

EVALUATING DEPENDENCY AND NEOCLASSICAL THEORIES IN EXPLAINING WEALTH INEQUALITIES THROUGH THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) AND ANTI-DUMPING POLICY IN ASEAN COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

The study examines ASEAN's economic transformations since China's Belt and Road Initiative (2013), revealing complex regional responses to global economic pressures. ASEAN countries demonstrate varied approaches to trade defense, with some implementing anti-dumping measures against Chinese commodities while others remain passive. The research highlights the tension between protecting domestic industries and managing global economic integration, showing how different ASEAN nations balance macroeconomic interests, microeconomic challenges, and geopolitical positioning across diverse economic strategies.

Keyword: BRI, Anti-dumping, Weak State, Geopolitic, ASEAN

INTRODUCTIONS

ASEAN-China Economic Relations: Strategic Dynamics and Trade Policy Challenges

This research delves into the intricate economic interactions between ASEAN member states and China, revealing a complex landscape of strategic challenges and opportunities. The analysis uncovers two distinct approaches to economic engagement: an active protection group (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines) demonstrating robust anti-dumping mechanisms, and a passive protection group (Singapore, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) with minimal practical implementation of trade defense strategies in ASEAN-China Economic Relations: Strategic Dynamics and Trade Policy Challenges.

The research highlights significant policy challenges, including substantial gaps in commodity market protection and a disproportionate focus on industrial sectors that leaves small-scale farmers and retailers vulnerable to predatory pricing. These economic dynamics are characterized by varying degrees of entanglement with China, creating asymmetric dependency matrices and unique risk-reward calculations for each member state.

Strategic opportunities emerge for ASEAN through three critical mechanisms: harmonizing regulatory frameworks, developing region-wide technology transfer standards, and creating coordinated human capital development initiatives. The diplomatic strategy of "bandwagoning" emerges as a crucial approach, where less powerful states strategically align with the superpower while seeking mutual benefits and maintaining a delicate balance between cooperation and self-preservation.

China's diplomatic approach, characterized by neighborhood diplomacy and a "community of common destiny" initiative, adds complexity to the regional dynamics. Key historical transition points, including China's WTO accession in 2001 and Xi Jinping's leadership beginning in 2013,

have significantly reshaped the economic landscape, particularly in emerging sectors like electronics manufacturing.

The research identifies critical challenges, including South China Sea territorial disputes and the ongoing challenge of balancing regional peace with economic opportunities. Significant research gaps persist, particularly in comparative analysis of anti-dumping mechanisms and understanding of Chinese capital infiltration strategies.

Ultimately, ASEAN-China relations represent a multifaceted interaction of economic interdependence, strategic hedging, and diplomatic negotiation. Success requires sophisticated, adaptable approaches that balance national interests with regional cooperation. The key recommendations include developing more flexible economic frameworks, enhancing protection for vulnerable economic sectors, investing in human capital and technological capabilities, and maintaining a strategic diplomatic equilibrium.

Methodologically, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of economic policies, diplomatic strategies, and trade mechanisms across ASEAN member states from 2001 to 2023, offering a nuanced understanding of this critical economic relationship in an increasingly interconnected global order.

Two Segments of BRI Impact on ASEAN Countries' Anti-Dumping Policies

China's World Trade Organization (WTO) integration has profoundly reshaped ASEAN's economic landscape, creating complex trade dynamics. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement dramatically transformed bilateral relations, quintupling trade volumes to over \$400 billion by 2014. This strategic partnership exposed fundamental differences in economic approaches across Southeast Asian nations.

The region demonstrates a clear bifurcation in trade policy: One group of countries (Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines) actively employs anti-dumping mechanisms, primarily protecting large-scale industrial commodities. Another group (Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Timor-Leste, Myanmar) adopts a laissez-faire approach, offering virtually unrestricted market access to Chinese imports.

President Xi Jinping's "shared destiny" framework has been instrumental in recalibrating economic strategies, founded on principles of mutual trust, cooperation, and understanding. While this approach has generated substantial investment flows, it has also introduced nuanced challenges in distinguishing between collaborative engagement and potential economic exploitation.

The evolving relationship reflects broader patterns of regional economic integration, where ASEAN nations strategically navigate complex trade dynamics, balancing national interests with regional cooperation amid increasing global interconnectedness.

Segment I: Strong Anti-dumping policy and balancing with great power- Strategic Alignment Patterns in ASEAN

Within the ASEAN framework, a group of nations including Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines demonstrate a strategic alignment with China, prioritizing economic integration and trade advantages. These countries balance economic imperatives with potential geopolitical tensions through sophisticated trade defense mechanisms.

Indonesia and Thailand have emerged as leaders in anti-dumping strategies, developing robust regulatory frameworks to protect domestic industries. Indonesia's Anti-dumping Committee

(KADI) focuses on investigating market distortions, particularly in steel and petrochemical sectors. The country's approach reflects a nuanced balance between trade defense, industrial policy, and geopolitical strategy.

Thailand's anti-dumping measures, governed by comprehensive legislation, emphasize sophisticated investigatory practices in key industries like steel and chemicals. The framework aims to stabilize markets, influence production dynamics, and support industrial policy objectives while maintaining ASEAN economic integration commitments.

Malaysia's approach stands out for its procedural sophistication, carefully evaluating supply chain dynamics and sectoral interconnections. The country has developed a balanced trade defense strategy that protects both producers and consumers while maintaining international commitments.

The Philippines has crafted an anti-dumping framework that integrates international best practices with local market dynamics. By targeting critical economic sectors, the country uses trade defense mechanisms as strategic tools for economic development.

Vietnam's approach is particularly noteworthy, reflecting its unique position as both a competitor and trading partner with China. The Trade Remedies Law of 2017 provides a sophisticated mechanism for protecting domestic industries while supporting technological advancement and supply chain integration.

Xi's administration has demonstrated strategic diplomatic approaches, prioritizing neighborhood diplomacy and maintaining reciprocity-based relationships. Despite tensions, particularly in the South China Sea, Beijing has effectively prevented crisis escalation while pursuing its regional interests.

These nations exemplify a sophisticated approach to managing economic relationships, balancing national interests with regional commitments, and using trade defense mechanisms as strategic tools for industrial development and economic growth.

Thailand's Gravitational Pull Towards China: A Multifaceted Analysis

Thailand was the first Southeast Asian nation to start a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with China for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), underscoring its enthusiasm for economic collaboration with Beijing. China has invested substantially in Thailand, particularly in infrastructure, real estate, and energy sectors. Key Chinese-backed projects include the high-speed railway connecting Thailand with Laos and, eventually, China; the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), which aims to transform Thailand into a high-tech industrial hub; and the expansion of the Laem Chabang deep-sea port, a critical logistics and trade node. These investments are aligned with Thailand's developmental priorities, enhancing its role as a regional transit hub and attracting further foreign investment.

Thailand's gravitation towards China's sphere of influence exemplifies a nuanced interplay of economic pragmatism and strategic recalibration, rather than mere diplomatic realignment. In the wake of the 2014 military coup d'état, Thailand embarked upon a calculated trajectory to diversify its international partnerships, predominantly as a countermeasure to attenuate its historical Western dependencies (Vinogradov, 2024). This strategic pivot dovetailed fortuitously with Beijing's ambitious agenda to consolidate its foothold in Southeast Asia, wherein Thailand emerged as a pivotal lynchpin in China's regional machinations (Pavličević & Kratz, 2018). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has strengthened Thailand-China relations, exemplified by projects like the Bangkok-Nong Khai high-speed railway, which boost regional connectivity and economic

interdependence. Despite implementing anti-dumping measures on Chinese commodities, Thailand actively participates in BRI initiatives, balancing domestic economic protection with international cooperation. This dual strategy highlights how protective trade policies can coexist with transnational collaborations, aligning national and regional interests effectively.

Thailand's wholesale embrace of China's geostrategic initiatives, with a focus on its dedicated role in the Belt and Road Initiative (B.R.I.) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (L.M.C.) mechanism, underscores the depth of this bilateral engagement (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayas, 2018). As the vanguard among Southeast Asian nations to formally endorse the B.R.I. through a memorandum of understanding, Thailand has subsequently witnessed the materialisation of transformative infrastructure projects, most notably the Eastern Economic Corridor and the modernisation of the Laem Chabang deep-sea port. Concurrently, Thailand's active involvement in the L.M.C. framework has facilitated the implementation of numerous Chinese-funded development initiatives across the Mekong region, encompassing infrastructure enhancement, educational advancement, and public health improvements.

The watershed moment materialised during President Xi Jinping's diplomatic sojourn to Bangkok in 2013, which catalysed an unprecedented intensification of bilateral economic engagement, epitomised by the landmark agreement to construct a high-speed rail network connecting the two nations (Lauridsen, 2020). This infrastructure initiative heralded a paradigm shift in Sino-Thai relations, precipitating an influx of Chinese capital into Thailand's burgeoning sectors, encompassing infrastructure development, real estate ventures, and energy initiatives, especially in EEC areas.

Notwithstanding the substantial economic dividends, Thailand's gravitational pull towards China stems not from perceived coercion but rather from calculated self-interest. Bangkok has demonstrated considerable agency in navigating this relationship, actively shaping Chinese policy positions on matters that impinge upon its national interests (Poonkam, 2023). However, Thailand's overwhelming dependence on tourism revenues and its initial policy predisposition towards Chinese investment has engendered a degree of economic vulnerability, with Chinese capital wielding considerable influence over Thailand's strategic positioning. This asymmetrical dynamic has complicated Thailand's efforts to maintain equilibrium in its alignment with China.

In conclusion, Thailand's strategic bandwagoning with China represents a sophisticated calculation predicated upon economic opportunism and the imperative to diversify its international partnerships beyond traditional Western alignments. While this realignment is not predicated upon perceived Chinese threats, it nevertheless entails intricate economic and geopolitical ramifications, illuminating the complex choreography of regional power dynamics in Southeast Asia.

Core Strategic Approaches: Thailand's Strategic Approach

Thailand's foreign policy towards China is primarily driven by economic interests and strategic diversification. Following the 2014 military coup, which strained Western relations, Thailand increasingly turned to China as an attractive partner for economic and political development. The relationship is characterized by low threat perception, with Thailand viewing China as a key collaborator in achieving economic goals and regional stability. While this approach has brought significant economic benefits through infrastructure projects and regional mechanisms like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, it also exposes Thailand to potential vulnerabilities such as debt dependency and economic influence that may compromise its strategic autonomy. Thailand's engagement reflects a pragmatic, opportunity-driven strategy that prioritizes economic integration over geopolitical concerns, effectively aligning with Chinese regional interests.

Indonesia

Indonesia's approach exemplifies a nuanced form of strategic hedging, characterised by the deliberate cultivation of policy autonomy whilst engaging with multiple powers. The transition from Yudhoyono's administration to Jokowi's presidency marks a significant evolution in Indonesia's strategic posture. Under Yudhoyono, Indonesia pursued a closer strategic partnership with China, seeking to maximise economic benefits while implementing sophisticated hedging strategies (Pang, 2017). However, Jokowi's administration has adopted a markedly more assertive stance, particularly in response to perceived challenges to Indonesia's maritime sovereignty. This shift manifests in enhanced military capabilities and closer security alignment with the United States, reflecting a more robust approach to managing potential threats (Arif, 2021). Throughout its diplomatic history, Indonesia has consistently demonstrated a sophisticated approach to international relations that is more accurately characterized as strategic balancing rather than hedging. While hedging implies a deliberate ambiguity in alignment, Indonesia has historically pursued a more decisive policy of active equilibrium maintenance among competing powers, exemplified by its foundational 'bebas-aktif' (independent-active) foreign policy doctrine. This approach has manifested in Indonesia's calculated diplomatic maneuvers to maintain strategic autonomy while engaging constructively with various global powers to advance its national interests."

Indonesia grapples with maritime sovereignty preservation, economic modernisation imperatives, and regional leadership aspirations (Marston, 2023). This analysis reveals the sophisticated nature of Southeast Asian responses to great power competition, demonstrating that regional states can maintain strategic autonomy through careful calibration of international partnerships and diplomatic engagement, albeit through markedly different approaches based on their specific circumstances and strategic cultures. The contrasting strategies of Indonesia illuminate the range of options available to regional states in managing great power relations, while also highlighting the importance of tailoring approaches to national circumstances.

Indonesia's approach to managing great power competition demonstrates a sophisticated and nuanced strategy that prioritizes policy independence and strategic autonomy. By carefully balancing development imperatives with sovereign interests, Indonesia has crafted a hedging strategy that navigates the complex dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. The country's strategic calculus is particularly evident in its handling of Chinese capital influx, especially in critical sectors like infrastructure and digital economy, where it maintains a delicate balance between economic opportunities and national strategic considerations. This approach offers valuable insights into how regional states can effectively manage relationships with major powers while preserving their own strategic interests and developmental objectives.

Malaysia and the Philippines: Contrasting Paradigms in Managing Chinese Influence

A Comparative Analysis of Strategic Approaches

I. Malaysia's Nuanced Bandwagoning Strategy

Malaysia's *modus operandi vis-à-vis* China exemplifies a sophisticated form of bandwagoning, underpinned by a nuanced constructivist threat perception framework. Malaysian policymakers have adopted an intellectually rigorous approach, positing that the mere act of characterising China as an existential threat could precipitate a self-fulfilling prophecy of heightened tensions (Gerstl, (2020). This theoretical underpinning manifests in a deliberate strategy of maintaining diplomatic equanimity while simultaneously implementing subtle hedging mechanisms.

Malaysia's diplomatic strategy with China is characterized by economic pragmatism and strategic hedging. By prioritizing economic engagement while carefully managing potential risks, Malaysia maintains a nuanced approach that balances development goals with national sovereignty. The country strategically leverages Chinese investments to support national projects without becoming overly dependent, employing a sophisticated calculus that differentiates between tactical challenges and fundamental threats. This approach allows Malaysia to cooperate economically with China while preserving its autonomy and avoiding unnecessary diplomatic confrontation.

Key Differences in Approach

Thailand and Malaysia approach China through distinct strategic lenses. Thailand views China primarily as an economic opportunity with minimal threat perception, exhibiting deep economic integration and willingness to rely on Chinese partnerships. Malaysia adopts a more nuanced strategy, carefully balancing economic engagement with strategic autonomy, managing potential risks while maintaining cooperative relations. While both countries benefit from economic ties, their approaches differ: Thailand demonstrates a more direct alignment, whereas Malaysia employs a cautious, pragmatic hedging strategy that prioritizes national interests and independence.

The Philippines' Strategic Recalibration

The watershed moment materialised with President Rodrigo Duterte's ascension to power in 2016, heralding a paradigmatic shift in the Philippines' strategic orientation (Castro, 2020). Under his administration, the nation embarked upon a trajectory of enhanced economic cooperation with China, concomitantly moderating its stance on South China Sea territorial disputes. This reorientation has facilitated substantial Chinese investment in developmental initiatives, albeit at the cost of significant adjustments to the Philippines' international political stance and maritime governance frameworks.

The Duterte administration's apparent accommodation of Chinese strategic objectives has engendered considerable controversy, with critics positing that such alignment potentially compromises national interests (de Castro, 2018). This strategic pivot has had far-reaching implications for the Philippines' relationship with the United States, manifesting in the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement and the rejection of American assistance (Greco, 2022).

In stark contrast, the Philippines' approach represents a more dramatic strategic pivot, particularly evident in the post-Belt and Road Initiative landscape. The nation has found itself negotiating an increasingly complex geopolitical labyrinth, necessitating a fundamental reassessment of its maritime interests and strategic positioning (Baviera & Arugay, 2021). The Philippines' strategic position in the South China Sea, marked by its control over key maritime routes, territorial claims, and offshore resources, enhances its bargaining power in trade relations, enabling the country to adopt a more autonomous stance in implementing anti-dumping measures against Chinese products while balancing territorial and economic interests.

Comparative Analysis: Malaysia and the Philippines' Strategies in Managing Chinese Influence

Malaysia and the Philippines display markedly different strategies in managing Chinese influence. Malaysia employs a constructivist, calculated approach focused on strategic autonomy, carefully balancing economic engagement without direct confrontation. The Philippines exhibits more variable tactics, alternating between balancing against and accommodating China, with shifts driven by political leadership and regional dynamics. While Malaysia maintains consistent

diplomatic flexibility, the Philippines experiences more dramatic strategic realignments, reflecting the complex challenges of navigating great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

Vietnam's Diplomatic Tightrope: Balancing Economic Pragmatism with Strategic Autonomy

In the intricate tapestry of contemporary geopolitical relations, Vietnam's stance vis-à-vis China's Belt and Road Initiative (B.R.I.) epitomizes the quintessential dilemma faced by emerging economies in an increasingly multipolar world. The Vietnamese leadership has demonstrated remarkable political acumen in crafting a nuanced approach that neither wholly embraces nor categorically rejects Beijing's ambitious infrastructure initiative.

The Vietnamese government's *modus operandi* reflects an astute understanding of *realpolitik*, whereby it acknowledges the inexorable reality of Chinese economic ascendancy while steadfastly safeguarding its strategic autonomy (Vu et al., 2022). This sophisticated balancing act manifests itself through a multifaceted strategy of diplomatic hedging, wherein Vietnam assiduously cultivates a diverse portfolio of international partnerships to circumvent excessive dependence on its northern neighbour.

The Vietnamese authorities' circumspect approach to B.R.I. participation stems from a confluence of well-founded apprehensions. Chief among these concerns is the spectre of debt-trap diplomacy, a phenomenon whereby infrastructure projects financed through Chinese loans potentially compromise the recipient nation's economic sovereignty (Nguyen et al., 2022). This wariness is further compounded by Vietnam's historical experience and contemporary territorial disputes with China, particularly in the contentious maritime area of the South China Sea.

Notwithstanding these reservations, Vietnam's engagement with the B.R.I. demonstrates remarkable diplomatic sophistication. While formally participating in connectivity initiatives, Vietnam has deftly established parameters predicated on international legal frameworks, reciprocal respect, and equitable partnership. This nuanced approach enables Vietnam to selectively leverage B.R.I. benefits while maintaining strategic independence.

Perhaps most noteworthy is Vietnam's assertiveness in articulating its concerns regarding maritime territorial disputes. Rather than allowing economic cooperation to silence its territorial claims, Vietnam has adroitly linked its B.R.I. participation to China's comportment in the South China Sea (Bama Andika Putra, 2024). This strategy exemplifies Vietnam's diplomatic finesse in utilizing economic engagement as leverage for addressing security concerns.

In essence, Vietnam's approach to the B.R.I. represents a master class in contemporary diplomatic statecraft. By maintaining a delicate equilibrium between economic pragmatism and strategic autonomy, Vietnam has crafted a sophisticated response to China's growing influence that could serve as a paradigm for other nations grappling with similar geopolitical challenges.

Vietnam's Diplomatic Tightrope: Balancing Economic Pragmatism with Strategic Autonomy

Vietnam's Strategic Recalibration: From Cautious Engagement to Calculated Resistance

The crystallization of Vietnam's cautionary stance vis-à-vis Chinese influence manifests most conspicuously in its recent strategic decisions regarding infrastructure development. The nation's rejection of Chinese funding for the strategically significant Van Don-Mong Cai highway exemplifies its heightened vigilance concerning projects that could potentially compromise national security or sovereignty (Trinh, 2022). This calculated demurral illuminates Vietnam's sophisticated understanding of the intricate interplay between infrastructure development and strategic autonomy.

Vietnam's *modus operandi* extends beyond mere passive resistance to encompass proactive measures aimed at forestalling potential entanglements in China's sphere of influence. The systematic cancellation of projects that could conceivably impinge upon its sovereignty demonstrates an unwavering commitment to maintaining autonomous control over its developmental trajectory (Pham & Ba, 2021). This strategic recalibration reflects a profound comprehension of the potential ramifications of excessive economic entanglement with Beijing.

In the broader context of regional dynamics, Vietnam's position within ASEAN has evolved into that of a diplomatic counterweight to Chinese expansionism, particularly concerning maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This assertiveness, juxtaposed against the backdrop of economic cooperation, exemplifies Vietnam's nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of international relations in contemporary Asia. Vietnam's approach represents a particularly sophisticated manifestation of what might be termed "strategic resistance" within Southeast Asia's broader response to Chinese influence (Stromseth, 2019). This positioning reflects a nuanced understanding that transcends simplistic binary categorizations of pro-Chinese or anti-Chinese sentiment. Rather, it exemplifies a sophisticated form of diplomatic engagement that simultaneously acknowledges China's economic significance while steadfastly safeguarding national interests.

Vietnam strategically navigates China's influence through a nuanced diplomatic approach that balances selective engagement with strategic autonomy. By carefully calibrating its response, Vietnam maintains constructive relations while protecting core national interests, participating strategically in Chinese initiatives without compromising sovereignty. This sophisticated model demonstrates that smaller nations can effectively manage relationships with larger powers through measured, principled engagement, offering a blueprint for navigating complex geopolitical competition while preserving independence.

Segment II: Vulnerabilities of ASEAN States to Chinese Economic Influence and the Risk of Market Monopolization; Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Timor-Este and Singapore

Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos face complex challenges in developing anti-dumping policies due to significant Chinese economic influence. Each country struggles with limited institutional capacity, nascent trade defense mechanisms, and heavy dependence on Chinese imports and investments. Their policy frameworks are characterized by rudimentary investigative structures, insufficient technical expertise, and the need to balance domestic industrial development with external economic dependencies, particularly with China.

Brunei's anti-dumping framework reveals the limitations of smaller ASEAN economies in trade defense. Despite formal alignment with ATIGA and WTO agreements, the country lacks independent investigation capabilities, relying heavily on ASEAN's collective expertise. Institutional constraints, including limited technical resources, prevent effective enforcement of anti-dumping measures, particularly against Chinese imports, resulting in minimal practical application of trade remedy policies.

Timor-Leste's anti-dumping policy is underdeveloped, reflecting an emerging economy's challenges in trade defense. With limited institutional capacity and a focus on developmental partnerships, especially with China, the country lacks a formal anti-dumping framework. Instead, Timor-Leste relies on regional mechanisms and external expertise, prioritizing cooperation over strict trade enforcement as it seeks WTO and ASEAN membership.

Singapore's anti-dumping policy aligns with its commitment to free trade and liberal market policies, emphasizing minimal use of trade defense measures. As an open economy, Singapore

generally avoids imposing anti-dumping actions but ensures strict adherence to World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations when necessary. The country's approach is advisory, focused on ensuring fair competition while maintaining compliance with global trade standards. This reflects Singapore's broader trade philosophy, which prioritizes openness and the maintenance of a level playing field in international trade. The country's policy framework is thus characterized by an emphasis on transparent practices and a preference for resolving trade disputes through consultation and negotiation rather than enforcement of protectionist measures.

Myanmar and Brunei: Dialectical Approaches to Chinese Hegemony

I. Myanmar's Strategic Metamorphosis

An examination of tripartite case studies concerning Belt and Road Initiative projects in Myanmar provides invaluable insights into the country's hedging considerations (Soong & Aung, 2020). These initiatives exemplify Myanmar's sophisticated balancing act between leveraging Chinese economic resources while maintaining sovereignty over its strategic assets (Mannan, 2020). Myanmar is currently embroiled in an intractable civil conflict characterized by multifaceted armed engagements between diverse ethnic armed organizations and the state military apparatus (Tatmadaw). This protracted internecine struggle has manifested as a complex interplay of ethno-nationalist aspirations, territorial autonomy claims, and challenges to centralized military authority, fundamentally destabilizing the nation's socio-political fabric and institutional frameworks.

Myanmar's response to its internal political upheaval exemplifies a complex transformation from hedging to explicit bandwagoning vis-à-vis China. In the immediate aftermath of the coup d'état, Myanmar's provisional administration endeavoured to maintain diplomatic equilibrium while engaging with diverse regional stakeholders (Marston, 2023). China, historically Myanmar's predominant trading partner, initially exhibited trepidation regarding the potential ramifications for its economic interests. However, this initial circumspection evolved into unequivocal support for the military regime within a year (Peng, 2021), manifesting in diplomatic advocacy at the United Nations and the provision of military materiel.

The transformation in Myanmar's foreign policy orientation has precipitated significant perturbations in Beijing's economic and political calculations, particularly evident in the suspension of major infrastructure initiatives such as the Myit Sone Dam and Special Economic Zones along the Sino-Myanmar frontier (Soong & Aung, (2020). This recalibration illuminates Myanmar's attempts to equilibrate its economic imperatives with China while pursuing diplomatic diversification.

The ongoing hostilities represent a culmination of deep-rooted historical grievances and contemporary political tensions, with various ethnic armed groups mounting sustained resistance against the military's hegemonic control. This conflict dynamic has precipitated a significant humanitarian crisis while simultaneously undermining regional stability and interstate relations within the ASEAN framework.

II. Brunei's Pragmatic Accommodation

Brunei's approach to managing Chinese influence, particularly regarding South China Sea territorial disputes, demonstrates a nuanced form of strategic accommodation predicated upon bilateral mechanisms and adherence to the ASEAN-China normative framework. The sultanate's deliberate abstention from asserting sovereignty over disputed territories, coupled with its conscious decision to maintain minimal military presence, reflects a sophisticated diplomatic calculus. The ruling oligarchy's strong support for China's Belt and Road Initiative arises from the

need to diversify its economy, heavily reliant on hydrocarbons, while safeguarding its political dominance. Brunei's adherence to its distinctive Malay Islamic Monarchy ideology facilitates a strategic diminution of China's territorial claims while pursuing economic integration (Putra, 2020). This intricate strategy serves to legitimise the incumbent regime's authority domestically while minimizing potential political repercussions.

The bilateral relationship experienced a qualitative transformation under Xi Jinping's administration, culminating in the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2018 (Liu et al., 2020). However, it would be premature to interpret these developments as indicative of wholesale alignment with Chinese interests, as Southeast Asian nations generally pursue multifaceted foreign policies that balance economic imperatives with security considerations (Stromseth, 2019).

Chinese capital investment in Brunei reveals critical gaps in the nation's anti-dumping regulatory framework. The current policy limitations expose local economic interests to potential market manipulation, especially in sectors with significant Chinese investment. This situation highlights the complex challenge of balancing foreign direct investment attraction with domestic economic resilience in Brunei's developing market context.

Comparative Analysis: Myanmar and Brunei's Approaches to Chinese Influence

The contrasting approaches of Myanmar and Brunei reveal distinct strategies for managing relations with China: Myanmar and Brunei have developed distinct foreign policy approaches with China, shaped by strategic evolution, economic integration, diplomatic positioning, and domestic priorities. Myanmar has moved from a hedging strategy to a more explicit alignment with China, primarily in response to shifting domestic priorities, while Brunei maintains a stable policy of pragmatic accommodation, balancing economic cooperation with cautious diplomacy. Economically, Myanmar engages with China selectively, adjusting its approach based on internal challenges, whereas Brunei has embraced comprehensive economic integration to diversify away from its hydrocarbon-based economy. Diplomatically, Myanmar navigates a complex triangulation, balancing China and other regional powers to mitigate external influence, while Brunei relies on bilateral mechanisms within the ASEAN framework, preserving a low-profile yet stable diplomatic stance. Domestic factors also shape these policies: Myanmar's military regime grapples with legitimacy issues that drive its external alignments, whereas Brunei's foreign policy consistently supports the monarchy's stability and succession planning, reinforcing a measured approach toward China.

Theoretical Implications

This comparison underscores the range of responses smaller states employ to manage relations with a powerful neighbor. Myanmar's shifting strategy reflects the impact of domestic political turbulence, while Brunei's stable monarchical system supports continuity. Additionally, Myanmar's economic approach highlights diversification challenges, whereas Brunei's integration aligns with its economic imperatives. These cases illustrate how domestic structures and strategic culture shape foreign policy orientations in response to regional dynamics.

Laos' Diplomatic Equilibrium: A Paradigm of Strategic Hedging in Contemporary Southeast Asia

I. The Architecture of Chinese Influence

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, China has emerged as the predominant external actor in Laos' strategic calculus, exercising multifaceted influence through an intricate web of economic, infrastructural, and diplomatic mechanisms. The trajectory of Chinese investment, surpassing \$10 billion across various sectors, has irrevocably altered Laos' economic topography (Tung, 2023). This financial hegemony manifests most conspicuously in China's possession of approximately half of Laos' sovereign debt obligations and its position as the nation's second-most significant trading partner, subordinate only to Thailand.

The materialisation of the contentious Lao-China high-speed railway project in December 2021 exemplifies the tangible manifestation of this economic interpenetration. Concurrent with these developments, a discernible demographic transformation has occurred through increased Chinese migration, further cementing bilateral socio-economic linkages.

A reductionist view of Laos' foreign relations—focusing only on China—misses the nuanced and multi-layered diplomatic strategy the nation employs. Laos adeptly balances diverse international partnerships, drawing on its historical relationships and recent alliances to manage its strategic environment.

Historically, Japan has been Laos' largest bilateral aid donor, cementing a long-standing economic and developmental partnership. Through mechanisms like the Asian Development Bank, Japan continues to play a crucial role, providing an alternative to Chinese economic influence (Fukuda-Parr & Shiga, 2016). South Korea's increasing aid contributions similarly reflect Laos' strategy to diversify its Asian partnerships, aiming to balance regional influences and deepen connections beyond China (Rubiolo & Aguirre, 2023).

Laos' diplomatic stance is also informed by historical alliances, particularly with Vietnam, with which it shares a legacy of revolutionary solidarity. The Laos-Thailand relationship, shaped by both cooperation and competition, adds another layer to its foreign policy, reinforcing Laos' tradition of complex interdependencies within Southeast Asia.

Strategic Evolution Post-2013

Since 2013, Laos has gravitated towards China's economic influence, especially evident in infrastructure projects. Chinese investments have transformed Laos' transportation and hydroelectric networks, creating a foundation for modernization while increasing economic dependence. Laos' position at the 2016 ASEAN Summit, where it refrained from opposing China's stance on South China Sea issues, reflects a deeper alignment with Chinese diplomatic interests (Kuik, 2021). The unprecedented proliferation of Chinese investment in Laos has catalyzed a profound socioeconomic metamorphosis, manifested through extensive urban development and infrastructure projects. This rapid transformation, characterized by the burgeoning construction of commercial establishments, entertainment complexes, and hospitality facilities, has precipitated a significant paradigm shift in the indigenous population's traditional way of life.

This accelerated modernization trajectory has engendered a pronounced socioeconomic dichotomy within Laotian society. While the urban landscape has been dramatically reconfigured through the establishment of modern edifices and infrastructure networks, this development has paradoxically exacerbated economic disparities. The local populace, confronted with this swift transition, finds itself increasingly marginalized from the mainstream economic progression, unable to adapt to or benefit from these rapid structural changes.

The emergence of gambling establishments and luxury accommodations, primarily catering to international clientele, has introduced new social dynamics that stand in stark contrast to traditional

Laotian cultural norms. This cultural and economic disjunction has contributed to the amplification of poverty indices, as local communities struggle to integrate into this rapidly evolving economic ecosystem (Sims, 2017). The resultant socioeconomic stratification has created a pronounced divide between those who can participate in this new economic paradigm and those who remain peripheralized by it.

China consolidates its influence in Laos through a two-pronged approach. President Xi's personal diplomacy fosters close relationships with Laos' elite, strengthening political and historical ties (Cheng, 2018). Meanwhile, institutional tools like the Belt and Road Initiative embed Chinese infrastructure and economic projects into Laos' development, supported by Laos' influential Pol Sena family within the Party (Kuik, 2021). This situation presents Laos with the potential risk of becoming economically and ideologically subjugated, as it may increasingly rely on external powers for economic sustenance and intellectual direction. Such dependency could undermine the nation's autonomy, placing it in a vulnerable position where key policy decisions, particularly in economic and cultural spheres, may be shaped or influenced by external forces, thus diminishing its capacity for independent decision-making and self-determination.

Chinese investment has fundamentally transformed Laos's economic and diplomatic landscape, creating a deep bilateral interdependence. This intensified partnership extends beyond commercial engagement to strategic alignment, with China significantly augmenting its soft power and geopolitical influence. The economic integration has intertwined Laos's development trajectory with Chinese regional objectives, profoundly impacting ASEAN's geopolitical dynamics.

Despite Chinese influence, Laos maintains a balanced diplomatic posture by fostering multiple partnerships, preserving economic options, and avoiding exclusive alignment. This approach reflects a blend of historical continuity and modern adaptation (Pang, 2017). The success of Laos' balancing act depends on economic diversification, effective debt management, and internal stability. As regional dynamics shift and ASEAN's cohesion evolves, Laos' hedging strategy will be tested.

Domestically, sustainable development and political succession will further influence Laos' ability to navigate competing global influences. Through this complex strategy, Laos exemplifies how smaller states can leverage their position amidst great power rivalries. This analysis reveals Laos' sophisticated approach to navigating the complexities of contemporary Southeast Asian geopolitics, demonstrating that even smaller states can maintain strategic autonomy through careful calibration of international partnerships and diplomatic engagement.

Divergent Approaches to Great Power; Singapore's Strategic Postures

The trajectories of Chinese investment across Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam exemplify distinctly varied patterns of economic engagement and strategic responses within the ASEAN framework. Singapore, functioning as a sophisticated financial hub, has positioned itself as an instrumental intermediary for Chinese capital flows into Southeast Asia, while maintaining its characteristic pragmatic approach to economic partnerships and regulatory oversight.

In the contemporary Indo-Pacific strategic landscape, the management of great power competition has emerged as a paramount concern for Southeast Asian nations. This research examines the contrasting approaches adopted by Indonesia and Singapore in navigating the increasingly complex dynamics between China and the United States, arguing that while both nations pursue sophisticated strategies to maintain their autonomy, their methods differ significantly based on their distinct historical experiences, geographic positions, and strategic cultures.

In contrast, Singapore's strategic positioning represents a more explicitly aligned approach, predicated upon its historical security partnership with the United States while maintaining sophisticated economic engagement with China. This strategy, rooted in Singapore's seminal decision to host American military facilities in the 1960s, has evolved into a comprehensive framework encompassing military cooperation, technology transfer, and strategic dialogue (Tan, 2016). Nevertheless, Singapore has demonstrated remarkable acumen in maintaining productive economic relations with China, particularly through participation in the Belt and Road Initiative and selective technological collaboration (Tong & Yuen Kong, 2021). In contrast to Indonesia's steadfast balancing approach, Singapore exhibits a more nuanced diplomatic posture that demonstrates a discernible strategic inclination toward China while maintaining robust ties with the United States. This diplomatic sophistication stems from Singapore's unique geopolitical position as a predominantly ethnic Chinese state situated within a Malay-dominant region. Historical evidence indicates that while Singapore has cultivated deep economic and cultural affiliations with China, it has simultaneously fostered critical security partnerships and extensive economic cooperation with the United States.

Singapore strategically balances its engagement with China and the United States, leveraging its Chinese cultural heritage while maintaining strong American military alignments. This nuanced approach involves participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative while providing military facilities to the U.S. Navy, demonstrating a sophisticated diplomatic strategy that prioritizes sovereign autonomy and regional stability. Singapore's method differs from Indonesia's approach, reflecting distinct interpretations of managing great power competition through selective economic partnerships and strategic positioning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while alignment with China has facilitated substantial economic growth for many nations, the potential risks associated with overdependence warrant careful consideration. Economic and trade cooperation with China offers substantial benefits but often brings a susceptibility to Chinese influence that necessitates a prudent approach. Many countries that have pursued alignment with China have shown a tendency to downplay critical issues, including human rights concerns related to the Uyghurs and disputes in the South China Sea. These unresolved tensions highlight the potential for future conflicts, and a persistent disregard for such issues may carry adverse repercussions.

The international political landscape is continually evolving, and a perception of China exerting dominant influence could undermine Western efforts to advocate for human rights and sustain global norms. Economic cooperation and strategic alliances should therefore be carefully calibrated to mitigate the risks of dependency. Countries adopting a bandwagoning strategy within ASEAN may indeed realize economic gains; however, a balanced and vigilant approach through hedging mechanisms can help to offset the risks of overreliance on China.

For countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, (categorized as Segment I), policy independence, and a balanced approach between the United States and China are essential for addressing challenges such as monopolistic practices and foreign interference. The anti-dumping policies of Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines toward Chinese products exemplify a sophisticated interplay between domestic industrial protection and the imperatives of regional economic integration. Thailand maintains a robust anti-dumping regime, deploying comprehensive investigations and imposing duties, particularly in steel and chemical industries, to shield domestic producers. Malaysia exhibits institutional maturity in trade remedies, employing data-driven approaches to counteract market distortions caused by Chinese

imports in industrial sectors. Vietnam has significantly enhanced its trade defense capacity, utilizing its Trade Remedies Authority to navigate complex investigations across sectors while balancing its economic interdependence with China. Indonesia adopts a strategically selective approach, focusing on targeted measures informed by methodical investigations to safeguard local industries without compromising its pivotal trade ties with China. Meanwhile, the Philippines, though operating under more nascent institutional frameworks, is progressively strengthening its anti-dumping mechanisms, particularly in response to market distortions in steel and other critical sectors, despite resource limitations. Collectively, these nations demonstrate a heterogeneous yet coordinated strategy within ASEAN and WTO frameworks, prioritizing a balance between protecting domestic industries and maintaining constructive economic engagement with China, a critical trading partner.

In contrast, nations in Category II; Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Timor-Este and Singapore may face trade-offs where deepening cooperation with China could entail opportunity costs and potential losses. These states must consider hedging strategies carefully to secure national interests within broader economic engagements. Anti-dumping measures across Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Timor-Leste, and Singapore towards Chinese products illustrate the nuanced dynamics of trade policy in Southeast Asia, shaped by economic dependency and institutional capacity. Myanmar and Laos, deeply enmeshed in China's Belt and Road Initiative, exhibit rudimentary anti-dumping frameworks due to limited technical capacity and a strategic emphasis on maintaining favorable economic ties. Similarly, Cambodia's trade defense mechanisms remain embryonic, with regulatory enforcement largely supplanted by informal dispute resolutions aimed at prioritizing Chinese investment. Brunei, leveraging its resource wealth, adopts a laissez-faire approach, favoring minimal intervention and aligning with WTO and ASEAN commitments to preserve its free-market orientation. Timor-Leste, as a developing non-ASEAN member, lacks formal anti-dumping policies, focusing instead on developmental partnerships with China while facing significant institutional constraints. In stark contrast, Singapore exemplifies a sophisticated trade policy, deploying anti-dumping measures sparingly and only under WTO-mandated conditions, ensuring its status as a premier global trade hub. Collectively, these nations underscore the intersection of economic pragmatism and institutional limitations, reflecting a regional predisposition toward cooperative engagement over regulatory confrontation in managing trade relations with China.

An ongoing question remains regarding the long-term viability of hedging as a mechanism to balance interests and serve national priorities. In a global arena marked by growing competition among superpowers, smaller states must remain attuned to shifts in geopolitical dynamics. Policies must therefore be responsive to both regional and global developments to prevent strategic lag and mitigate political risk.

Notably, countries with greater political, economic, and social stability have more latitude to deploy hedging strategies effectively against dominant powers. Nonetheless, caution is warranted concerning debt risks, such as those associated with loans from institutions like the Asian Development Bank. In cases where nations finance joint infrastructure projects with China, particularly in regions like Vietnam, there is a risk of entering a “debt trap,” leading to an unsustainable reliance on Chinese economic support. Proactive adoption of alternative financial strategies can help secure long-term stability and mitigate vulnerabilities. Without robust safeguards, nations risk entrenching themselves in a cycle of dependency, which could pose enduring challenges to their sovereignty and economic resilience.

The tripartite comparison of these nations' engagement with Chinese investment illuminates the complexity of ASEAN-China economic relations, wherein each country's unique developmental priorities, institutional capacities, and strategic considerations have shaped distinctly different approaches to managing Chinese economic influence. This heterogeneous response pattern underscores the multifaceted nature of regional economic integration and the varying degrees of economic interdependence within the broader ASEAN-China relationship.

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