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EDITORIAL

Introduction to the special issue: changing dynamics in Southeast Asia-China relations

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Abstract

The evolving global order and regional dynamics have profoundly impacted China-Southeast Asia relations. As the world grapples with the geopolitical implications of intensified US-China competition, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries find themselves navigating a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. The US-led Indo-Pacific strategy has significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape, yet Southeast Asia's relations with China are marked by interwoven challenges and opportunities. This special issue includes six papers that cover Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines, illustrating how small and medium-sized states navigate an increasingly multipolar world. A central theme across the papers in this special issue is the critical role of domestic factors in shaping each country's relationship with China.

Keywords: China-ASEAN relations; China-Cambodia relations; China-Malaysia relations; China-Philippines relations; China-Thailand relations; China-Vietnam relations

The evolving global order and regional dynamics have profoundly impacted China-Southeast Asia relations. As the world grapples with the geopolitical implications of intensified US-China competition, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries find themselves navigating a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. The region's strategic significance as a hub for trade, investment, and security has placed Southeast Asia at the heart of China's regional strategy, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this volatile environment, Southeast Asian nations are employing a mix of strategies – ranging from strategic alignment and hedging to outright accommodation or resistance – to manage their relationships with China and other major powers.

New dynamics in Southeast Asia-China relations

Southeast Asia's relations with China are marked by interwoven challenges and opportunities. The US-led Indo-Pacific strategy has significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape, emphasizing freedom of navigation, security alliances, and economic resilience to counterbalance China's growing influence. This strategy has found resonance among Southeast Asian nations wary of overdependence on Beijing but has also underscored the region's strategic dilemma in aligning between the USA and China. Concurrently, the ongoing US-China trade war and tech rivalry have pushed global manufacturing to relocate to Southeast Asia, with countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia emerging as alternative production hubs. These shifts highlight the region's increasing centrality in global supply

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chains but also pose challenges in terms of infrastructure development, labor standards, and geopolitical alignment.

The tech rivalry between the USA and China has added another layer of complexity to regional dynamics. Southeast Asia has become a critical battleground for competing 5G infrastructure projects, with countries negotiating between Chinese and Western technologies. Moreover, the diversification of supply chains and the push for resilient manufacturing hubs in the region have underscored Southeast Asia's growing strategic importance.

China's investments in infrastructure and trade partnerships have catalyzed growth in the region, but concerns over debt dependency and economic sovereignty remain significant. Politically, Beijing's growing influence has provoked anxieties about interference in domestic affairs, while cultural exchanges through Confucius Institutes (CIs) and other platforms have sparked debates over soft power and identity.

The South China Sea disputes continue to be a major point of contention, with China's assertive actions drawing varied responses from ASEAN members. Countries like Vietnam and Malaysia adopt nuanced hedging strategies, while Cambodia's overt alignment with China underscores the diversity of regional responses. The relocation of manufacturing from China to Southeast Asia, driven by geopolitical tensions and rising costs in China, offers economic opportunities but also strains regional infrastructure and governance.

Recent years have witnessed significant transformations in China-Southeast Asia relations. The multidimensional diplomacy of smaller states like Malaysia illustrates the delicate balancing act between deference to Beijing's economic allure and defiance against its assertive postures. Similarly, Vietnam's hedging strategy highlights the role of regime legitimacy in shaping foreign policy decisions amid US-China rivalry.

China's health diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic further exemplifies this evolving dynamic. While Beijing's aid initiatives sought to strengthen ties, domestic political contexts in recipient countries like Thailand and the Philippines limited the effectiveness of these efforts. This underscores the intricate interplay between local and international factors in shaping perceptions of China.

Contents in this special issue

This special issue includes six papers that cover Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines. A central theme across the papers in this special issue is the critical role of domestic factors in shaping each country's relationship with China.

In the first paper, Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Yew Meng Lai provide an in-depth exploration of Malaysia's dualistic diplomacy, defined by a calculated mix of deference and defiance toward China. The paper situates Malaysia's evolving foreign policy within a historical context, tracing shifts from overt defiance during the early post-independence years to strategic engagement since the 1990s. Through case studies on the BRI, the South China Sea disputes, and the handling of Xinjiang-related issues, the authors argue that Malaysia's approach reflects domestic imperatives, including elite legitimation and balancing economic benefits with sovereignty concerns. This dualistic strategy exemplifies the broader challenges faced by smaller states in navigating asymmetric power dynamics with China.

In analyzing Vietnam's strategy toward US-China rivalry, Phan Xuan Dung and Benjamin Tze Ern Ho provide a comprehensive analysis of Vietnam's hedging strategy amid the intensifying US-China competition. The authors argue that Vietnam's foreign policy is guided by the Vietnamese Communist Party's regime legitimation strategies, which include economic performance, nationalist rhetoric, and strategic flexibility. By examining Vietnam's deepening maritime cooperation with the USA and its cautious engagement with China, the paper illustrates how Hanoi balances its economic interdependence with Beijing against security concerns in the South China Sea. This study highlights the domestic factors shaping Vietnam's nuanced approach to great-power rivalry.

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In the third paper, Jiangyu Li and Chong Xv delve into the role of CIs in Thailand as a vehicle for projecting Chinese soft power and shaping perceptions of national identity.[1] Using participatory observation and in-depth interviews with CI educators, the paper examines how these institutes balance the promotion of state-driven narratives with adaptations to local cultural contexts. The authors highlight the tensions between the symbolic representation of Chinese identity through cultural diplomacy and the pragmatic realities of its reception in Thai society. By focusing on the day-to-day activities and strategies of CI teachers, the study sheds light on the dynamics of transnational identity construction and the complexities of cultural engagement.

In discussing Indonesia's Islamist Politics and China Policies, Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia and Klaus Heinrich Raditio offer a nuanced analysis of how domestic Islamist groups influence Indonesia's foreign policy toward China. The paper compares the Yudhoyono and Jokowi administrations, focusing on how political inclusion or exclusion of Islamist factions impacts their stance on China-related issues. Under Yudhoyono, Islamist groups – integrated within the ruling coalition – adopted more cooperative stances, while their exclusion under Jokowi led to heightened anti-China rhetoric and opposition to his policies. Through detailed case studies, including reactions to Chinese investments and labor influx, the authors illustrate how political Islam serves as both a moderating and destabilizing force in Indonesia-China relations.

Next, Xirui Li, Zi Yang, and Mingjiang Li analyze the mixed outcomes of China's health diplomacy efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper explores how substantial aid – ranging from vaccine donations to medical equipment – was met with varying degrees of public skepticism in Thailand and the Philippines. The authors attribute these outcomes to domestic political environments, including opposition movements and preexisting public distrust of government authorities. By examining the intersection of international aid strategies and domestic politics, the paper provides critical insights into why China's soft power initiatives often face obstacles in achieving their desired impact, particularly in politically fragmented societies.

In the last paper, Sebastian Strangio, Mingjiang Li, and Xirui Li explore Cambodia's increasing reliance on China as a strategic and economic partner. The paper attributes this alignment to domestic political considerations, particularly Hun Sen's need for external support to consolidate his regime amid international democratic pressures. Through an examination of Cambodia's participation in the BRI and its alignment with China on contentious issues like the South China Sea, the authors underscore the role of domestic political survival in driving foreign policy decisions. The paper also discusses the long-term implications of Cambodia's close ties with China for regional stability and its relations with other ASEAN members.

Contributions of this special issue

Collectively, these papers illuminate the multifaceted nature of China-Southeast Asia relations. They emphasize the importance of domestic political contexts in shaping foreign policy decisions, demonstrating how internal dynamics, such as elite legitimation, political opposition, and nationalist sentiments, interact with external pressures from great-power competition.

By examining a range of issues – from dualistic diplomacy and health diplomacy to soft power initiatives and economic dependencies – these studies provide nuanced insights into the strategies Southeast Asian states employ to balance opportunities and challenges posed by China's rise. The inclusion of case studies from Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines underscores the diversity of national responses and highlights the region's complexity.

Furthermore, this special issue contributes to broader debates on global governance, regional security, and economic interdependence. The analysis of the US-China rivalry's impact on Southeast Asia adds a vital layer to our understanding of how small and medium-sized states navigate an increasingly multipolar world. The papers also shed light on how Southeast Asia's role as a

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manufacturing hub and its centrality in global supply chains are reshaping its interactions with major powers.

Overall, these contributions deepen our appreciation of the interconnectedness between local, regional, and global dynamics in international relations. They offer valuable lessons for policymakers, academics, and practitioners seeking to understand the evolving nature of China-Southeast Asia relations and the strategic choices facing states in the region.

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