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**Charm Offensive amid the Tariff War:  
China's Diplomatic Engagements in Southeast Asia  
and the Strategic Echoes from the United States**

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## **I. Introduction: Xi Jinping's Visit to Southeast Asia and Research Background**

In April 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping embarked on his first overseas trip of the year, covering three Southeast Asian countries: Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> Against the backdrop of U.S. President Donald Trump announcing sweeping tariffs on most countries—Southeast Asian nations being among the hardest hit—Xi's visit has been widely interpreted as a move in China's "charm offensive", which refers to a strategic campaign of goodwill gestures, such as high-level visits, development aid, and rhetorical appeals, aimed at winning influence without overt coercion. Unlike previous multilateral summits accompanied by state visits, this trip showcased an unprecedented depth of bilateral engagement and regional prioritization. It marked China's attempt to consolidate its "Global South" base through regional diplomacy amid U.S.-China economic decoupling and the reshaping of the global order.

Although the United States and China agreed in May 2025 to temporarily reduce tariffs, lowering U.S. rates on Chinese goods from 145% to 30% and Chinese tariffs on U.S. goods from 125% to 10% for 90 days, many punitive measures remain in place, and the future trajectory of enforcement remains uncertain.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is still critical to assess China's long-term strategy, Southeast Asian responses, and evolving U.S. intentions, because these dynamics will continue to shape the region's institutional balance, strategic alignments, and normative order regardless of short-term trade fluctuations.

This paper draws on a diverse and credible mix of government documents, think tank reports, news articles, and expert interviews, each contributing distinct strengths. Government publications—such as those from the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), and Treasury—provide authoritative insights into official policy decisions and sanctions, serving as reliable primary evidence of U.S. actions. The inclusion of older

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<sup>1</sup> CNA. *Xi Jinping's Southeast Asian Tour: Strategic "Charm Offensive" Amid US Tariff War*. April 2025.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/east-asia/xi-jinping-sea-tour-malaysia-cambodia-vietnam-china-tariffs-5056911>.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Luck, *Understanding the Temporary De-Escalation of the U.S.-China Trade War*, commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), May 13, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-temporary-de-escalation-us-china-trade-war>.

government documents (e.g., from 2016 or 2019) helps contextualize dated material within ongoing strategic developments. To balance Western perspectives and enrich the analysis, this paper also incorporates primary sources from the Chinese government, including white papers, official press releases, and state media reports. These documents are essential for understanding China's own strategic self-presentation and diplomatic framing. While Western sources lack local reception or internal rationale, Chinese primary materials help illuminate Beijing's narratives and diplomatic intentions, particularly in the Global South.

Think tank analyses from institutions like Carnegie China, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) offer rigorous, policy-relevant frameworks and regional expertise, particularly valuable in assessing strategic competition and institutional dynamics. Yet, while timely, these sources may reflect the ideological orientation or policy priorities of their home institutions. News outlets such as *Reuters*, *Straits Times*, *CNA*, and *Phnom Penh Post* bring immediacy and local nuance, especially in capturing Southeast Asian perspectives, though they are often limited in depth and analytical rigor. Lastly, the expert interview with Sebastian Strangio adds interpretive depth, though it represents an individual viewpoint rather than institutional consensus. Collectively, these sources support a well-rounded analysis.

Future research could strengthen this foundation by incorporating additional perspectives. First, drawing more deeply on Chinese primary sources, such as official speeches, policy documents, and particularly white papers issued by the State Council, would enhance the analysis of how China frames its diplomatic strategies and intentions for international audiences. Second, more extensive use of Southeast Asian government statements and ASEAN communiqués would better capture regional agency, moving beyond media interpretations. Third, integrating Indo-Pacific perspectives from U.S. allies such as Japan or Australia could add depth to the assessment of American strategy as seen from within the broader regional architecture. These additions would enhance analytical balance and interpretive depth in evaluating the trilateral dynamic.

Building on this foundation, the paper proceeds to four core analytical sections:

**Chapter III** analyzes China's diplomatic strategies.

**Chapter IV** examines Southeast Asian nations' reactions and geopolitical calculations.

**Chapter V** explores the United States' assessments and prospective responses.

**Chapter VI** reflects on the evolving roles of China and the United States in the global order.

Ultimately, the paper seeks to answer: In the hybrid game of “tariff war and charm offensive,” how does China seek to recalibrate regional leadership through symbolic diplomacy and economic engagement? How do Southeast Asian countries interpret and navigate China's influence in light of their own strategic interests? How is the United States assessing and responding to these shifts through tools, partnerships, and recalibration? More broadly, what do these dynamics signal about the evolving roles of China and the United States in the global order, and what would be the future of Southeast Asia amid intensifying great-power competition?

## **II. Core Argument: Diplomatic Breakthrough and Geostrategic Counterbalance Under the Tariff War**

Against the backdrop of intensifying U.S.-China trade tensions, Xi Jinping's visit to three Southeast Asian nations is not merely a symbolic “charm offensive”, but a clear indication of China's recalibration of regional geopolitical leadership.

While the visit showcased China's emphasis on partnership, shared destiny, and economic cooperation, it is worth noting that this diplomatic engagement unfolds within a broader dual-track strategy—charm in diplomacy, firmness in security. This approach allows China to project soft power through aid and infrastructure initiatives while simultaneously asserting its maritime presence through grey zone activities in the South China Sea. The coexistence of these two tracks complicates regional perceptions and creates strategic ambiguity in China's posture.

Meanwhile, U.S. think tanks and policymakers generally agree that while Xi's visit does not pose a fundamental challenge to Washington's existing Indo-Pacific architecture, it does create a “pressure differential” in regional diplomacy, prompting the United States to accelerate the development of responsive mechanisms. However, U.S. stakeholders remain alert and critical of China's expanding military presence in the South China Sea, which they view as part of their effort to shift the regional balance of power.

It is important to analyze the United States' responses to China within the context of its broader diplomatic orientation, which combines conditional idealism with transactional bargaining. After the Cold War, the United States positioned itself as the principal architect of the global liberal order, championing open markets, multilateralism, and institutional governance. In practice, U.S. diplomacy has long oscillated between normative commitments and strategic self-interest. In recent years, foreign policy has increasingly taken on a selectively transactional logic: treating alliances as business partnerships when seeking economic or strategic returns, while invoking ideals such as democracy or human rights to discipline allies or justify pressure when alignment falters. The United States' diplomacy neither strictly adheres to a value-based doctrine, nor resorts to pure economic rationale—but selectively draws on ideals or incentives to suit its strategic objectives.

This paper's core argument is structured around three main points:

### 1. Xi Jinping's visit represents a proactive “diplomatic breakthrough” under tariff pressure from the United States

Faced with the Trump administration's punitive tariffs reaching as high as 145% on Chinese goods at that moment, Beijing understands that it is unlikely to achieve short-term policy breakthroughs in Western markets. In response, Xi launched an active diplomatic campaign centered on Malaysia (current ASEAN chair), Vietnam (a manufacturing hub with strong ties to the United States), and Cambodia (one of China's closest regional allies), aiming to solidify China's “regional circle of friends” and construct a partial alternative trade and political support zone to the Western market.

According to data from the IISS, 74% of the visiting heads of state to China in 2024 came from the Global South. This reflects a shift in Xi Jinping's diplomatic approach—from the traditional model of *personal diplomacy* through outbound visits, toward a strategy of *head-of-state diplomacy by invitation*, in which foreign leaders are invited to Beijing. Xi's recent Southeast Asia tour, however, signals a temporary reactivation of the older outbound model as a tactical extension of his overall engagement strategy.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Southeast Asian nations, while benefiting from Chinese investment and market access, mostly pursue “cautious balancing” or “strategic ambiguity” between the United States and China

As evidenced by Carnegie's multinational scholar survey and CNA's field interviews, most Southeast Asian countries welcomed Xi's visit while deliberately downplaying political tension. For instance:

- Malaysia publicly emphasized its stance of non-alignment just before Xi's arrival;
- Vietnam, despite territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, continued pushing forward military procurement talks with the United States;
- Cambodia, though heavily supported by Chinese capital and military aid, simultaneously permitted Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force to access Phnom Penh's port.<sup>4</sup>

These countries are leveraging China's visit to soften the economic impact of U.S. tariffs, but none have truly “tilted” toward Beijing. This indicates that while China offers material incentives, there remains a significant ceiling when it comes to trust and security alignment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, “China's Head-of-State and Defence Diplomacy,” *Charting China*, April 17, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/charting-china/2025/04/chinas-head-of-state-and-defence-diplomacy/>.

<sup>4</sup> Selina Ho et al., “A Second Trump Term: Will Southeast Asia Tilt Toward China?” *Carnegie China*, April 15, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/04/a-second-trump-term-will-southeast-asia-tilt-toward-china>.

<sup>5</sup> “Xi Jinping's Southeast Asian Tour: Strategic ‘Charm Offensive’ amid US Tariff War but Pitfalls Ahead,” *Channel News Asia*, April 15, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/east-asia/xi-jinping-sea-tour-malaysia-cambodia-vietnam-china-tariffs-5056911>.

3. U.S. think tanks and policymakers assess that China's actions are more symbolic than structurally transformative, but caution against the growing power of its "Global South narrative."

CSIS, in two of its recent reports, notes that although China has deeply penetrated the region, it lacks the institutional binding power that the United States possesses. Most countries continue to prefer U.S. military cooperation and economic interdependence.<sup>6</sup>

However, should Washington persist with a "punishment and neglect" approach toward ASEAN, it risks enabling Beijing to fill the trust vacuum through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative (GDI)—thus gaining a "narrative advantage" in the Global South.

Therefore, institutions like CSIS and Carnegie broadly recommend that the United States, while maintaining strategic pressure on China, must simultaneously scale up substantive investment, technology transfer, and soft power engagement in Southeast Asia to prevent ceding regional discourse space due to perceived value imbalances.<sup>7</sup>

### III. China's Diplomatic Strategies

Xi Jinping's recent tour of Southeast Asia is not an isolated diplomatic move, but rather a continuation and escalation of China's broader efforts to construct a "Global South narrative" and assert regional order leadership. The trip illustrated China's approach of "radiating global influence through neighboring diplomacy," as articulated in recent Central Neighborhood Work Conferences<sup>8</sup>. Through a dual-track strategy of "head-of-state diplomacy" and "defense

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory B. Poling and Charles Dunst, "Crossroads of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crossroads-competition-china-southeast-asia-and-pacific-islands>.

<sup>7</sup> "Why Did Xi Jinping Skip Indonesia on His Southeast Asia Visit? CSIS Explains," *Tempo*, April 12, 2025, <https://en.tempo.co/read/1997509/why-did-xi-jinping-skip-indonesia-on-his-southeast-asia-visit-csis-explains>.

<sup>8</sup> 中华人民共和国中央人民政府. "亲诚惠容行大道, 命运与共开新篇——习近平主席对越南、马来西亚、柬埔寨进行国事访问, 树立了中同东南亚国家关系史上新的里程碑(*Upholding Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit and Inclusiveness, Ushering in a New Chapter of Shared Destiny — President Xi Jinping's State Visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia Set a New Milestone in China–Southeast Asia Relations*)" Gov.cn, April 2025, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202504/content\\_7019965.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202504/content_7019965.htm).



diplomacy”, Beijing seeks to counter U.S.-led efforts to restructure global trade by shifting its regional focus and embedding its discourse in institutional frameworks. This strategy serves three key objectives:

### 1. Solidifying a Regional Core Through Head-of-State Diplomacy: Building an “Asian Narrative Center”

According to systematic analyses by IISS, since 2023 China has declared that “head-of-state diplomacy is the highest form of Chinese diplomacy.” The number of foreign heads of state meeting with Xi Jinping in Beijing rose dramatically, reaching 84 in 2024, with 74% from the Global South.<sup>9</sup>

Xi’s proactive visit to three Southeast Asian countries marks a shift from inviting leaders to Beijing (“inviting the guest into the room”) to “personally knocking on their doors.” In all three countries, Xi used personal diplomacy and symbolic gestures—such as flag displays, joint declarations, and coordinated media messaging—to present itself as Asia’s benevolent core.<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis on shared historical narratives and ideological solidarity, particularly with fellow socialist states like Vietnam and Cambodia, highlights China’s attempt to construct a pan-Asian political identity anchored in the notion of a “community of shared future.”<sup>11</sup> As CSIS analysts Gregory Poling and Charles Dunst observe, China’s use of “soft consensus-building” enables it to “bind elites into China’s worldview” without overt coercion.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, China’s diplomatic messaging during the trip was notably light on large-scale economic deals. Instead, the focus was on discursive concepts like “peaceful development,”

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<sup>9</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, “China’s Head-of-State and Defence Diplomacy,” *Charting China*, April 17, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/charting-china/2025/04/chinas-head-of-state-and-defence-diplomacy>.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory B. Poling and Charles Dunst, “Crossroads of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands,” *CSIS*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crossroads-competition-china-southeast-asia-and-pacific-islands>.

“anti-unilateralism,” and “Asian solidarity.”<sup>13</sup> This reflects a deliberate choice to foreground narrative dominance—China aims not only to participate in the region but to shape how the region talks about itself.

In contrast, the United States has frequently engaged in punitive bilateralism characterized by sanctions, tariff threats, or aid suspension in Southeast Asia. In Myanmar, Washington imposed sweeping sanctions on military leaders and suspended development aid following the 2021 coup, seeking to isolate the junta and force a democratic transition.<sup>14</sup> In Cambodia, the United States revoked trade preferences under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and sanctioned officials for human rights violations and growing military ties with China.<sup>15</sup> In Thailand, military aid and joint exercises were suspended after the 2006 and 2014 coups in accordance with U.S. law, despite Thailand’s strategic significance.<sup>16</sup> Under the Trump administration, Vietnam was labeled a “currency manipulator” and targeted with steel tariffs due to its trade surplus, prompting Hanoi to enter direct negotiations under threat of broader tariffs.<sup>17</sup> The Philippines, too, faced U.S. visa sanctions against officials involved in extrajudicial killings, and arms sales were at times threatened in response to human rights concerns.<sup>18</sup> These actions, while framed as value-driven or security-conscious, reflect a pattern of pressure-based engagement, compared to China’s more development-oriented diplomatic approach.

While U.S. diplomacy has often prioritized security and economic interests, it has also historically grounded its regional engagement in liberal norms such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. What distinguishes China’s approach is not just the invocation of values, but

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<sup>13</sup> “Xi Jinping’s Southeast Asian Tour: Strategic ‘Charm Offensive’ amid US Tariff War but Pitfalls Ahead,” *Channel News Asia*, April 15, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/east-asia/xi-jinping-sea-tour-malaysia-cambodia-vietnam-china-tariffs-5056911>.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Burmese Military Leaders,” February 11, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0024>.

<sup>15</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, “Cambodia’s Eligibility for GSP,” October 2019, [https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Cambodia\\_GSP\\_Review.pdf](https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Cambodia_GSP_Review.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-Thailand Relations*, updated March 4, 2016, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41308>.

<sup>17</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, “Vietnam Currency Section 301 Investigation,” January 15, 2021, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2021/january/ustr-concludes-section-301-investigation-vietnam%E2%80%99s-currency-valuation>.

<sup>18</sup> Reuters, “U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Philippine Officials over Senator’s Jailing,” December 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-sanctions-idUSKBN1YR0V9>.

its emphasis on symbolic, pan-Asian discursive frameworks that seek to redefine the normative order itself.

## 2. Expanding Security Peripheries Through Defense Diplomacy: Legitimizing Regional Presence

China's growing involvement in regional defense diplomacy serves to legitimize its security presence beyond mere economic ties. According to IISS, China held over 58 bilateral defense dialogues in 2024, with a majority focused on Asia and Africa.<sup>19</sup> These dialogues, often involving senior officials from countries like Myanmar, Nigeria, and South Africa, reinforce China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and present Beijing as a provider of public goods in the security realm.

Chinese defense diplomacy does not resemble traditional alliance-building; instead, it promotes a non-Western model of military relations. Agreements typically include equipment sales, joint training, and policy coordination that emphasize sovereignty, non-intervention, and collective development.<sup>20</sup> For many Global South countries, this model offers a politically acceptable alternative to U.S. security frameworks that often include democratic conditionalities or intrusive oversight.

At the same time, China's activities in the South China Sea exemplify its dual strategy of "defense diplomacy + grey-zone pressure." The recent supervision of the Philippines' resupply mission to the grounded Sierra Madre warship on Ren'ai Reef demonstrates how China enforces its territorial claims without escalating into direct conflict.<sup>21</sup> Through patrols, coast guard operations, and the organized use of maritime militias, Beijing maintains a posture of dominance while framing its actions as lawful and restrained.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, "China's Head-of-State and Defence Diplomacy," *Charting China*, April 17, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/charting-china/2025/04/chinas-head-of-state-and-defence-diplomacy>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "China Supervises Philippines' Resupply Mission to Warship," *China Daily*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202505/20/WS682c511aa310a04af22c0897.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "China's Grey Zone Coercion in the South China Sea," Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 2025.

As noted in testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, these grey-zone tactics are calibrated to “create facts on the ground” while staying below the threshold of military confrontation.<sup>23</sup> Combined with its official diplomacy, this approach allows China to steadily erode regional resistance and normalize its maritime presence.

### 3. Advancing China-Centered Multilateral Mechanisms: Creating Institutional “Anchors”

Beyond bilateral and security ties, China seeks to embed itself in the region through multilateral mechanisms that function as “institutional anchors.” The recent conclusion of negotiations for the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area Version 3.0 is a key example. This upgraded agreement expands into digital economy, green energy, and supply chain cooperation—areas where China holds significant technological and industrial advantages.<sup>24</sup>

According to official Chinese statements, the 3.0 agreement “marks a new phase of deep regional integration” and reflects shared resistance to “unilateralism and trade fragmentation.”<sup>25</sup>

Simultaneously, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—which includes 15 Asia-Pacific countries—has been instrumental in boosting China’s trade with the region, growing to over 12 trillion yuan in 2023 alone.<sup>26</sup>

Institutional frameworks like RCEP and the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation Mechanism not only foster economic interdependence but also offer China normative influence. Unlike Western bilateral deals that often use pressure tactics, China’s mechanisms emphasize procedural equality, infrastructural alignment, and narrative control.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “中国与东盟十国全面完成中国—东盟自贸区3.0版谈判((*China and the Ten ASEAN Countries Fully Conclude Negotiations on the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area Version 3.0*),” *Gov.cn*, May 2025, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202505/content\\_7024691.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202505/content_7024691.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “《区域全面经济伙伴关系协定》生效实施3周年(*Three Years Since the Implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)*),” *Gov.cn*, January 2025, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202501/content\\_6996013.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202501/content_6996013.htm).

<sup>27</sup> “Why Did Xi Jinping Skip Indonesia on His Southeast Asia Visit? CSIS Explains,” *Tempo*, April 12, 2025, <https://en.tempo.co/read/1997509/why-did-xi-jinping-skip-indonesia-on-his-southeast-asia-visit-csis-explains>.

The Global Development Initiative (GDI), another pillar of China's multilateral diplomacy, extends this influence into the development space. At the 2023 UN event “Supporting the Global South—China in Action,” Wang Yi highlighted how the GDI has helped developing countries “enter the fast lane” of modernization.<sup>28</sup> By framing development as a sovereign and collective endeavor, rather than a donor-recipient relationship, China appeals to countries wary of Western aid's political strings.

As Sebastian Strangio observes in *In the Dragon's Shadow*, China does not always seek overt coercion but often prefers to induce “path dependency” through institutional construction and resource commitment.<sup>29</sup> As a result, even when Southeast Asian nations avoid choosing sides, they remain highly dependent on China in both economic and institutional dimensions.

## China's Integrated Diplomatic Strategy in Southeast Asia (2025)

### Head-of-State Diplomacy

- Xi Jinping's state visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, Cambodia
- Public reaffirmation of bilateral ties
- Personal narrative of China's peaceful rise

### Defense Diplomacy

- PLA drills and officer training (Cambodia, Malaysia)
- Security dialogues and port access agreements
- Military ties to counter U.S. alliances

### Multilateral Institution-Building

- RCEP trade integration
- Belt and Road ‘high-quality’ partnerships
- Phase II: China–Cambodia Community of Shared Future

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<sup>28</sup> “王毅出席‘全球发展倡议支持全球南方—中国在行动’主题发布活动((Wang Yi Attends “Supporting the Global South Through the Global Development Initiative — China in Action” Thematic Launch Event),” *Gov.cn*, September 2024, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202409/content\\_6977073.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202409/content_6977073.htm).

<sup>29</sup> Sebastian Strangio, “In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century,” *US–China Perception Monitor*, April 2025, <https://uscnpm.substack.com/p/in-the-dragons-shadow-w-sebastian>.

## IV. Southeast Asian Countries' Responses to Xi's Visit and Their Geopolitical Strategies

Although Xi Jinping's visit was a high-profile diplomatic showcase of China's "regional appeal," the host countries responded with measured caution and deliberate restraint. Beneath this restraint lie carefully calibrated national strategies—ranging from "flexible neutrality" and "cautious engagement" to "soft balancing"—each shaped by domestic political structures, economic dependencies, and relationships with the United States. This section analyzes the specific positions of Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia under the current U.S.-China rivalry.

### 1. Malaysia: Cautious Welcome, Institutional Cooperation First

As the 2025 ASEAN Chair, Malaysia occupies a strategic position in Xi's Southeast Asia itinerary. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim welcomed Xi during a time of rising U.S.-China tension, signaling Malaysia's non-alignment stance. However, public statements remained notably restrained.

According to CNA, no major new agreements were signed during the visit. Instead, the emphasis was on deepening trade and supply chain cooperation under the RCEP framework, along with a shared commitment to "connectivity."<sup>30</sup> Analysts note that Malaysia's inclusion on the U.S. tariff list (subject to 24% duties) has increased its economic reliance on China for manufacturing and infrastructure support. Still, concerns about abrupt shifts in U.S. policy have led Kuala Lumpur to avoid overt displays of favor toward Beijing.

Malaysia's approach can be described as "institutional cooperation with political ambiguity." The country continues to stress a unified ASEAN stance and avoids visible tilting between the great powers.<sup>31</sup> For example, in the wake of heightened U.S.-China tensions, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim emphasized in 2023 that Malaysia would not choose sides and

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<sup>30</sup> "Xi Jinping's Southeast Asian Tour: Strategic 'Charm Offensive' amid US Tariff War but Pitfalls Ahead," *Channel News Asia*, April 15, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/east-asia/xi-jinping-sea-tour-malaysia-cambodia-vietnam-china-tariffs-5056911>.

<sup>31</sup> Selina Ho, et al., "A Second Trump Term: Will Southeast Asia Tilt Toward China?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 15, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/04/a-second-trump-term-will-southeast-asia-tilt-toward-china>.

reaffirmed ASEAN centrality as the foundation of regional stability, stating that “ASEAN must not be dragged into the rivalries of major powers.”<sup>32</sup>

## 2. Vietnam: Strategic Dual Balancing Through “Bamboo Diplomacy”

As a territorial claimant in the South China Sea, Vietnam has long-standing maritime disputes with China. Yet it has also mastered a distinctive “bamboo diplomacy” style—firmly rooted but flexible in the wind.<sup>33</sup>

While maritime frictions with China persist, Hanoi has remained cautious in its public posture—especially as recent U.S. tariffs of up to 46% on Vietnamese exports raise economic stakes. Although Xi Jinping’s visit to Vietnam was not fully confirmed at the time of writing, expectations remain that the trip would focus on economic continuity and support China’s “Global South” strategy.<sup>34</sup>

Vietnam has demonstrated strategic composure amid shifting geopolitical tides. On one hand, it continues defense cooperation with the U.S., Japan, and Australia (e.g., the “Super Garuda Shield” joint military exercises); on the other, it maintains open communication with China. This reflects a “non-aligned but counterbalancing” strategy characteristic of emerging middle powers.<sup>35</sup>

## 3. Cambodia: “Strategic Openness” Under Pro-China Traditions

Compared to the other two countries, Cambodia maintains a much closer relationship with China. Since the Hun Sen era, the two countries have cooperated extensively on military,

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<sup>32</sup> “PM Anwar: Malaysia Will Not Be Dragged into Major Power Rivalries,” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/pm-anwar-malaysia-will-not-be-dragged-into-major-power-rivalries>.

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century*, Interview with US–China Perception Monitor, April 2025, <https://uscnpm.substack.com/p/in-the-dragons-shadow-w-sebastian>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Teuku Rezasyah, “Indonesia: Maybe, as China is Becoming More Important in Indonesia’s Strategic Thinking,” in *A Second Trump Term: Will Southeast Asia Tilt Toward China?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025.



financial, and infrastructure fronts. Xi's visit, his first to Cambodia since 2016, signals China's recognition and support for new Prime Minister Hun Manet.

According to a Carnegie China report, Chinese investments in Cambodia total \$34.25 billion, accounting for nearly half of the country's foreign capital inflows.<sup>36</sup> Cambodia has accelerated the institutionalization of the "China-Cambodia Community of Shared Future" with China's backing. Still, it has not fully abandoned cooperation with other countries, notably Japan and Australia, especially in areas such as naval base access and educational aid. This reflects a posture of "open yet pro-China" flexibility.<sup>37</sup>

Ahead of Xi Jinping's expected 2025 visit to Phnom Penh, the United States imposed punitive tariffs of up to 49% on Cambodian solar exports, citing circumvention of China-origin components.<sup>38</sup> In response, Prime Minister Hun Manet publicly proposed lowering tariffs on U.S. goods to 5% and expressed interest in renewing trade dialogues, stating that Cambodia "welcomes partnership with all sides."<sup>39</sup> This reflects a pragmatic effort to ease economic pressure from Washington without jeopardizing longstanding ties with Beijing. At the same time, China remains Cambodia's primary source of infrastructure investment and political support, especially through initiatives such as the Phase II China–Cambodia Community of Shared Future, which have reinforced elite-level ties and underwritten key development projects.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Neak Chandarith, "Cambodia: No, Because Cambodia Maintains Strategic Hedging," in *A Second Trump Term: Will Southeast Asia Tilt Toward China?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory B. Poling and Charles Dunst, "Crossroads of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crossroads-competition-china-southeast-asia-and-pacific-islands>.

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, "Final Determination on Circumvention of Solar Products through Southeast Asia," November 2024.

<sup>39</sup> *Phnom Penh Post*, "Hun Manet Urges New U.S. Trade Talks Amid Tariff Fallout," February 2025.

<sup>40</sup> *Xinhua*, "China, Cambodia Deepen Strategic Partnership through Shared Future Framework," January 2025.



Country	U.S. Tariffs	Security Ties (U.S.)	Economic Ties (China)	ASEAN Alignment	Key Quote
Vietnam	High	Strong (EDCA talks)	Moderate	Medium	"Not choosing sides"
Malaysia	Moderate	Limited drills	Strong	High	"Won't be dragged into rivalries"
Cambodia	Very high	Minimal	Very strong	Low	"Open to all partners"

**V. The United States’ Interpretations of Xi Jinping’s Southeast Asia Visit and Potential Strategic Responses**

In April 2025, Xi Jinping’s visit to three Southeast Asian countries occurred against the backdrop of renewed tariff escalation by the Trump administration and a fresh wave of U.S.-China regional rivalry. Within this context, the U.S. government and mainstream think tanks largely interpret the visit as part of China’s broader strategic charm offensive—though evaluations vary in assessing its real impact. Likely U.S. responses span military and diplomatic rebalancing, resource reallocation, and the use of regulatory levers across Southeast Asia.

This section is divided into three parts:

- 1. U.S. perceptions of China’s strategic intentions;
- 2. Initial responses from think tanks and policymakers;
- 3. Potential U.S. policy actions.

1. Heightened Vigilance in the Context of “Grey Zone Coercion”

First, the U.S. strategic community generally believes that despite Xi Jinping’s rhetoric around “friendship,” “cooperation,” and “economic win-win outcomes,” the visit’s core intent is to undermine U.S. strategic influence in the region—particularly in the South China Sea.

In CSIS’s 2025 testimony to Congress, analysts asserted that China is systematically engaging in grey zone coercion in the South China Sea, using coast guard vessels, paramilitary militias, and commercial ships to harass oil exploration and supply missions by Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. These incidents are not isolated, the testimony notes, but part of a “state-driven chain of strategic tools.”<sup>41</sup>

The report highlights that Chinese coast guard vessels patrolled Malaysia’s Luconia Shoals for 359 days in 2024—nearly the entire year.<sup>42</sup> U.S. assessments conclude that Xi has not de-escalated militarily but is instead pursuing incremental encroachment under the guise of maintaining the status quo, wearing down Southeast Asian resistance through sustained psychological pressure.

Thus, Xi’s diplomatic tour is viewed as a “soft cover” for grey zone coercion—an effort to mask ongoing strategic pressure with promises of economic benefit and political goodwill, ultimately laying the groundwork for a China-led regional order.<sup>43</sup>

## 2. Think Tank and Diplomatic Responses: Anxiety and Self-Reflection

Following Trump’s announcement of high tariffs on Southeast Asian countries—including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia—numerous U.S. think tanks warned that failing to recalibrate U.S. policy would cede strategic space to China.

Carnegie China warned that under Trump’s “America First” framework, regional governments may accelerate institutional alignment with China due to the perceived unreliability of the United States as an economic partner. As the U.S. retreats from multilateral trade leadership and increases bilateral pressure, countries in Southeast Asia are more likely to deepen integration with China through frameworks like RCEP, which offer predictable market access and supply chain stability.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Gregory B. Poling, “Testimony: China’s Grey Zone Coercion in the South China Sea,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2025, <https://www.csis.org>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Selina Ho et al., “A Second Trump Term: Will Southeast Asia Tilt Toward China?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 2025.

A CSIS report titled *Crossroads of Competition* noted that China is building a sustainable influence network in Southeast Asia through the integration of local governments, state-owned enterprises, and military-police coordination. The report urged the United States to strengthen “non-military instruments of regional engagement”.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, IISS cautioned that China’s state visits are only part of the strategy. Defense diplomacy is expanding as well: Defense Minister Dong Jun conducted 58 bilateral meetings in 2024, and Chinese naval vessels made frequent visits to Malaysia and Cambodia.<sup>46</sup>

In summary, U.S. think tanks increasingly suggest that relying solely on traditional alliances and values-based rhetoric will be insufficient to counter China’s full-spectrum influence operations.

### 3. Potential U.S. Policy Actions

In light of these assessments, the United States is likely to pursue a mix of military, economic, and diplomatic responses:

First, strengthen both bilateral and multilateral security mechanisms in the region. The U.S.–Philippines alliance deepened in 2024 with the addition of four new sites under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allows U.S. forces rotational access to Philippine military bases, and in 2025 the United States is leading joint military exercises in the Philippines with Japan, Australia, France, and Germany.<sup>47</sup> The United States is also exploring joint Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) frameworks with Vietnam and Indonesia to enhance real-time responses to grey zone actions.

Second, restore economic assistance and market access for Southeast Asian nations. In 2024, U.S. military aid to the Philippines rose sharply from \$100 million to \$500 million, while economic aid to Cambodia and Laos was suspended due to human rights concerns. As China expands its economic footprint through initiatives like the Belt and Road and deepens regional

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<sup>45</sup> Gregory B. Poling and Charles Dunst, “Crossroads of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands,” *CSIS*, February 26, 2025.

<sup>46</sup> “China’s Head of State and Defence Diplomacy,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, April 2025, <https://www.iiss.org>.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Ching Velasco, “Philippines: No, because of the long-term U.S.-Philippines alliance,” in *A Second Trump Term*, Carnegie, 2025.

integration under frameworks such as RCEP, U.S. policymakers—especially Democrats—are urging Congress to reassess trade access and technology cooperation with small and medium-sized economies to avoid perceptions of abandonment and geopolitical retreat.

Third, encourage ASEAN collective action to counter China’s regulatory dominance.

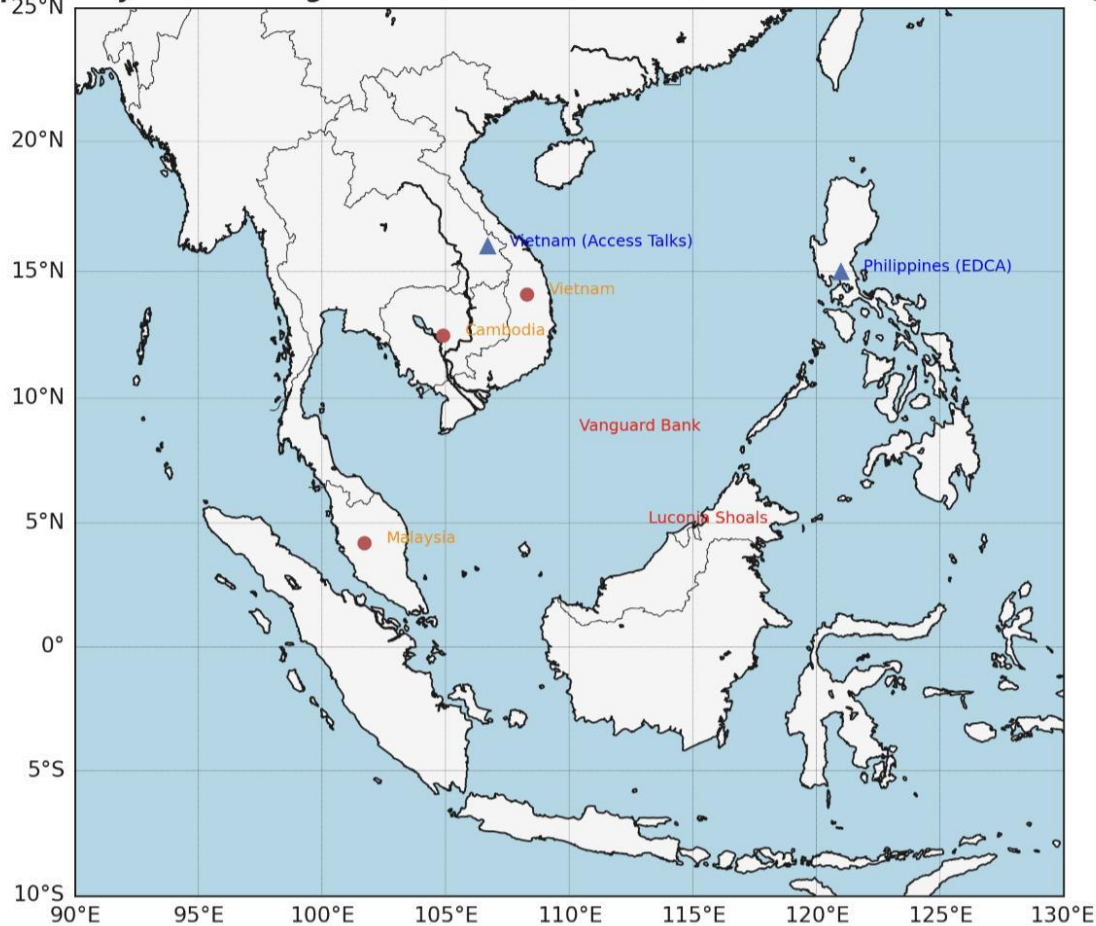
As CSIS recommends, the United States should expand institutional ties with the ASEAN Secretariat, and launch “non-political” cooperation initiatives in areas like digital economy and green infrastructure to offer alternatives to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the United States could support regional actors in pursuing legal claims in World Trade Organization (WTO) and international maritime courts, strengthening the legitimacy of rules-based pushback against China’s maritime assertions.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

**Map Overlay: U.S. Strategic Echo and Chinese Naval Presence in Southeast Asia (2025)**



**U.S. military presence is marked with blue triangles.  
Chinese maritime patrol zones with red crosses.  
U.S. tariff-targeted countries with orange circles.**

## **VI. The Evolving Roles of China and the United States in the Global Order**

President Xi Jinping's visit to three Southeast Asian countries is not an isolated event; rather, it is a key slice of a broader shift in U.S.-China global rivalry. Against the triple backdrop of the tariff war, supply chain restructuring, and strategic outreach to the Global South, China and the United States are both redefining their roles in the world order: China seeks to break free from unipolar hegemony and shape a multipolar world, while the United States is increasingly focused

on defending its traditional dominance—often through more inward-looking and short-sighted means.

This section is divided into three parts:

1. How China is shifting from a “rule-taker” to a “norm-shaper”;
2. How the United States is evolving from “rule-maker” to a more self-serving geopolitical actor;
3. How Southeast Asia, as a crossroads of global order, navigates this competition.

### 1. China: From Rule-Taker to Norm Competitor

For decades, China was a beneficiary of the U.S.-led global order. Since the reform and opening period, it grew its economy within the frameworks of the WTO, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, evolving into the world’s manufacturing powerhouse. But starting in the 2010s, as its national power surged, Beijing’s strategic ambitions shifted. No longer content with being an internal player, it began challenging certain international norms and promoting institutional alternatives.

As Sebastian Strangio notes in *In the Dragon’s Shadow*, China “does not seek to conquer Southeast Asia,” but “increasingly wants the region to operate on its terms.” This is evident in its maritime claims, supply chain influence, and value exports.<sup>49</sup> Since Xi Jinping’s rise to power, China has promoted “institutions beyond the West”—including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), RCEP, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—aiming to reduce dependency on Western platforms and invite Global South countries into a China-led governance model.

Meanwhile, China has become more active in shaping global narratives. As CNA analysis suggests, Xi’s visit to the three countries aims to project China as a “reliable partner,”

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<sup>49</sup> Sebastian Strangio, “In the Dragon’s Shadow,” *US-China Perception Monitor*, April 2025, <https://uscnpm.substack.com>.

counteracting uncertainty created by U.S. policies, while using economic incentives to reshape supply chains and build political capital.<sup>50</sup>

This shift marks China’s evolution from a developing country focused purely on trade to a “systemic power” that integrates economics, diplomacy, and security into a cohesive global strategy.

## 2. The United States: From Rule-Maker to Transactional “Landlord”

In contrast, the U.S. trajectory is more paradoxical. After the Cold War, the United States served as the principal architect of the global liberal order—championing open markets, multilateralism, and institutional governance. In recent years, however—especially under Trump—American foreign policy has taken on a “transactional” or “rental” logic: no longer driven by shared values, but rather by expected returns, even treating alliances as business-like contracts.

As Singapore’s Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen quipped at the Munich Security Conference, “Asia once saw America as a liberator. Now it sees it as a landlord collecting rent.”<sup>51</sup>

The Carnegie report “Will Southeast Asia Tilt Toward China” also notes widespread unease across Southeast Asia regarding U.S. unpredictability, particularly its withdrawal from multilateral mechanisms (e.g., non-participation in RCEP, reduced funding to the Mekong River Commission, etc.).<sup>52</sup> This has forced smaller states that once depended on U.S. security guarantees to adopt more strategic autonomy.

More critically, America’s “selective adherence” to international law—for instance, refusing to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) while invoking “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea—is widely viewed as a double standard, undermining U.S. legitimacy in the region.

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<sup>50</sup> CNA, “Xi Jinping’s Southeast Asian Tour: Strategic ‘Charm Offensive’ Amid US Tariff War,” *Channel News Asia*, April 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com>.

<sup>51</sup> Selina Ho, “Singapore,” in *A Second Trump Term: Will Southeast Asia Tilt Toward China?*, Carnegie, April 2025.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Southeast Asia: A Strategic Crossroads and Transitional Zone

Geographically and economically, Southeast Asia lies at the nexus of U.S.-China influence and serves as a critical node in global supply chain realignment. The ten-member ASEAN is not only China's largest trading partner (with China-ASEAN trade reaching \$963 billion in 2024) but also the central axis in Washington's effort to reclaim strategic footholds.

The CSIS report "Crossroads of Competition" identifies three typical strategies used by Southeast Asian nations in navigating structural rivalry: Security alignment with the United States., economic integration with China, and institutional self-strengthening.<sup>53</sup> This multi-track strategy reflects the region's desire to avoid binary choices, while maximizing gains from both sides.

For example, Vietnam has continued enhancing defense ties with the United States (including a procurement deal signed in 2025), while quietly expanding artificial island-building in the Spratlys without strong opposition from Beijing. Malaysia, as ASEAN chair, promoted a "narrative of neutrality", maintaining agenda-setting leverage across both power blocs.<sup>54</sup>

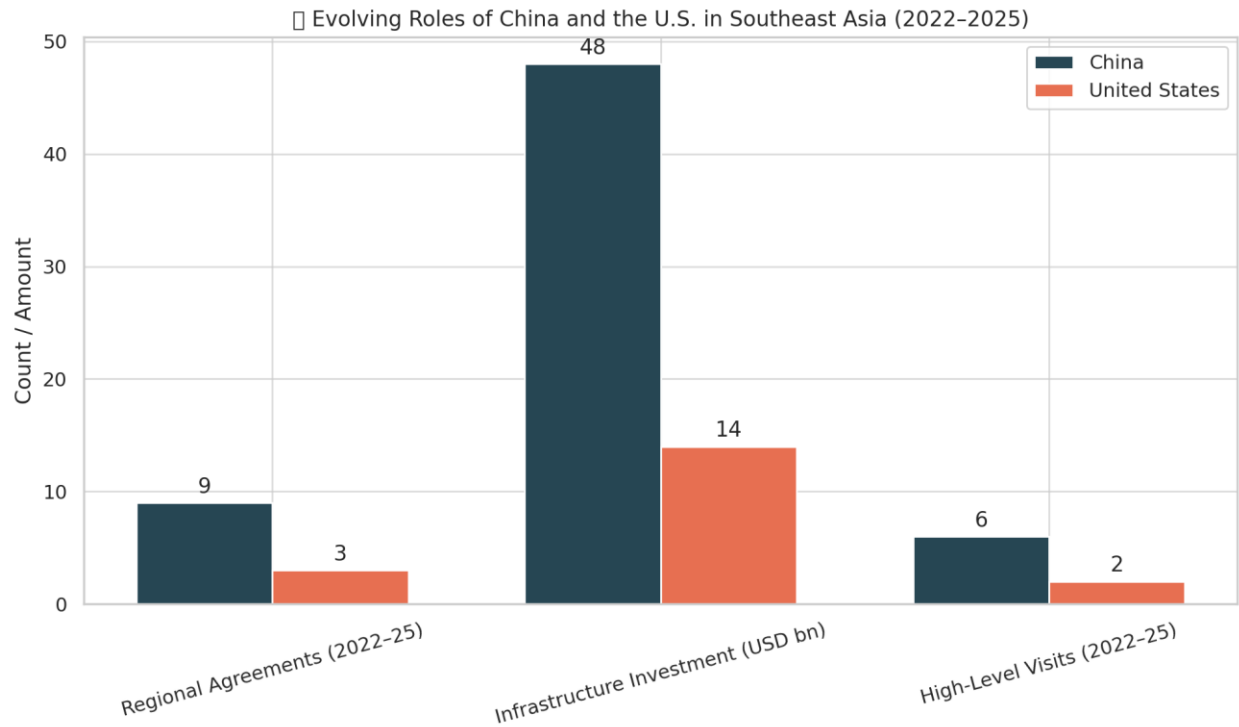
As Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan once stated, "We will neither be bullied, nor bought." This reflects the rational balancing strategy that smaller nations are pursuing amid the tectonic shifts in global order.

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<sup>53</sup> Gregory B. Poling and Charles Dunst, "Crossroads of Competition," CSIS, February 2025.

<sup>54</sup> CNA, "Xi's Southeast Asian Tour," 2025.





## VII. Conclusion: Southeast Asia’s Strategic Depth Amid U.S.-China Rivalry

President Xi Jinping’s recent visit to Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia came at a time when a new wave of U.S. tariffs was disrupting global trade dynamics. The significance of this visit extends far beyond bilateral diplomacy—it represents a strategic initiative by China to reshape its geopolitical foothold and win Global South alignment amid a new Cold War landscape.

This paper has systematically explored: China’s head-of-state diplomacy and regional penetration strategies; Southeast Asian states’ balancing tactics; U.S. responses to Chinese expansion and its redefined regional positioning; and the evolving roles of both powers within the global order.

Through this lens, the paper reveals an intricate web of U.S.-China competition across two interwoven dimensions: economics and security. Key conclusions include: China is reengineering structural dependence in the region through institutional innovation and economic re-binding. The United States, facing erosion of its traditional dominance, has turned to tariffs

and military alliances as tactical tools, though its strategic vision appears increasingly inward. Southeast Asian countries, rather than passively submitting to great power logic, are actively shaping space within regulatory gray zones, pursuing non-alignment without marginalization via multilateral engagement.

This trilateral dynamic does not lead to a binary outcome of “Southeast Asia tilting toward China” or “returning to the United States.” Instead, it reflects a post-hegemonic complexity: in an era where a multipolar system remains under construction and unipolar dominance has clearly waned, each state is navigating toward the least-bad path of cooperation—seeking to preserve sovereignty and long-term development in the eye of the storm.

## **VIII. Looking Ahead: Key Trends to Watch in U.S.-China Competition in Southeast Asia**

### 1. Regional integration mechanisms will become key tools for buffering great power conflict

Frameworks such as RCEP and ASEAN+ are likely to evolve into institutional platforms for Southeast Asian nations to reject binary alignment. At the same time, these structures provide China with practical venues to advance de-dollarization and reduce political dependency on the United States, forcing Washington to rethink the cost of economic isolationism.

### 2. The United States risks losing long-term strategic depth in Southeast Asia without rebuilding multilateral credibility

Beyond treaty allies like the Philippines, countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia—non-military allies—may drift away from U.S. influence if Trump-style unilateralism continues. Such an imbalance would weaken America’s ability to mobilize in strategic zones like Taiwan and the South China Sea.

### 3. China may suffer long-term reputational losses if it fails to restrain grey-zone coercion

Reports from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) highlight that while China has

not used lethal force, actions bordering on violence, such as high-pressure water cannons and incidents of physical injury, have severely hurt its public image. Strong pushback from Vietnam and the Philippines indicates that unless China adopts a more restrained model of low-intensity pressure, it will struggle to win the psychological advantage in the South China Sea.

In summary, Xi Jinping's visit to Southeast Asia exemplifies a quietly ambitious grand strategy in motion. Amid a global order undergoing profound structural transformation, this visit is not a one-off moment but part of a long-term trajectory—a strategic entry point for China's pursuit of a Global South consensus. At the same time, if the United States continues to underestimate these nations' emphasis on respect and stability, its traditional alliance architecture may begin to loosen. The future world order will no longer revolve solely around a U.S.-China binary, but rather around fluid coalitions and shifting affinities across multiple issue domains. Southeast Asia, in this context, is not merely a battleground for U.S.-China competition, but the very cradle of a post-hegemonic global paradigm.

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