Meeting the China challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian regional security strategies

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Item Summary

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Abstract: Traditional friends and allies of the United States in East Asia acknowledge that a key determinant of stability in the region has been the U.S. presence and its role as a security guarantor. In the post-Cold War period, regional uncertainties about the potential dangers attending a rising China have led some analysts to conclude that almost all Southeast Asian states now see the United States as the critical balancing force, both in the military and political-economic spheres. The existing literature on this Southeast Asia-U.S.-China security dynamic tends to assume that China’s rise is leading to a systemic power transition scenario in which the region will have to choose between a rising challenger and the incumbent power. The de facto expectation is that these countries will want to balance against China on the basis that a rising China is threatening. Thus, they will flock toward the United States as the lead balancer. Yet, most key states in the region face complex pressures with regard to China’s growing role and do not perceive themselves as having the stark choices of either balancing against or bandwagoning with this powerful neighbor. For Southeast Asia, there is a consensus among analysts that the subregion has adopted a twin strategy of deep engagement with China on the one hand and, on the other, “soft balancing” against potential Chinese aggression or disruption of the status quo. The latter strategy includes not only military acquisitions and modernization but also attempts to keep the United States involved in the region as a counterweight to Chinese power.

This study probes the nature of the Southeast Asian regional security dynamic by investigating the regional security strategies of three key states: Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Working from the premise that the United States is the vital security player in the region, the focus is on how these states envisage the United States acting out its role as security guarantor vis-à-vis the China challenge. That is, this study fleshes out Southeast Asia’s so-called hedging strategies against China—and particularly the role of the United States in these strategies.

Hedging is defined here as a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another. Hedging behavior in Southeast Asia comprises three elements. First is indirect or soft balancing, which mainly involves persuading other major powers, particularly the United States, to act as counterweights to Chinese regional influence. Second, hedging entails complex engagement of China at the political, economic, and strategic levels with the hope that Chinese leaders may be persuaded or socialized into conduct that abides by international rules and norms. In this sense, engagement policies may be understood as a constructive hedge against potentially aggressive Chinese domination. The third element is a general policy of enmeshing a number of regional great powers in order to give them a stake in a stable regional order. All told, Southeast Asian states are in fact hedging against three key undesirable outcomes: Chinese domination or hegemony; American withdrawal from the region; and an unstable regional order.

This study is divided into two sections. The first section updates our understanding of Southeast Asian threat perceptions and conceptions of regional security challenges after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It evaluates the extent to which Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam still regard China as the primary challenge to regional security and, as well, the relative importance accorded to the threat of terrorism. It demonstrates that concerns about China have not receded even as most countries have adopted terrorism as a key security issue. It argues, though, that these states’ adoption of the counterterrorism agenda strongly reflects a general desire to strengthen security relations with the United States. Furthermore, none of these three countries is reacting to the twin challenges of China and terrorism by recourse to balancing or bandwagoning strategies. Rather, they have developed multipronged hedging strategies.

The second section examines these hedging strategies and the role of the United States within them. It investigates each state’s perceptions of the American role in regional security and discusses how they operationalize their hedging policies against a potential U.S. drawdown in the region, as well as the different degrees to which they use their relationships with the United States as a hedge against potential Chinese domination. It finds, furthermore, that this hedging behavior includes a policy of “omni-enmeshment” of a number of major powers in the region—aimed at encouraging a hierarchical security structure that is perceived to enhance regional stability. In this context, the section discusses these states’ expectations of what the United States should do to help in their hedging strategies toward China, suggesting a range of policies that span the military as well as political, diplomatic, and economic realms.

It suggests that while the current distribution of hard power in favor of the United States will not change for some time, more fluid and challenging is the shifting “balance of influence” in Southeast Asia with the steady development of China’s multilayered relationships with the region. Even so, the United States continues to be the key provider of critical common security goods in the region—leading in counterterrorism, anticorruption, and antitrafficking efforts as well as maintaining the military deterrent of the San Francisco system of alliances. Consistent with this role, the region looks to Washington to boost security in three other ways: deepening economic ties to build up internal balancing capabilities of individual countries and to help the region as a whole diversify and prevent overdependence on China; managing key crisis issues such as Taiwan and the Korean peninsula in concert with other big powers; and supporting efforts to engage with China and the region through multilateral institutions.

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