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GREAT POWERS AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN
REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIES:
OMNI-ENMESHMENT, BALANCING
AND HIERARCHICAL ORDER

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ABSTRACT

The small and medium-sized states in Southeast Asia have undergone significant geo-strategic changes with the end of the Cold War and the rise of China. There has been a lively debate over the last decade about whether these countries would balance against or bandwagon with China, and how their relations with the other major powers in the region would change. Recent works that argue against the simple dichotomy of balancing versus bandwagoning are correct in asserting that Southeast Asian countries do not want to choose between the two major powers, the U.S. and China. But this paper goes further to present the results of an empirical study that fleshes out the conceptual thinking that underlies this avoidance strategy. It finds that instead of merely adopting tactical or time-buying policies, key Southeast Asian states have actively tried to influence the shaping of the new regional order. It argues that key Southeast Asian states in fact have (a) distinct conceptualisations of two main pathways to order in the region – omni-enmeshment of major powers and complex balance of influence; and (b) a concrete vision of the preferred power distribution outcome, which is a hierarchical regional order.

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GREAT POWERS AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIES: OMNI-ENMESHMENT, BALANCING AND HIERARCHICAL ORDER[*]

Introduction

In the wake of the Cold War, the prognosis for East Asia appeared to be extremely bleak, particularly according to western scholars. With the decline of the Soviet Union and the rise of China, they predicted that the region would move towards an unstable multi-polar order, as the United States drew down its forces, Japan re-militarised, China grew, and other countries in the region began to engage in arms races.[1] Fifteen years on, there is a growing literature, led by Asian scholars, which lauds the fact that East Asia has not descended into anarchy with disruptive power balancing as predicted. This is largely because the U.S. has not withdrawn but has maintained its web of alliances and its deep economic and strategic involvement in the region. However, some scholars also argue that the relatively peaceful transition so far has also been the result of two complementary strategies on the part of key East Asian states like Japan and regional groupings like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): the building of regional multilateral institutions which serve to regulate exchanges, develop norms, create regional identity, thereby institutionalising cooperation amongst the major powers and socialising China; and 'soft' balancing against potential Chinese power by facilitating the continued U.S. commitment to the region.[2]

Unlike those who study the region primarily using realist or neo-realist theoretical frameworks, these scholars who focus on the policies and strategies of East Asian states demonstrate that many key countries like Japan and South Korea in Northeast Asia, and ASEAN, are not balancing against China as realists would expect. The most interesting of these recent studies is David Kang's thesis that balancing is not occurring against China

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[1] Aaron Friedberg, 'Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia', *International Security* 18(3), Winter 1993/4, pp.5-33; Richard K. Betts, 'Wealth, Power and Instability: East Asia and the United States after the Cold War', *International Security* 18(3), Winter 1993/4, pp.34-77; Gerald Segal, 'The Coming Confrontation between China and Japan', *World Policy Journal* 10(2), Summer 1993, pp.27-32; Richard Bernstein & Ross Munro, 'The Coming Conflict with America', *Foreign Affairs* 76(2), March/April 1997, pp.18-32.
[2] See especially Yuen Foong Khong, 'Coping with Strategic Uncertainty: The Role of Institutions and Soft Balancing in Southeast Asia's Post-Cold War Strategy', in J.J. Suh, Peter J. Katzenstein Allen Carlson, eds., *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

because of the region's tradition of hierarchical relations. That is, prior to the intervention of western powers, states in East Asia were used to an asymmetrical regional order in which Chinese domination meant relatively little intervention by China in their affairs, and so was perceived as a source of stability and benefit. Kang explicitly rejects the neo-realist notion that 'hierarchy' is the opposite of anarchy; instead he uses 'hierarchy' as shorthand for unequal relations amongst states, but short of hegemony or empire. The implication is that East Asian states are more comfortable with deferring to a strong China than others might think: thus the U.S. will not succeed in finding support for a balancing strategy; and if the U.S. withdraws from the region, these countries will most likely bandwagon with China.[3]

The observation that East Asia has been more peaceful than expected is accurate, and these studies that privilege Southeast Asian viewpoints are helpful. However, they do not go far enough. Khong's work is descriptive of East Asian states' policies but not of their strategies – what the ultimate goal of the twin strategy of institution-building and soft balancing is – while Kang extrapolates from history without providing sufficient contemporary empirical evidence. This study, based on recent empirical research in Southeast Asia, takes into account the profoundly ambivalent feelings Southeast Asian states have regarding China, gives greater credit to the depth of strategic thinking present in the region, and recognizes significant activism on the part of these small- and medium-sized states in shaping the regional order. It is commonplace to hear that Southeast Asia does not want to have to choose between the U.S. and China. This paper fleshes out the conceptual thinking that underlies this avoidance strategy. It finds that instead of merely adopting tactical or time-buying policies, key Southeast Asian states have actively tried to influence the shaping of the new regional order. It argues that key Southeast Asian states in fact have (a) distinct conceptualisations of two main pathways to order in the region – omni-enmeshment of major powers and complex balance of influence; and (b) a concrete vision of the preferred power distribution outcome, which is a hierarchical regional order.

Apart from elucidating Southeast Asian regional security strategies, the other key aim of this paper is to contribute a discussion on the question of regional order in these strategies. 'Order' in the most general sense refers to a condition or state of affairs, but more

[3] David Kang, 'Hierarchy and Stability in Asian International Relations', in G. John Ikenberry & Michael Mastaduno, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); David C. Kang, 'Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks', *International Security* 27(4), Spring 2003, pp.57-85.

specifically, 'order' describes a pattern or method that signifies the lack of chaos.[4] At the international level, order is most widely construed in terms of its normative *substance*, as the condition of 'peace', or the absence of general war. The *form* of order is seen in the way in which inter-state relations proceed along largely well-known channels and patterns, which limit unpredictability and stabilise expectations between states. These patterns derive from regulatory rules and norms, which are the *processes* reckoned to sustain peaceful international relations. Hedley Bull drew together these three elements in his classic formulation of international order as a pattern in the relations between states, which aims at and results in particular goals.[5] Bull's concept of international order is driven by the premise of the prior existence of a 'society of states', which determines the substance of this order.[6] More recently, Alagappa disputes Bull's conflation of means and ends, and suggests that we confine the meaning of international order to the form and processes of "rule-governed interaction" among states (which then may or may not produce the substantive result of peace in the system).[7] Focusing on order-producing and order-maintaining processes, Alagappa argues that in Asia, there are multiple pathways that sustain the present security order, including hegemony, balance of power, concert, multilateral institutions, bilateralism, and self-help. However, the Alagappa volume finds that there is no single pathway that is dominant in the management of Asian security affairs; even though it acknowledges that American preponderance does weigh heavily in key security relationships and issues, the security order is not hegemonic since Washington cannot manage security in Asia by itself and needs the cooperation of other Asian powers. By interrogating Southeast Asian security practices and strategies, this paper reveals the centrality of three specific pathways to order – institution-building, balance of power, and hegemony – while at the same time revealing that they occur in particular variants and with certain modifications.

We have seen a consolidation of Southeast Asian regional security strategies in the last 15 years after the Cold War. Time and space precludes a comprehensive discussion of

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[4] Definitions from *The Oxford Modern Dictionary* (Oxford, 1994).

[5] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p.4, 8.

[6] *Ibid.*, p13. For a more detailed discussion of international society, see Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[7] Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003), Chapter 1. He builds on the work of Andrew Hurrell and Barry Buzan, who mediate Bull's account by distinguishing between different levels of order or international society – see Hurrell, 'Society and Anarchy in the 1990s', in B. A. Roberson, ed., *International Society and the Development of International Relations* (London: Pinter, 1998); Buzan, 'From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School', *International Organization* 47(3), (Summer 1993), pp.327-352.

the individual strategies of the ten states in what is a very diverse sub-region, and the recent expansion of ASEAN has deepened the divides between the 'old' and the 'new' members making a coherent regional stance more elusive. Much of this paper will draw from two of the original ASEAN states, Singapore and Thailand.[8] The focus on these two countries stems from the relative activism of their leaders in terms of regional security – regular and clear articulations of strategy by Singaporean leaders in public speeches, and the Thaksin government's policies of fostering a variety of regional institutions in recent years. From these cases, we can identify three elements of a broad strategy to deal with the new geopolitical conditions of the rise of China, the end of the Cold War ideological divide and bipolar order, and U.S. unipolarity.

1) The attempted *omni-enmeshment* of big powers in the region

The idea of 'enmeshment' refers to the process of engaging with an actor or entity so as to draw it into deep involvement into a system or community, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the eventual aim of integration. In the process, the actor's interests are redefined, and its identity possibly altered, so as to take into greater account the integrity and order of the system. This concept falls in the spectrum between the ideas of engagement on the one hand, and of security communities on the other. It goes further than engagement because it includes the longer-term goal of identity alteration, and because it is better able to accommodate multiple objects or targets. But it does not go as far as security community building as the emphasis here lies more in securing a workable modus vivendi amongst key actors, which could be achieved through a range of means, such as a concert of power, or mixtures of means.[9]

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[8] This may present problems, as Singapore and Thailand (along with the Philippines) are both part of the formal and informal U.S. security structure in the region. Countries at the other end of the scale, particularly Indonesia, may have divergent views and preferences. Yet, one might argue that Jakarta, in spite of its traditional reservations about the role of external powers in regional security, also tacitly supports and facilitates U.S. predominance in the region. It participates in the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) bilateral military exercises with the U.S. Navy, has resumed security cooperation talks with Washington since 2002, and is widely expected to resume some military aid and cooperation activities given the imperative of counter-terrorism. While SE Asian states may quarrel about the extent to which external powers ought to be included within various fora (such as the East Asian Summit), no ASEAN member state has voiced objection or acted contrary to the themes identified here.
[9] On engagement, see Alastair Iain Johnston & Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The management of a Rising Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999). The classic statement of security communities is Karl Deutsch et al, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), and see also Emmanual Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambrudge University Press, 1998).

Much has been written in recent years about Southeast Asia's strategies to engage China by political and economic means, through bilateral efforts and using multilateral regional institutions.[10] Yet, observers of the region will note that these efforts at developing closer economic relations; creating political/security dialogue, exchanges and cooperation; and establishing military exchanges and relationships are aimed not only at China, but also at the U.S., as well as other major powers such as Japan, South Korea and India. Thus Southeast Asian states can be characterised as having adopted an *omni-enmeshment* strategy.

Within the broader context, the potential scenario sketched by western analysts of a transition towards an unstable multi-polar regional order with a number of major powers engaged in power competition is feared by Southeast Asian states as well, but they have chosen to hedge against this possibility not by picking sides or excluding certain great powers, but rather by trying to include all the various major powers in the region's strategic affairs. Since the 1990s, ASEAN, and especially Singapore and Thailand, have pushed for a regional security structure that would involve as many big powers as possible, through their engagement in regional institutions and through bilateral arrangements with individual member states. The idea is to attract these powers to closer economic and political relationships with Southeast Asia as a whole, and to deeper political and defence relationships with individual countries, so as to deepen interdependence and to deepen their sense of having a stake in the region's security, so that they would be more interested in helping to maintain regional stability, mainly through political and diplomatic means. This strategy of enmeshing all major powers that can influence regional security – omni-enmeshment – involves the avenues of regional multilateral institutions, multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements, and bilateral security exchanges and multilateral security cooperation.

At the regional level, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a key example of the strategy of engaging many big powers in action, bringing as it does the U.S., China, Japan, and also the European Union, into regional dialogue. Furthermore, the ASEAN+3 dialogue process serves to tie China, South Korea and Japan more tightly into exchanges and pseudo-

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[10] See especially Alice Ba, 'Who's Socializing Whom? Complex Engagement and Sino-ASEAN Relations', *Pacific Review* 18(3), (forthcoming, 2005); Yuen Foong Khong, 'Singapore: A Time for Economic and Political Engagement', in Johnston & Ross, *Engaging China***.**

membership in ASEAN, particularly in economic matters. There is some evidence that this strategy is effective, as we have seen some competitive actions on the part of these major states. For instance, shortly after the U.S. and Singapore announced talks for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2000 (signed at the end of 2003), China decided to open negotiations for an FTA with ASEAN (endorsed in June 2001), and the region's first FTA with Japan was signed by Singapore in January 2002. Furthermore, Australia signed an FTA with Singapore in July 2003, and announced in November 2004 that it will begin to negotiate an ASEAN-wide FTA. At the diplomatic level, China and India signed on to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003, and Japan, South Korea and Russia followed in 2004.[11]

At the country level, this thinking is best exemplified in Singapore, where policy-makers have tried to turn the geopolitical reality of great power penetration in the region to its benefit. Its limited size forces the island-state to base its larger regional security strategy "principally on borrowing political and military strength from extra-regional powers". Singapore has carefully built upon its strategic location at the crossroads of vital sea-lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. During the Cold War, in an effort to engage the major powers and deter potential aggression, it forged strong commercial ties not only with the U.S. and Japan, but also the Soviet Union and China.[12] In recent years, it is negotiating free trade agreements as another means to deepen major countries' economic stakes in the island. At the same time, it tries to make itself valuable and relevant to the major powers – through the provision of military facilities and strategic cooperation with the U.S., and by cultivating the image of being an interlocutor between China and the U.S., for instance – such that they would feel a stake in Singapore's prosperity, stability and security. In addition, Singapore has also promoted military-to-military relations with major powers in the form of joint military exercises with the U.S., exchanges with China, and most recently, joint naval and air exercises with India.[13]

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[11] See Evelyn Goh, 'Singapore's Reaction to Rising China: Deep Engagement and Strategic Adjustment', in Ho Khai Leong & Samuel Yu, eds., *Reassessing China-ASEAN Relations: Global Changes and Regional Challenges* (Singapore: ISEAS, forthcoming, 2005); 'FTAs with ASEAN vital, India told', *The Straits Times*, 20 October 2004.

[12] Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000), p.33-4.

[13] Mushahid Ali, 'Singapore's Balancing Diplomacy: Defence Cooperation with USA, India', IDSS commentary, 12 November 2003; 'Singapore, India in joint air exercise', *The Straits Times*, 12 October 2004.

Thailand, too, has had a history of engaging and harnessing the power of larger states in its national and regional security strategy, as seen in its alliance with the U.S. and subsequent alignment with China to deal with the Vietnamese threat in the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, Bangkok has employed a strategy similar to Singapore's of using multilateral institutions and trade agreements to draw the major powers into the region as a means of ensuring stability. Significantly, Thailand is in a better geographical position to do this as it sits at the crossroads of Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia. Hence, while both Singapore and Thailand are now looking to cultivate India as another potential great power that will take an interest in the region, it is Bangkok that has been more active diplomatically. The Thaksin government has tried assiduously to cultivate ties with South Asia through economic organisations like Bimstec (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation), and in forging a new trans-regional dialogue forum - the Asian Cooperation Dialogue - which brings together countries in East and South Asia as well as the Middle East. These moves are largely seen as attempts to boost Thailand's (and Thaksin's) leadership role in Asian affairs, and observers doubt the efficacy of their actual plans and projects. However, they do indicate the beginnings of a policy to develop Southeast Asia as a strategic bridge between the different parts of greater Asia. The view that developing this useful role vis-à-vis the major powers will help to assure the region's security is shared by other Southeast Asian countries. As Singapore's Minister of Trade and Industry puts it,

> "Southeast Asia is both a bridge and a buffer between the two great civilisational areas of China and India. Neither China nor India has ever invaded or occupied Southeast Asia because it serves as a useful buffer without impeding trade."[14]

The key purposes of enmeshment vary from state to state. As Khong points out, the fundamental reason for ASEAN's efforts at creating the ARF was to enmesh the U.S. in regional institutions so as to reduce uncertainty about continued U.S. commitment to the region. This 'superpower entrapment' is seen as the vital determinant of regional stability.[15] Other ASEAN countries see China as the key target of enmeshment. Some, like Vietnam, which is deeply suspicious of Chinese domination for historical reasons, harbour a defensive enmeshment concept, hoping that institutional membership will constrain potential Chinese

[14] George Yeo, 'The American Role in the Asian Dream', *Asiaweek*, 20 April 2001.
[15] Yuen Foong Khong, 'Coping with Strategic Uncertainty: The Role of Institutions and Soft Balancing in Southeast Asia's Post-Cold War Strategy', in J.J. Suh, Peter J. Katzenstein Allen Carlson, eds., *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p.202.

aggression. In the Vietnamese discourse, the term is the "constructive entanglement" of China and the hope, according to a Vietnamese foreign ministry official in 1992, is that:

"Sino-Vietnamese relations will be meshed within the much larger network of interlocking economic and political interests…[creating] an arrangement whereby anybody wanting to violate Vietnam's sovereignty would be violating the interests of other countries as well."[16]

Thailand and Singapore are also trying to enmesh Japan and India in order to induct these secondary and rising powers into the regional order, and to help to diversify the sources of Southeast Asian strategic and economic stability.

Thus some Southeast Asian states envisage a situation in which a number of major powers – the U.S., China, Japan, Korea, India – would be actively involved in the region by means of good political relationships, deep and preferential economic exchanges, and some degree of defence dialogue and exchange. The aim is to create overlapping spheres of influence in the region which are competitive but positive-sum. Ideally, it is hoped that this would translate into greater stability in the region because, first, in the negative sense, the major powers would be able to "keep an eye on each other" and to act as mutual deterrents against adventurism from one another. In this sense, enmeshment is about hedging against the possibility of violent rivalry between major powers in the region and great power aggression against smaller states. More constructively, however, these countries hope that, over time and with greater interdependence, these powers will discover that they have common interests that are not mutually exclusive, such as the economic benefits of free trade and secure trading routes in the region. They would thus be unwilling to disrupt the status quo at each others' expense – which would be more costly than if it were at the expense of the small or medium states of the region alone. The major powers would then settle into a sustainable pattern of engagement and accommodation with the region and each other.[17]

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[16] Nguyen Hong Thach, quoted in Carlyle Thayer, 'Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest', *Asian Survey* 34(6), June 1994, p.528. See also David Wurfel, 'Between China and ASEAN: The Dialectics of Recent Vietnamese Foreign Policy', in Carlyle A. Thayer & Ramses Amer, eds., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1999).
[17] See Amitav Acharya, 'Regional Institutions and Security Order: Norms, Identity and Prospects for Peaceful Change', in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Essentially, in emphasizing omni-enmeshment as a pathway to order, these states are not trying to prevent a potential transition to multipolarity per se, but are instead attempting to manage the transition so as to prevent an unstable regional order involving multiple powers.

2) Broad-ranging *balancing policies* vis-à-vis the major powers in the region

In much of the regional security discourse, the concept of 'balancing' power is nebulous and is used to imply the presence of countervailing strength against another power – a situation which is implicitly understood as preferable to one in which a dominant power is unchallenged or unadulterated by competition. Yet, the way in which 'balance of power' is understood and acted upon in the region differs from the realist definition prevalent in the study of International Relations. A fundamental tenet of the realist school of thought is that states will form coalitions with a weaker major power in order to balance against the dominant power in the system. According to this logic, Southeast Asian states ought to be bandwagoning with China to balance against the U.S. But instead, these states in fact exhibit balancing behaviour against the greater perceived *threat* of China. Their 'soft balancing' strategies which rely upon the encouragement and sustenance of American dominance in the region are, in fact, aimed at maintaining the existing imbalance or preponderance of power in favour of the U.S.[18]

Furthermore, the concept of 'balance of power' used in Southeast Asia tends towards the common confusion between the power structure, and the processes of policies or behaviour designed to influence the structural outcome.[19] Here, it is the latter with which we are concerned, and framing it this way opens up the possibility that even small or medium states can engage actively in balancing behaviour, or actions that help to engender outcomes which affect the distribution of power. This assumption underpins the key thinking about balance of power that has emerged from Southeast Asia.

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[18] Khong, 'Coping with Strategic Uncertainty'.
[19] One work that distinguishes between the two is Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

Finally, in Southeast Asia, the effective balancing of growing Chinese power hinges on three elements. First is the successful playing of triangular politics – the use of bilateral relations with one major power as leverage to make advances in improving relations with another. This is seen, for instance, in Thailand's strategy vis-à-vis China and the U.S. Second, a strong expectation of deterrence – the harnessing of superior U.S. force in the region to persuade Beijing that any aggressive action would be too costly and/or unlikely to succeed. The third element is in fact engagement and enmeshment – the meaningful integration and socialisation of China into the regional system, cultivating it as a responsible, constructive, and status quo regional power. Such a vision means that the balancing policies of Southeast Asian states go beyond the deployment of military strength or diplomatic leverage. Rather, the model of balancing here is much more managerial and encompasses all the key elements of international relations.

Certainly, balance of power is a critical pathway to order in a region which is self-consciously realist both in rhetoric and in belief. However, balancing behaviour and expectations vis-à-vis the major powers in Southeast Asia comprise as much of military components as it does economic and political ones. In this sense, regional strategists are concerned not simply with balance of power but rather with a more subtle and broader 'balance of influence' instead. Balancing is a broadly conceived range of policies for the following reasons.

Within the neo-realist literature, the key *medium* of balancing is the forging of temporary alliances, usually with the weaker or less threatening power against the stronger or more threatening power. In Southeast Asia, two states – the Philippines and Thailand – are formal allies of the U.S. but neither plays host to American troops or bases. Instead, they and a number of non-allied countries, including Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia – provide military facilities and access to U.S. naval and air forces. They also engage in bilateral and multilateral joint exercises occasionally, and some countries have preferential military supply relations with the U.S. In addition, strategic relations are also built upon more non-exclusive media. Most Southeast Asian countries have military exchanges with the U.S. as well as China. Increasingly, they are also pursuing preferential economic ties with both these powers as well as others. Indeed, in the economic realm, 'balance of influence' is about diversification of portfolios and risks – Japan and the U.S. are the top trading partners of most

Southeast Asian countries, and even as Chinese economic powers grows, they want to continue maintaining all these ties in order to reduce dependence on one power.

Southeast Asian balancing strategies also encompass more *indirect* action. Apart from spanning the range of military and economic policies, they also include individual action by states to boost their internal balancing capabilities (through military modernisation), collective action (such as Vietnam joining ASEAN for regional leverage in negotiating with China), as well as indirect policies to facilitating balancing by others. The latter obviously includes the actions of Singapore, Thailand, and other states which provide the U.S. with military access in the region.

The *objectives* of balancing are also broader in Southeast Asia. In the neo-realist concept of balancing behaviour, the aim is to challenge and change the distribution of power. However, taking into account the possibilities of balance of threat means that states may aim to preserve, or further entrench, the status quo power distribution. In Southeast Asia, actions to ally with or otherwise support U.S. predominance in the region as a way to balance against the Chinese threat will serve to further consolidate American dominance in the region. At the same time, it is hoped that encouraging the balancing presence of the U.S., Japan and other powers within the region would act as a fall-back warning to persuade China to change its preferences and intentions towards peaceful ones. In this sense, balancing behaviour is harnessed to redress the balance of threat.

Finally, there may be multiple *targets* of balancing behaviour in the region. Even as most analysts assume that most Southeast Asian countries wish to balance against growing Chinese power, two developments indicate that the U.S. may also be the object of balancing. The success of Chinese diplomacy in the region over the last decade, particularly after the financial crisis of 1997, has significantly helped to put its Southeast Asian neighbours at greater ease and has highlighted the massive economic opportunities a growing China can provide to the region. At the same time, Washington's preoccupation with the war on terrorism after 11 September 2001 has created domestic political difficulties for many governments in the region with Muslim populations, and there is a general perception that

this focus has been to the detriment of other issues important to the region.[20] Thus, Southeast Asian states may be seen to be playing the 'China card' towards the U.S., with the main aim of warning Washington that it should stay engaged in the region or risk losing it to the Chinese sphere of influence.

The two main pathways to order in Southeast Asia – omni-enmeshment and balance of influence – serve to complicate the analytical boundaries provided by traditional IR theory. Broad-ranging balancing strategies necessarily overlap with institutional and bilateral strategies of enmeshment. On the one hand, balancing behaviour is evident within strategies of enmeshment. For instance, while one of the key means of enmeshment is through multilateral institutions, institution-building may take on a competing or balancing element. For instance, the ARF appears to be increasingly pitted against ASEAN+3, with Beijing putting heavy emphasis on the latter as the only exclusively 'Asian' institution dealing with economic matters judged most important by the region. The ARF, on the other hand, is mired in difficulties partly because of the disagreement between the U.S., Canada and Australia, and China and ASEAN about the pace at which the institution should develop.

Second, enmeshment may also be part of a complex balancing strategy that utilises many available means. Brining together multiple powers within a regional and institutional context ensures that they would exercise competitive influence in the region, with the balancing logic reducing the region's dependence on any one power, while the enmeshment logic channels the contest in non-violent ways.

Essentially, the goal of balancing and enmeshment is to produce and manage regional order rather than to bring about or to forestall a power transition. These pathways are not about a power distribution contest, but an order-producing activity or process. In the process, though, these range of policies do aim to harness major powers towards a preferred type and structure of regional order, as discussed in the next section.

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[20] See, for instance, Irman Lanti, 'Indonesia', in Evelyn Goh, ed., *Betwixt and Between: Southeast Asian Strategic Relations with the U.S. and China*, IDSS monograph no. 8, forthcoming, 2005.

3) **The preferred outcome of a *hierarchical order* in the region**

In contrast to the assumptions of the existing literature, the preferred distribution of power in the region is not one brought about by two or more powers of roughly equal capabilities balancing out one another's strengths. Rather, as discussed above, by 'balance of power', policy-makers in the region actually implicitly mean the preservation of a regional equilibrium sustained upon the predominance of U.S. power. More interesting, however, is the question of what the rest of the regional order would look like beneath the superpower overlay. Based on ongoing interviews with officials and policy-makers in several Southeast Asian countries, it appears that the pattern of the regional order that these states aim for and strongly prefer is a hierarchical regional order that looks like this:

> (a) Superpower overlay: US
>
> (b) Regional great power: China
>
> (c) Major powers in the region: India, Japan, South Korea[21]
>
> (d) ASEAN[22]

This notion of a regional hierarchy is a significant departure from existing concepts in a number of ways. First, the perpetuation of U.S. preponderance makes it essentially a unipolar system, and thus a hierarchy in the sense used by Waltz, as opposed to anarchy. However, this would be a superficial reading once the layers below the superpower overlay are taken into consideration.[23] Hence, the hierarchical system here would conform more closely to Kang's suggested definition of hierarchy in international relations, which emphasises unequal relationships which are nevertheless short of hegemony or empire. That is, Southeast Asian states prefer to bring about U.S. dominance in the region, but a moderated and implicit type of dominance, beneath which a hierarchy (in the true sense of the word meaning layers) of other powers forms.

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[21] It is interesting that Australia does not seem to be considered.

[22] With its own internal hierarchy of 'old' and 'new' ASEAN, plus Indonesia as first amongst equals in the former, Vietnam as first in the latter.

[23] Other authors have argued for the importance of studying regional or local hierarchies, but as far as they consider this region, they have tended to identify separate South Asian, Southeast Asian and Northeast Asian hierarchies. See, for instance, Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). These ASEAN leaders appear, in contrast, to envisage an Asia-Pacific-wide regional hierarchy.

Second, note that the expectation and acceptance of this overall hierarchy is contingent and dependent upon the existence of the U.S. superpower overlay. Indeed, it would seem that states in this region might have transferred their traditional comfort with beneficial and stable hierarchical systems from historic China to the present-day U.S. Without this overarching assurance, the distribution of power will be harder to predict. It is unclear whether we would see Wolhforth's suggestion of strong balancing behaviour on the part of China's neighbours – especially Japan, India and Russia – against it; or if Kang's theory of countries like Japan and Korea reverting to acceptance of a Chinese dominated regional hierarchy would more prove accurate.[24]

Interestingly, realists would note that such a preferred hierarchy suggests that the ultimate strategy of Southeast Asian states might indeed be a form of modified buck-passing, as the aim is to give the major powers a stake in the region, to allow them to balance each other. However, this preference indicates a more activist and managerial vision of Southeast Asian states' roles in facilitating such an outcome than realists would concede.

This notion of a regional hierarchy is derived from initial results of interviews with policy-makers in Southeast Asia about their ideal preferences regarding the regional power structures, and many questions remain about the actual process of bringing about such a scenario. However, it is possible to suggest, at this stage, some ways in which this notion of a regional hierarchy is consonant with ideas of order. In the first instance, such a system would entail restraint and acceptance by the states and powers at each level of their respective positions within the hierarchy. This suggests something akin to a Gramscian notion of hierarchy involving the conscious consent of these states. It highlights the interactive nature of the order, in which the major powers retain their relative dominance in part because of the acceptance of smaller states. In such a system, preferences, choices, and management become the key considerations. It would also entail various pathways for the maintenance, management and legitimacy of such an order. One important pathway would be multilateral institutions, although there may be a complex division of these entities. One possibility is that they may be split by regional blocs: for instance, the U.S. would dominate 'Asia-Pacific' institutions, China 'East Asian' ones and India 'South Asian' ones; while at the sub-regional level, there would be more cooperation between the U.S. and China with Japan and Korea to

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[24] William Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security* 24(1), Summer 1999, pp.5-41; Kang, 'Getting Asia Wrong'.

maintain 'Northeast Asian' institutions, and with ASEAN for 'Southeast Asian' ones. At the same time, balancing would remain a critical pathway to order, mainly within each tier of the hierarchy, particularly within the third tier, involving Japan and Korea. There may also be balancing behaviour across tiers, especially between China and the U.S., and India and China. The latter would be destabilising if the aim of balancing were to revise the relative positions in the hierarchy.

Conclusion

This paper has presented some preliminary findings of a project that investigates contemporary Southeast Asian regional security strategies and ideas of regional order. It suggests that key Southeast Asian states rely on two main pathways to regional order – the omni-enmeshment of major powers and complex balance of influence. These approaches are subtler and entail more activism on the part of these small states than the generalisations of institution-building, balance of power and hegemony that we find in the literature. Southeast Asian states also have a vision of the preferred power distribution outcome, which is a hierarchical regional order.

These initial findings suggest that regional order as conceived by these states is about system preservation, as suggested in Bull's concept of order.[25] In this case, maintaining regional order is about preserving the broad hierarchical system dominated by the U.S., which has proven to be successful and beneficial over the last 50 years. In this context, reacting to China's rise is primarily about integrating China into the existing international order without having to make too many significant adjustments to prevailing norms, including the dominant hierarchical position of the U.S. Southeast Asian states share the American aim of preventing a power transition in the region, but their emphasis is not on containment but on assimilating China as a new great power, but at a tier below the U.S. It is about adjusting the regional order rather than facing a transition or revision.

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[25] Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p16-19.