

An Analysis of the Relations Between Ten ASEAN Countries and China in the Context of Indo-Pacific Strategy

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The “return to the Asia-Pacific” policy and the “Asia-Pacific rebalancing” policy during the Obama period marked the germination of the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States, and since then, the Indo-Pacific strategy has been continuously strengthened by the two administrations of Trump and Biden (Ling, 2023). In order to stop China from rising, the United States has been trying to draw the ten ASEAN countries which are geographically close to China to American side. However, due to the different national conditions and the different needs of the ten countries, it is difficult for the United States to keep ASEAN’s attitude towards China consistent under the frame of Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, this paper will analyze the different attitudes of the ten countries towards China respectively, so as to help China formulate better policies and find better ways to cope with America’s containment of China’s rise and maintain regional and world peace.

Keywords: ASEAN, Indo-Pacific Strategy, China, USA, Geopolitics, Sino-American competition

Literature Review

The Indo-Pacific strategy began to sprout during the Obama administration, when the United States began to show its intention to contain the rise of China. After Trump became the president, the Indo-Pacific strategy was turned into formal and more detailed policies to suppress and contain China’s development in almost every field. After Biden became the president, he continued the Indo-Pacific strategy and strengthened it. After the US started the Indo-Pacific strategy, they made their efforts to draw more countries in the international community to his side. Thus, much smaller and more changeable mechanisms emerged, such as Quad, AUKUS. In order to maintain American supremacy and stop China’s greater influence in the world, the US will spare no effort to draw ASEAN countries which are located in the key area of Indo-Pacific to go against China. Therefore, the analysis of ASEAN under the Indo-Pacific framework is significant to both China and the world security. Li Xuewei and Li Jiaying (2023) pointed out that the practice of Indo-Pacific strategic grouping has seriously affected the security of China and China’s surroundings, but the future of bilateral cooperation is full of complexity. Tan Shujun (2024) points out that the US Indo-Pacific strategy puts ASEAN countries in a position where they have to “choose either side” between China and the US. The ten ASEAN countries have different histories, national conditions, uneven strength, and inconsistent goals, which have made it difficult for the ten countries to reach an agreement within ASEAN, and it is even more difficult to reach agreement on major issues under the framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy (Tan, 2024). Tian Shihui and Zheng Xianwu (2024) analyzed

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the role and opportunities of ASEAN in the context of Sino-US competition in the “China-US-ASEAN tripartite Maritime Issues Competition”. In the Sino-American competition, both China and the US actively support ASEAN maritime issues to win ASEAN’s participation, which is both an opportunity and a challenge for ASEAN (Tian & Zheng, 2024).

It can be found that the actions of the United States to attract ASEAN in order to contain China have seriously threatened the security around China and disrupted the world order. ASEAN’s attitudes towards China vary because of different interests of the ten countries. However, there is no literature on the specific analysis of the ten ASEAN countries’ attitudes toward China in the existing research. This paper will classify the ten ASEAN countries according to their attitudes and relationships with China.

An Analysis of the Relations Between Ten ASEAN Countries and China Under the Indo-Pacific Framework

China-US-ASEAN Relation Analysis

China is ASEAN’s largest trading partner. The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between China and ASEAN has boosted trade and investment and deepened economic ties between the two sides. China’s investment in ASEAN is mainly focused on infrastructure construction, manufacturing, and service fields. The United States is one of ASEAN’s key economic partners, especially in the high-tech and services sectors. But its economic influence in the region has waned in recent years, partly due to the rise of China in the ASEAN economy. China’s position on the South China Sea issue is at odds with that of some ASEAN countries, but China has tried to build mutual trust with ASEAN countries through diplomatic means and economic cooperation as well as the Belt and Road Initiative.

The US has important geopolitical interests in the Asia-Pacific region, and its “Asia-Pacific rebalance” strategy aims to strengthen ties with ASEAN countries to balance China’s rising influence in the region. The United States defends its interests in Southeast Asia through military assistance, security cooperation, and diplomatic efforts. The US security policy in Southeast Asia is mainly achieved through military presence and security cooperation. The United States has military alliances with some ASEAN countries, such as the Philippines and Thailand.

The South China Sea issue is a key factor affecting the security relations between China and ASEAN. China advocates bilateral negotiations to resolve disputes, while some ASEAN countries prefer multilateral mechanisms. Despite the differences, China and ASEAN have worked hard to maintain regional peace and stability through dialogue and cooperation.

China, the United States, and ASEAN are all participants in multiple multilateral mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum. These platforms provide opportunities for dialogue and cooperation among the three parties. As the global political and economic landscape changes, the relationship between China, the United States, and ASEAN is also evolving. China will continue to seek to strengthen economic and security cooperation with ASEAN, while the United States is likely to adjust its Asia-Pacific strategy in response to China’s rise. ASEAN countries need to find a balance point in the great power competition to safeguard their own interests and regional stability. The interaction among the three parties not only affects their own national interests, but also exerts a far-reaching impact on regional and global stability and development. How to promote regional cooperation and peace while safeguarding their own interests will be a challenge for the three parties to face together.

Attitudes of the Ten Countries to China

ASEAN's attitude towards China since the early 1990s has been gradually improved by concerns over China's modernisation of its military and the South China Sea, as ASEAN and China have increasingly exercised economic and geopolitical interests. China is already an important economic partner of ASEAN, and the establishment of China-ASEAN Free Trade Area has become the key to the development of bilateral relations between China and ASEAN. The two sides have also made important progress in security cooperation, such as combating transnational crime, piracy, and drug trafficking. In the context of Sino-US competition, ASEAN can gain more benefits by cooperating with both sides to hedge. Such a state of affairs between China and ASEAN poses a threat to the interests of the United States in Southeast Asia although the United States still has a large influence in the region and is increasingly taking more proactive measures to undermine the relationship between China and ASEAN (Yuan, 2006). Therefore, under the intervention of the United States, different ASEAN countries have different attitudes toward China.

Despite the Philippines' economic and cultural cooperation with China, the South China Sea dispute was hyped up by the US and the Philippines. They held the idea that the controversial issue should be solved by the international Arbitration Tribunal. The disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea have affected the normal life of residents nearby, threatened the security environment of China and the Philippines, and brought destabilizing factors to the world (De Castro, 2019). Vietnam and China have had a complicated historical relationship, ranging from cultural exchanges to border disputes. China is an important trading partner and investment partner of Vietnam. The two have a lot of cooperation in trade and infrastructure, and have made efforts to improve and develop bilateral relations. However, the US attempts to hype the sovereignty conflicts between China and Vietnam in South China Sea islands. Even diplomatic frictions have occurred several times.

Brunei is an important economic partner of China. Many Chinese companies are involved in helping Brunei build infrastructure and help develop energy to develop its economy. Despite the territorial disputes, different political systems, and values, China and Brunei have historically been on good terms. There are also many non-governmental activities to promote cultural exchanges between the two countries. For example, the Chinese will hold traditional New Year activities such as dragon and lion dances during the Spring Festival in Brunei (Womack, 2018). Malaysia, despite its territorial disputes with China, has always been friendly in the political, economic, and cultural fields, and this friendly relationship has been stable. This relationship is of strategic importance to the sustained and healthy development of both sides. China and Malaysia have maintained close cooperation on international and regional affairs. Top officials of China and Malaysia have been actively communicating and consulting on cooperation and territorial disputes to find the best solution for both sides. Economic cooperation is crucial to bilateral relations. China is a very important trading partner of Malaysia in many fields, such as infrastructure construction and energy development. In addition, Malaysia has also conducted in-depth cooperation with China under the Belt and Road Initiative. In terms of culture, Malaysia and China carry out many cultural exchange programmes to promote mutual understanding and friendship between the two peoples. Malaysia and China have always adhered to the principle of seeking common ground while shelving differences, and sought solutions that are most beneficial to both sides. This sets an example for other countries with territorial disputes to get along well with each other.

There is both cooperation and competition between China and Indonesia, but the current attitude towards China is wary. Indonesia is a major regional country with strong economic power. China's policies in the South China Sea involve fishery resources and maritime security. As a maritime country under the Indo-Pacific strategic

framework, Indonesia is more alert to China's policies in the South China Sea. However, China and Indonesia have in-depth cooperation in economic and trade, and extensive cooperation in infrastructure construction and resource development. Compared with Vietnam and the Philippines, Indonesia has important economic ties with China, and if it does not involve its core interests, Indonesia may be inclined to have deeper and broader cooperation with China in the future, which is in line with people's desire for peace and in the interests of both sides (Damuri et al., 2019). Singapore is a very developed country in Southeast Asia. Similar to Indonesia, although Singapore, as a developed country in Southeast Asia, is more alert to China, China and Singapore have a lot of cooperation in tourism, economy, politics, trade, science and technology, etc. Singapore has continuously deepened cooperation with China under the "Belt and Road" Initiative. Singapore has huge potential for economic cooperation with China. Eliminating prejudice and resolving differences through communication is conducive to each other and to promoting positive development of the region and the world (Ho, 2021).

The four remaining ASEAN countries hope that the South China Sea dispute will not affect their bilateral relations with China (Storey, 2012). Thailand has been in contact with China for a very long time. It has a close relationship with China since ancient times. In the context of Indo-Pacific strategy, Thailand not only hopes to maintain the traditional alliance relationship with the US, but also does not hope that the relationship with the US will affect the cooperation with China in many aspects and fields. Because China is an important partner of Thailand, and China is also a source of investment for Thailand. These countries depend to some extent on China's economy, so they do not want to affect cooperation with China. Thailand is actively participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, which will raise more opportunities for Thailand to develop its country, so Thailand does not want to affect its relations with China despite being an ally of the United States. As a small country, Cambodia is more dependent on China than Thailand, and China is Cambodia's largest source of aid and investment. China and Cambodia have very close cooperation in agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure. Although the US is trying to woo ASEAN countries under the Indo-Pacific strategy, Cambodia has always maintained a very friendly attitude toward China and actively participated in the "Belt and Road" initiative. In addition, due to Cambodia's own weak national strength, it has been receiving military assistance and military training from China in order to improve its security level. China and Laos have long-term stable and friendly relations, although the United States through the Indo-Pacific strategy drew ASEAN countries into their camp, Laos is still very supportive of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative. Like Cambodia, China has been providing investment and trade with Laos. However, Laos is different from Cambodia in terms of traditional security. Although Laos has military cooperation with China, Laos hopes to maintain its independence in military security, so its cooperation with China is more manifested in economic aspects. Myanmar is strategically important because it is at the crossroads of the Indo-Pacific. Myanmar has extensive cooperation with China in infrastructure, agriculture, and energy, but it is more similar to Thailand. Although it has extensive cooperation with China in various fields, it also hopes to cooperate with more other countries. Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar have no disputes with China in the South China Sea, and how to maintain balance in the context of Sino-US competition is what these countries, especially Thailand and Myanmar, are thinking about.

Conclusion

Here are some suggestions that China can do in the future to help with the relations between China and the ten countries:

The RCEP and other multilateral trade agreements should be used to further lower trade barriers. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, increase investment in infrastructure construction fields in ASEAN countries, such

as transport networks, energy projects, and communication systems. Leaders of the countries meetings and senior officials' consultations can be held regularly to ensure timely communication and mutual understanding of the policies and positions. The two sides should enhance the synergy of their development strategies, such as China's Five-Year Plan and ASEAN's Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. Increase the number of scholarships to encourage exchanges between students and scholars from both sides to promote mutual cultural and educational understanding. Strengthen cooperation in counter-terrorism, and combat transnational crimes and disaster management. The South China Sea disputes could be resolved by arranging meetings for the leaders of these countries and consultation in accordance with international law. We should actively participate in regional multilateral mechanisms to jointly address regional challenges. Establish joint research centers to promote scientific and technological innovation and intellectual property protection. Establish a regional public health emergency liaison mechanism to handle public health problems. Promote green finance and investment, and support renewable energy and environmental protection projects. Help ASEAN countries achieve their poverty reduction goals through technology transfer and capacity building. Strengthen economic cooperation and security management in border areas and enhance connectivity in border areas as well as cooperation in addressing climate change and jointly promote global environmental governance. Work together to improve and support the international system with the UN.

The United States is trying to contain China's rise in every field, but the United States strategy is not smoothly sailing. These ten countries lack cohesion under the Indo-Pacific Strategy with different attitudes toward China and the US. China can analyze the situation on a case-by-case basis and combine the different backgrounds, goals, and national conditions of each and take the above suggestions to make foreign policies and benefit more China's development and world peace.

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