

SOUTHEAST ASIA BETWEEN THE US' AND CHINA'S VISIONS FOR THE WORLD

Pavle NEDIĆ*

Abstract: The Chinese initiatives proposed in 2022 and 2023, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative, along with the already existing Belt and Road Initiative, jointly present Beijing's views on the principles, values, and efforts for the future. On the other hand, Washington has a vision for the world that builds on the well-known and established rules, patterns, and norms promoted by the US since the end of the Cold War. The US National Security Strategy, unveiled by the Biden administration in October 2022 as the document concerned with the security aspect of this vision, is the most recent one that points to how the US sees the world and its role in it. The countries of Southeast Asia (SEA), the region where these two great powers directly interact with each other through overlapping spheres of influence, are particularly concerned about how these two contrasting visions affect them. The paper aims to determine how the SEA countries will respond to the new global initiatives launched by China and how these initiatives will impact relations in the region between local actors and great powers alike, particularly in the context of regional stability and the balance of power in the region. The paper draws from the works of Michael Leifer and the concepts of the English School of International Relations, primarily the writings of Hedley Bull, by which Leifer was greatly influenced, and is based on the idea that the balance of power is a strategy willingly employed by the states to achieve regional order. The paper will argue that the SEA countries will find aspects of China's initiatives appealing, especially those aligned with the core principles of ASEAN, while remaining careful to avoid being pulled into the binary division in the battle between democracy and autocracy.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, the US, China, regional stability, regional order, balance of power.

* Research Assistant, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia; pavle.nedic@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7055-0628>

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INTRODUCTION

The United States and China are the two great powers whose competition will shape the general character and ways in which states interact with each other in the international system. It will influence the main features, processes, and characteristics of international relations in the upcoming decades. China, as a challenger, and the US, as a hegemon whose supremacy is being contested, have their own visions for the international system, including how it should function, on which norms it should be based, and what role the major powers should have in it. Naturally, smaller powers must navigate these contrasting visions and try to find a place for themselves that will, in the best way, allow them to achieve their own goals. For some of them, being situated in the regions that are and will continue to be crucial in this rivalry brings additional pressure to formulate a foreign policy that will not make them collateral victims of the Washington-Beijing competition. Such is the case with the countries of Southeast Asia (SEA). They must navigate this global competition and articulate ways to make the best use of the opportunities and avoid the risks it brings. In this regard, their stances towards China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) are a good benchmark.

The article is divided into two parts. The first will outline the theoretical framework used in the analysis. It will explain the key concepts of the English School, such as international society, international order, and the role of balance of power, with a particular focus on the writings of Michel Leifer, who applied them in his work on Southeast Asia. The second part will first give a brief summary of the main characteristics of the three Chinese initiatives and the US's alternative vision while highlighting the role of Southeast Asia in them. Then, it will explain the different responses to the three initiatives by the SEA countries.

ENGLISH SCHOOL, INTERNATIONAL ORDER, AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

In order to understand how the US's and China's contrasting visions of the world order reflect on Southeast Asia, we will turn to the ideas and theoretical concepts introduced by the English School of International Relations. Sitting outside of the three classical approaches to the study of international relations, namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism, the authors of the English School

carved for themselves a distinct place in the history of the science of international relations and developed theoretical concepts that connect them to all three of the mentioned schools. In the opinion of this author, their ideas are most closely related to the realist approach to international relations. The state-centrism, importance of balance of power, and driving force of interests are among the main features that point to the connections between the two theoretical approaches, although the English School shows greater flexibility and willingness to include and rely on the ideas that bring additional complexity to the explanations of certain phenomena in international relations.

According to Barry Buzan (2014, p. 12), the 'English School of thinking is built around a triad of three key concepts: *the international system, international society, and world society*'. While the international system includes a number of states in interaction with each other, the international society contains units (states) interlocked in a more closely spun relational web. They are connected by shared goals and thus promote an international order aimed at accomplishing them, mainly through the maintenance of common interests, rules, and institutions. World society takes individuals as its units and encompasses the whole global population. It transcends the international society of states and establishes a world order that reflects the 'primary goals of social life among mankind as a whole' (Bull, 2002, p. 19).

International society is at the centre of the classical works by the English School authors, including the seminal work *The Anarchical Society* by Hedley Bull (2002). Bull deals with the issue of order in international society. According to him, the international order represents 'a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society' (Bull, 2002, p. 8). For the international order to be maintained, several conditions must exist: 'a sense of common interests in the elementary goals of social life; rules prescribing behaviour that sustains these goals; and institutions that help to make these rules effective' (Bull, 2002, p. 63). It is important to notice that the institutions are mainly understood in a more general way as 'deep and relatively durable social practices' that 'must not only be shared among the members of international society but also be seen among them as legitimate behaviour' (Buzan, 2014, pp. 16-17). Bull identifies five: balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war, and the great powers. Out of these, for further analysis in this article, the balance of power is the most important one and will be given further attention.

Bull distinguishes among several conceptions of the balance of power on the basis of various criteria. Among others, he makes a differentiation between the general and local or regional balances of power. Additionally, separation is made between a fortuitous and a contrived balance of power. While the first 'arises without any conscious effort on the part of either of the parties to bring it into being', the second 'is one that owes its existence at least partly to the conscious policies of one or both sides' (Bull, 2002, p. 100). For Bull, a contrived balance of power is a more potent understanding. He argues that balance of power is not an inevitability, and neither it is independently established without the effort of the states, nor is there a historical or any other law that pushes the states to act in order to create one. For him, there is 'only a need to maintain one if international order is to be preserved. States may and often do behave in such a way as to disregard the requirements of a balance of power' (Bull, 2002, p. 107). Thus, pursuit of the balance of power can be regarded as only one of the possible foreign policy choices for the states, which have to consciously put effort into it in order for it to be established. This understanding of the concept is also evident in the works of Michael Leifer, as will be shown in the next section.

English School theoretical underpinnings in the works of Michael Leifer

Michel Leifer remains among the most important authors in the study of Southeast Asian politics. In his vast body of work, he analysed, among other subjects, the role and contributions of ASEAN, the effects of different crises, such as the Vietnamese-Cambodia war, on relations in the region, and the foreign policy of specific regional states, including Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. However, in his research on politics in Southeast Asia, he rarely relied on specific theoretical frameworks or aimed to contribute to the development of theoretical concepts in the science of international relations.

Nevertheless, as with any serious scholar, his theoretical starting points and assumptions, however implied or indirect, were consistent and strongly rooted. To which theoretical approach they can be most strongly linked is a different question altogether. Some authors define him as a realist (Peou, 2002; Emmerson, 2006; Tan, 2006), while others are more inclined to associate his thinking with the English School (Liow and Emmers, 2006; Khong, 2006; Haacke, 2006). The author of this article finds more potency in the second argument. Whatever the case may be, Leifer's use of the concepts

of regional order based on the idea of a society of states and balance of power, understood as a conscious policy of regional states and great powers, is useful in order to explain the current efforts of the SEA states to navigate the contrasting visions for the world offered by Washington and Beijing.

Leifer's definition of the concept of the international order is similar to the classic interpretation of the term by the English School: 'condition of international political life which is the product of shared assumptions about interests and conduct on the part of those states which play the major role in determining the central or global balance of power' (Leifer, 2005a, p. 91). Furthermore, he directly links the idea of international order to the great powers, which are instrumental in creating a balance of power. Their stance towards the existing international order is crucial because they possess the means to maintain or disrupt it in accordance with their perception of their own interests. The effect the great powers exercise on a particular region is dependent on whether they are geographically situated in it, as was the USSR in Eastern Europe, or they are only projecting their influence, which is the case with the US and China in Southeast Asia (Leifer, 2005a, pp. 92-93). Additionally, the internal structure and political situation in a region play a significant role as well. The existence of a particular regional order can shape the effects of great power influence.

Stemming from his definition of (global) international order, he sees regional order as 'the existence of a stable structure of regional inter-governmental relationships informed by common assumptions about the bases of inter-state conduct'. Moreover, it 'refers to a condition of security obtaining between regional states that is upheld by their deferring to a formal or informal set of rules' (Leifer, 2005b, p. 98). But it 'requires more than just a rudimentary code of interstate conduct. It also requires the existence of a set of shared assumptions about the interrelationships among resident and external states' (Leifer, 1986b, p. 152). From this, we can conclude that the role of the regional balance of power is equally important for the maintenance of the regional order as it is on a global level. This is evident in Leifer's writings on the ASEAN.¹ He points out that the origin of this organisation is in the

¹ It is important to note that, at the time of writing of most of the works by Michael Leifer cited in this article, the ASEAN, which was created in 1967, consisted of the founding members Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, as well as Brunei, which joined in 1985. The so-called Indochina states (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) became members in the 1995-1999 period.

regional conflict, and its main role was to overcome its consequences and legacies. The position of Indonesia as the most likely candidate for regional hegemony was contained by the formal constraints of the ASEAN. At the start of the 1970s, the organisation's push for reinforced commitment to values of sovereignty and non-interventionism by great powers was made through the idea of a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), which was a response to a changing balance of external influences (Leifer, 1986a, p. 122). Additionally, the members of the organisation were eager to use the presence of US forces to check the potential overwhelming influence of China, which was one of the main ideas behind the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the early 1990s (Leifer, 2005c, pp. 153-154).

Thus, the ASEAN and its adjacent platforms and organisations are seen as means for the preservation of regional order through a balance of power among the regional actors and the great powers that exercise influence in the region. It correlates with the second of the two meanings Leifer attributes to the balance of power. The first is seen as a distribution of power and 'is a description of a relationship between two or more states defined in terms of their respective capabilities'. The second is explained as a policy that is 'being directed at preventing the establishment of undue dominance by one or more states' (Leifer, 2005c, p. 153). This idea of a balance of power as an important tool to maintain the regional order in Southeast Asia, understood as a pattern of interactions among the actors that share common rules and norms and thus form an international (regional) society, will be used as a starting point in our further analysis.

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S REGIONAL ORDER AND THE US-CHINA RIVALRY

As the great power that is taking a more assertive stance on the international stage and aspires to play a significant role in the tackling of all crucial issues of modern international politics, such as climate change, inequality, or regional conflicts, China has outlined its own ideas on how to address them. They are presented in the two concept papers on the Global Security Initiative and the Global Development Initiative. The Global Civilization Initiative, introduced by President Xi in his keynote speech at the Chinese Communist Party in Dialogue with the World Political Parties High-

Level Meeting, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has proven very successful in its implementation ever since its announcement in 2013, lay the foundation for Beijing's wide and multisectoral vision for the emerging international order.

In the aspect of security, the importance of a win-win approach is highlighted several times in the GSI concept paper. It ties to the holistic concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. The security of one country cannot come at the expense of the security of others (GSI, 2023). The value China attributes to the region of Southeast Asia is evidenced by the place it is given in the priorities of cooperation identified in the GSI concept paper. The aim to 'support and improve the ASEAN-centred regional security cooperation mechanism and architecture...' is ranked sixth, coming immediately after the global priorities and before any other specific region (GSI, 2023). In addition to security, the promotion of peace and development are additionally emphasised in the document. The importance of development as a significant concept is further strengthened through the GDI, which identifies eight core concepts and principles: prioritising development, people-centred, leaving no country and no one behind, harmony between humans and nature, innovation-driven, global development partnership, action-oriented, and synergy (GDI, 2021, pp. 2-3). Through its focus on development, Beijing can provoke interest in many countries of the global South, especially those that have already participated in the BRI, including those in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the attractiveness of the GCI lies in its focus on the diversity of cultures and civilizations and its refrain from imposing its own values or models on others (Xinhua, 2023).

The most recent American document that presents their vision of the world and particularly the role of the US is the National Security Strategy, published in October 2022. For Washington, the decisive conformation is between democracies and autocracies (NSS, 2022, p. 8). This confrontation is aimed at convincing people around the world of the benefits of the respective types of government, but the US is not alone in it. It relies on its partnerships and allies, and they do not include only democratic countries. In order not to exclude and alienate its important partners with autocratic regimes, the main criteria for the side on which a country stands in this clash is whether it supports and adheres to the current international order, as defined in the document as rules-based (NSS, 2022, p. 16). Stemming from

this, the main challengers are Russia and China. But, while Russia presents an immediate threat, it is China who is perceived as ‘the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective’ (NSS, 2022, p. 8). Naturally, the Indo-Pacific is singled out as the region where the Washington-Beijing competition will mostly take place, although the global aspect is not neglected. Additionally, the importance of the ASEAN is acknowledged, while the alliance with Thailand and the Philippines is additionally accentuated (NSS, 2022, pp. 37-38).

Of course, the nature and function of the Chinese and American documents previously analysed are very different. China’s initiatives are aimed at a global audience, present broader ideas and goals, and propose general future actions in order to achieve them, all in non-specific terms. On the other hand, the US National Security Strategy is targeted at the American audience, has a much narrower and more concrete aim, the protection of the US, its citizens, and its own national interests, and is more direct in proposing concrete measures and actions that should advance them. Still, given the nature of the status of both China and the US, the comparison can lead to meaningful conclusions. This is due to the fact that China is a challenging power that aims to shake the order organised in accordance with the benefits of the current hegemon and thus must present a viable alternative that can attract wider global support, while for the US, being the aforementioned hegemon, its own security and the current international order are inseparably linked, and because of that, it has the goal of maintaining the status quo.

The Southeast Asian countries response to Chinese global initiatives

For the countries of South-East Asia, the norms and basic propositions of regional order are highlighted in the fundamental principles of ASEAN: ‘the mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations; the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion, or coercion; non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; settlement of differences or disputes in a peaceful manner; renunciation of the threat or use of force; and effective cooperation among themselves’ (ASEAN, n.d.). They stem from

the mutual history of regional actors and the need to function in a geographical space of vital interest for great powers, primarily the US and China. Thus, the insistence on these principles is interconnected with the continual practice of maintaining good relations with both sides and attempting to maximise gains, but staying away from completely siding with one over the other.

This is mainly achieved through the application of the hedging strategy in their relations with Washington and Beijing. Hedging can be defined as ‘a middle way between balancing and bandwagoning, a strategy that is focused on the creation of backup options for response to a risk through engagement with the potential threat in military, economic, and political areas on the one hand, and deterrence through a form of soft or indirect balancing on the other’ (Nedić, 2022, p. 96). Naturally, manoeuvring space and the degree of alignment with either side vary, as the history, conditions, and current circumstances of each individual country in the region are different. For example, Thailand and the Philippines are, in some aspects, constrained by their formal alliance with the US. Summarily, the regional order for the SEA countries means the respect of the fundamental ASEAN principles and the maintenance of the balance of power amongst the regional countries and the great powers alike. Having that in mind, we can assess their stances on the different initiatives promoted by Beijing.

The SEA countries’ view of the GSI is largely shaped by the domain of interstate relations it covers. Security, as one of the core and most vital interests of any state, is always a sensitive issue. Since China is a neighbouring great power, whose geographical proximity and aspirations can pose a direct threat to many of the SEA countries, the support for a larger role for Beijing as a security provider in the region is limited. As the 2023 State of SEA survey report shows, citizens in the regional countries are unconvinced of the GSI’s positive effects, as at the ASEAN level, 15.4% of people express no confidence and 29.1% have little confidence, while 21.7% are confident and only 5.7% are very confident (Seah et al., 2023, p. 34). These attitudes in the population affect the stance of national leaders. Additionally, the larger security role of China can provoke a more direct response from the US and thus increase the potential for an escalation that would greatly affect all countries in the region. The firm and reliable US military presence in the SEA, the continual FONOP missions the US undertakes, and the increased focus on relations with the ASEAN countries during the Biden administration are a stark reminder that

Washington regards its interests in this part of the world as priorities. Furthermore, the many existing disputes between countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia with China regarding territorial waters and claims in the South China Sea make them reserved on the idea of a further reliance on China in the security domain (Camba, 2023).

The GDI is producing an altogether different response. The importance of development for all the countries in the region cannot be overstated, and China played an important role as a partner in their undertakings. The GDI is building on the success of the BRI, which has several major projects in the region, such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway in Indonesia or the China-Laos railway. All of the regional countries are members of the Group of Friends of the GDI. As a region, they are also the largest beneficiaries from this initiative, being partners in 14 out of a total of 50 projects (28%) in the GDI Project Pool's first batch (Thi Ha, 2023a, p. 5). On the other hand, Washington's results in providing meaningful alternatives have been mixed. The Trump administration's abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was supposed to be a serious alternative for economic development in the region through trade, caused a major lack of confidence among regional leaders. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), a sort of replacement initiative, has not thus far accomplished major results. The State of SEA shows that while 46.5% expect that IPEF's overall impact and effectiveness will be positive, 41.8% are not sure, mainly due to lack of information (27.2%) or dependency on the negotiation results (35.5%) (Seah et al., 2023, pp. 21-23). While expectations of results exist, the problem is that the framework is loosely defined and too vague. Consequently, the ASEAN states do not see in the US a reliable counterpoint for partnership with China in the economic development aspect, which is a stark contrast to their perception of Washington's role as a security actor.

Lastly, the GCI, as the most recent and at this point the least concrete initiative, can also incite support in some aspects, although in others it will find SEA countries more skeptical. Firstly, it is reminiscent of the discourse on Asian values, which also asserted that there are multiple paths to modernity and was promoted by the SEA countries in the 1990s, at the height of the unipolar moment but on the heels of their economic success. It was particularly advocated by Singapore and Malaysia, but it understandably receded after the Asian economic crisis (Thi Ha, 2023b). Secondly, the GCI states that the

modernization path is not uniform and that multiple understandings of the concept as well as approaches to its fulfilment are viable. This opens the space for cooperation among countries with differing histories and aspirations and reflects the way the ASEAN functions: advocating cooperation, promoting independence from external actors as much as possible, and relying on sovereignty and non-interference in order to accommodate communist regimes and US allies, autocracies and democracies, and majority Muslim or Buddhist states alike. On the other hand, the GCI is much more interlinked with the US-China global rivalry and presents a comprehensive alternative view to the western, liberal, individual rights-oriented outlook. China promotes an essentially Westphalian order focused on sovereign states, one where the needs of the collective are privileged over the rights or freedoms of the individual (Walt, 2021). In this clash, the SEA states will cautiously support the CSI aspects that are fundamentally aligned with the ASEAN principles while being careful to avoid being pulled into the binary division in the battle between democracy and autocracy.

CONCLUSION

While the international order is based on agreed-upon assumptions and shared goals primarily by great powers, every region has its own regional order reflecting specific local characteristics. For Southeast Asia, it is mainly upheld by adherence to the principles of ASEAN, which focus on sovereignty and non-interference in order to accommodate diverse types of states in the region and to enable mutual cooperation despite that. Additionally, it is based on hedging between the major powers that project their influence in the region, the US and China. The rising rivalry between the two brings two contrasting visions for the world and the need for the ASEAN states to adjust their stances towards them. China's vision is most concretely expressed through the three global initiatives that have caused mixed reactions in Southeast Asia. While the GDI is being overwhelmingly supported, the stance towards the GSI is much more reserved, and the GCI is expected to be embraced only in some of its aspects. These different responses are shaped in part by the alternatives offered by the US, which are much more convincing in the security domain than in the economic domain. While this summarises the general response of the ASEAN states, the nuanced and specific reactions of each individual country could be the subject of further research.

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