

A NEW BALANCE OF POWER IN ASIA-PACIFIC
IMPLICATIONS FOR ASEAN'S POSTURE

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Introduction¹

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the four-decade-long Cold War structure, the entire nature of the geopolitical landscape in the Asia-Pacific region has dramatically changed. The bipolar equilibrium of the two superpowers broke down. As a result, regional players have commenced *a new game of balance of power*.

One of the main features of the regional strategic chessboard is the emergence of a new balance of power. The question of just how a balance of power is formed and what direction this new balance is moving in remains complicated, unpredictable, and even arguable. Nevertheless, it is likely characterized as an evolution in which no major conflict occurs, and the new power equation appears *as a flexible five-power equilibrium* in which no single power becomes a hegemon, while the United States and China play dominant roles. The relationships among the five Great Powers in the region (United States, China, Japan, Russia and India) are now geared to *both cooperation and competition*, instead of collusion and confrontation.

¹ This paper was prepared by the author during his stay as a Fellow at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs of Harvard University. The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of the Vietnamese Government or of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

Therefore, a detailed examination and analysis of the nature of this new power configuration and some of its factors, as well as the prospects for its development in the future, are essential contemporary issues that capture much attention and concern from countries both inside and outside the region.

Under these circumstances, how should the future role of an expanding ASEAN, as middle-sized game-players in the Asia-Pacific region, be viewed and assessed? In other words, how will the new correlation of forces affect the interests and strategic posture of the states of Southeast Asia? Answering these questions would undoubtedly help identify various policy options that can best serve the benefits of ASEAN. This is of significant importance for ASEAN states, especially as we enter a new century.

The purpose of this paper is to look into and understand a variety of factors, particularly the relationship between the United States and China, and how it affects the rallying of forces and the shaping of a new balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. Based on this, an attempt is made here to arrive at a critical evaluation of ASEAN's current posture, the problems that may arise, and the policy options taken by ASEAN that can contribute to the strengthening of its role and position.

The scope of the research is largely focused on the post-Cold War era. The analysis and observations are based on a methodology of systematic, historic and comparative approaches, as well as some leading international relations theories.

The theme of the research is addressed in three parts. Part one deals with the concept of balance of power and the present balance of power in Asia-Pacific in the post-Cold War era. Part two concentrates on assessments of the US-China relationship, the trends of its future evolution, and its effects on the rallying of forces in the region. All ideas and observations relating to ASEAN's role and posture, its opportunities and challenges, as well as its strategic options in a new regional game, are contained in the final part of this paper.

PART I

BALANCE OF POWER IN ASIA-PACIFIC

I/ Concept of Balance of Power

In general, there are two main theoretical schools of international relations: *realism* and *liberalism*. *Realism* identifies the entire system of state relations based on criteria such as strength, power, geopolitics, geostrategy and the correlation of forces largely among Great Powers. *Liberalism* emphasizes other factors, such as economic interdependence, “soft” sources of power, and the role of international institutions and multilateralism.

According to many scholars, while various approaches could be considered supplementary, realism is the more dominant theoretical tradition since the policies of Great Powers and their relations have so far strongly influenced international affairs. Moreover, the regional and multilateral institutions would not be able to function without the participation of Great Powers.

The theory on balance of power is associated with realism and remains the most fundamental framework for understanding international relations. The concept of balance of power has historically been used to explain the actions of states in an insecure environment. The system was first formed and operationalized among the

city-states of ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. This theory is still widely applied though debate on it continues.

1. Balance of Power: Definition

Balance of power is perceived *as the basic concept in the relations among states*. Modern theory on balance of power is connected to the Newtonian conception of an universe in equilibrium. The substance of this theory is: *Under normal circumstances, all states always seek to maximize their power and international positions through various methods and techniques, and because of the adjustments of the “invisible hand”, no one gains hegemony and an equilibrium in the international relations systems is maintained.*² This definition suggests a mechanism in which any attempt by any state to expand its power and attain dominance or hegemony that would allow it to impose its will on the other states will be resisted. No state, therefore, will be in a position to determine the fate of others.

Thus, a state of equilibrium in the international relations system is one in which no state becomes an absolute dominant power; more powerful states, in spite of pursuing various strategic interests, are satisfied with the existing territorial,

² J.E.Dougherty, R.L.Pfaltzgraff, "Contending Theories of International Relations", Longman Inc. Pg 39.

political and economic arrangements in the system. Although some elements and adjustments may take place, no powerful state (or group of states) seeks to change the system fundamentally, as it would not yield additional benefits commensurate with the anticipated costs.³ Consequently, the Great Powers have frequently supported the balance of power system throughout history, because they have both greater capacity to influence outcomes and the largest stake in the established order. In effect, balance of power mirrors the Great Powers' compromises on the distribution of benefits and spheres of influence in the world on the basis of their correlation of forces.

2. Rules of the Game

The aim of countervailing power is the protection of each state's security and the system in which these states exist as a whole. Therefore, the way to ensure each state's security is to prevent the emergence of any preponderant state that would lead to an upset of the existing status of equilibrium.

As Wolfers puts it, in balance of power terms, these rules can be stated in the following manner:

- (a) Watch a potential adversary's power and match it.*
- (b) Ally oneself with a weaker state to restore the balance of power.*

³ R. Gilpin, "War and Change in World Politics". Pg 11.

- (c) *Abandon such alliances when the balance has been restored and the common danger has passed.*
- (d) *Regard national security interests as permanent; alliances must therefore change when a new threat rises.*
- (e) *Do not treat defeated states harshly through punitive peace treaties (today's adversary may be tomorrow's ally).⁴*

3. Change of Equilibrium

An international system is not maintained in a state of stable equilibrium when important shifts in the array of forces among states occur. There are two basic elements leading to the attempts to change the balance of power system:

- Differential growth in political, military and technological power that creates a change in the array of forces among states.
- Shifts in states' domestic political coalitions may necessitate redefinition of their "national interests" and foreign policies.

An equilibrium can be altered if there is a shift in political, military and technological capabilities of states and, as a result, *the expected benefits exceed the expected costs of bringing about a change in the system.*

Throughout history, a new equilibrium was principally established by war. The victorious state or states would create the new peace settlements and status quo reflecting the redistribution of power in the system. The hegemonic wars in this view included the Thirty Years War from 1618-1648, the wars of King Louis XIV from 1667-1713, the Napoleonic Wars from 1792-1814, World War I from 1914-1918 and World War II from 1939-1945. However, resolution of crises is still possible through peaceful adjustment of the systemic disequilibrium, by compromises or moderation of the ambitions of emerging Great Powers. Essentially, it is the sharing of costs and benefits in keeping the status quo among the existing Great Powers.

The determinants of whether or not to create and maintain the international balance of power are the cost-benefit calculations that a state (or states) will make in the determination to change the existing equilibrium. The material environment (e.g., economic growth, demographic change, military technologies, communications and transportation conditions), the international system structures, and “internal” factors (e.g., leadership personalities, national identities, political-economic interests of groups and others in the society) provide incentives or disincentives for a state to attempt to change the international system.

⁴ A. Wolfer, “Discord and Collaboration”. Pg 145.

With these remarks in mind, the ever-increasing stake of international interdependence and the existence of nuclear weapons in the world today will certainly cause extremely high costs if one state (or a group of states) seeks to change the existing balance of power.

4. Significance of Implementing a Balance of Power Policy

As J. Spanier explains, all states are very concerned about their strength or power for survival. To prevent an attack, a state must be *as powerful as potential aggressors; a disproportion of power may tempt another state. A balance of power is thus a prerequisite for each state's security.* When the balance is disturbed, the tendency is to take responsive action to return to a position of equilibrium. If states disregard the operational rule that power must be counterbalanced, they place their own security in jeopardy.⁵

As Kissinger argues, *the balance of power serves to restrict the ability of states to dominate each other and to limit the scope of conflicts.* Kissinger views the balance of power not as an automatic mechanism, but instead as one of two possible outcomes of a situation in which states are obliged to deal with each other. One state can become so powerful that it dominates the others, or else the “pretensions” of the most aggressive member of the international community are kept in check by

a combination of the others; in other words, by the operation of a balance of power chosen by prudent leaders.⁶

Harman, when studying the significance of theory on balance of power, asserts that *prudent states do not amass more enemies than they can effectively counter or handle at any one time. If states must deal with two or three adversaries, it would be wiser to concentrate on the strongest one by isolating and separating it from the others.* This principle is called the “conservation of enemies”.⁷

II/ Balance of Power in Asia-Pacific in the Post-Cold War Era

1. Chessmen on the New Strategic Chessboard

On the international strategic chessboard, the ranks of “chessmen” are classified by geopolitical, demographic, economic, military and traditional criteria in which geopolitics has significant importance. Generally, two ranks are identified: the first rank comprises *Great Powers*, whose scope of interests and capability of intervention reaches out beyond their borders. The second rank is comprised of *Middle and Small Powers*, which do not have (or have only a very few) of these

⁵ J. Spanier, “Games Nations Play”. Pg 24.

⁶ H. Kissinger, “Diplomacy”. Pg 20.

⁷ F. Harman, “The Relations of Nations”. Pg 326.

characteristics. The Great Powers are considered the chief game players having the roles to act, while the Middle and Small Powers are acted upon.

The “chessmen” positioned on the strategic chessboard in the Asia-Pacific are ranked as follows:

- *First* is a group of Great Powers that includes the United States, China, Japan, Russia and India. These are the chief game players in the strategic chessboard.

Their positions, however, are not necessarily equal to one another:

- The United States is currently the single superpower having political, economic and military might, and global influence.
 - China is an emerging power with an increasingly important voice in the regional economy and greater political influence in the Asia-Pacific.
 - Japan is an economic power whose political and military stature are not commensurate with its economic abilities.
 - Russia’s international prestige declined sharply after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In spite of this, however, Russia still has a strong military force, including nuclear weapons.
 - India is now exercising its clout mainly in the South Asian region and is also viewed as a rising power.
- *Second* is a group of Middle Powers. These countries do not have great influence on the developments in the region, but they play an important role in balancing power, as they occupy strategic geopolitical positions and are the

objects of the Great Powers' rivalries. They are countries like Indonesia, Korea, and Vietnam.

- *Third* are Small Powers (Laos, Cambodia, Singapore) and some very small states like Brunei (with a population of 300,000 people), and the Marshall Islands (with a population of 40,000 people). Those countries can only make worthwhile stands when they are engaged in alliances or alignments with other actors.
- *In addition*, some scholars of liberalism have flirted with the idea that new transnational actors, such as international and regional organizations, NGOs and multinational corporations, are gradually playing a greater role in international affairs.

2. Trends of Change in Power Equations

The US economy has recently gained advantages in technology, productivity and competitiveness, and the country is likely to continue as the unique global power for several decades to come. Brzezinski holds that the United States is not only the first as well as the only truly global superpower, but is also likely to be the very last. In the coming years, no single power is likely to reach the level of 30% of the world's GDP that the United States sustained throughout much of the twentieth

century.⁸ Kissinger also believes that the United States is the only remaining superpower with the capacity to intervene in every part of globe in the post-Cold War world.⁹

However, the United States is also facing severe competition with other contenders, namely Western Europe, Japan and a rising China. At the current rate, the US economy's share of the world economy will decline to about 20% of world GDP by 2010, and Asia's share of world output is predicted to grow to exceed 70% of North America's and Europe's output combined.

China is on the road to superpower status by the first decades of the twenty-first century. As projected by the World Bank in its recent report on China in 2020, if China can sustain economic growth rates of 7-8% per year, China's GDP on a purchasing power parity basis would reach \$3.3 trillion in 2015. This would be about 27 percent of US GDP in that year, and roughly equal to the US GDP in 1966. China would then become the world's largest economy in terms of total GNP by 2020.

An economically powerful China would no doubt introduce faster changes in the power equation in the Asia-Pacific. Paul Dibb observes that China's influence will

⁸ Z. Brzezinski, "The Grand Chessboard". Pg 209-210.

⁹ H. Kissinger, "Diplomacy". Pg 805.

grow over the next decade or two as its economic strength develops. China is not a status quo power: it seeks a greater role for itself in world affairs and it does not fully accept the legitimacy of the present international order.¹⁰

It should not be overlooked, however, that China has some problems that might make its future uncertain. The most serious problems arise from the transition of its political and economic system. In this, the possibility of economic failure might lead China to adopt a more assertive and hostile foreign policy. Because of this, some scholars argue that China can only become a regional, not a global, dominant power in the future.

Japan is now undergoing a period of serious structural crisis. However, the Japanese economy has enormous potential, and it is unlikely that it will see the turbulence that occurred in the 1970s. Nevertheless, Japan will need a longer time to revive its economy and to undertake necessary large-scale reforms.

Russia currently faces many difficulties and has few prospects for improvement in the next few years. However, Russia is a large country situated in both Europe and Asia. Its territory has substantial natural resources, and its economy has great potential. Russia also retains a very large nuclear arsenal and extensive

¹⁰ P. Dibb, "Toward a New Balance of Power in Asia". Pg 26.

conventional military forces from the former Soviet Union. If its economic transformation succeeds, Russia will regain its Great Power status.

India currently exerts its influence only in South Asia. India's GDP is the sixth largest in the world in terms of purchasing power parity, and its economic reforms promise a much more successful economy in the long run which, unlike China's, is based on an established judicial and financial system. In May 1998, India carried out nuclear tests, joining the Great Powers' nuclear club. It will unquestionably remain the most powerful South Asian state in the long run.

In brief, the trends of change in the power equation in Asia-Pacific in the coming decades are: the United States maintains supremacy as the single superpower, and China strives to develop into one of the leading Great Powers with the capacity to challenge the supremacy of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. These two Great Powers are situated at a higher level than the others. Behind them, Japan and Russia also have important voices in regional affairs, while India will emerge as a regional power.

3. Rivalry for Sphere of Influence among Great Powers

The United States continues to be the predominant power that wants to keep the status quo in Asia. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States is

the remaining superpower, and its primary strategic objective is to prevent the rise of hostile powers that could dominate Asia and alter the power equation in the region.

However, the United States today must adapt to a very different reality in the relationship among Great Powers. In the past, China was once allied with the Soviet Union against the United States, only to later align itself with the United States against the Soviet Union. But China has now become the No.1 contender of the United States in the Asia-Pacific. Dobb goes further and identifies that China is the one power with the potential to contend with the United States for leadership in the twenty-first century.¹¹

Japan's growing desire to reduce its dependence on the United States and play a greater political role in regional issues has complicated its relationship with the United States. In fact, it has become an increasingly fierce economic competitor.

Russia has also readjusted its strategy, displaying a "more independent" relationship with the United States, and has dramatically improved its relations with China and Japan.

Under these circumstances, the United States advocates a policy of carrying out a mixture of containment and collaboration with these powers. The US policy on

both promoting cooperation and bringing pressure to contain China is the most obvious. The continued deployment of 100,000 US military troops in the Asia-Pacific region (the same level of deployment as in Europe) as well as the intensification of security ties with Japan are targeted in this regard.

China's strength is expected to grow further within a few decades, in line with its economic modernization. Its central objective is to strive to become a superpower. China's relationship with the United States remains a primary concern, as China badly needs capital and technologies for economic development and the achievement of great power status in the twenty-first century.¹² In the eyes of the Chinese, the United States is considered both an important partner as well as a tough contender, especially in Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asia.

At this point, China's first priority is devoted to cooperation with the United States. Coupled with the above requirements, China is also making rapid strides to improve its relations with Russia, building up a "strategic partnership" aimed at taking countervailing measures to its relations with the United States. With regard to Japan, China seeks ways to pursue a policy of both containment and cooperation, in particular, grasping at opportunities to attract Japanese capital and technology.

¹¹ P. Dibb, "Towards a New Balance of Power in Asia". Pg 27.

¹² The US consumer goods market has been a major contributor to Chinese modernization. In 1977, the US was China's largest export market, purchasing over 18% of Chinese exports. The United States is China's third largest foreign investor. It provided 7% of FDI in China from 1979

In the next few years, Japan must concentrate its efforts on solving its domestic socioeconomic crisis. Japan has a long-term interest in developing into a political power commensurate with its economic might, first and foremost in Asia-Pacific. Recognizing new regional and global developments, Japan has recently placed emphasis on pursuing a strategy on “turning back to Asia” with a view to scrambling for, or at least consolidating, its role in Asia and having a more balanced position in the US-China-Japan-Russia strategic quadrangle.

Chalmers Johnson is of the view that Japan is moving towards a disengagement from the United States, and is at least seriously considering orienting its foreign policy “around East Asia and the United Nations.”¹³ To this end, Japan on the one hand continues to enhance closer bilateral relations with the United States, but on more equal basis. On the other hand, it is expanding its economic-political engagement with China in order to both exploit the vast market and constrict China’s influence.¹⁴ It also attaches importance to making necessary “arrangements” with Russia, which is seen as the weakest edge of Japan’s relations with Great Powers. Japan also promotes its traditional cooperation with Southeast Asian states (ASEAN).

to 1995. In 1996, total US FDI in China was \$2.9 billion, an increase of 36% over 1995.

¹³ Chalmers Johnson, “The End of Japanese-American Alliance”. Pg 14.

Russia's objective is to restore the superpower status that it enjoyed under the Soviet Union. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has emphasized the importance of maintaining constructive relations with China, Japan, and other states in the region. Russia is intensifying its efforts to make a rapprochement with China, establishing the "strategic partnership towards the twenty-first century." At the same time, Russia is markedly improving its relations with Japan, which has strong economic potential and direct impact on Russia's security. If the territorial disputes are resolved, the Russia-Japan relationship could move even closer, especially in the economic-commercial areas. In addition, Russia continues its traditional ties and maintains political, economic and military cooperation with India.

India's long-term goal is to overcome the economic and political constraints that have limited its influence outside South Asia and to become a qualified regional power. In order to cope with the danger of increased Chinese presence in the region, including the Indian Ocean, India is developing nuclear weapons capable of deterring China and enhancing its military cooperation with Russia (though not as the same level as with the Soviet Union). From trade-investment and strategic perspectives, an improved and stable relationship with the United States is inevitably most beneficial for India.

¹⁴ Trade between Japan and China has grown from \$ 17 billion in 1990 to over \$ 40 billion in 1997 (15% annual increase). And Japanese investment committed in China was over \$ 6 billion by 1997.

4. Prospects for a New Balance of Power

During the Cold War, peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific were closely connected and determined by either tension or détente between the Soviet Union and the United States, and by the readjustments in strategic triangular relationships among the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Nevertheless, unlike in Europe, a distinct polarization had taken place in the region by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, when China split from the Soviet Union and antagonized it (e.g., the Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969). The balance of power game played by the United States, the Soviet Union, and China began from that time, though China remained relatively weak compared with the other two sides of the triangle.

Since the end of the Cold War, Asia-Pacific has experienced profound changes that have strongly affected the strategic power equation as well as the gathering of forces among regional states. The evolvement of the correlation of forces and the Great Powers' rivalries constitute major factors shaping the balance of power and institutions in the region's international relations system. The key point here is that for the first time in centuries, *the prospect for peace and stability in the region will depend more on Asian countries than on external powers.*

What direction will the new balance of power tend to follow in the next few years?

As Kissinger observes, the relations of the principal Asian nations to each other

bear most of the attributes of the European balance of power system in the nineteenth century. Any significant increase in strength by one of them is almost certain to evoke an offsetting maneuver by the others.¹⁵ Calder takes a similar view that the balance of power being formed in Asia-Pacific is almost in the same shape of Europe from the middle of seventeenth century up to World War II.¹⁶

Dibb describes how the former two-power balance is now being replaced by a five-power balance that has different characteristics:

- a) *The actors no longer need to be equal in power, like the Soviet Union and the United States were before.*
- b) *The actors no longer need to be equal in military power, including strategic nuclear deterrents like nuclear missiles.*
- c) *The bilateral relationships among five great powers need not be equal to one another.*
- d) *The actors' own spheres of influence are not completely divided as they were in the two-power balance.*
- e) *The rule of the game is not necessarily that of a zero-sum game.*
- f) *There will be no new alliances, but only alignments on specific policy issues (e.g., arms control, environment, trade, human rights).*

¹⁵ H. Kissinger, "Diplomacy". Pg 826.

¹⁶ K. Calder, "Asia's Deadly Triangle". Pg 126.

g) *The equilibrium to be achieved will be an unstable one because the Great Powers' interests, the alignments among themselves and their alignments with the middle and small countries are in a state of flux.*¹⁷

In sum, the five-power balance is a structural equilibrium in which no rank is provided, military strength is unequal, and the spheres of influence are intertwined. This will lead to setting up an open system providing information on steps taken by opponents in the strategic chessboard and responses to any danger of upsetting the equilibrium. In other words, this is a system of coordination on checks and balances among states.

In such a situation, *the middle and small countries are able to further strengthen their positions and to have more choices and bargaining counters in the balance of power game.*

¹⁷ P. Dibb, "Towards a New Balance of Power". Pg 118.

PART II

THE US-CHINA RELATIONSHIP ITS EFFECTS ON THE POWER EQUATION IN ASIA-PACIFIC

I/ Decisive Factors in US-China Relations

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949) until the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), US-China relations have had ups and downs closely linked to profound changes occurring in the world, in the relationship among Great Powers, and in the internal affairs of respective countries. Many historians and international relations researchers share identical views on the *three major factors governing US-China relations over the last five decades, i.e. strategic, ideological, and domestic factors.*

1. Strategic Factors

China: The People's Republic of China came into being during the existence of the US-Soviet "bipolar" world. In the Great Powers' equation, China was a weaker state in comparison to the United States and the Soviet Union; economically it was even weaker than Japan and Western Europe. Despite this, China still enjoyed a degree of international influence. If China were to align with either side, the power equation would inevitably change.

By recognizing its geostrategic advantages and disadvantages, China constantly gave top priority to balancing strategies vis-a-vis the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the “bipolar” era. To realize its strategic goal, China engaged once in alignment with the Soviet Union against the United States and once in “strategic coordination” with the United States against the Soviet Union. It then maintained “well-balanced” relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union. According to Kissinger, what China seeks from the United States is a strategic relationship to balance neighbors it considers to be both powerful and covetous.¹⁸

The United States: The United States has essential interests in Asia, though it is neither an Asian state nor a state bordering China. However, the United States can not protect these interests without “coordination” or “participation” from China. China is a vast land and the most populous nation in the world, situated in the center of the Asian mainland. Furthermore, it has the capability of generating enormous challenges for the United States and other Great Powers. Ross holds that in an emerging multipolar environment, the United States may well find China a useful partner in maintaining a regional balance of power or in deterring regional conflict.¹⁹

¹⁸ H. Kissinger, “Diplomacy”. Pg 831.

¹⁹ R. Ross, “After the Cold War”. Pg 32.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, China as a rising power has increasingly kept a high profile in US strategy. This is based on two perceptions: China is both a potential adversary (because, except for China, no other power in Asia is expected to challenge the superpower supremacy of the United States), and an important partner in solving regional and global issues. In 1943, Roosevelt envisioned China as one of the world's "four policemen" and thought that it would show the greatest relative increase in stature among the Great Powers.²⁰ At the same time, the United States has been most important to China's political stability and economic modernization, for with the exception of the US, none of the other powers, including Japan, Russia and India, can pose a direct threat to its security and development.

2. Ideological Factors

The history of US-China relations has shown that the ideological differences between the United States and China over issues of political regimes, structural social organizations, cultural traditions, religions, and perceptions of democracy and human rights have continued as factors influencing foreign policy-making processes and ways of handling bilateral and multilateral relations. As Harding argues, many Chinese Communist leaders had a lifelong aversion to capitalism and imperialism and saw the United States as the principal embodiment of both evils in

²⁰ H. Kissinger, "Diplomacy". Pg 829.

the post-war world. Chinese conservatives see the growing American economy and cultural presence in China as a dangerous intervention in its internal affairs and are worried that the United States is again trying to damage China's international image. Conversely, many Americans considered any variety of communism repugnant and regarded Chinese communism as even more brutal than its Soviet counterpart.²¹

However, *ideological differences are not* the fundamentals that determine the nature of US-China relations. In fact, this relationship has seen wide fluctuations of tension and détente since 1972, and the overall trend is moving towards the easing of strained relations and the setting up of a “strategic partnership.” During the last fifty years, although both the United States and China have on several occasions altered their strategies, China's consistent national interest has been to make itself into a Great Power having a worthy stature in international relations. On the other hand, the objective of the United States in this regard has been to contain China from rising into a powerful state that will change the power equation in the region.

²¹ H. Harding, “A Fragile Relationship”. Pg 18.

3. Domestic Factors

For many decades,²² all markedly important events occurring in the political-social lives of the two countries have contributed considerably to the fluctuations of US-China relations. The years 1989-1996 were marked by continuous frictions in the bilateral relations between the two countries, as both countries internally experienced many conflicting decision-making debates .

According to Harding, there were two rounds of serious debates about the national priorities and policies vis-a-vis China in the United States in the first half of 1990s with two tendencies. One emphasized the pursuit of containment policy, while the other emphasized “comprehensive engagement.”²³

These two tendencies struggled against one another, and as a result, the China policy carried out by the Clinton administration in the first term was viewed as lacking clarity. As Steve Teles and Robert Sutter argue in their book *After the Cold War*, US policy towards China is buffeted by the pressures of domestic politics,

²² The relationship between China and the United States has evolved through four phases since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The first phase, from 1949 to 1969, was marked by hostility. The second phase, from 1969 to the early 1980s, was a marriage of convenience for strategic purposes. The third phase, from the mid-1980s to 1989, saw enthusiastic American cooperation in China's modernization and reform. The fourth phase, beginning around the time of the Tiananmen crisis, has brought back mutual suspicion but not disruption of relations. H. Harding, “A Fragile Relationship”. Pg 297-300.

²³ H. Harding, “A Fragile Relationship, the US and China since 1972”. Pg 260-275.

and there are now greater opportunities for domestic politics to interfere in policy-making in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Concurrently, heated internal debate on the policy vis-a-vis the United States was also taking place in China between “conservative” and “radical” factions within the civilian and military branches. The conservatives were concerned about the US “containment” policy, while the radicals advocated overcoming difficulties and avoiding confrontation with the United States in order to create favorable international conditions for China’s entry into the twenty-first century.

The political, economic and social turbulence, especially the profound changes produced by economic reforms in China that culminated in the Tiananmen Square incident (June 1989), pushed US-China relations into a disruptive period. More obstacles for the US-China relationship were created by congressional lobbyists, the MFN debates, nuclear nonproliferation groups, and activities taken by interest groups such as those concerned with human rights.

II/ Strategic Similarities and Differences between the US and China

1. US-China Strategic Similarities

In the next ten to twenty years, both the United States and China should give top priority to economic growth, market expansion, and scientific-technological invention, especially in high-tech and military industries in order to improve their national strength. Proceeding from these identical strategies, the two countries need to maintain peace and stability, build up long-term cooperative relations, and refrain from provoking direct military conflicts that could jeopardize the security and economic development of either country.

The United States and China need to cooperate with one another to prevent potential flash-points from causing major turbulence in the region or in the world, and to deal with global issues such as arms control, environment, narcotics, population, energy and food production and distribution.

Furthermore, the United States and China need to share the common ground by using the Great Powers' mechanism in international organizations and multilateral forums to control the world situation, particularly the P5 (permanent representatives) in the UN Security Council and the "Nuclear Powers" Club.

2. US-China Strategic Differences

The United States seeks to maintain the world order it wants, while China opposes US supremacy and wants to establish a multipolar order. Over the last several decades, the prevention of any newly emerging superpower that could conceivably challenge the position of the US unique has been an unswerving objective of the United States in the Asia-Pacific.

This objective, however, runs counter to China's goal. This is the fundamental contradiction between the United States and China, and it will dictate the direction of all US-China relations in the coming decades.

The United States and China are not only two Great Powers but are also two large economies in the world. Their relations are not only closely interlinked, but are also filled with potential elements that may lead to considerable conflict over the issues of national interests, economic institutions, and levels of development.

For instance, according to US statistics, the United States had a \$49.7 billion trade deficit with China in 1997, second only to the US trade deficit with Japan. Moreover, China's 1996 exports to the United States increased by 21.4% over the

previous year and will likely continue to grow at a rapid pace.²⁴ Some US Congress agencies have indicated that in the near future China could easily replace Japan as the country with the largest trade surplus with the United States. These differences tend to exacerbate problems related to Chinese protectionism, textiles, trade deficits, infringement of intellectual property rights (American manufacturers lose \$2 billion per year from IPR piracy in China) and conditions for Chinese membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Taiwan also continues to be a sensitive issue in the US-China relationship. How to tackle the Taiwan issue? What will the “Taiwanese regime” be? After the handing-over of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999, China’s next step is to reunite Taiwan leaving open the possibility of using force if Taiwan unilaterally declares independence. China’s formula is “One China, Two Political Systems”. However, the Taiwanese voters elected President Chen Shui-bian, a pro-independence leader of the Democratic Progress Party, in the March 2000 Elections creates a situation fraught with danger which risks a clash between the United States and China.

For these reasons, Taiwan remains a hurdle that can easily flare up in US-China relations. Harry Harding also shares the view that many uncertainties surround the

²⁴ US Trade Representative, 1998 Foreign Trade Barriers Report.

issue of Taiwan, which remains of critical importance in determining the future of Sino-American relations.²⁵

These two East and West cultures and civilizations greatly differ from each other. With its economic, scientific-technological and military advantages, the United States has achieved tremendous expansion of both “soft power” and its superpower stature. China on the other hand, as one of the earliest civilization, is very sensitive to the influence of “external cultures” and acts to protect its national cultural traditions. In another dimension, China also seeks to expand its own cultural clout by different ways and means, especially through the well-organized ethnic Chinese networks all over the world.

III/ Prospects for US-China Relations

The future of US-China relations is difficult to predict, as all the important conditions are in a state of flux. Nevertheless, various assessments have been made on trends of its development. The realists generally offer a “pessimistic” view about the future of cooperation with China, as they believe that it will rise to change the existing power equation and challenge the US world leadership status. Their view rests on the assumption that US conflicts with China in the future are inevitable.

²⁵ H. Harding, “A fragile Relationship”. Pg 302.

The liberal thinkers see the prospects for US-China cooperation as “optimistic.” Their argument is that all economies, including those of the United States and China, are closely intertwined in an increasingly globalized world, and that regional and global multilateral institutions are becoming more important. Therefore, many global issues in international relations in the post-Cold War era will be solved not only by the United States, but with China and the other Great Powers. Engaging and binding China to common rules will therefore help limit China’s actions from harming the interests of the United States and other countries.

As analyzed above, the US-China relationship is a complicated one governed by various factors, but it clearly shows that a balance of power strategy is the most decisive factor affecting the future development of their relationship. In fifteen or twenty years to come, there may be three following scenarios:

1. Confrontation

China becomes a more powerful state. The clashes between the United States and China intensify. The “contain China” calculations in the US policy escalate. This outcome leads to confrontation between the two countries and the world enters into the “US-China Cold War” era.

Neither the United States nor China is desirous of this scenario in the foreseeable future, as the two countries will be forced into a new arms race, jeopardizing the priority given to economic development and protection of Great Power status. Kissinger argues that a policy of confrontation with China risks America's isolation in Asia. No Asian country would want to or could afford to be supportive of America, and in such circumstances the vast majority of Asian nations would dissociate themselves from America.²⁶

In addition, what has happened in the relations between the two countries in the "post-Tiananmen" period indicates that confrontation and tension are not the optimum, since both sides have to pay a price for their losses (though China certainly has to pay more). Due to their strategic differences, however, some potential elements may lead to this scenario in the future.

In their book *The Coming Conflict with China*, Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro assert that in spite of common interests in a number of issues, the United States and China will eventually be adversaries, because a stronger China will upset the power equilibrium in Asia-Pacific and place US vital interests in jeopardy. Robert Scalapino believes that there is a real prospect of a strongly nationalist China with ample military power emerging within a decade or so.²⁷ Furthermore, according to

²⁶ H. Kissinger, "Diplomacy". Pg 830.

²⁷ R. Scalapino, "China's Role in Southeast Asia". Pg 66.

Brzezinski, the United States is seen as the principal obstacle in China's quest not only to become globally preeminent, but even just regionally predominant. Is a collision between the United States and China therefore, inevitable?²⁸

2. Harmony

China becomes stronger, but the two countries share more common interests in dealing with differences and coordinating international political-economic activities. US-China relations enter into a framework of long-term stable cooperation and avoidance of direct military confrontation.

With this scenario, the United States and China establish an international order in which they both play dominant roles. The solutions to many current transnational issues require collective and cooperation from both countries. These include hot points, crises, regional territorial disputes, and other global issues such as nuclear nonproliferation, the environment, food security, terrorism and narcotics.

However, the sustainability of this scenario is very low, as the two countries widely differ in their strategic interests and sociopolitical systems and the volatility of China's internal affairs is unpredictable. Although a "strategic partnership" is

²⁸ Z. Brzezinski, "The Grand Chessboard". Pg 152.

emphasized, China can not take even the role of the former Soviet Union, and US-China relations cannot determine the other Great Powers' relationships.

3. Combination

The United States and China are not likely to face a compelling need for a geostrategic alliance, nor can they easily overcome their ideological and cultural differences. In fact, the two countries pursue varied strategic policies, taking advantage of bilateral ties to counterbalance their relationships with other Great Powers. *This relationship undoubtedly fluctuates between strain and relaxation, cooperation and confrontation, but does not converge onto a destructive collision course.*

Based on the nature of US-China relations, as well as the trends of balance of power shaped in the region, it is anticipated that *this third scenario is the most likely to come about. Alternately, the third and the second scenarios simultaneously take place on specific issues at specific times. The first scenario is unlike to be seen.*

IV/ Effects of US-China Relations on the Power Equation in Asia-Pacific

1. Effects on other Great Powers' Status

In case of the first scenario: The United States, China, and the other Great Powers do not want to see this scenario occur, as they all will be placed in a very difficult situation in dealing with one another. However, if this case should come about, *the process of rallying forces will be followed by two blocks, with one block comprised of the United States and its allies, the other block comprised of China and its allies, and with the rest in between the two sides.* Specifically:

- Polarization is in place, with the United States and Japan on the one side (based on US-Japan Security Pact), and China and Russia on the other.
- China seeks alliances with other Asian nations (based on cultural and religious similarities), which may lead to a loose coalition between China and India and Japan (the US-Japan Security Pact to be nullified by China) to limit US influence in the region.

When China becomes more powerful and more aggressive, other Great Powers may ally with the United States to curb China's ambitions.

In case of the second scenario: Regarding options taken in dealing with the United States and China, two hypotheses can be put forward:

- Russia, Japan, and India improve their relations with both the United States and China, thus making *a concert of power*. Coordination among Great Powers is formulated in solving regional and international issues in which the United States and China play leading roles.
- After the establishment of strategic partnerships, the United States and China attach less importance to their relations with other Great Powers or even compromise on each others' interests. The consequent gradual decline of the role played by Japan, Russia, and India in the strategies of the United States and China therefore compel them to regroup to struggle for their balanced interests.

In case of the third scenario: As the US-China relationship is largely driven by a mixture of cooperation and competition, both countries must attach greater importance to broadening their relations with external forces so that other countries will have more policy choices that conform to their own interests.

2. Effects on Middle and Small Powers' Status

The Middle and Small Powers often have less opportunity to act rather than be acted upon by the adjustments of Great Powers' strategies in complicated international relations. In Asia, the relations of neighboring countries with China

have frequently been in a state of flux, depending on China's strength or weakness and the status of its relations with other Great Powers.

In the book *The Game Nations Play*, John Spanier refers to three major behaviors of Middle and Small Powers in dealing with Great Powers:

- To ally or align with one single Great Power and rely on security, political, and economic protections from that Power.
- To participate in the games, but keep balanced relations with all Great Powers.
- To stay out of the games and keep neutral like Finland and Switzerland (the mode called "Finlandization").

Because of the widely diversified interests of all countries, there is a variety of behaviors. In view of many fundamental changes in the world today (e.g., the existence of multipower balance, growing globalization, highly interdependent conditions), *alignment is likely to be seen instead of the classical alliance, and no nation is likely to stay outside or be "neutral."*

Dibb observes that in these uncertain circumstances, Middle Powers in the region are likely to view their own interests as best served by preserving an equilibrium among Great Powers. He cites Amitav Acharya, who notes that the ASEAN states' preferred approach to regional order seems to lie in the maintenance of a regional

balance of power. In the ASEAN states' view, the old-fashioned balance of power mechanisms remain critical to the prospects for regional order in the post-Cold War era. The Middle Powers are likely to feel threatened by the domination of the Asia-Pacific region by any one Great Power, and to regard some measures of checks and balances on each by the other as the condition of their own security. According to Dobb, *all the Middle and Small Powers in the region seek ways to avoid tendencies of either a keen rivalry or confrontation or a concert of Great Powers*, because these scenarios leave them less space for maneuver.²⁹

It is anticipated therefore that whatever US-China relations develop, *Middle and Small Powers naturally opt to participate in the balance of power game, maintaining balanced relations with the Great Powers, especially with the United States and China on the one hand, and regrouping themselves to raise counterweights in dealing with those Great Powers on the other.*

²⁹ P. Dobb, "Towards a New Balance of Power in Asia". Pg 57.

PART III

EFFECTS OF US-CHINA RELATIONS ON THE POSTURE OF ASEAN COUNTRIES

I/ Position of ASEAN on the Regional Chessboard and Strategies of the United States and China

1. Position of ASEAN on the Strategic Chessboard in the Asia-Pacific

ASEAN is an association comprised of all ten Southeast Asian nations that are not regarded as powerful states having dominant influence on developments in Asia-Pacific or in the world as a whole.³⁰ However, ASEAN captures an important position in Great Powers' strategies as *ASEAN states are ranked Middle Powers (some of them have become newly industrialized countries) and are geographically situated in sensitive areas in the region.* Brzezinski argues that these Middle Powers are “geopolitical pivots” that have very significant political and cultural consequences for more active neighboring geostrategic players.³¹

Moreover, the landscape in Southeast Asia today is strikingly different from that of the Cold War period. For the first time since 1945, Southeast Asia is a relatively peaceful and stable region, where a state of confrontation in the relationships

³⁰ ASEAN has expanded from six to ten countries with the admission of Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.

³¹ Z. Brzezinski, “The Grand Chessboard”. Pg 41.

among Great Powers has been totally replaced by that of dialogue and cooperation. All ASEAN states are now actively involved in a regional integration process for the benefit of their own development, and the association has emerged as a noticeable political and economic center in Asia-Pacific.

In spite of new challenges posed by ASEAN's expansion, its remarkable achievements recorded in all fields over the past three decades are undeniable, and up to now ASEAN has basically preserved its solidarity, cohesion, regional self-reliance and self-resistance identities. ASEAN is also a unique regional organization in a developing world, which successfully attracts all major Centers and Great Powers to engage in regional political, security, economic forums.

For that reason, ASEAN asserts itself as an indispensable element in the establishment of a new balance of power and regional order in Asia-Pacific in the post-Cold War era.

Some are of the view that ASEAN's position in the regional strategic chessboard is no longer considered as important as before, when "certain arrangements" were directly made by Great Powers. Even so, it is obvious that the international game today is entirely changing. If all chessmen had to entrust their fates to one general on the board during the Cold War, they are now in mixed positions. Every chessman, even a pawn, has its own soul, fate, and moves on the board, though

they are linked by the common destiny of the game. In this context and with its growing international posture, ASEAN's role will be increasingly enhanced.

2. Position of ASEAN in the US Asia-Pacific Strategy

Stemming from the strategic requirements of the United States as well as ASEAN's political role and economic dynamism, ASEAN constitutes a considerable element in the US policy vis-a-vis Asia-Pacific, particularly in the context of the higher priority given to this region and China's rise as a new power. Furthermore, this region is also capturing increased attention from other Great Powers.

Given these considerations, the United States wants to see a continued prosperous and American-influenced Southeast Asia serving the political and economic interests of the United States in the region and becoming a counterweight to China and Japan so as not allow these countries to control the region and modify the balance of power. Economically, ASEAN is viewed as an attractive potential market with enormous trade and investment opportunities (the region consists of 500 million people and a total GDP of \$600-1000 billion), and the United States has great interest in promoting economic ties with ASEAN.

Accordingly, the United States has reaffirmed its continued commitment to the region, applauding ASEAN's position economically and politically, and has

encouraged ASEAN to be a driving force in building up regional security mechanisms. Recently, the United States has devoted further attention in assisting those ASEAN countries affected by economic crises in overcoming difficulties, thus preventing the danger of spreading regional disturbances, and limiting the negative impacts on the US economy.

3. Position of ASEAN in China's Asia-Pacific Strategy

China's consistent strategic objective is to become a powerful political, economic and military state in the world, first and foremost in Asia-Pacific. To realize this goal, China on the one hand seeks to develop cooperative relations with all countries, especially the United States and other Great Powers, just as it takes advantage of other countries' constraints and difficulties to enhance its own role in the region. Southeast Asia is perceived as China's traditional "backyard" and ASEAN is an important competing object that China needs to win over in order to strengthen its position and create a counterbalance to the other Great Powers in Asia-Pacific.

Over the last few years, China's ties with the Southeast Asian states have been continuously fostered and developed into full-fledged partnership, while China's relations with other Great Powers have been complicated. Remarkably, China has undertaken a series of activities aimed at consolidating and building up a

framework of relations with regional and neighboring countries by working out comprehensive cooperation programs in political, economic, security, military, cultural fields for the twenty-first century, marking a new milestone in the China-ASEAN relationship.

However, China has reaffirmed on several occasions since 1991 its claim to sovereignty of the Spratly Islands, and has projected military forces there (adoption of state law on territorial waters in 1992; proclamations of basic lines in 1996; economic special exclusive zones and continental shelves with an area of over 3.5 million square kilometers; construction of structures in Mischief Reef; a ban on fishing in the Spratly Islands). Some scholars have argued that China has taken advantage of US preoccupation with European affairs to vigorously expand its own role in Asia and Southeast Asia.

II/ Opportunities and Challenges for ASEAN

ASEAN's opportunities and challenges originate from its position on the regional strategic chessboard.

1. Favorable Conditions and Opportunities for ASEAN

From a balance of power perspective, ASEAN states currently enjoy fundamentally favorable conditions for the implementation of their foreign policies. With the end of the Cold War, peace and development have prevailed in the international relations in the region. Great Powers, namely the United States, China, Japan, Russia and India, have been willing to compromise and seek coordination, creating a relatively balanced and stable framework of their relations. All these factors have contributed to an ongoing favorable environment. Moreover, the Great Powers' possession of nuclear weapons constitutes, to some extent, a deterrent balance in the region.

In the next fifteen to twenty years, China still needs to maintain stable international relations, especially with Great Powers and its neighbors, to realize its four modernizations (i.e., agriculture, industry, culture and military). The political and economic advances that ASEAN has made over the last thirty years, as well as the

potential for its cooperation and development in the years ahead, and its enhanced international prestige, have helped lay solid foundations for ASEAN's future.

At present, ASEAN is not tied to any Great Power military alliance and can no longer be dragged into any balance of power game as in the Cold War. *Thus, ASEAN has considerable choices and scope to maneuver in the regional game.*

2. Difficulties and Challenges for ASEAN

The first challenge is ASEAN's inescapable "security dilemma." The security of ASEAN is closely linked to that of the Asia-Pacific region and to the global policy considerations of the Great Powers. As a consequence of its geography and historical background, any single gesture made by ASEAN in its relations with the United States or other Great Powers is understandably very "sensitive" to China, just as any further improvement in ASEAN's relations with China is understandably very "sensitive" to the United States, Japan and other Great Powers.

Faced with unceasing fluctuations of the array of forces among Great Powers and unpredictable complexities while the Asia-Pacific region still lacks region-wide comprehensive cooperation and security mechanisms to regulate potential rivalries, how to build a more balanced relations with Great Powers and to limit their

complication are always embarrassing factors that weigh heavily on ASEAN's shoulders in the conduct of international relations.

The second challenge is ASEAN's ability to "manage" sources of conflict with Great Powers. While other regions were able to develop peacefully after World War II, the ASEAN states had to face the sufferings and consequences of continued wars and conflicts. Besides that, the sources of conflict that existed in the region remain unsolved, as illustrated by various forms of territorial and natural resource disputes, and differences on levels of economic, historical, cultural and religious development.

The crucial challenge for ASEAN therefore lies in its ability to manage these sources of conflict without the possibility of provocation from Great Powers, and to restrain the conjuncture of being affected, controlled, or even imposed upon with a "rule of the game" by Great Powers.

The third challenge is the question of the Indochinese peninsula, which is tacitly understood as the "sensitive" zone of Southeast Asia. For the Southeast Asian region, Indochina is of great geostrategic importance and often draws the Great Powers' special attention. This fact is demonstrated by those complexities of Great Powers' deep involvement throughout the Cold War period.

The full expansion of ASEAN encompassing all Southeast Asia nations has created not only fundamental advantages (such as enhanced geopolitical weight and bargaining position vis-a-vis Great Powers, and sustained regional stability) but also new difficulties, as ASEAN becomes more diversified in terms of its respective country's developmental levels, their relationships with Great Powers, and the ongoing internal uncertainties in some countries.

This is a difficult math for both the Southeast Asian mainlanders and islanders in seeking a policy on balance of power among Great Powers for the common sake of the association.

III/ The Making of Strategic Decisions by ASEAN in a New Chess Game

The policy options taken by ASEAN originate from its strategic interests and position in the interactions with other players, especially the United States and China.

1. *The desirable as well as the basic and long-term goal of ASEAN* is to see an Asia-Pacific region of peace, stability, and harmonious settlement of disputes and differences, where international laws and cooperation for mutual prosperity abide.

2. In a period of transition from the old regional order to a new one with many uncertainties, *the optimal interests of Middle Powers like ASEAN states are guaranteed by a relative equilibrium among Great Powers*. History has shown that conflicts or confrontations among Great Powers with the compelling involvement of other countries are a catastrophe for the region. Furthermore, a concert of Great Powers is also viewed as a circumstance unfavorable for Middle and Small Powers. As Dibb suggests, a situation of “moderate rivalry” among Great Powers provides the best conditions for the Middle Powers.³²

3. *The pursuit of balance of power strategy among Great Powers in general and between the United States and China in particular* will generate more flexibility for ASEAN in carrying out its foreign policy. This will allow it to avoid dependence on any single Great Power, as well as being stranded in the power struggles among Great Powers. This will enable ASEAN to maximize benefits by both taking “cooperation opportunities” with Great Powers and exploiting the Great Powers’ differences.

4. *The building up of multilateral institutions* aimed at engaging all big and small states in working out codes of conduct in the region will help limit the “scope of negative responses” to be taken by Great Powers, especially those who have ambitions to regional or global hegemony. Dibb is convinced that it is only

³² P. Dibb, “Towards a New Balance of Power in Asia”. Pg 59.

through strengthened multilateral institutions that the small states of Asia will be able to face the twenty-first century with greater confidence and that Great Powers can be encouraged to work within a peaceful regional order.³³

The approach to region-wide “cooperative security” being pursued by ASEAN is part of these arrangements and in fact ASEAN has already been a considerable factor in the establishment of a new security order and balance of power in the region./.

³³ P. Dibb, “Towards a New Balance of Power in Asia”. Pg 69.

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