

Same Game, No Winners: COVID-19, U.S.-China Rivalry, and Southeast Asian Geopolitics

By Ian Storey and Malcolm Cook

The COVID-19 outbreak has spawned a plethora of commentaries forecasting the geopolitical consequences of the pandemic. For some observers the virus has caused a decisive shift in the balance of influence, with China emerging as the paramount power (especially in the Indo-Pacific) and America teetering on the brink of losing its status as global hegemon. Other pundits have offered less paradigm-shifting assessments: that COVID-19 is unlikely to upend the existing international order but may catalyze existing global trends.

Four months into what is very likely to be a long and wrenching crisis it is, of course, very difficult to make predictions. However, we believe that at least in Southeast Asia, what we are witnessing thus far is less a rupture event and more an amplification of the current geopolitical dynamics. COVID-19 has led to a sharp deterioration in U.S.-China relations and this has reinforced negative views of both countries in Southeast Asia and exacerbated regional concerns about escalating superpower rivalry.

Same Game

Some analysts argue that China is using the pandemic to change the rules of the game in the South China Sea in its favor. During the COVID-19 crisis China has undertaken a series of activities which have ticked up tensions in the contested waters. In February a Chinese warship turned its fire-control radar on a Philippine Navy ship in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ); in March a China Coast Guard vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat; in April a Chinese survey ship entered the EEZs of Vietnam and Malaysia; shortly thereafter Beijing announced new administration units to govern the Paracels and Spratlys and named 80 geographical features in the South China Sea. During this whole period, both the U.S. and Chinese navies undertook high-profile exercises in the area, while the U.S. Navy conducted three "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPs) in the South China Sea (10 March, and 28 and 29 April).

To be sure China is no doubt gleeful that the United States and Southeast Asian claimants are preoccupied with tackling the virus. But none of the above incidents are game changers in the South China Sea; they have become routine events and likely would have happened with or without COVID-19. The United States was expected to increase the frequency of its FONOPs in 2020; China has sunk Southeast Asian fishing vessels before (including a Philippine boat last June); Chinese survey ships were operating off the Vietnamese and Malaysian coast last year; and as expected Hanoi and Manila have protested all of China's moves to buttress its jurisdictional claims. A real game changer would have been an announcement by China that it was establishing an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Spratlys or indications that it had started reclamation work at Scarborough Shoal. Nothing has fundamentally changed in the South China Sea: China continues to assert its claims, America responds with more FONOPs, and the Southeast Asian claimants look on with concern and a degree of fatalism.

Ian Storey and Malcolm Cook, Senior Fellow and Visiting Senior Fellow, respectively, at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, explain that "In Southeast Asia, what we are witnessing thus far is less a rupture event and more an amplification of the current geopolitical dynamics."

But the outbreak of COVID-19 among sailors aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, and the perceived lack of U.S. leadership during the crisis, have deepened fears in Southeast Asia concerning America's commitment to the region. At the same time, Beijing's bout of assertive behavior in the South China Sea is being seen as opportunistic and extremely unhelpful at a time when ASEAN and China are supposed to be negotiating a Code of Conduct to reduce tensions (those negotiations are currently on hold due to COVID-19).

No Winner

What is true for the South China Sea is true for Southeast Asia more broadly. In the region, so far neither the United States nor China is a clear geopolitical beneficiary of the pandemic. Instead, Southeast Asia worries that the regional externalities of this superpower rivalry are being exacerbated.

The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's State of Southeast Asia 2020 Survey Report released in January clearly indicates that doubts about China and the United States respectively weighed heavily before COVID-19 spread from China to Southeast Asia, as did concerns about their rivalry. With regard to China, 72 percent of regional policy elites polled expressed concern about Beijing's growing economic influence, and 85 percent about China's growing strategic and political influence. Two-thirds had little or no confidence in China's new, purportedly more inclusive BRI approach, while only one out of every 67 respondents agreed with Beijing's narrative that China is a benevolent power. The spread of COVID-19 from China to Southeast Asia, abetted by memories of the same pattern for the SARS epidemic in 2003, likely will deepen concerns about China's influence on and in Southeast Asia. Beijing's continuing aggression in the South China Sea during the pandemic will hardly convince many of its benevolence regardless of how many medical supplies China donates.

Results for the United States in this survey were better than those for China but still bad and discordant with the Trump administration's rhetoric of heightened engagement. Three-quarters of those polled agreed that U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia had fallen under the Trump administration. Only one in ten respondents disagreed. Nearly 50 percent of survey respondents expressed little confidence in the United States as a strategic partner, while twice as many viewed China as the leading strategic power in the region compared with the United States. America suffering the highest number of total COVID-19 infections and deaths globally and the international media's critical coverage of the Trump administration's pandemic response likely will add to these doubts.

Southeast Asian states want greater international cooperation to address the pandemic and its social effects. However, the pandemic has made the U.S.-China rivalry more virulent, greatly constraining cooperation between the world's only two superpowers. This will undoubtedly deepen Southeast Asian concerns about the regional implications of the U.S.-China rivalry and hurt the image of both powers as well.

Currently, the geopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia look bad for the United States, China and the region itself. Southeast Asian countries are looking beyond the first wave of the pandemic to a more uncertain and daunting future. The United States and China individually and through effective cooperation could help reverse this lose-lose-lose situation and improve their images in Southeast Asia.

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