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**SINO-US COMPETITION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA  
IN THE EARLY 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

**Aukatova Anel Samatovna**

[aukanel@gmail.com](mailto:aukanel@gmail.com)

4<sup>th</sup> year student of Oriental Studies, Faculty of International Relations  
L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan  
Supervisor – PhD, lecturer Nuriddenova A.K.

*Introduction*

After the Cold War the United States was a global authority with no country that could oppose it, however now we observe the world's rising power that threatens the U.S. global position. China's rapid economic growth, expansion of its regional and global influence, assertive politics and military modernization strain already complex relations with the United States, which are becoming more and more competitive. Yet, the direct conflict of interests is happening in the region of Southeast Asia and the relations between these two states are too important to be ignored.

As we know from historic accounts Southeast Asia had a geostrategic significance for a long time, however the region's dynamic economic development boosted its international importance in a new era, making it a theatre for Sino-American actions for gaining strong influence and implementation of their own national interests. It is important to note that in this paper the region of Southeast Asia embraces the following countries: Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The ten of them, excluding Timor-Leste, are the members of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with the total population of 632 million and economy valued at \$2.4 trillion.

The United States have empowered themselves as the security guards of the region since the period of Cold War, having military bases primarily in Philippines and Singapore, and still playing this role. Furthermore, economic factor is also crucial in forming American interest in this region, since Southeast Asia is America's one of the largest trading partners. However, nowadays China is trying to restore historical justice and maintain its dominant position in Southeast Asia. Here the main question arises of whether Southeast Asia would actively support American presence or they

would be more inclined towards China. The outcome of that question depends on whether American political culture and its support outweigh economic perspectives offered by China.

*Theoretical framework: Asymmetry*

The analysis of the conflict of interests between the United States and China in Southeast Asia will be carried out in the framework of asymmetry theory of international relations. The theory of asymmetry centers its ideas on the disparity of power and capacity between states which forms different perception and relative interest. The main idea of a theory is that disparities between more powerful and less powerful states can produce different perspectives among them, which in turn lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings of one of the state's intentions [1]. Asymmetry arises between two states, stronger and weaker, for the first one the relationship with weaker state will be less important and present small share of its own interests along with the occupation by its own domestic interests, resulting in under-attention policy. If a crisis or conflict occurs in a weaker state, the stronger one will be slow at helping or changing policy. In a situation with the weaker state the relationships will be more important, producing over-attention strategy.

Another important concept of this theory presents the unlikelihood of the will imposition on a weaker state by the powerful one. The Sino-Vietnamese case can act as a convincing example; concerning the history of relations between China and Vietnam, we can admit that China has always been a larger state in comparison to Vietnam and despite the fact that their relations are better described as hierarchic tributary system; Vietnam was never fully part of China. Sometimes, the vicious circle of misunderstandings of each other's intentions can end in involving the third state by less powerful state aiming to balance relations with stronger state. However, ally's capacities have to be at least equal to the stronger state or even more powerful.

In asymmetric relations more powerful state requires the deference of less powerful, however deference does not mean obedience, instead it gives confidence that weaker state will act on the basis of disparity between them.

It is important to note that the discourse of "we versus others" still remains in American perception towards political actors. After all political culture is considered to be as a key component in dominating the region; undoubtedly in this case China has more privileges as it has "a common ground" with some Southeast Asian countries. Generally culture itself is acting as a liaison between countries in the post-Cold War world order, furthermore Samuel Huntington argues that countries have gone into an identity crisis and initiated a process when they are becoming closer to the ones with similar ancestry, religion, language, values and institutions, therefore distancing themselves from the different ones [2]. The new world order puts forward fundamental cultural differences between civilizations. Obviously there are significant differences between American and Southeast Asian countries and American ideals of freedom, individualism come into confrontation with Asian society.

*The presence of the US and China in Southeast Asia*

After the end of the Cold War the United States had an opportunity to dominate Southeast Asia, and its interest started with the annexation of the Philippines in 1899 which has proceeded to colonial rule for almost half a century. After the Second World War America, in accordance with the policy of containment, had to coordinate its actions as a way of preventing expansion of communism in countries of the Southeast Asia and provide a 'security umbrella'. Even after the end of the Cold War American presence in Asia-Pacific area seems to rest on the notion that without it, other countries with their national intentions would strive for regional dominance [3]. Since the stability in this region is critical to US own interests, and it is believed that American withdrawal can provide an opportunity primarily for Chinese exercises of military power over the issue of disputed territories in South China Sea.

ASEAN attracts US, making members of this organization the largest destination of American investments. According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative, in 2016 goods and services and trade with ASEAN countries comprised over \$234 billion [4], during 2012 - 2014 American investments to ASEAN countries totaled with \$32,7 billion. Apart from the

economic support, the USA has several allies and strategic partners, including the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, etc., which depend on American pre-eminence as a security guard. Moreover, American diplomatic engagement and cooperation with regional states in terms of cultural and educational programs are important, especially in the framework of 'The Lower Mekong Initiative' created after the meeting of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the foreign ministers of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. It can be seen that America has been exercising its soft power in a right way, attracting countries of Southeast Asia to cooperate with the United States on a new level.

However, the US withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was intended as a trade agreement between Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States, caused serious concerns about further American plans in the region. It was planned that TPP would create single economic area with low tariffs and broad set of rules for trade and investment, but 'America First' policy announced by Trump replaced 'pivot' to Asia, initiated by Barack Obama's administration.

Nowadays, China is actively practicing its soft power and using its military growth in Southeast Asia, trying to become a regional leader and replace the United States. Many authors, including Denny Roy, argue about Chinese military rise along with its assertive foreign policy that jeopardize American leadership in Asia, thereby basing his argument on the fact that Chinese spends on its military forces have increased at least fivefold in a period from 2000 to 2017 [5].

Moreover, not only Washington's investments are received by Southeast Asian countries, but China also plays the role of one of the largest source of investments. By the end of 2017, mutual trade turnover among China and Southeast Asian countries increased by 13.8% in comparison with 2016, reaching \$515 billion [6].

The economic growth of China and the strengthening of its position on the world market are favorably considered in the region as an alternative to American pre-eminence. It is important to note that China provided financial support to Southeast Asian countries during financial crisis in 1997–1998. The main recipients of Chinese financial support in Southeast Asia are the regimes that may not qualify for aid from Western countries with liberal views; therefore the main recipients of Chinese aid are Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, to whom China has lent \$2 billion, \$600 million and \$400 million respectively [7]. Thus Beijing Consensus attracts developing countries more than Washington Consensus, due to the existence of some countries in Southeast Asia which have failed in establishing democracy. The realization of 'One Belt, One Road Initiative' can boost cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and in the long run increase military presence, substituting the US in this region.

Even though we can observe reconciliation of China with countries in Southeast Asia based on economic conditions, the overall relations seem to be complicated, as Southeast Asia has fears of China resulted from historical experience [8]. In order to balance such rising power Southeast Asian states are trying to 'invite' the United States to that region and maintain response to the challenges of China's rise.

Southeast Asia is already a meeting point of political and economic interests of both China and the US, and even though America's interest in this region seems to be decreased, Washington definitely is not intended to cede this strategically important sector to China. We also should understand how Southeast Asian states are reacting to the current situation, whether they are ready to support the USA, making preference for America's military clout and its political culture, or support and accept Chinese dominance, assuming the economic perspectives. This paper argues that the disparity between the United States, China and Southeast Asian countries, in which Southeast Asia acts as "a weaker state", creates double asymmetric unequal relations, where the stronger ones hold central position and influence the region. However among these stronger actors only one power is going to strengthen its relations with Southeast Asia and probably culture will stand as a determining factor.

Talking of American political culture, the sticking point of democratization, since some countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia are far away from transforming into democratic states, will not play in favor for America.

There is no doubt that some states historically were influenced by Confucianism and still have the remnants of the Confucian heritage. The influence can be seen in the everyday lives, at the social-psychological and macro-economical levels [9]. On this basis, countries with similar views, like Southeast Asian states and China can be brought together, whereas distance between these states and the US can even widen and there will not be a chance for accepting ideals and ideas proposed by American political culture.

We cannot predict how the rest of Southeast Asian countries would act and which side they would choose, even though some of these countries hope this will not happen. However now we already can observe that some of them are trying to delicately solve issues with China. During the Philippines' president visit to China in October 2016, Rodrigo Duterte announced the movement of the two countries to a peaceful solution, providing for freedom of navigation and flight, as well as the creation of a permanent bilateral consultation mechanism. Earlier in 2018 during Duterte stated that China was already in possession (of the South China Sea) and called the US to stop provoking Beijing with its military actions. He believes that China and ASEAN countries can solve their issues without American involvement.

#### *Conclusion*

It is definite that the United States and China will not end up in a military confrontation, as they are not ready to an armed conflict due to the interconnectedness of their economies. Obviously the USA is losing its leadership in economic cooperation with Southeast Asian states, while China is closely engaging itself with region's economies. However for some time American military presence and cooperation will play key role until countries of Southeast Asia will not be reassured in China's "good intentions" toward the region and act on a basis of common culture, which is considered to be crucial for developing strong and positive asymmetric relations.

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