

# Challenges and Responses to ASEAN's "Strategy of Balancing Great Powers" in the Context of China-US Competition

Gang Zhu

ASIA-EUROPE INSTITUTE, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
zg19950916@163.com

**Abstract:** *The strategy of balancing great powers is a long-standing diplomatic strategy by ASEAN countries. By implementing the "strategy of balancing great powers," ASEAN has gained a voice in international affairs in Southeast Asia, maintained regional stability and development in Southeast Asia, and has become the central player in the region. However, with the intensification of competition between China and the United States in recent years, ASEAN's "strategy of balancing great powers" is facing challenges. Therefore, this paper will start with an introduction to ASEAN's strategy of balancing great powers, discuss the challenges faced by ASEAN's strategy of balancing great powers under the backdrop of China-US competition, and explore how ASEAN can continue to maintain its strategy of balancing great powers to adapt to the new international environment in the future.*

**Keywords:** Strategy of Balancing Great Powers; ASEAN; China-US.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the unique geography of the region, ASEAN has always made the balance-of-powers strategy the centerpiece of its development of foreign relations. This strategy has helped ASEAN countries achieve a dominant position in the international arena and has created a favorable external environment (Heydarian, 2020). But in recent years, the rivalry between China and the United States, as two world powers, has been intensifying. This has added much uncertainty to ASEAN's great power balance strategy (Koga, 2022).

In the late twentieth century, Southeast Asian countries sought a balance between China and the United States through a more singular and simplistic approach. This is reflected in the fact that ASEAN needs the help of the United States in the political, economic and security areas. On top of that, culture, tradition and tourism relied heavily on China (Ha, 2022). At this stage, China and the U.S. are developing in different directions in Southeast Asia, so they will not create too much conflict or intersection (Dugga, 2023). Southeast Asia can also handle the relationship between China and the U.S. well at this stage. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, China's economy has been growing rapidly and China's foreign trade and investment have been intensifying. As a result, China and the United States began to experience friction of interest in areas such as trade and investment regarding Southeast Asia (Yue, 2023). While the United States worked against terrorism, the trade pattern between China and ASEAN accomplished a steady development (Cao, 2021). ASEAN plays a unique role in the U.S.-China rivalry as the most dynamic and successful regional organization. Despite the limitations of the great power balancing strategy adopted by ASEAN, which is disturbed by many external factors, it has indeed helped the stable development of ASEAN countries. Even as the competition between China and the United States intensifies and the political space for ASEAN countries to manage their relations with China is squeezed, ASEAN is trying to achieve a balance between the two countries (Khalid, 2019). This is because ASEAN realizes that its policy choices will not only directly affect its bilateral relations with the United States and China but will also feed through to the U.S.-China relationship (Ha, 2022).

ASEAN is faced with the dilemma of how to engage with the two major powers, China and the United States. Its claim to "centrality" implies the need to maintain an equal distance from both powers (Po & Primiano, 2021). It continues to benefit from China's economic rise, while allowing the United States to ensure stability. It does not want to be part of a military alliance system, nor does it want to be forced to choose between China and the United States (Faisal & Khan, 2022). Therefore, it is of practical importance for both China and the U.S. as well as ASEAN countries to understand the current challenges to ASEAN's great power balance strategy and how it can be addressed.

This essay will first introduce the background and the concept of ASEAN's Strategy of Balancing Great Powers, and then discuss in detail the challenges to ASEAN's balance of great power strategy and ASEAN's responses in the context of increased competition between China and the United States. Finally, a conclusion of all the contents will be presented.

## 2. HYPOTHESIS

The China-US competition asserts significant pressure and influence on ASEAN's great power balancing strategy, with potential impacts on the peace and stability of the ASEAN bloc, as member states navigate pressure and competing interests from the two great powers. Therefore, with China and the US competing, it would be expected that ASEAN uses a strategy that maintains the economic stability, and peace that it has managed to bring to member states while avoiding being caught up in the confrontation.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taking the difference between physical education and non-physical education college students in Gannan Medical College as the research object, some college students in Gannan Medical College were selected as the survey objects. The specific situation is shown in Table 1 and Table 2. The purpose of this essay is to examine the challenges and responses to ASEAN's great power balance strategy in the context of Sino-US competition and to answer this question, the paper splits this complex issue into three sub-questions.

**Q1: What is ASEAN's great power balancing strategy?**

**Q2: In the context of US-China competition, which challenges does ASEAN's great power balance strategy face?**

**Q3: How can ASEAN address these challenges to sustain its great power balance strategy and adapt to the new international environment?**

## 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 ASEAN's Strategy of Balancing Great Powers

In the course of their development, the ASEAN countries realized that national development required the use of a means to keep interdependent powers in check (Heydarian, 2020). Thus, after thinking and planning, ASEAN began to change its foreign policy and the balance of great power strategy began to work (Cook & Ha, 2020).

The ASEAN balance of power strategy includes both the balance of the ASEAN organization and the specific behavior of ASEAN countries and is a combination of both. Moreover, the term "balance of power" does not appear in official ASEAN and national documents, but rather in terms of policy preferences. Balance is only the purpose and goal of ASEAN and its countries. Malaysia's equidistant diplomacy, Indonesia's pragmatism, Laos and Myanmar's neutral diplomacy, and Singapore's balanced diplomacy can all be classified as great power balance strategies.

One of the ways that the ASEAN uses to balance great powers is to strengthen internal cohesion and resilience among member states. ASEAN fulfills this goal by promoting social development and economic integration among the member states. One such initiative is the ASEAN Economic Community, which aims to promote trade and investment in Southeast Asia (Lardo, 2021). The rationale behind this formation is that creating a more integrated regional economy helps ASEAN countries reduce overdependency and reliance on external powers, making the region more self-sufficient (Lardo, 2021; Murphy, 2017). The Southeast Asia region has been one of the most rapidly developing regions worldwide, with increased economic growth experienced in the region. However, when the ASEAN was formed, most member-states were low-income countries (Parks et al., 2018). Nonetheless, its emergence aligned with a period of increased economic expansion in Southeast Asia, which saw the region's per capita income experience a 33 times increment, growing from \$ 122 in 1967 to 2016's \$ 4021 (Parks et al., 2018). This economic prosperity has been realized thanks to ASEAN's efforts to maintain stability in Southeast Asia while enabling greater economic cooperation.

ASEAN has also increased cohesion among member states, by minimizing internal conflicts. During its earlier days, the geopolitics of Southeast Asia were marked by interstate territorial disputes, weak social and political ties among the region's new nation-states, intra-regional ideological polarizations, legitimacy problems of postcolonial governments, and increased external powers interventions (Acharya, 2014). As such, the region was muddled by conflicts threatening new states' survival and regional order prospects. The region was also polarized during the Cold War, resulting from Indochina's communist efforts to spread revolutionary ideologies to the neighboring states. However, as stated by Acharya (2014), since the formation of the ASEAN in 1967, some of the original founding members, including Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, never fought against each other. More involvement in the ASEAN's fostering of regional order was evident in its involvement in 1991 Cambodia's Paris Peace Agreement (Acharya, 2014). This shows the effectiveness of ASEAN in fostering peace in the region.

Another notable strategy the ASEAN uses to balance great power's influence is the neutrality and non-alignment principle. By impartiality, ASEAN treats all actors equally and refrains from taking sides in the conflict while offering the confronting parties a safe environment to settle their differences (Yoshimatsu, 2022). This impartial enmeshment strategy aims to mitigate power confrontations by emphasizing regional cooperation. As stated by Yoshimatsu (2022), enmeshment helps mitigate severe conflicts by integrating great powers into regional institutions, where great powers can keep one another in check. Further, when integrated into a particular region's institutional framework, commitment is reinforced. A culture of mutual dependency is created, preventing great powers from planning or using their power to influence policy changes in isolation (Yoshimatsu, 2022).

But objectively speaking, the balance of power strategy has distinct limitations (Cook & Ha, 2020). First, it is influenced by the geopolitical environment. Secondly, factors such as the ASEAN community and the multivariate cooperation mechanism all play a role in constraining the balance of power strategy. These limitations are even more evident in the context of intensifying China-US competition, which undoubtedly brings new challenges to ASEAN's great power balance strategy (Bitas, 2020).

#### **4.2 Challenges to ASEAN's Strategy of Balancing Great Powers**

The competition between China and the United States has brought a variety of challenges to ASEAN's balance of power strategy but neither China nor the U.S. can become the dominant power in Southeast Asia at the moment, so the great power balance strategy remains the ideal choice for ASEAN (Yoshimatsu, 2023). However, the foreign policies of the U.S. and Chinese governments have placed certain external constraints on the ASEAN balance of power strategy.

First, the U.S. government's definition of China as a systemic power has exacerbated ASEAN's dilemma of choosing sides (Dugga, 2023). A coalition between the U.S. and other countries could effectively prevent China from becoming the dominant regional player. Some ASEAN countries have also become targets of U.S. alliances. The Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quadrilateral Mechanism are both means for the U.S. to bring in other countries (Bao, 2023). The quadrilateral mechanism is constantly being upgraded and the topics are expanding, and now covers topics such as science and technology, infrastructure, and climate change. This indicates that the U.S. is working to create an Indo-Pacific strategy with the Quadrilateral Mechanism at its core (Zhang, 2023). The Biden administration's efforts to create a "coalition of issues" to deal with China will test ASEAN's centripetal strength and its commitment to the principle of inclusiveness (Zhang, 2023).

Second, the economic and technological sanctions adopted by the U.S. government against China have brought a new test to the balance of power strategy. The U.S.-China rivalry has led to a decline in Chinese demand for parts and components for ASEAN output, which has affected the economic development of ASEAN countries (Po & Primiano, 2021). In addition, Sino-US competition has accelerated the industrial shift of multinational enterprises to Southeast Asia. But the industrial transfer is inadequate and limited to low-end manufacturing. This is because many companies believe that the infrastructure and transportation in ASEAN countries are not conducive to business development. This means that the gap of development within ASEAN will further increase (Po & Primiano, 2021). Therefore, how to weigh the relationship between China and the United States affects the economic development of many ASEAN countries.

Third, the policy direction of China and the United States towards ASEAN increases the difficulty of implementing ASEAN's balance of power strategy. First of all, it is undeniable that the development of ASEAN-US-China relations affects the future of US-China competition (Avdaliani, 2022). This means that

ASEAN needs to be careful in implementing its balance of power strategy. While the U.S. government has repeatedly emphasized its support for ASEAN centrality (Avdaliani, 2022), the U.S. has taken a less soft approach in dealing with China, instead using various means to pressure ASEAN countries. In contrast, China has adopted a different strategy in dealing with ASEAN (Paul & Underwood, 2019). China and ASEAN became the number one partners and the relationship between the two became closer. Cooperation between the two sides in response to COVID-19, economic recovery, and the Lan-Me mechanism dovetailing with the ASEAN sub-regional cooperation mechanism will also further enhance their relationship (Rashid, 2022).

Fourth, ASEAN's internal challenges test its ability and conditions to implement a balance-of-power strategy. First, there is still a long way to go in building the ASEAN community. There are large differences between the rich and poor among its members, and how to activate the development potential of each region and narrow the gap between rich and poor has become an internal influence on ASEAN's balance of power strategy (Avdaliani, 2022). In addition, the outbreak of COVID-19 also hit the economic recovery of ASEAN countries. Many factories started to close down, which seriously affected the development of the country (Rashid, 2022). If the internal factors of ASEAN countries are unstable, this is not only a negative factor for their implementation of the parity strategy but also has a bad negative impact.

#### **4.3 ASEAN's Responses to U.S.-China Competition**

According to the above, in order to cope with the risk of increased competition between China and the US, ASEAN has taken a clear position of "not choosing sides" and carefully balanced the relationship between China and the US. In addition, ASEAN is committed to promoting economic integration and enhancing overall cohesion to maintain ASEAN centrality. The aim is to reduce dependence on China and the U.S. and to broaden the scope of its foreign strategy. From the development of ASEAN's relations with China and the U.S. in recent years and the issues on which it has focused, the following are its main responses.

The first is to continue to clarify and maintain the position of "not choosing sides" and carefully balance the relationship between China and the United States. According to ASEAN leaders' statements and polls, 96 percent of ASEAN people want to enhance regional cohesion and expand strategic space to deal with U.S.-China competition, rather than "choosing sides" (Grano, 2023). ASEAN believes that the United States plays a positive role in achieving regional peace and prosperity. At the same time, it believes that it is in ASEAN's best interest to develop economic and trade relations with China while maintaining security cooperation with the United States. They promote increased dialogue between China and the U.S. and call on the U.S. to accept China's rise, because it is occurring within a U.S.-dominated system and has no intention of challenging it enough to pose a threat to the U.S. (Grano, 2023). ASEAN needs the United States to continue to provide security for the region and to use ASEAN's multilateral mechanisms to jointly restrain China and make it a constructive force for regional peace and prosperity (Grano & Weber, 2023). ASEAN is also committed to calling on China and the United States to resolve their differences in an appropriate manner and to find ways to cooperate in areas such as climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and public health (Maini, 2023). Despite the difficulty of escaping the dichotomy between ASEAN's security dependence on the United States and its economic dependence on China, the progress of ASEAN-US-China relations suggests that it is still cautiously seeking equidistant diplomacy with the United States and China.

The second is to promote the process of collective identity building and integration to enhance the ASEAN centripetal force. The unity and cohesion within ASEAN are the root of maintaining the centrality of ASEAN (Avdaliani, 2022). In the process of ASEAN integration building, the construction of economic community and political security community has made certain achievements, but the construction of social and cultural community is not satisfactory (Avdaliani, 2022). This phenomenon is complicated by the differences in the positions of ASEAN countries in the context of the intensifying competition between China and the U.S., and there is a risk of internal division in ASEAN. To address the risk of ASEAN fragmentation, ASEAN proposed in 2018 the idea of establishing an "ASEAN identity narrative" to proactively promote the construction of a collective identity for ASEAN countries. The aim is to take preventive measures to enrich the ASEAN identity and enhance its attractiveness (Thompson & Sunchindah, 2023). The year 2020 has been designated as the Year of ASEAN Identity, and ASEAN has adopted the document "ASEAN Identity Narrative" to cultivate a sense of belonging and identity among the people of ASEAN countries. The themes of ASEAN meetings in the last two years also reflect the desire of ASEAN countries to collaborate collectively and address challenges together (Thompson & Sunchindah, 2023).

Third, ASEAN will pay more attention to the building of economic communities. Under the impact of the competition between China and the United States, ASEAN, on the one hand, promises to continue to open up its markets and continue to leverage its competitive advantage of opening up its markets in a situation where some countries tend to be conservative and closed (Lee, Hamid & Hardy, 2023). On the other hand, it will continue to promote internal interconnection and economic and trade development. In this way, it hopes to improve ASEAN's flexibility and operational efficiency and enhance the proactive and adaptive capacity of ASEAN's economic integration (Börzel & Risse, 2020). Since 2018, the four ASEAN Chairs of Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Brunei have made enhancing regional resilience and sustainable development a key agenda (Börzel & Risse, 2020). Singapore's chairmanship has focused on promoting the transformation of the regional digital economy, resulting in the ASEAN Smart Cities Network Framework. Its use of innovation and technology to promote sustainable urban development has sought to narrow the development gap between cities and become a new growth point for building the ASEAN Economic Community (Ali et al., 2023). The mainstreaming of the "The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)" is one of the core tasks of Indonesia when it assumes the new chairmanship of ASEAN on 29 January 2023. The implications of this task focus on the policy of neutrality and non-selection of sides in ASEAN's political diplomacy (Aristyo, 2023). The Shangbao Indonesia editorial reported that rivalry between the great powers of the Asia-Pacific region had become a focus of attention and that ASEAN had demonstrated its neutrality and was unwilling to be drawn into the fray. Indonesian President Joko Widodo emphasized that ASEAN could not be the voice of any great power in the face of competition and games between them.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Changes in the power structure of a region can affect the strategic adjustments of the region, especially for small and medium-sized countries. The power structure in Southeast Asia has not been shaped solely by the interaction of the countries within the region but to a large extent by the strategic games of the external powers in Southeast Asia, which have led to the interaction of the local countries. The growing trend towards a China-US 'quasi-bipolar' pattern and the existence of a sub-regional power structure in the region have made the power structure in Southeast Asia even more complex. The complexity of regional security determines the diversity of national strategic orientations (Lee, Hamid & Hardy, 2023). In recent years, Southeast Asian states have not only developed the 'ASEAN Way' to promote their own community building and ensure stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia but have also established a normative and central position in a region as geopolitically complex and fiercely competitive with great powers as Southeast Asia.

However, the balance of power strategy pursued by ASEAN has also seen many challenges due to the lack of national strength and the intensification of competition between China and the US. In this context, therefore, ASEAN has made some timely adjustments to respond to the changing situation. For example, it has made clear its position of "not choosing sides", carefully balanced the relationship between China and the US, promoted the building of a collective identity and integration process, enhanced ASEAN's centripetal strength and resilience, and most importantly, maintained ASEAN's centrality and promoted inclusive regional cooperation. The aim is to enable ASEAN to achieve steady development in a complex context.

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## AUTHOR PROFILE

**Zhu Gang**, postgraduate student of University of Malaya. Research direction: ASEAN Studies.