

Southeast Asia and the Return of the Great Powers

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Abstract

Since 2009, the United States has focused its grand strategy back towards Asia, significantly reshaping the international politics of the early twenty-first century. Southeast Asia, as part of this strategic area, has thus been directly affected by the US foreign policy for the region. This article will address the basic but crucial question: why has this region become pivotal for the great powers, in particular the US, since the end of the Cold War? I argue that in order to answer this question, we have to reexamine the origins of the Cold War.

Keywords: Pivot to Asia, Cold War, Southeast Asia, US grand strategy, China, Russia

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1. Introduction

It is important to the United States' security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat.

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The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action.

Hillary Rodham Clinton
67th United States Secretary of State

During her historic visit to Asia in 2012, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commented: 'My trip reflects a strategic priority of American foreign policy today... [T]he United States is making substantially increased investments – diplomatic, economic, strategic and otherwise – in this part of the world. It's what we call our pivot toward Asia'. Hillary Clinton's trip to Asia clearly shows a redirection of the Obama administration's grand strategy, comprising a move away from fighting wars in the Middle East and Asia, including the region of Southeast Asia – a strategic area that the US abandoned at the height of the Cold War. Major shifts in Washington's foreign policy positions always bring uncertainty in both the international and regional climates, particularly in conflict zones and areas with significant power rivalries.

The instability that arose in Southeast Asia as a result of the US abandoning the region after their failure in the Vietnam War threatened the economic, social and political prosperity of

the entire region. In South Vietnam, Saigon's government had collapsed, and was annexed by the communist regime in Hanoi. Similarly, in Cambodia, Lon Nol's regime had been toppled by communist insurgency by the Khmer Rouge, who renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea. In Lao, the US-backed Royal Lao Government was overthrown by the Pathet Lao – the Hanoi-backed communist movement – thus completing the loss of Indochina to Communism. Bangkok – a forsaken friend of Washington – was therefore besieged by the communist camp along its northern and eastern borders, and thus its national security was under external threat.

The defeat of the US in the Vietnam War and its retreat from the region in the wake of this led the mainland area of Southeast Asia in particular to become Beijing's 'backyard' or sphere-of-influence. Two decades later, after the end of the Cold War, Washington returned to the region and, as at the beginning of the Cold War, proclaimed this region to be pivotal to the future of the US. The rapid military and economic growth of China over the last two decades, together with its augmentation of economic and political cooperation with its small neighbours in Southeast Asia through regional architecture, has been the driving-force behind this increasing US attention. China's rise has made the US and its allies, particularly Japan, anxious about their waning roles and declining positions in the regional power hierarchy. Significantly, China's aggressive attitude toward the disputes over the South China Sea have seemed to give the US and its allies confirmation over their fear that China's rise would not be a peaceful one. This worry is greatest

among the claimants in Southeast Asia – in particular in Vietnam and the Philippines – as the more inexorable China becomes, the greater their threat becomes. Although not identical, the world’s political and economic climate today resembles ‘America’s Pacific Century’ in the early Cold War years.

Even though past states of affairs may not be replicated in the future, learning from the past does provide us with a precedent through which we can understand and predict the *unprecedented* better. Thus, I will use these ‘shadows from the past’ to examine the possible implications and lessons they may provide for current international affairs, in order to help us to understand the ‘*pivot*’ that Southeast Asia currently provides for the great powers, particularly the US. That is, in order to understand the present US momentum towards Southeast Asia, I argue that we need to go back to the origins of the Cold War.

2. The Resonances of the Cold War

The world has been surprised by the actions that the US has taken towards Indochina and Myanmar in recent years. The beginning of the Obama-led democrat presidency marked the end of a long period of international boycott towards Burma that was originally initiated by the Democrats in the 1990s in response to the massive violations of human rights that occurred under the junta. It was the current Democratic government that permitted *Naypyidaw* to join the international institutions whose doors had once been permanently closed to the junta. Moreover, it was under the current Democratic presidency that the historic visit to Indochina, Beijing’s sphere-of-influence, was made during

the tense climate of the maritime territorial disputes. This may, in part, be due to the new generation being caught up with the post-Cold War image of American heroes and heroines as campaigners for human rights, that ‘*save the strangers*’ (Wheeler, 2000) whose human dignities are at risk. The heyday of liberalism and global capitalism created idealist illusions of world peace derived from complex interdependences and the increasing roles of international institutions and international society, and is based on the international norms of Westphalian synthesis. Rapid and complex regional integration in Europe, as well as emerging cooperation among former adversaries in other regions (such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Southeast Asia) has led to interstate wars being unlikely, especially among great powers – something that has come to be seen as the triumph of Western liberal ideologies.

These illusions convinced many of us to neglect the reality of the international system – anarchy, uncertainty and fear – and daydream about the existence of perpetual peace. This, not surprisingly, led to perplexity about the War on Terror, which produced the first two wars of the 21st century and their aftermaths. The War on Terror, I argue, is an important clue to gaining an understanding of the present politics of the great powers.

The terrorist attack on American soil on 11 September 2001 was unbelievable for both policy makers and international relations scholars despite the indications and warnings that experts on strategy and war raised about such a challenge being forthcoming, as it represented the first time that *the modus vivendi* of

the international political system had been significantly challenged by sub-state actors (see Jones & Kennedy-Pipe, 2000). Nevertheless, the sequence of events leading up to 9/11, I contend, is not unprecedented, and thus the subsequent wars ought not to be bewildering. However, in order to understand them, it is important to reconsider the lessons of history. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, a British Cold War expert, has proposed an intriguing idea regarding the sequence of events leading up to 9/11. She contends that it was impossible to understand a number of events in the first decade of the 21st Century without understanding the history of the Cold War (2007; 2008), including US foreign policy since 2001 (2008, pp.401–419). The beginning of the War on Terror, she suggests, is analogous to the origins of the Cold War in three ways:

1. In both cases, the US responded to a perceived ideological threat to its military and economic powers as well as its enshrined values, hence cementing its position in global politics. Communism was identified as the ideological threat to the US during the Cold War, especially during the peak of McCarthyism – an ultra-anti-communist movement of the late 1940s. After the attacks of 9/11, Islamic fundamentalism replaced Communism as the great threat to the Republic.

2. In both cases, the US created a new framework for conducting foreign and security affairs and reformed its bureaucracy. It also redefined security issues as either ‘domestic’ or ‘international’. These reforms resulted from intelligence failures and incompetent readings of international politics. Finally, 9/11 and Pearl Harbour symbolised the eroding of US leadership

and the foundations of the American republic.

3. In both cases, it is essential to understand the link between the ideological and material elements of both domestic and international politics and to not attempt to separate them (Kennedy-Pipe, 2007, pp.25–27).

Kennedy-Pipe’s thesis is intriguing. However, one problem with it is its identification of the ‘potent threat’ or enemy. Fundamentalist Islam could only be a great threat for a short time, as Islamic fundamentalism, unlike communism, does not represent the official ideology of any governments in the international arena, and al-Qaeda is not a state. Moreover, as the origins of the Cold War show, al-Qaeda’s Islam is like militarist Japan, in that the perceived long-term threats to the US existed long before the exigent threats emerged in both cases. By the latter stages of the Second World War, Soviet Communism had come to be perceived as the long-term threat to America, and the seeds of this were sown long before the Second World War via the public fear of Communism embedded in American culture (Inglis, 1995, p. 438), as well as in Washington’s snubs of Moscow in the 1920s (Kennedy-Pipe, 2007, pp. 46–48, 154–155), when it refused to recognise Communist Russia (Small, 1996 p. 54). The Soviet Union was much weaker than the US during the post-war period, and Stalin recognised the importance of Washington’s support for the Soviet’s post-war reconstruction when he sought to retain a relationship with the US, as well as the other allied powers, even though it was Washington that first closed the door on Moscow. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Communism has remained the perceived long-term threat

for the US since the end of the Cold War in the form of '*Communist China*'.

In reality, the Cold War did not end in the sense that the great power politics that constituted it did not cease. Rather, it only paused for the collapse of one great power. Intriguingly, scholars of international relations fail to recognise Communist China as another great power in the international system. However, even though it has much lower military and economic capabilities than the US and the Soviet Union had during the late Cold War, China's potential is nonetheless evident. In the late 1950s, A. F. K. Organski – a prominent political science scholar – predicted that China would challenge American dominion. In his famous book, *World Politics*, published in 1958, he outlined the theory of 'power-transition', and this theory has become increasingly relevant for contemporary scholars and policy-makers. Organski (1958) predicted that China would become a challenger to the US if it were to become industrialised: '[g]iven the huge Chinese population, the power of China ought to become greater... through internal development' (pp.321–322). According to Organski (1958), China had already entered the stage of transitional growth – that is, the process of industrialization – by the 1950s, and he warned that 'the rise of China... promises to be equally spectacular [to the Soviet challenge]' (p.304).

Since the late 1970s, China has been considered as a high-potential great power (if not a typical one) owing to its vast territory. The rise of China began with its rapid economic development and military modernisation in the 1990s, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s left it as the only existing

communist great power. Unlike the Soviet Union, China developed its military and economy steadily, despite domestic unrest (including the Tiananmen Square protests). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was inevitable that China would stand as the challenger to the American New World Order. Deng (2008) argues that China's image as a threat intensified during this period, and this phenomenon came to be known as the '*China threat theory*'. Deng discusses the theory in terms of its analysis of international security and China's rapid economic growth:

On the security front, they focused on China's threat of force against Taiwan, irresponsible arms sales, claims to contested territories, military buildups, and a lack of transparency. Also, in more general terms, a dangerous Chinese expansionism is said to have manifested itself in [terms of] power, intentions, and behavior. The aggregate material power accruing from its phenomenal growth, coupled with an illiberal regime and nationalism, would lead to greater military prowess and aggressive foreign behavior. On the economic front, its spectacular growth alone means that the PRC would out-compete other countries in areas where it enjoys comparative advantage, particularly labor-intensive manufacturing industries, and absorb much of the foreign direct investment that would otherwise be destined elsewhere. China's economic gains would be attained at the expense of its economic partners. Its mercantilist trade policy would undermine the

international liberal economic regimes. At the outset of the new century, China's surging demand for natural resources has added fuel to international concerns about global competition over these finite goods. Its growing economic presence in Asia, Africa, and Latin America has also raised questions about the political, economic, and security implications of China's ever-expanding global reach (Deng, 2008, p. 105).

The aforementioned briefly demonstrates how material and ideational and perhaps ideological elements were compounded to produce the threatening picture of Communist China – the perceived threat to US primacy for policy-makers in Washington since the second half of the 1990s. However, as already mentioned, the long-term Chinese threat to the US has been overshadowed by the urgent threat that Al-Qaeda and international terrorist groups have been deemed to pose, although the so-called 'pivot' – the strategic rebalance towards Asia announced by the Obama administration – is now refocusing US strategy on China (Friedberg, 2012, pp. 31–35; Ratner, 2013 pp. 21–38). The US pivot toward the Asia-Pacific region is best illustrated by the new US attitude toward Southeast Asian states, notably mainland ones, which implies that the ready-to-use containment policy has again been adopted to deal with the adversary (Viotti, 2010, p. 53).

However, it is not only the US and its challenger that are pivoting on Southeast Asia. Russia is also in the game. Thus, there is a triangular political relationship between the great powers focussing in on Southeast Asia. In the next section, the reason for the focus of the US,

China and Russia on Southeast Asia will be discussed.

3. Triangular Politics in Southeast Asia

The previous section drew some analogies between Cold War and contemporary international affairs, flagging up the importance of history to the study of international politics. It is not an exaggeration to refer to contemporary political affairs as the '*current history*' since political affairs are, to some extent, all shaped by the past. As Levy (1997) observes, although historical political events must be understood in relation to their temporal and spatial contexts, patterns of events can still be found, and lessons from history can thus be generalised. In this sense, I argue that triangular politics – the tripartite rivalry between the US, China and Russia in Southeast Asia – which will be explained in this section, can be understood as running in parallel with the 'hot war' periods of the Cold War in the region, in that there are a number of similar elements between them. However, only a number of powers will be examined here. As the game consists of three parties – the US, China and Russia – and the first two have already been discussed, I shall start with Russia, and then briefly return to the other two.

Russia

After the end of the Cold War, Russia entered a period of significant decline as the result of the Soviet legacy. It not only lost its sphere-of-influence, but also its status as a first-class great power. Moscow's influence over remote communist regimes faded away, including the close relationships with Vietnam and Lao PDR that it had formed during the Cold

War. China benefitted from Russia's loss, with Russia becoming a secondary great power. Nevertheless, thanks to its vast boundaries, from Europe to the Pacific, Moscow still plays a role in great power politics, even though it neglected by a large number of scholars and policy-makers (Trenin, 2012). In the post-Soviet era, the grand strategy of Moscow was to seek to restore its status as a 'normal' great power by increasing Russia's security and encouraging its market economy (Tsygankov, 2005). In addition, recapturing Soviet 'grandeur' – the prestige of superiority – is an important objective for Moscow, since this is seen as a vital non-material ingredient of power and, under Vladimir Putin, Russia has striven to reassert Russia's global eminence (Wood, 2013, pp. 403–404).

Thus, Moscow's strategic mind-set has not changed in the post-Soviet decades, with the Kremlin, as Lo notes, continuing

to think and act within the conceptual framework of a well-understood geopolitical triad: zero-sum games, notions of balance of power, and spheres of influence. Notwithstanding declarations about an exciting era of cooperation in place of the confrontation of the past...[Russia's] foreign policy [remains] firmly centred in the primacy of the security and geopolitical agenda (2003, p. 72).

According to de Haas's assessment of Russia's security papers:

[t]he West is considered a threat to [Russian] national security. In particular NATO, for its unwillingness to sign the adapted CFE Treaty and its continued enlargement (possibly also with Georgia

and Ukraine), and the USA for the deployment of troops in Romania and Bulgaria and of the intended missile defence shield in Poland and the Czech Republic (2010, p. 24).

Hence, Europe has had primacy in the focus of Russia's national security, and has also represented a major factor in Russian foreign policy formation.

East Asia in general, and Southeast Asia in particular, have been assigned a second-class priority in Russian foreign policy. Moscow's prime concern in East Asia has been the rapprochement and maintenance of good relationships with Beijing, especially regarding the issue of the Sino-Soviet border (Lo, 2003, p. 26). Russia has not been a primary actor in Southeast Asia, notwithstanding Moscow's accession in ASEAN-led multilateral cooperation, for example, in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Moscow's involvement in the region is primarily driven by the intention to counterbalance Washington's power and influence, especially after its declaration that Southeast Asia is the 'pivot to Asia'. The Kremlin's efforts to counterbalance the White House manifested through its engagement with Southeast Asian states – prominently Malaysia and Vietnam – in terms of trade and arm sales.

Vietnam has seen Russia as a safeguard against China's ambitions – especially its aggressive moves in the South China Sea. In Malaysia, thanks to Russia's campaign for an Asian counterbalance against American domination, Kuala Lumpur has formed good relations with Russia and, in 2002, it even declared itself to be Russia's gateway to the region (Buszynski, 2006, pp. 284–289).

Thus, within Southeast Asia, Moscow has represented itself as an alternative to American hegemony for the local states, and also as a force to safeguard against Beijing's more threatening policies (Kucera & Pejsova, 2012, p. 8). Nevertheless, it should be noted that Russia has neither provided a balance against the US nor deterred China explicitly, since its grand strategy still requires it to align itself with China's strategic direction in order to do this. The alignment that has formed here, I argue, resembles the alignment in the early years of the Cold War. However, in the current phase, the leading power is not Russia, but China.

China

The Southeast Asian region, especially the mainland one, has long been perceived by Beijing as comprising its tributary states. This derives from Beijing's self-image of itself as the centre of the world civilisation, rooted in the great history of the Middle Kingdom (Jones, 1991, pp. 145–146). Despite the suspicions that Southeast Asian states harbour towards China, and their perception of it as a threat, China has had a strong influence in the region, which has become obvious since the Asian financial crisis that was triggered in 1997. Beijing's sagacious response to the crisis – and, more importantly, its decision to prevent the devaluation of the Chinese currency – has contributed to the image of Beijing as a 'friend in need' in the eyes of local elites, particularly those in Bangkok (Sutter, 2008, p. 263). China has also played a constructive role in ASEAN and ASEAN-driven platforms, such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) cooperation and ARF. Nevertheless, not all states are happy with China's increased influence

in the region, with Singapore, a strategic partner of the US, providing a good example. Likewise, Vietnam and the Philippines have held a high degree of suspicion of China as a result of its ambitious move in the South China Sea, as both also see themselves as claimants here. The more assertive that China becomes over the maritime territorial disputes, the greater the perception of China as a threat becomes in these local states, and thus the likelihood that China will be perceived by them as a foe rather than friend increases further.

The United States

As the primary focus of this article has been on the United States, there is little left to add. In short, the present US strategy towards Southeast Asia does not differ from its strategy during the Cold War – that is, to maintain its hub-and-spoke relations. The ultimate goal is, of course, to contain China from expanding its power in the way it did with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated the importance of the Cold War for understanding the ongoing game that is being played by the great powers in Southeast Asia. As a 'pivot' for the great powers, the present politics in the region has historical resonances. In this regard, I contend that in order to explain and understand the contemporary political dynamics regarding this region, it is a prerequisite to understand the related history. Even though history cannot offer any future predictions, its lessons can help us to sketch the world ahead more accurately. Hence, the return of the great powers to Southeast

Asia and the potential aftermath of this, including armed conflict and war, should not be beyond our expectations if we learn from the history of the Cold War.

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