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Geopolitical Competition among Great Powers and ASEAN's Policy Preference

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Abstract

The United States has long been a security ally and economic partner of the ASEAN member states. Strengths of the U.S.-ASEAN partnership include cooperation on regional security, economic growth, and people-to-people ties. The United States also supports ASEAN's efforts to promote regional cooperation and integration through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. Moreover, the United States has demonstrated its commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region, which is consistent with ASEAN's own aspirations for a rules-based regional order. As China continues to exert influence in the region, ASEAN countries may seek the support of the United States to maintain their sovereignty and territorial integrity. The U.S. factor is regarded as a key factor in the strategic choice of indirect checks and balances against ASEAN. Due to the strategic presence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States is considered to play a very important role in ASEAN's soft balancing against China. This Article going to explain the lack of political and security cooperation between China and ASEAN, especially focusing on ASEAN's security policy towards China.

Keywords: Geopolitical Competition; ASEAN; Policy Preference

1. Introduction

The Obama administration paid special attention to the Asia-Pacific region. In July 2011, then-President Obama delivered a speech at the

Australian Parliament. This speech is the official symbol of the United States launching the "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy. ¹during Trump administration, he launched the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" is that as China's "Belt and Road Initiative" is gaining more and more influence in Southeast Asia. ²Since 2011, the United States has taken several measures to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN. In 2015, President Obama announced the establishment of the US-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, which aims to strengthen economic, political and security ties with ASEAN. This partnership strengthens U.S.-ASEAN cooperation in a range of areas, including trade and investment, defense, counterterrorism, and disaster response. U.S. participation in ASEAN-led regional forums: The U.S. has increased its participation in ASEAN-led regional forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN-U.S. Summit. These forums promote cooperation and dialogue on security, economic development, trade, and other regional issues, as well as joint military exercises, and the United States has demonstrated its commitment to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN by establishing robust and comprehensive partnerships in various fields. Since Biden became president of the United States, the United States has tried to further strengthen its relations with ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries and strengthen its alliance and partnership by promoting "free development" in the Indo-Pacific region. With the improvement of ASEAN's international status and its geopolitical importance, it is of great value to study ASEAN's handling of major power relations. Existing literature offers different interpretations of ASEAN's policy preference.

2. Liturature review

(1) Hedging strategy for Southeast Asia's strategic choice

ASEAN's hedging strategy, which aims to maintain the balance of power in the region through alliances with external powers. The authors argue that ASEAN's hedging strategy is driven by the unstable security environment in Northeast and Southeast Asia, where power competition among major powers such as the United States, China, and Japan has intensified in recent years. ASEAN's hedging strategy is reflected in three dimensions: forming alliances with external powers, balancing power through military and economic means, reducing risks, and maintaining good economic cooperation with China. The authors provide examples of ASEAN

¹ Remattsby Preident Obamatothe Australan Petlamens Patlerent House Canbere. Auatral. TheWhite House Office of the Press Secretary, November 17, 2011,

² Da Wei, Wang Xin. From "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" : Continuity and Variation of U.S. Diplomatic Strategy [J]. Contemporary World,2020, (09):11-16.

hedging behavior, including ASEAN's decision to strengthen relations with external powers such as India, Japan, and the United States, while also maintaining good relations with China. The challenges and limitations of ASEAN's hedging strategy, such as the risk of getting caught up in a power struggle among major powers and the potential negative impact on ASEAN's cohesion and centrality. The paper points out that ASEAN's external hedging strategy is an adaptive response to the turbulent regional environment, and it is also an important means of trying to maintain its autonomy and protect its own interests (Emmers and Kivimäki's, 2018).³ Southeast Asian countries are simply promoting the continuation of U.S. military superiority in the region as a counterweight to the growing of Chinese power, and they will strive to create a regional distribution of power that mirrors U.S. hegemony or a bipolar system in which China and the U.S. balance each other's power. Instead, they strive to maintain a regional balance based on U.S. dominance. But it is not U.S. hegemony that they are after, because all-round integration and a complex balancing strategy will inevitably encourage the formation of a hierarchy of regional powers under the umbrella of this superpower, starting with the critical assimilation of China into a lower-level America's regional power status. This is in line with the goal pursued by the classic engagement strategy, that is, "to minimize conflicts and avoid wars without compromising the integrity of the existing international order." Rather than forming balancing alliances, established powers "seek to restore balance to the system by adjusting international prestige levels and territorial divisions to the new global balance of power, while maintaining the system's formal institutional arrangements and informal rules". Southeast Asian countries, while not great powers, all have similar goals: to bring China and other rising regional powers into a regional hierarchy below the United States, while strengthening the scope of regional institutions and consolidating U.S. dominance, with economic hopes and China remains tightly coupled. The post-Cold War strategy of Southeast Asian countries is to involve all major powers with interests in East Asian security in regional security affairs, which helps to promote a hierarchical regional order that approximates the following priority distribution of power: (1) super Superposition of great powers: the United States; (2) regional powers: China; (3) regional powers: Japan and India; (4) major players in the region: ASEAN, Australia, and South Korea(Evelyn Goh ,2005).⁴

Neilson, D and Thayer, C. A. argue the concept of hedging in Southeast Asia and its implications for the Association of Southeast Asian

³ Emmers, R., & Kivimäki, T. (2018). ASEAN's External Hedging Strategy. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ Goh, E. (2005). Meeting the China challenge: The US in Southeast Asian regional security strategies. East-West Center.

Nations (ASEAN). The authors argue that hedging, or the strategic balancing of relations with great powers, has become a dominant approach to foreign policy in the region. This paper discusses a range of strategies adopted by ASEAN member states to guard against potential great power dominance, including building up military capabilities and diversifying economic relationships. The authors also examine the challenges and risks of hedging, including potential conflict and the difficulty of remaining neutral in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Overall, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the future direction of ASEAN and the role of hedging in shaping regional dynamics. (Neilson, D., & Thayer, C. A).⁵Scholars such as Shafiah F.Muhibat and M.Waffaa Kharisma stated that although ASEAN countries cannot avoid being influenced by external strategic forces. With the rise of competing Indo-Pacific strategies advocated by major powers, ASEAN faces the challenge of maintaining its centrality amidst these pulls. The existence of different views on connectivity strategies does not necessarily condemn strategic competition among ASEAN countries, as this is a spillover effect of competition from external rivals (Shafiah F.Muhibat and M.Waffaa Kharisma, 2022) .⁶These strategies are mutually reinforcing for the effective development of regional integration. Can ASEAN reconcile various sentiments and policy preferences at the national Synergies between interworking methods. ASEAN's principles, mechanisms, prospects and vision need to effectively filter out the negative impact of excessive competition. the United States is paying more and more attention to ASEAN, and the economic and trade cooperation between the two sides is being further strengthened. However, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) led by the United States, while bringing new development opportunities to relevant members of ASEAN, has also split ASEAN to a certain extent. Out of the consideration of the "balance of great powers" strategy and the "central status of ASEAN", ASEAN not only further relies on the United States in terms of political security, but also actively strengthens economic and trade relations with the United States, trying to get rid of the situation of economic dependence on China. The relationship will not have a material negative impact on China. After the TPP is put into operation in the future, the economic and trade relations between the United States and ASEAN will be substantially strengthened, which may have an adverse impact on the economic and trade relations between China and ASEAN. Among the four ASEAN members

⁵ Neilson, D., & Thayer, C. A. (2019). Hedging in Southeast Asia: Which way forward for ASEAN? *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 41(3), 423-450.

⁶ Shafiah F. Muhibat , M. Waffaa Kharisma , Connecting the Indo-Pacific: ASEAN Amidst Competing Connectivity Strategies, (NOV, 2022 REGIONAL PROGRAMME POLITICAL DIALOGUE ASIA, P23-42.

joining the TPP, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore are respectively China's first, second and third largest trading partners in ASEAN. In 2015, the trade volume between China and these three countries accounted for the total trade volume between China and the 10 ASEAN countries. 57.8% (Lu Jianren and Wen Zhangmei 2016).⁷ Once the TPP starts to operate, how much trade diversion effect it will have and what impact it will have on the trade between China and ASEAN need to be studied. Especially for Vietnam, TPP's rules of origin are unfavorable to Vietnam's import of raw materials from China (non-TPP member), which may lead Vietnam to reduce its imports from China and instead import from TPP member countries. Wang Yuzhu pointed out that the hedging strategy is suitable to explain the behavior of ASEAN in recent years, even if it refuses to "embrace" with major powers. The paper argues that all hedging concepts cannot be fully designed to controllably reduce or eliminate uncertain risks. Some small countries use hedging strategies mainly to maintain the balance of great power. Because of its history, culture, system, and special relationship with superpowers, a small country has become a defender or challenger of the order of a big country or a superpower, so it either chooses to take side or balancing. (Wang Yuzhu, 2021)⁸

(2) ASEAN countries' policy preferences

The United States is deeply advancing the "Indo-Pacific strategy" to contain China's influence in the region. Unlike Trump's "neglect" of ASEAN, the Biden administration has stepped up its strategic layout in the ASEAN region since he came to power. Based on geopolitical competition, the United States uses the "Quadruple Security Dialogue" mechanism to shape a small multilateral alliance, revive the partnership between the US government and ASEAN through high-level dialogue, and try to deal with China through multilateral and bilateral alliance partnership networks. In addition, the Biden administration positively stated that the United States is willing to carry out international anti-epidemic cooperation with ASEAN countries. At present, the epidemic situation in many ASEAN countries is severe. The Biden administration has increased public health assistance to Southeast Asian countries and donated new crown vaccines to ASEAN countries to counter China's efforts to help the region deal with the epidemic. The United States is upgrading its geopolitical confrontation, consolidating its partnership network with Southeast Asia, restoring its

⁷ Lu Jianren, Wen Zhangmei. (2016). The Economic and Trade Relationship between ASEAN and the United States and its Impact on China [J], *Asia Pacific Economics* (3) P46-51.

⁸ Wang Yuzhu. (2021). Hedging strategy and its significance for China-Asean relations [J]. *World Economics and Politics*, (1): 22-50, 156-157.

traditional influence in Southeast Asia, and intending to gain more support from its allies when implementing the "Indo-Pacific Strategy". Therefore, in at present and in the future, how to properly respond to the US "Indo-Pacific strategy" and the new situation in the South China Sea region is a strategic test for China and ASEAN countries" (Fan Zuojun ,2021). ⁹China and ASEAN There are three main challenges facing the political aspect: the "China Threat Theory", the South China Sea issue, and major power relations. Since the "China Threat Theory" was put forward, the United States, Japan and some European countries have begun to hype this issue and pay attention to it. The number of problems and areas is also increasing, and the content forms are various (Tu Niansong and Tu Qijun ,2018). ¹⁰Western countries can always find excuses to put pressure on China, such as the Tibet issue, boycott of the Olympics, human rights issues, South China Sea issues, military threats, and economic threats." It seems that the common problems facing the world are all related to China's rise. In the 1990s, with the rapid development of China's economy and the continuous improvement of political influence, some ASEAN countries had "warning and doubts" about China. in the past 10 years, South China Sea disputes have been attracting attention. As China builds islands in the middle of the South China Sea, in less than two years, China has turned seven islands into seven military bases, making the South China Sea one of the most disputed waters in the world. Before the conflict is resolved, the South China Sea claimant countries in Southeast Asia hope to usher in more external intervention, among which the United States is one of the important players. Even the formation of AUKUS and QUAD later made China more aggressive. Tensions in the region have exploded (Yunus Erbas,2022). ¹¹ The growing of China threat theory in southeast Asia. but it is still difficult to eliminate the inherent fear of China in small Southeast Asian countries. Southeast Asian countries Some governments and people are full of doubts about the "Belt and Road" proposed by China, and full of insecurity about strengthening the interconnection construction project with China, which has affected the implementation of the "Belt and Road" construction project. Vietnam's commitment to the Central South Economic Corridor The willingness to build is not strong, and Myanmar and India have insufficient economic motivation for Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. Vietnam and the

⁹ Fan Zuojun. (2021). Prospects of China-Asean Strategic Partnership in the Post-COVID-19 Era [J], *Contemporary World*, Issue 8, P41-47.

¹⁰ Tu Nansong, Tu Qijun. (2018). *On Harmonious Relations between China and ASEAN Countries* [M], Beijing: China Economic Press, 272 pages.

¹¹ Yunus Erbas , *The Conflict in the South China Sea: A Focus on a Possible Solution* Apr 11, 2022 *Peace and Conflict Management, Research, War and Conflict*.

Philippines, which have maritime disputes with China, hope to reduce their economic dependence on China and diversify their foreign economic relations to reduce economic security risks (Quan Yi, Yin Zhu ,2017).¹²

2.1 Limitations and deficiencies of existing research

First, ASEAN countries have traditionally used hedging strategies to balance relations with China and the United States, as these two countries are important economic and strategic partners of ASEAN. But in recent years, the tension between China and the United States has escalated, and the United States has been more active in pushing its allies to take a tough stance against China. This has created a difficult situation for ASEAN, because the United States wants its allies to support it to check and balance China. In addition, the rise of China in recent years has made Southeast Asia more and more economically dependent on China, but at the same time, some Southeast Asian countries and China have the South China Sea. The dispute over the issue presents ASEAN with a dilemma between not wanting to anger China and risk economic retaliation, but also not wanting to give up its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult for ASEAN countries to use hedging strategies to balance their relations with China and the United States. They face pressure from both sides to take a stand, forcing them to make difficult choices about alliances and policies.

Second, previous studies mainly focused on the South China Sea issue or cooperation between Southeast Asian countries and China. Some scholars focused too narrowly on specific countries or problem areas and lacked middle-level theoretical basis. Some scholars also try to analyze ASEAN's behavior of balancing China through the theory of power checks and balances. For example, institutional checks and balances and other perspectives, but Southeast Asia is an organization with complex and diversified behaviors. At the same time, institutional checks and balances are sometimes difficult to distinguish from traditional foreign policies. ASEAN's institutional checks and balances on China may not be as expected by previous scholars. Obviously then, because ASEAN operates on consensus-based decision-making, which makes it difficult for the organization to take a unified and tough stance against China. ASEAN also places importance on maintaining good relations with all major powers in the region, including China, to avoid escalating tensions. Thus, institutional balancing against China may not be as evident in ASEAN's actions as in other regions or organizations, through more explicit alignments with certain

¹² Quan Yi, Yin Zhu, "Innovation of China-Asean Regional and Sub-regional Cooperation Mechanisms and Cooperation Models" [J], Southeast Asian Studies, No.6,2017, P15-368-6099. 152-153100.

major powers. Furthermore, the notion of institutional balance in ASEAN's actions toward China may also be exaggerated, as it assumes that all ASEAN members have the same level of concern about China's actions, which is not necessarily the case. ASEAN members have varying degrees of dependence, interests, and threat perceptions on China, which may affect their approach to institutional balancing.

Finally, some scholars try to explain the ASEAN dialogue policy from the perspective of exceptionalism. One possible explanation is that ASEAN is a diverse region, and member states have different priorities and interests, which may be reflected in their foreign policies toward China. superior. In addition, ASEAN may be pursuing a hedging strategy, that is, adopting a strategy of combining engagement and deterrence against China, rather than a complete balance. However, although ASEAN's behavior does not clearly show its own checks and balances against China, this does not represent ASEAN's behavior. It belongs to following or there is no check and balance on China. Regarding the use of exceptionalism to explain this phenomenon, individual member states may have their own exceptionalism beliefs or tendencies, which may affect their foreign policy toward China. It may not be fully applicable.

3. 'balancing' of Major Powers by ASEAN

3.1 Soft balancing Theory

Kenneth Waltz describes balancing of power as a stabilizing factor in international politics. He believes that balance of power in international politics can help prevent a superpower from monopolizing global politics and economics. Through mutual balancing the interests of various countries can be balanced, and wars and conflicts can be avoided. In Waltz's perspective, checks and balances are a kind of insurance mechanism for the distribution of power in international politics, so that even if one country becomes stronger, it will not pose a threat to others. Through alliances, diplomacy, and the balance of force, though not necessarily a balanced distribution of power, but hopefully some improvement on the status quo.¹³ Stephen M. Walter (1987), a well-known scholar in the field of international relations, explained the concept and purpose of balance in his book *The Origin of Alliances*. According to Walter, balance of power are actions taken by one state or group of states to offset the growing power of another state or group of states. The purpose of checks and balances is to maintain a stable distribution of power and prevent any one country or group of countries from dominating the international system.¹⁴ Mearsheimer (John J., 1994) argues

¹³ John Mearsheimer (2006) "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History*, October.

¹⁴ Walt, Stephen M. "The Origins of Alliances." Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.

that states will seek either internal or external equilibrium according to the distribution of power in the international system. When one country or group of countries becomes too powerful, others seek to balance of power. Mearsheimer argues that this behavior is driven by the anarchy of the international system, with no higher authority to guarantee the security of individual states.¹⁵ According to Wolfers, the core condition of the international system is the just and balanced distribution of power. He stressed the importance of checks and balances as key to maintaining international order and stability. He further divides the conditions of checks and balances into two types: internal checks and balances and external checks and balances. Internal checks and balances refer to the control of the balance of power through the internal systems of the state, such as the implementation of democratic institutions and the rule of law. External checks and balances refer to the balance of power control through international organizations, treaties, agreements and other international multilateral cooperation mechanisms.¹⁶

However, because the traditional balancing "hard balancing", has a certain threshold for a country's power, some scholars point out the concept of soft balancing. (Robert A. Pape,2005) believes that in a unipolar system, the cost to check and balance the great powers is too high, and the secondary powers usually use the strategy of soft balance to counter the unipolar powers, that is, to establish military alliances, strengthen arms trading, and cross-regional economic cooperation to achieve the purpose of balance.¹⁷ Another representative of soft checks and balances, (T.V.Paul, 2005) believes that soft checks and balances on superpowers can be achieved through strategic checks and balances, specifically through diplomatic decisions, so as to effectively check the monopoly of distribution by great powers without directly challenging the military superiority of superpowers.¹⁸

3.2 ASEAN soft Balancing Toward China

Since the 21st century, the level of political interaction and exchanges between China and ASEAN has been greatly improved, and they have increasingly become close partners in Asia-Pacific international

¹⁵ Mearsheimer, John J. "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, pp. 5-49.

¹⁶ Wolfers, Arnold. *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1962.

¹⁷ Robert A.pape, "soft balancing against the united states",*international security*,VOL.30.No.1,summer 2005,P10.

¹⁸ Paul, T. V. (2005). "Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy." *International Security*, 30(1), 46-71.

relations. The international status of both sides has been significantly improved. China and ASEAN have grown from "Comprehensive Dialogue Partner" to "Strategic Partnership".¹⁹ However, in the context of major power competition, ASEAN is facing many challenges, which require careful consideration and strategic action. One of ASEAN's most pressing challenges at a time when great power competition is intensifying is the need to balance its relationship with these two powerhouses. China's increasing influence in Southeast Asia will pose a threat to ASEAN.

According to the official information, since 2009, China has continued to maintain the status of ASEAN's largest trading partner. ASEAN-China trade has more than doubled since 2010 (accounting for 18% of ASEAN's total trade) and has almost quadrupled since the 2005 China-ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement came into force. From 2010 to 2019, ASEAN's exports to China grew at an average annual rate of 10.4%, while ASEAN's imports from China increased at an average annual rate of 12.5%. ASEAN's trade deficit with China increased from US\$10.4 billion in 2010 to US\$102.9 billion in 2019. According to preliminary data from ASEAN, China's FDI (foreign direct investment) in ASEAN reached US\$9.1 billion in 2019, accounting for 5.7% of the total FDI in the region.²⁰ The cooperation between China and ASEAN is relatively prominent in terms of economy, but it mainly manifests in two different forms in terms of political security. First, resolve the South China Sea issue through peaceful consultations. Since 2011, the main political and security cooperation between China and ASEAN has been manifested in the peaceful settlement of the South China Sea issue through consultations. In July 2011, the guidelines for implementing the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" were reached. In September 2013, consultations on the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea" were launched. In July 2016, a joint statement on the full and effective implementation of the Declaration was issued. On August 6, 2017, the foreign ministers of China and ASEAN met in Manila and adopted the framework of the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea". In June 2018, a draft single consultation text of the "Guidelines" was formed. In July 2019, the first reading of the "Guidelines" text was completed ahead of schedule, and the second reading of the text was completed in May 2022. Second, in terms of exercises, China held joint

¹⁹ Zhang Jie, The Reconstruction of ASEAN-Centralism and the Development of China-ASEAN Relations (Institute of Asia-Pacific and Global Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; School of International Relations, University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China) [J], *International Studies*, 2021 (3) P118-135.

²⁰ ASEAN-China Economic relation,

<https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/mic>

maritime exercises with Southeast Asian countries in 2018 and 2019, and in 2019, when it served as the co-chair of the Anti-Terrorism Expert Group of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus Meeting with Thailand, for the first time under this mechanism China held a large-scale military exercise.

In contrast, the ways of political and security cooperation between ASEAN and the United States are more diversified and the content of cooperation is more in-depth. In 2011, the United States became the first country to have a dedicated military adviser/liaison officer at the U.S. Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta. In November 2011, the United States joined the East Asia Summit, providing a platform for the United States to participate in the discussion of regional security issues, and strengthening the strategic communication between ASEAN and the United States. The Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative (SEAMLEI), 2014 (Shield of Partnership Exercise 2014, SOPEX 14), was established in 2013, and the 2014 Secretary of Defense hosted ASEAN Defense ministers in the United States for the first time.²¹ Participate in the U.S.-ASEAN Defense Forum in Hawaii to discuss key strategic issues. In 2015, the United States announced the appointment of a new ASEAN Technical adviser.²² The United States hosted the Sunny lands Summit, the first summit between the United States and ASEAN to be held alone in the United States. In October 2017, at the informal US-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting in the Philippines, then-US Secretary of Defense James Mattis proposed the establishment of the ASEAN-US Defense Partnership Maritime Exercise (AUMX).²³ The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 was signed by President Trump on December 31, 2018. In August 2018, ASEAN Chiefs of Naval Staff discussed and recommended an AUMX in 2019; During the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting held in Singapore in October 2018, ASEAN defense ministers approved the implementation of the agreement. Since then, Thailand and the United States have agreed to co-organize AUMX. The United States and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have held their first naval exercises. The exercise will be held in ASEAN-US in 2019 and will involve more than 1,000 military personnel from the US and ASEAN countries. The existing U.S.-ASEAN Southeast Asia Cooperation

²¹ Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/pl/240798.htm>

²² Fact Sheet: Unprecedented U.S.-ASEAN Relations, <https://id.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/embassy-fact-sheets/fact-sheet-unprecedented-u-s-asean-relations/>

²³ Association of Southeast Asian Nations-United States of America MARITIME EXERCISE FRAMEWORK, https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2020_April_ADSOM_Phetchaburi.%203%20April%202019_Annex%2021.%20AUMX%20Framework%20for%20Policy%20Discussion_Final.pdf

and Training (SEACAT) exercise in August/September 2019 to implement the AUMX focuses on promoting maritime safety and security through shared awareness, technical cooperation, and the sharing of knowledge and expertise between the United States and ASEAN. It is hoped that the event will be repeated in the coming years. In March 2020, the 116th Congress of the United States discussed the international role of the United States Coast Guard, proposed the permanent deployment of the United States Coast Guard in Southeast Asia, and stressed that "to play the special advantages of the Coast Guard, through participation in international cooperation, access to international strategic channels of intelligence information sharing and joint law enforcement powers." To gain an edge in competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative." The United States is committed to supporting the implementation of ASEAN's Vision for the Indo-Pacific Maritime Pillar. The United States announced \$60 million for a new regional maritime initiative, most of which will be led by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG). The State Department and USCG will deploy a training team in the region with additional dedicated support from U.S.-based trainers, expanding USCG support to Southeast Asian maritime law enforcement agencies. These technical experts will provide regional partner maritime law enforcement agencies with capacity building in institutional development, preparedness, equipment maintenance and workforce specialization. The U.S. Coast Guard and the State Department will provide ASEAN with new training on energy security, protection of critical maritime infrastructure, and response to all hazards.

3.3 ASEAN countries' s arms trade

China's arms exports to ASEAN countries (unit: millions of US dollars)

Year/Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
CAM	4			16	39					2	1		23	14	99
LAO				16	16		1		2	51	9				95
MYM	19	5	277	251	185	63	180	215	115	98	50	4	54	102	1622
IDN		2	8	64	73	34	38	40	34	66	14	17	2		343
THL	1		2	18	22	7	1	77	131	52	97	6	29	2	453
VET															None
PHI															None
MLS	5										28		55	28	115
SGP															None
BRU															None

Resources: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>

U. S.'s arms exports to ASEAN countries (unit: millions of US dollars)

Year/Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
CAM															None
LAO															None
MYM															None
IDN			0	35	84	150	83	94	246	89	21	87	101	14	1004
THL	4	1	50	21	54	32	27	46	29	49	10	24		49	396
VET									54				54	0	108
PHI	0		60	6	55	12	46	82	23	2	10	60	92	16	463
MLS	10	12	2		6	10	4	10	4		1	1		26	84
SGP	720	691	453	432	623	23	75	557	113	57	22	6	106	266	4150
BRU					15	36	36						0		87

Resource: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>

Southeast Asia's attitude towards China and the US dates back mainly to the period of the Cold War and the ASEAN-China relations after the Cold War. Land Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar) during and after the Cold War these countries did not experience the benefits of the then-dominant U.S. order. During the Cold War, Cambodia's Civil war, the Vietnam War, and the crisis in Laos were all struggles at different levels by the United States to prevent the expansion of the Communist Party. Burma, on the other hand, has chosen a policy of closed doors and self-isolation, so U.S. aid and markets are irrelevant to these countries. China has played an important role in the development of these countries, so they have generally established close relations with China and according to the General Trend Index (TIV) of Sino-US military trade with these three countries, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos are obviously highly dependent on China. However, only Myanmar has a high overall trend indicator (1,622 million), while Cambodia and Laos have a low trend indicator (99 million and 95 million respectively). Second, another major factor affecting ASEAN countries' relations with the US and China concerns the South China Sea claimants, such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia. With the heating up of the South China Sea issue, these countries are more eager to borrow the power of the United States to guarantee their own security and have closer security cooperation with the United States. (Philippines, Thailand) The United States once ruled the Philippines, and the two countries have a mutual defense treaty and some military cooperation. Thailand: The United States and Thailand have a mutual defense agreement and work closely on several military cooperation projects. Vietnam, though not seeking direct security assistance from the

United States, will step up military cooperation in some areas. In this context, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei are highly dependent on US arms sales to them.

However, as an important economic and financial center of ASEAN, and with strong political and diplomatic influence in ASEAN, Singapore has always been able to maintain good relations with China and the United States among ASEAN countries. However, according to TIV data, Singapore is the highest importer of US arms among ASEAN countries since 2009, and Singapore has no record of military transactions with China during this period.

Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia are among the ASEAN countries that have had military trade with both the United States and China since 2009. The target value of Indonesia's acquisition of US weapons is 1004 million, and that of China is 343 million. The target value of Thailand's arms purchases from the United States is 396 million, and that of China is 453 million. Malaysia has been actively cultivating good relations with China in recent years, although the trend value of Malaysia's arms trade with the United States is \$84 million and that with China is \$115 million. And imports from China are mostly small arms and equipment. According to the above data , the arms trade between China and the United States with ASEAN countries, ASEAN countries are still highly dependent on the United States in terms of military. This is also one of the manifestations of ASEAN's soft balancing against China.

Conclusion

Since the United States proposed to return to the Asia-Pacific, the ASEAN organization's behavior toward China has changed both invisibly and subtly. Although there is little clear evidence to explain ASEAN's balancing behavior toward China, this does not mean that ASEAN does not have any balancing action against China, but its balancing action is in form of soft balancing. When great power competition becomes more and more fierce, ASEAN constantly relies on the power of the United States to maintain its own interests. Especially in the South China Sea issue and in the security field, that is, by strengthening political and security cooperation with the United States.

Through the above argument, this paper believes that with the more intense competition among great powers, hedging strategy is not suitable for ASEAN to deal with the relationship between ASEAN and great powers. However, the traditional hard checks and balances need to pay more costs, and ASEAN is unable to pay such a huge cost. Therefore, this paper holds that soft balance is feasible for ASEAN. ASEAN's soft balancing against China is through strengthening political and security cooperation with major

powers, expanding the scale of military exercises with the United States, accepting military assistance from the United States, and importing large weapons and military equipment from the United States.

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