be the number one global economy. As Stefan Halper (2010) argues, we have entered the political realm of the “Beijing Consensus.”

Given these odds, many ASEAN members are walking a political tightrope. With the US pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership pact, it has removed one irritant in US-China relationships and given China’s Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership a boost. But for the TPP partners, this is an unhealthy sign. The biggest threat to the region is how China decides to solve its South China Sea claims in the light of global disapproval and the US military challenge. As Indonesian President Joko Widodo states: “Without ASEAN unity and centrality, the region will be the venue for big-power rivalry.”

For Southeast Asian states, there are five options in dealing with the growing geopolitical shifts in the region. Firstly, there needs to be a multilateral code of conduct (ASEAN’s COC) and legally binding measures for all the states involved in the South China Sea, ASEAN states, China and the US. There might be a need to call on the UN to oversee this multilateral agreement. Secondly, if the US cannot commit to the region in terms of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, then Southeast Asian states need to find some common ground in handling economic dialogue outside the US political orbit. Thirdly, despite the widespread differences in ASEAN member states’ relations with China, ASEAN needs to speak with a common voice and handle

negotiations with China as a regional grouping rather than individually. Fourthly, ASEAN might have to forgo its 'formal regional' (i.e., cultural commonality) relationship for a more "functional regional organization" thereby allowing China to integrate with the region on a functional basis. China's unilateral invitation into the region via territorial annexation will be a cause of much uneasiness and the ramifications will be long term.

Finally, China's specific appeal to the region as bonding with "Asians" is a shallow contentious argument. In a globalizing world, China should not fall into President Trump's nationalistic ideology and the East-West divide rhetoric. The characterization of Asians against Westerners, underscoring Samuel Huntington's (1996) Clash of Civilizations thesis is not what is required in a world faced with such global challenges as climate change, poverty, pandemics, food insecurity and water scarcities. Racial and ethnic appeals that are evident in Trump's politics are divisive and they have no place in a global, cosmopolitan world.

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