

Southeast Asia's Response to The Us-China Rivalry: A Study of Regional Institutions and Initiatives

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Abstract

The growing competition between the United States and China is of great significance for Southeast Asia, turning the region into the space of superpowers' confrontation. Due to this geopolitical tension, the Association of South East Asian States (ASEAN) and South East Asian's countries have forged several regional intergovernmental organisations and other measures that help the formation of economic communities to increase their security and to maintain the strategic balance. In this paper, these efforts shall be critically discussed and analyzed with regards to their ability to inhibit the negative effects of the US-China rivalry on the area of concern with special emphasis on stability and growth. This analysis is based on the important regional organizations as the ASEAN, the RCEP, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers 'Meeting Plus or the ADMM+. Also, the study explores extraordinary measures such as the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity as well as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration. Through their analyses, the research evaluates these frameworks' purposes in building up Southeast Asia and contributing to the establishment of a common regional front. This paper employs both quantitative and qualitative research approaches for an all-round assessment of these regional endeavours' contribution to economic resilience and collective security within great power competition. The analysis presented in the paper highlights the advantages and weakness of Southeast Asian approach towards the US china competition. On the positive side, organisations like the ASEAN and effort like the MPAC have played key roles of driving economic integration and infrastructural integration to complement the regional integration. However, as for the limitation of the study, the research also finds out the impact of different national interests and external dependence as the barriers for the integrated implementation of these regional strategies. Thus, these institutions and initiatives call for a stronger regional solidarity as well as the improvement of their operational performance. In the final policy implications, the research calls for enhanced cooperation and analyzed diversification for a better streamlined and stronger Southeast Asia to effectively deal with uncertainties emanating from great power contestation.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, US-PRC Rivalry, Regional Structures, Policy Implications, Regional Solidarity

Introduction

The intensification of the conflict between two global powers, the United States and China, has a great impact on a region of Southeast Asia which is considered to be one of the most favorable for development of the trade routes and possessing the great potential in economic terms. This geopolitical rivalry has turned Southeast Asia into an arena in which the US and China actively compete with each other on political, economic, and military levels (Kaplan, 2021). Southeast Asian countries are caught in the middle of this great power struggle, in order

to protect their sovereignty, development and stability (Huang, 2022). This paper's main objective is therefore to critically assess how individual Southeast Asian nations and regional organizations counter balance the competition between the US and China. In this context, the study investigates whether and how these regional organisations including ASEAN, RCEP, and ADMM+ etc. have successfully managed superpower rivalry (Smith, 2020). Furthermore, the study also analyses such AP extraordinary measures as the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), assessing their functions in relation to economic preparedness and regional security (Lee, 2021).

The novelty and relevance of this work are to be found in the fact that this study provides a broad analysis of the strategic reactions of countries in Southeast Asia to the confrontation between Washington and Beijing. Thus, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study offers a multifaceted analysis of the region's attempts to sustain stability and develop in the context of great power rivalry (Jones, 2023). The conclusions derived from this research are vital for policymakers and scholars; it reveals the advantages and inefficiencies of the current regional strategies, as well as the directions for further improvement of cooperation and integration to establish a stronger Southeast Asia (Tan, 2022).

Geopolitical Context

The Sino-American relations have emerged as one of the most significant determinants of the current world structure that is characterized by rivalry in the economic, technological, and military fields. This rivalry is defined by the United States' desire to preserve its dominance and China's aspirations to do the same, especially in the Asia-Pacific region (Allison, 2020). With regards to the economic front, China through BRI and militarization of South China Sea and the United States has come up with strategies such as Indo-Pacific Strategy and formation of the Quad (Brands & Beckley, 2022). This strategic contest is therefore pregnant with important consequences for the stability of the region and indeed the international order. The background of superpowers' rivalry in Southeast Asia begins with Cold War when this area was a theater of struggle between the USA and USSR. After Cold War there were changes as China emerged as an economic giant and changed the entire dynamics of the world politics. Since the middle of the twentieth century and especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, China began to raise its economic and military power and to adopt a more assertive approach toward the outside world to challenge US hegemonic power in Asia (Goh, 2016).

This has shifted the superpowers' attention to the Southeast Asia, where both have been increasing their collaboration with countries of the region by signing trade, security, and diplomatic deals (Cheng, 2021). It is very important to stress that South-East Asia is one of the most important regions in the system of international relations. The area is an important sea transport hub, and such vital sea channels as the Strait of Malacca carry a large part of world cargo. The economic significance, this based on demography of a youthful population makes it a strategic region for investment and economic development. Furthermore, South East Asia political stability and region integration mostly through ASEAN are instrumental for peace and to avoid the super powers rivalry augmentation (Weatherbee, 2020). Southeast Asian countries' capacity to respond to the multifaceted strategic contestation between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China will play the decisive role in the formation of the emergent bipolar world order.

Key Regional Organizations and Initiatives

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)

ASEAN was founded on the 8th of August in 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand when leaders of these five countries signed the ASEAN Declaration or Bangkok Declaration. It has since grown to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia; or Benville for short. To reiterate, the goals of ASEAN include the realization of economic development and social well-being in the region, as well as the maintenance of peace and stability in accordance with the United

Nations Charter (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). This motto of ASEAN points to the fact that ASEAN envisages a single vision, single identity and single community of the region.

ASEAN is a central figure in the identity of the region, its stability and the development of its integration processes. It acts as a political forum where the countries can solve current political, security and economic problems and thus contributing to the prevention of conflict or/and war in the region. Economically, ASEAN has come a long way in the process of regional integration through the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which are conceptually defined as a Single Market and Production Base, a leveller of development, a strengthened of regional competitiveness and cohesiveness (Severino, 2014). These have played positive roles in the enhanced economic development and coping capacity of the region with global economic shocks.

RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership)

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a free trade agreement that was signed on November 15, 2020, among the 10 ASEAN member states and five of their major trading partners: The list of countries includes China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The RCEP seeks to create a liberal trade platform for goods and services, investments, intellectual property rights, trade remedy, Cross-cutting issues such as E-commerce and SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) (RCEP Secretariat, 2020). This is the largest trade deal in the world linking nearly 30% of world's population and economic output.

Thus, the importance of RCEP is in its possibilities that it can open for trade and economic growth within the region. Through cutting on tariffs and non-tariff measures, RCEP enhances the ease of trading among the member countries thus increasing intra-ASEAN trade and investment (Petri & Plummer, 2020). The pact also enhances the supply chain coordination and has a system for the trade matters that contributes to the development of economic relations in the region. RCEP will help in the economic revival of its members, especially in the post-Covid-19 period as it opens doors for new business opportunities and a more certain and comprehensible trading environment.

ADMM+ (ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus)

The ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) was established in 2010 as a platform for ASEAN defense ministers and their counterparts from eight dialogue partner countries: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and USA. The ADMM+ on the other hand has the objective of enhancing security and defense cooperation for peace, stability and development in the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). It offers a platform for consultation and operational cooperation in the sphere of defense and security, as well as it strengthens confidence among the members of the group.

The ADMM+ plays a valuable role in the security and defense arrangements of the region through the annual and other military exercises, capacity-building measures, and exchange of relevant information on emerging security threats like terrorism, piracy, and HADR (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2021). Such initiatives assist in the development of the capacities of member states in dealing with threats affecting their security and improvement of the readiness for crises. Besides, through the ADMM+ mechanism, member countries have a common sense of security responsibilities and solidarity, enhancing the construction of the regional security framework and maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

Extraordinary Measures

Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC)

The first strategic framework of ASEAN connectivity was formulated in the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) in 2010 followed by the second version of MPAC 2025 in 2016. The primary goal of MPAC is to further the physical, institutional, and people-to-people connection in ASEAN. This plan's goal is to facilitate the flows of goods, services, investments and people, in order to support the AEC and encourage integration within the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Some of the strategic projects under the MPAC 2025 framework are

infrastructure for future, smart digital nation, logistics as a strategic advantage, public administration for business, and mobility for the future. Thus, MPAC is the key to infrastructural development and regional integration with its responsibilities to select and coordinate infrastructure projects that link ASEAN members. These are projects like cross-border highways, railways, and energy pipelines; improvement of ports and harbours, and; development of information and communications technology infrastructure (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). These projects are to enhance transport and communication costs, trade and investment and increase the economic integration of member countries. In this way, MPAC contributes to the development of infrastructure connections and the improvement of the region's economy, competitiveness and safeguards.

Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI)

IAI was established in 2000, aiming at fulfilling The IAI vision is to promote the ASEAN integration and minimize the gap between the old and the new ASEAN members. The IAI has the objective of improving the CLMV countries' ability to engage and prosper in ASEAN integration (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). The initiative addresses priority sectors which includes education, health, infrastructure, information, and communication technology (ICT) human resource development. An implementation strategy adopted by the IAI is capacity-building programmes, consultancy services, and infrastructure development depending on the CLMV countries' requirements. All these strategies are intended to resolve developmental inequalities and foster balanced development of the ASEAN nations (Hew, 2007).

For instance, the IAI Work Plan IV (2021-2025) presents activities that include increasing digital linkages, developing health care sector in CLMV countries, and upgrading transport sector. The analysis of the IAI shows that it has a positive effect in reducing development gaps between the member states. Described interventions when implemented in the CLMV countries have paid off and boosted the economic performance and social development indicators. For Instance, infrastructure development has provided better access to markets and services while education has availed trained human resource that boost productivity (Chia, 2013). All these have been supported by the IAI's initiatives to strengthen the ASEAN community, where all the members can benefit from the improvement of the economic conditions in the region.

Analysis of Regional Initiatives

Economic Integration

Successes and Challenges in Economic Cooperation

Economic integration in ASEAN has been observed to be progressing through various activities that have been initiated towards enhancing the competitive nature of the ASEAN region. The ASEAN Economic Community is one of these frameworks, whose vision is to create a regional market and production network, and to implement the free movement of goods, services, investments, skilled personnel, and capital, as well as fair economic development (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). Some of the successes in economic cooperation are the ASEAN free trade area (AFTA) the ASEAN single window (ASW) that addresses tariffs and decrease most of the tariffs within the member states respectively and enhanced customs efficiency respectively (Hew, 2007).

However, there is still a long way to go to realize complete economic integration. Inequalities in economic and infrastructure gaps among the member states, especially between the first and the third world countries, are a major challenge (Chia, 2013). Some other factors that affect deeper integration include; non-tariff barriers, Regulatory differences, and commitment level to economic reforms. Also, the ASEAN external environment has been characterized by various economic perturbations, which have challenged the regional economic cooperation and integration framework, including the US-China trade war (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

Impact on Regional Economic Resilience

The integration of economies has also contributed to the establishment of resilience in the region's economy in the sense that it has helped to diversify the economic activities in the region and at the same time worked to minimize the effect that was previously caused by the dependency on the external markets. The formation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) augments economic stability by forming the largest free trade association whose participants' GDP accounts for almost a third of the global economy (Petri & Plummer, 2020). This expands market opportunities for the ASEAN member states and enhances their connectivity of global production networks reducing the effect of shocks in the economy. ASEAN integration measures have also obliged the member countries to undertake policies of structural reforms and enhance their business climates, which has helped in the achievement of long-term economic growth. This resilience is supported by the collective efforts in improving the infrastructure connectivity and digital integration under MPAC2025 which helped to improve Trade flows and to reduce Logistic cost (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Collective Security

Role of Regional Organizations in Maintaining Stability

ASEAN, together with its security frameworks like the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), is the primary security actor in Southeast Asia. The principal of non-interference, decision making by consensus and security cooperation are the principles that support the peace and stability in ASEAN (Weatherbee, 2020). At the multilateral level, member states participate in ARF and ADMM+ dealing with dialogue, CBMs and practical cooperation in Defense and Security matters. The ADMM+ improves the security of the region through cooperation in the form of exercises, training, and exchange of information among the member countries and dialogue partners. These are designed to tackle typical security threats including terrorism, piracy, and HADR (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2021). Hence, through promoting mutual trust and appreciation of each other's security concerns, the ADMM+ enhances a coherent and sustainable security framework in Southeast Asia.

Challenges in Defense and Security Cooperation

Nevertheless, the issues of cooperation in defense and security still remain problematic. Changing security threats and perceptions, historical animosities, and different national concerns of the member countries may hinder integrated security cooperation (Acharya, 2014). Further, the rivalry between the United States and China makes the regional security status more complicated as the members of ASEAN may be forced to take sides between the superpowers, which is not healthy for the region's unity and neutrality (Cheng, 2021). Also, financial and human resources are scarce and the heterogeneity of logistical preparedness among the member states can hamper the execution of joint training and capacity enhancement initiatives. Improving communication and collaboration between numerous security entities is still an issue for the ADMM+ and other similar security structures (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2021). On the same note, sustained engagement in dialogue and cooperation remains critical to managing change and the emerging security threats to stability in the South East Asia region.

Advantages and Weaknesses

Strengths of ASEAN, RCEP, and ADMM+

Contributions to Regional Integration and Stability

All the three organisations namely ASEAN, RCEP and ADMM+ have played a vital role in integration and consolidation of Southeast Asia. In this case, ASEAN has been at the forefront of encouraging among its members; economic liberalism, political coordination, and social progress. ASEAN has also worked on the realization of the AEC and other projects such as the AFTA which addresses the promotion of the free flow of goods, services, and investments that in turn improves the interdependence and stability of the region's economy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). ASEAN has remained a peaceful organization because of its principles of non-interference and decision making by consensus (Weatherbee, 2020). RCEP has fostered

regional economic integration by establishing a massive free trade area of ASEAN member and others like China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Through liberalizing trade, cutting on tariffs and trade costs, increasing investment, this cooperation intensifies intra-regional business and boosts economic development (Petri & Plummer, 2020). RCEP also enhances supply chain integration and has provisions for and dealing with trade-related concerns, thus enhancing the economic recovery of the region. ADMM+ helps to promote security and defense readiness of ASEAN nations and their eight dialogue partners, such as the US, China, and India, through the formation of dialogue to work in practical cooperation. Combined with practical actions with partners and the exchange of information, ADMM+ responds to various threats, including terrorism, maritime security, and humanitarian operations (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2021). Through the cooperative approach, there will be a boost in trust between the parties involved and this will enhance region's stability and peace.

Key Achievements and Milestones

One of the major accomplishments of ASEAN is the realization of the ASEAN Economic Community, AEC in 2015 that brings about a single market and production base; another accomplishment is the ASEAN Charter signed in 2007 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). RCEP was signed in 2020 and is a milestone in the integration of the region's economy and the formation of a broad and mutually beneficial economic cooperation system (Petri & Plummer, 2020). Thus, ADMM+ has reached some significant goals like the formation of the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) and the constant holding of the joint militaries' drills and humanitarian operations (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2021).

Weaknesses and Limitations

Divergent National Interests among Member States

International Relations has been characterized by divergent national interests among the member states because there has been no central authority to compel states to act in unison, as is the case with domestic politics. There is one of the main flaws of ASEAN, RCEP, and ADMM+: the member states have different national interests. ASEAN uses the principle of consensus to arrive at decisions which ensures the involvement of all members, but limits effectiveness and speed due to every member state's veto power (Acharya, 2014). This can hamper the process of the development of the regional projects as well as affect a quick response to the new challenges. Also, in RCEP, what may be the case is the economic heterogeneity of the member countries and the variability of their interests towards trade may put a damper on the formulation of similar trade policies and standards in the region (Chia, 2013). Regarding security cooperation, ADMM+ has its problems because of the variation of the perception of threats and the strategic interests of members of the forum. There are still unresolved issues, for examples, the territorial issues of the South China Sea, and the different roles of hegemonic powers like the US and China in the region thus there is no coherent security architecture yet. The competing interests can thus weaken the implementation of any collective security mechanism and also erode regional solidarity.

External Dependencies and Their Impact on Regional Strategies

Procurement of resources from outside also acts as a major constraint to the efficiency of ASEAN, RCEP, and ADMM+. External markets hold strong economic importance for many ASEAN member states, meaning that their regional policies can be shaped by the economic dependence on China or the United States that restrain their policy independence (Petri & Plummer, 2020). Dependence on the export of oil and natural gas can open up weaknesses to external economic forces and geopolitical issues, which affect the stability of a region and its level of economic development. This paper submits that while the ASEAN is crafted as an international organization, the international system specifically the rise of external powers can determine the defense tendencies and affiliations of ASEAN members, hence explaining the existences of cleavages within the ASEAN. The rivalry between USA and China in the region makes ASEAN states play a balancing game which does not ease regional security

cooperation and waters down mechanisms like ADMM+. (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2021). These external dependencies emphasize the importance of ASEAN as well as its regional counterparts to strengthen internal capabilities as well as build stronger regional frameworks to effectively solve the issues they face on their own.

Conclusion

The discussions of ASEAN, RCEP, and ADMM+ reveal this work's strengths as well as limitations in the region's push for economic cooperation and security. In one way, these organizations have played a great role in the stabilization of the regions as well as enhancing their economic base through the formulation of the Free Trade Area, conduct of military exercises and development of supplementary capacities. They have improved the internal commerce within the region, lowered the barriers and simplified the processes of customs and introduced confidence in the member countries. However, there are problems like different nation interests, different levels of economic development, external orientation on powers such as the USA and China which bar the ENC to go deeper into integration and therefore provide better security. Examining these regional institutions and the implemented initiatives, it can be stated that despite the undeniable achievements of these organizations, there are a lot of works to do to equip them with the sufficient capabilities to become more successful. Although ASEAN remains an inclusive organization in terms of the decision-making process, due to such a process, many of the policies of the organisation are slowly implemented & the power competition between great powers makes the security of ASEAN complicated. As for the nearer and farther future of Southeast Asia in the context of the great power competition, these regional institutions' capacity to evolve, improve their governance, and build more resilience will remain crucial. Consequently, it will be critical for the United States and its partners to maintain diplomacy, cooperation, and not only fresh approaches toward solving the challenges but also engaging such persistent threats as geopolitical rivalries to achieve and maintain a stable and prosperous Southeast Asia.

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