

Southeast Asia's balancing game

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



Southeast Asia is trying to find its place in the global power transition that is underway by simultaneously engaging the United States, the dominant global power; China, its chief countervailing power; and India, China's main rival in Asia.

In that spirit, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto has made one trip each to China, India and the US since his presidency began in October 2024. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has made three trips to China, two to the US and one to India since his premiership began in November 2022.

These visits are a small but pertinent indication of the way in which Southeast Asian countries are seeking to balance China against the US and India against China, and not bandwagon with any one of those powers by choosing the probable winner in an imminent conflict.

The outcome remains uncertain, but the goal is clear. It is to ensure that Southeast Asia does not become a cockpit of great-power rivalry as it did during Cold War 1.0. The region wishes to preserve its strategic autonomy to the extent possible in the Cold War 2.0 that is building up.

The Indo-Pacific

That will not be easy given that Southeast Asia is a key geographical link in the strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific, a term popularised by the Americans to demarcate their forward presence and extended sphere of influence in this part of the world. In the American mind, the Indo-Pacific stretches from the western shores of India to the west coast of the US.

It includes the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, the western and central Pacific Ocean, and the seas that connect them. America's bi-oceanic Indo-Pacific Strategy, announced in 2022, is based on the self-recognition (contained in official US documents) that the "US is an Indo-Pacific nation. As the most dynamic and fastest-growing region on earth, the Indo-Pacific is an essential driver of America's future security and prosperity. The region is home to more than half the world's population, and it accounts for 60% of global GDP as well as two-thirds of global economic growth". Hence the need for "an Indo-Pacific region that is free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient".

The problem with this otherwise harmless description of geographical realities and economic expectations is that it excludes the second most



Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia's president attending the Republic Day parade on Jan 26 when he visited India

important power in the Indo-Pacific after America: China. The concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) explicitly targets the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a hostile nation. That is seen in an update on the progress of the Indo-Pacific concept released by America in 2024. It mentions "our accomplishments under the Indo-Pacific Strategy over the past two years" but adds: "We have seen the PRC become more repressive at home and more assertive abroad, undermining human rights and international law, and seeking to reshape the international order."

This is the crucial point. What America is against is the fact that China seeks to reshape the international order by avowedly undermining human rights and international law. It is not so much that China is allegedly an egregious perpetrator of human rights abuses and that it supposedly undermines international law. The US is no stranger to friendly rentier states in the Middle East which abuse human rights ritually. As for breaking international law, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 without the mandate of the United Nations Security Council was not exactly a glorious affirmation of the international law that governs conflicts between states. The problem is not China's domestic system or its international practices: The problem is that China is trying to reshape the international order to American disadvantage.

There are two ways of looking at that Chinese effort. Great powers have always reshaped global affairs whether peacefully or violently. Hence, China is doing no more than what its global predecessors have done. However, what worries Southeast Asian nations is the way in which China is trying to reshape the global order. That reshaping is not to their advantage. For exam-

ple, China's military control of extensive swathes that it claims in the South China Sea has revealed to members of Asean, both claimant and non-claimant states in the South China Sea dispute, that what China claims as part of its territory it manages to get. The maritime expanses of the South China Sea, elevated to a core Chinese national interest, follow the reclamation of historical Chinese territory in Hong Kong and Macau. All that remains immediately between China and a recreated Sinosphere, at least in Northeast Asia, is stubborn Taiwan. Behind that Taiwan stands America.

This is where India enters the picture. Unlike the US, for whom the South China Sea dispute is one between its allies and friends in Southeast Asia and China (and the East China Sea dispute is between its ally Japan and China), for India, its dispute with China is not an outsourced one. That dispute is territorial, involving the Himalayas to India's north and the Indian Ocean to the south, an area in which the Chinese have made substantial strategic gains by consolidating naval links with some of India's neighbours. India's decision to become a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) along with the US, Japan and Australia affirms its belief in the power of a countervailing America-led effort to contain Chinese expansionism. In seeking to contribute to a balance between the US and China, Southeast Asia cannot but look to the rival power of India against a resurgent China.

However, India, too, knows that no matter how close it grows to the US, that country remains what could be described as a naval neighbour as best (because of the power projection displayed by America's aircraft carriers along with its air power) but that China remains a land neighbour.

The Americans can choose to withdraw from the Indo-Pacific one day, but China will not because it is an inherent part of the Indo-Pacific theatre. This is why India is trying to build its own bridges to China while keeping its ties with America as its ultimate security insurance policy.

India's long-standing relations with Russia, reaffirmed by New Delhi refusal to toe Washington's line against Moscow during the Ukraine crisis, are a signal to Washington that it should not take its links with New Delhi for granted. Should US President Donald Trump succeed in ending the Ukraine crisis, it would only strengthen India's hand in its relations with America and Russia, perhaps to some disadvantage for China, whose friendship with Russia is predicated on its hostility towards the US.

This is how matters stand in the Indo-Pacific, the theatre in which Southeast Asia operates. That theatre is contested deeply between the United States and India, on the one side, and China on the other. No one in Southeast Asia has any illusions about the difficult duration and progress of the conflict ahead. All that can be done in the meanwhile is to not choose one side — by choosing all sides. Then, the real choices will appear once the strategic chips fall in place.

Asean

On the rocky road ahead, it is important to not make too much or too little of Asean. Asean is a regional organisation and not a supranational one like the European Union, in which the concept of pooled sovereignty has a direct influence on the strategic choices made by its member-states. Asean has no such power. Yet, Asean does offer an institutional framework within which its member-states can come up with

at least minimalist positions that reflect Southeast Asia's stance in the great-power conflict underway.

It is for this reason that the US, China and India take Asean seriously: Each of them wants to steer the organisation its own way. Great-power courtship of Asean is good news for Southeast Asia. It means that those powers believe that the region is integrated enough to be considered a single piece on the global chessboard. The old adage about hanging together or hanging separately applies with strategic sharpness to Asean. Should Asean be divided by the extra-mural conflict between the US, China and India, its members will be incorporated into the spheres of those three countries.

Should Asean stay the uneasy course ahead, Southeast Asia's balancing act should bear some fruit. No one knows how the saga of mastery over the Indo-Pacific will play out. There would be universal disaster should even conventional military conflict break out between China and America over Taiwan: A nuclear conflict is best left to the lexicon of nightmares. It is impossible to know how India would respond to such a scenario: Like every third player in a conflict, it would calibrate its choices and go with the side expected to win.

Meanwhile, Southeast Asia must live on. ■

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