

Playing Beta to China and Other International Alpha Powers (Again)

**Michael W. Charney
(SOAS)**

For those who have been asleep for the last half decade, the US and other members of the revived Quad and those who would seek to support the Quad directly and indirectly are concerned about the rising threat of the PRC and its BRI project to their security and that of Asia as a whole.

Depicted economically as a conflict in vision between a PRC dominated One Belt One Road and a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and legally as a struggle between against and for a rules-based international order, it has caught Southeast Asia in the middle and Southeast Asia is being pressured to take sides.

So intense and unavoidable is this pressure that it may lead to ASEAN fracturing as an organisation, being torn apart by the standoff between the PRC and the QUAD+ Powers.

Although depictions of this struggle are that it is very new on the one hand and in a way timeless, a universal (rather than regionally-bounded experience) when understood through the Thucydides Trap paradigm, on the other, it is neither new, nor universal.

I. the nature of ASEAN vis-a-vis the external "Big Power"

The basic problem is that we are only supposed to examine the current situation through a presentist framework

This is one of the problems with Western IR, is that we look at state behaviour and only those states in play now when these states are merely avatars for other versions of these states going back hundreds and sometimes thousands of years

So all of the players we are seeing right now, this is just the latest round, not a new game

If we were going back a half century ago, we had the US, Australia supported by some Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines and Thailand and trying to presenting a threat to the PRC and ultimately concerned in winning against North Vietnam which was allied with the PRC

And before that the US and Japan struggling for control of the Pacific, and Japan trying to carve up SEA and China

And before that the US and lot of European powers carving up SEA and trying to do the same to China

We present what's happening now as a peculiar threat from the PRC to a rules-based order internationally and to Southeast Asian freedoms regionally

In reality, this is yet another round of regionalisation of imperial competition

II. The past record of the previous rivalry, including military, in the region

This is the basic problem of ASEAN is that it is designed to wade over this kind of external power manipulation

External powers can undermine member states within domestically and as long as this interference occurs domestically, the rest of ASEAN will not get involved.

The organisers decided that they would not have the same defense or intelligence cooperation features of SEATO

So, the current conditions exist due to the fact that they are timeless and brought by great power rivalry somewhere else using the region to wage proxy wars

However, the reason that this is having a meaningful effect within the ASEAN states is because ASEAN is too circumspect, it's too weak, it needs reformulation.

So, the US and the PRC in the current round brought the sickness and ASEAN is the reason Southeast Asia will not get better.

ASEAN is a product of the ebbing phase of the last imperial context, the Cold War, and the region within ASEAN could only thrive in this unwinding phase of the cycle

As the cycle winds up again, in the current imperial struggle, something that hasn't been named yet, ASEAN is not only not relevant to the security of the Southeast Asia but it is becoming one of the vehicles by the PRC will undermine the region's independence

III. Hot and Cold Wars fought in the region.

Another problem in the mix is that Southeast Asia is considered a secondary region and it has usually accepted this role historically.

We often cite the region's growing prosperity, the size of its population, its military prowess, but while other poorer, smaller, less powerful countries in the world regularly carve out for themselves a global role, think Australia and other middle powers like Brazil, Southeast Asian states hold themselves back.

Yes as members of international institutions they hold seats, even chairing the Security Council, but not as states.

Only recently, the last three years, has Jokowi started to even pursue free trade agreements with Africa, Latin America and so on, and this does spell a change in perspective.

But until recently, Southeast Asia generally saw itself as a collection of countries that could only affect themselves.

Great we should say, they are not imperialists.

But the result has been that those countries that do play the global power, whether big like the US or Japan or the PRC or small like Australia or the Netherlands or Britain always take the alpha position and see the Southeast Asia self-view as a clear sign of a beta.

Since the larger competition between the alpha powers elsewhere would be too damaging to their own societies and economies they always seek out betas to have their proxy wars.

So Southeast Asia had the, should I say “iconic” wars, genocides, and puppet states of the Cold War.

It was Southeast Asia that gave us not one, but three Indochina Wars, the Cambodian Genocide, the Indonesian genocide, the slaughter in East Timor, twice (!).

So, when we scrape the surface a little with our fingernail, we will find beneath the graves of Southeast Asians who will die tomorrow, graves of earlier Southeast Asians who died in the same way, for wars that were about tensions somewhere else on the basis of decisions made in Beijing, Tokyo, Washington, D.C., Canberra and so on.

Consider whether decisions made in Jakarta, Manila, and Hanoi could destroy the economy of Western Europe, wipe out the population of half of Spain in a senseless genocide, or lead to a massive buildup of the armies of Poland and Belarus.

In reality, some of the countries in Southeast Asia are in the position or could be of being this kind of global player. Psychologically, however, they have inculcated a kind of beta-perspective that encouraged by the alpha powers to keep them in line.

Intimidation can be a powerful (and enduring) thing.