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Competitive Strategy of India and China in Southeast Asia and Its Impact on the Region

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Abstract

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Due to Southeast Asia's geopolitical, economic, and commercial significance, world powers have focused on this region. China and India, the two neighboring nations of Southeast Asia, both with aspirations to become the dominating force in the Indo-Pacific region, have been employing all means to draw Southeast Asia into their sphere of influence. Controlling Southeast Asia would confer immense strategic gains on both nations. The goal of this study is to assess the policy of India and China toward Southeast Asia utilizing pertinent data and documents, official comments from the respective governments, and the research of Vietnamese and foreign researchers. The analysis reveals that India and China seek benefits by promoting close ties with Southeast Asia, but their methods for achieving this objective are distinct. Suppose India employs flexible diplomatic measures to develop its good relations with Southeast Asia. In that case, China has the upper hand when pursuing a diplomatic strategy that is both flexible and assertive to advance its objectives, particularly in East Sea-related problems. This provides Southeast Asia/ASEAN with difficult choices and decisions about India and China to balance their respective interests and, more significantly, to maintain ASEAN's central position in regional and international concerns.

Introduction

In recent years, the world and the region have witnessed the substantial rise of both India and China. As neighboring countries that share a border of about 4,056 km and are the largest economies of the Indo-Pacific region, the fierce competition between these two powers will significantly impact the region's general situation. China's robust and substantial rise has dramatically changed the regional and world power structure.

As the globe prepares to enter the third decade of the 21st century, the geopolitical competition between China and India, the two Asian superpowers, intensifies. According to [Delatolla et al. \(2021\)](#), "a significant aspect in China's perspective is the notion of becoming the 'big man,' the solitary growing power, while from the Indian perspective, this notion is recognized and respected by the world community". China and India have devised grand regional and global plans to attain their overall strategic objectives. As for the region of Southeast Asia, which holds an important strategic position, China and India have both expanded their close ties, seeking ways to incorporate this region into their calculations in a more substantial manner. China and India have territorial conflicts, borders, and global ambitions today. Both are significant markets with a strong interest in safe, inexpensive trade routes and energy security. In addition, China and India have a long-standing bilateral connection, particularly in commerce and investment cooperation. However, prolonged border clashes, disputes, and economic and security concerns compel these two neighbors to adopt a strategic approach to rivalry instead of more collaboration. In terms of the nature of their relationship, India and China are ideologically opposed, in conflict over strategic ambitions and

objectives, do not trust each other but must cooperate to some extent, have limited access to each other, and head-to-head competition dominates the bilateral relationship. In terms of the strategic interests of the two countries, China employs a competitive strategy to prevent a powerful India and makes every effort to stifle India's development and prevent the expansion of cooperation between India and other countries in the region, particularly the close economic, political, security, and defense ties between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. In the meantime, India considers China as the primary danger to its security and prosperity. India, which has always been in a weak position relative to China, has never relaxed its guard, mistrusted China, and dealt passively with it. In a sense, the Indo-China relationship in Southeast Asia is a "mirror" of the more significant strategic relationship between these two nations, incorporating features of cooperation, coexistence, and competition.

Literature Review

With its important geo-strategic location, Southeast Asia has become one of its power competition centers. This topic has become of interest to Vietnamese and foreign historians. Strategic competition between India and China in Southeast Asia is a new issue that has been studied in Vietnam and is only mentioned in general in the literature on the relations between India or China with South East Asian countries or in books specifically on Southeast Asian history [Nguyen and Truong \(2022\)](#); [Thu \(2012\)](#); [Vinh \(2020\)](#); [Vinh, Hiep, and Hung \(2021\)](#); [Vo \(2017\)](#). Besides, since independence until now, India and China have constantly been competing for influence in Southeast Asia, a strategically crucial for countries' security and development. However, the foreign policies of India and China since independence have only been mentioned in several general works on each country's foreign policy and are still somewhat sketchy [Daly and Vo \(2013\)](#); [Dang, Pham, Bui, and Van Le \(2020\)](#); [Eberstadt \(2002\)](#); [Le \(2019\)](#); [E.-Y. Lee and Park \(2019\)](#). In addition, the East Sea issue in the policy of China and India has recently become the focus of research by Vietnamese scholars [\(Singh, 2005; Vinh et al., 2021; Vo, 2017\)](#).

If Vietnam's study on the competition between China and India in general, and between the two countries in Southeast Asia in particular, is still highly restricted. In contrast, this subject is of significant interest to numerous researchers in other nations. Numerous studies on the foreign policy of India or China address this problem. [Brewster \(2010\)](#); [Das \(2018\)](#); [Li \(2020\)](#); [Pal \(2016\)](#); [Xavier et al. \(2020\)](#). Other publications provide an overview of India-ASEAN and China-ASEAN ties in the sectors of cooperation, emphasizing the impact of India and China on the security situation and the politics and economy of Southeast Asia. [\(Bello, 2010\)](#); [Hong \(2007\)](#); [Keling, Shuib, and Ajis \(2009\)](#); [Pant and Deb \(2017\)](#); [Sinha \(2009\)](#) Meanwhile, the relations between India and China are also said quite a lot [Jain \(2004\)](#); [Mansingh \(1994\)](#) show that these powers have their own calculations when implementing foreign policies in the new period. Moreover, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

increasingly plays a prominent role in regional concerns and international relations, with India and China paying increased attention to the organization due to its expansion. (Anwar, 2020; Harnandez; C. Lee & Fukunaga, 2014; Principles, 2012; Secretariat, 2007; Y. Wang, 2008).

However, the concerns connected to this paper's topic described in the abovementioned studies are still general and incomplete. With this method, foreign scholars primarily focus on the evolution of relations between India, China, and ASEAN in general or bilateral interactions in several specific periods, highlighting Southeast Asia's vital signs in the foreign policies of India and China. Since the two nations' independence, the problem of competition between India and China in Southeast Asia has been discussed in each work in a hazy, imprecise, and disorganized manner. Nonetheless, it is essential to rely on the results of Vietnamese and international scholars, which provide a foundation for processing the research content of this study.

Southeast Asia in India's Competitive Strategy

In recent times, India has faced a massive challenge from the increasing influence of China, primarily through large infrastructure loans under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. BRI) for New Delhi's neighbors in South Asia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepal. India also expressed concern about China's increased naval presence in the Indian Ocean region Frankel (2011); Hong (2013). In addition, India and China now have many issues of territorial disagreements that have persisted in the past. Despite signing the "Joint Statement on Principles of Comprehensive China-India Relations and Cooperation" and declaring that they do not view each other as enemies or threats, they will build and develop a long-term partnership, aiming to create a long-term partnership while maintaining the policy of friendly neighborliness. However, they have not yet been able to resolve the border issue to their satisfaction. Due to mutual suspicion, any action by either nation in the border areas, including infrastructure construction, development, and usage of raw materials, will generate significant challenges for Indo-China bilateral relations in particular and regional peace and stability in general (Pradhan, 2021).

In contrast, India's rapid economic expansion renders it susceptible to Chinese influence. India has a greater motivation to compete with China in South Asia and Southeast Asia, where India's national interests are intertwined with China's, given that the United States views India as a regional superpower and a partner in its efforts to restrain Beijing. To implement the "Look East" policy, India also actively participates in cooperation mechanisms in the region, especially with Southeast Asia, which India has long identified as a "common civilization" and "attached to the destiny" of India. Therefore, over the past two decades, India has created many cooperation mechanisms with Southeast Asia at diverse levels, such as the India-ASEAN Summit, the ASEAN-India Joint Declaration on cooperation in counter-terrorism, the General Agreement on

Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between India and ASEAN, India's participation in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the India-ASEAN Vision and more.

In addition, the significant developments in the ASEAN-China strategic alliance prompted India to be more active in implementing the "Look East" strategy, which eventually evolved into the "Act East" policy, with the primary objective of bolstering cooperative relations with ASEAN and Asia-Pacific nations. India shares the concerns of other major countries regarding China's expanding influence in this region. India could lose its interests in Southeast Asia if it does not increase its presence there, but China could use Southeast Asia as a springboard to rule India and intervene profoundly in South Asia, India's traditional sphere of influence. The official use of the term "Look East Policy" began in the 1995-1996 Annual Report of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.

However, it was not until the 2006-2007 annual report that India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed that the "Look East Policy" was born in 1992, associated with the event that India became a partial dialogue partner of ASEAN. The "Look East" policy aims to turn India into an economic and military power in Asia and the world. In his speech to the ASEAN Business Advisory Council on December 12, 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that India's "Look East" policy is not simply a foreign economic policy but also a shift in India's global perspective and its role in the emerging global economy. "I have always viewed India's destiny to be intertwined with these countries, especially Southeast Asia, due to its outreach to its civilized neighbors in Southeast and East Asia." (Singh, 2005).

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, India's key foreign policy priority is to increase its influence in Asia. This policy was developed more favorably when the Congress Party returned to power in May 2004, replacing the role of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's People's Party (1998 - 2004). With China's increasing presence, India is becoming more and more pragmatic by developing relations with major powers such as the US, Russia, and Japan and actively implementing the "Act East" policy. This policy has found a positive resonance from the US policy of "Asia rebalancing" as well as Japan's "return to Asia" policy or Russia's "Eurasian balance," arousing great potential for cooperation between the largest country in South Asia and other powers. In particular, the closer relationship between India and the US stems from the similarities in the foreign policies of these two countries, with the common goal of countering China's growing influence. To strengthen its presence in Southeast Asia, India has no better way than to enhance ties with ASEAN, the standard regional cooperation organization of all Southeast Asian nations. At the end of 2003, India signed a Framework Agreement with ASEAN to build a Free Trade Zone between the two sides in 2011.

The ASEAN - India Free Trade Agreement was signed on August 7, 2008, after the efforts of both parties. The agreement's implementation has resulted in a significant increase in trade between the two parties. The value of India-ASEAN commerce reached \$79.3 billion in 2011-2012, representing 30.42 percent of the overall value of trade between India and the Asia-Pacific region [Daly and Vo \(2013\)](#). ASEAN's general merchandise trade with India climbed from US\$10 billion in 2000 to US\$58.5 billion in 2015, a rate of growth of 13 percent per year, which was significantly greater than ASEAN's total trade growth of 8 percent. Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows from India into ASEAN ranged between \$1.9 billion and \$6.6 billion [Athukorala \(2009\)](#). In 2018, bilateral trade volume reached 80,8 billion USD, and FDI from India to ASEAN nations reached USD 1.7 billion. In 2015, India was ASEAN's sixth-largest trading partner and eighth-largest country in foreign direct investment.

It can be seen that the relationship with India acts as a catalyst and a driving force for ASEAN's economic growth. In a world that is drawing closer together under globalization and regionalization, the relationship between India and ASEAN will be challenging to separate. ASEAN needs India and vice versa. During the 35th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, on November 3, 2019, ASEAN leaders welcomed India's implementation of the Act East Policy [L. Lee \(2015\)](#), actively supporting ASEAN's central role and efforts in regional integration and community building. Prime Minister Narendra Modi affirmed India's strong commitment to ASEAN and emphasized that ASEAN is at the heart of India's Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific Vision, actively supporting the relationship between the two countries. ASEAN Points on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) [\(Agastia, 2020\)](#).

Regarding the importance of this relationship, Indian Secretary of State Anil Wadhwa pointed out: "Strengthening connectivity with Asian neighbors is one of our strategic priorities, turning ASEAN into a bridge with wider Asia-Pacific region. Increasing connectivity brings many benefits to all countries in the region. In particular, connectivity holds the potential to bring significant positive developments to our Northeast region" [\(Spry, 2019\)](#). ASEAN and India have also intensified their collaboration in politics- security. India has joined a range of regional cooperation procedures established by ASEAN to stress its importance. India joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996; in 1997, India became an ASEAN conversation partner. The first India-ASEAN summit was conducted in 2002. Since that summit, the ASEAN + 1 process with India has been formally created. India signed the TAC in 2004 and participated in the East Asia Summit process, which was founded in December 2005 in Kuala Lumpur. India has made significant contributions to the establishment of this forum [\(Downey et al., 2017\)](#).

Southeast Asia is the "heart" and "central pole" of India's "Look East" policy, according to the Narendra Modi government (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017). In the Indo-Pacific strategy of New

Delhi, Southeast Asia continues to play a vital role. Moreover, the emphasis on ASEAN centrality enables India to pursue its goal of an open, accessible, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, displaying the independence of New Delhi's foreign policy. At the same time, India is anticipated to profit more from expanding economic connections with Southeast Asia, particularly the expansion of bilateral trade and investment exchanges. The development in connectedness between ASEAN and India is also reflected on the political and security fronts by strengthening defense collaboration between New Delhi and Singapore and oil and gas cooperation in the East Sea with Vietnam.

In diplomacy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited most ASEAN nations except Cambodia and Brunei and invited all ASEAN leaders to attend India's annual independence celebrations in January 2018. [Limaye \(2016\)](#). The preceding acts highlight the significance of ASEAN for India's Indo-Pacific strategy in particular and foreign policy in general. It also demonstrates New Delhi's willingness to aid ASEAN politically to balance relations with China's expansion in the area. It should be highlighted again that expanding relationships with ASEAN helps India maintain a balance in its dealings with other powers. In particular, in the face of China's power expansion, especially China's East Sea strategy, India is concerned about China's growing influence that may threaten India's maritime security in the region. Fearing that China's expanding influence from the "South China Sea" pearl will spread to the Indian Ocean, India has increased its exercise activities with the navies of countries such as Singapore, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea.

The convergence points of India's "Look East" policy and China's "Southward" policy in the South China Sea. Consequently, the contradiction between India and China about the maintenance of strategic influence is also readily apparent. If China can control the South China Sea, it will undoubtedly turn its attention to the Indian Ocean. Notably, in 2005, when the search for Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean was highlighted by the grand memorial ceremony for Zheng, He, the Ming Dynasty explorer who frequented the waters between China and Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Persian Gulf, and the Horn of Africa in the early fifteenth century. This demonstrates China's assertion that these waterways remain within its area of influence. Therefore, more than ever, India understands that deepening and improving relations with Southeast Asia through arms trade and building maritime cooperation capacity between India and ASEAN will be vital to maintaining the good relations between the two sides, and it will also boost the spirit of India is competing equally with China in this region.

Amid the complicated context of multi-dimensional international relations, and fierce competition among regional powers, India increasingly realizes the strategic position of Southeast Asia. India's regular and stable presence in all aspects, especially politics and security in the Asia-Pacific region, will help ensure India's national interests and bring peace and regional peace

and stability. Rajiv Sikri, Secretary of State for India's Ministry of External Affairs in charge of Look East Policy (2002 - 2006), emphasized: "India was not able to emerge on the international stage until it had an authentic relationship with ASEAN... of which the India-ASEAN summits provided the most useful opportunity" ([Asher, Sen, & Srivastava, 2003](#)).

India became one of eight ASEAN partners at the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) in October 2010, marking a step toward a broader engagement in Asia-Pacific security problems. Binh Duong. Since 2010, India's involvement in ADMM+ has allowed it to participate in security cooperation and rivalry for influence with other powers. India is an active and responsible participant in security dialogue mechanisms or promoting regional cooperation, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Southeast Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN - India Summit, Shangri-La Security Dialogue... In addition, India also signed cooperation agreements or Memorandum of Understanding on defense cooperation with nine Asia-Pacific countries, including six ASEAN member states, namely Malaysia, Myanmar, Indonesia, Singapore, Laos, and Vietnam. As Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once affirmed: "We (India) are attached to the importance of our relationship with ASEAN, which plays a central role in India's Look East Policy" ([Singh, 2005](#)).

The South China Sea is an issue that has traditionally been considered sensitive, and India usually takes a restrained stance, but recently India has begun to criticize China. The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India expressed India's support for US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement rejecting most of China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, a significant change in US policy towards the South China Sea, on July 16, 2020, by emphasizing that the South China Sea is a global common property and that India has binding interests in peace and stability in this sea [Scott \(2013\)](#). Additionally, the frequency and quality of the Indian Navy's visits to Southeast Asia are on the rise. In June 2016, four of the Eastern Fleet of India's most modern warships were docked at Cam Ranh (Vietnam), Subic Bay (Philippines), and Port Klang (Malaysia) (Malaysia). China has expressed "concern" over India's first deployment of naval ships carrying anti-ship weapons to Pacific nations. However, this action demonstrates that India is prepared to protect its economic and trade interests in the region and ensure freedom of navigation in the face of rising tensions in the East Sea. In addition, India has boosted maritime cooperation with the United States and Japan, increasing Beijing's concern. In 2007, the India-United States naval exercise Malabar was expanded into a large-scale, multilateral practice in the Bay of Bengal involving the United States, India, Japan, Singapore, and Australia. China views this event as an attempt to prevent the country's ascent. [Brewster \(2010\)](#). At the same time, the 2014 India-US Joint Strategic Vision Statement also affirmed: "the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the East Sea" [Das \(2018\)](#).

In addition, India's military diplomacy with ASEAN nations has strengthened, as demonstrated by the agreement to undertake yearly joint naval exercises with Singapore, known as SIMBEX, since 1994. The drill between the two sides on May 18, 2017, was the twenty-fourth exercise between the two navies in the East Sea. Over time, the scope and scale of joint activities have grown to encompass all aspects of air defense, marine deterrent, etc. India has also struck an agreement with ASEAN to host a joint exercise with eight of its partner nations since 2017. Within the framework of ADMM+, the cyber practice dubbed FORCE-18 incorporates ground operations, peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, etc. In July of 2020, India and Australia struck an important defense deal allowing the use of each other's military sites and inviting Australia to participate in the Malabar Navy exercises that India performs with Japan and the United States to bolster the efforts of the "Quad" - Australia, Japan, the United States, and India - against China's maritime ambitions in the region [Mansingh \(1994\)](#). In addition, India and ASEAN conduct many security cooperation through maritime patrol against terrorism, piracy, and transnational crime. India has also transferred radar and submarine detection technology to Myanmar and has contracted to sell two frigates to the Philippines. Vietnam and India also had 9 times the Vietnam - India Security Dialogue at the level of deputy defense ministers. India also gave Vietnam a credit of USD 100 million (2014) and USD 500 million (2016) [Sarma \(2020\)](#) for defense connectivity between the two countries, and many military cooperation agreements between the two sides were signed, such as training, Naval training, anti-piracy drills, pilot training, military equipment maintenance or military equipment installation, military procurement.

For many years, India has helped Vietnam train many pilots to fly Su-30 MK2Vs and crew members of Kilo-class submarines [Vo \(2017\)](#). India and Vietnam are negotiating whether India will sell Brahmos and Akash long-range rockets to Vietnam. India is assigning Indian company Larsen&Tubro (L&T) to build a number of high-speed patrol boats [Rosenberg and Chung \(2008\)](#) for Vietnam to protect maritime security, control illegal activities at sea, and control illegal activities at sea participating in search and rescue operations. Importantly, L&T will transfer the design and technology to Vietnam and supply spare parts and equipment to build this type of vessel at a Vietnamese shipbuilding company. India is aiming to export arms to ASEAN amid the growing defense industry. Vietnam, Myanmar and the Philippines are now India's main partners in this field. In the future, ASEAN will be an important market for the Indian military industry as the awareness of the security environment is increasing concern by countries in the region.

In terms of connectivity, India's commitment to re-presentation for the Mekong - Ganges Cooperation (MGC) under the Modi administration is assisting mainland Southeast Asia in attracting the attention of major countries such as the United States (with the Lower Mekong Initiative-MLI), China (with the Mekong - Lancang Cooperation), Japan (with the

Greater Mekong Subregion Cooperation), Korea (with the Mekong - Korea Action Plans 2014 - 2017; 2017 In addition to the importance of building a strategic balance for the area, India and other major countries' investments helps expand and strengthen the infrastructure and infrastructure connectivity for mainland Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN-India ties are progressing toward long-term and strategic objectives, and ASEAN is becoming India's regional foreign policy's primary priority. And perhaps now is the perfect time for Southeast Asian nations to reap the benefits of India's policy of expanding its economic, military, and security presence. As researcher Alka Acharya once mentioned: "ASEAN is the gateway to the Asia-Pacific region, and the Look East Policy becomes a springboard to bring India out of the confinement of South Asia, helping India become a key player, a rising regional power" ([Hong, 2013](#)).

Southeast Asia in China's Competitive Strategy

Southeast Asia is located in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Important sea routes pass through this area, especially Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam. For China, Southeast Asia holds an even more critical position because many Southeast Asian countries share land and sea borders with China. Equally important, China's rise requires space, and China has chosen Southeast Asia as a strategic site for Beijing's growing influence. The role of Southeast Asia with China is becoming more and more critical in the context that significant powers in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the United States, Japan, and India, are also constantly increasing their cooperation in many fields in this area. After many years of fostering the growth of their relations together, ASEAN and China have achieved very significant results. This relationship has provided a robust legal foundation for collaboration in all critical areas. Cooperation institutions are pretty complete. The principles of cooperation are clear and straightforward, based both on internationally recognized legislation and the Asian way of life. The breadth of cooperation is broadening with increasingly tangible outcomes.

Based on these achievements, on October 8, 2003, at the 7th ASEAN-China Summit held in Bali, Indonesia, the two sides' leaders decided to upgrade their relations to Strategic Partnership. In the "Joint Statement between the Heads of State/Government of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the People's Republic of China on the Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity," the two parties expressly stated their intent to form a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity. Promote amicable relations, mutually beneficial cooperation, and good neighborliness, and further contribute to the region's lasting peace, development, and collaboration [Yeung \(2006\)](#). The ASEAN-China strategic partnership will be realized through a comprehensive expansion and development of ASEAN-China cooperation relations.

The idea that the ASEAN-China strategic alliance was settled upon when ASEAN had just concluded its expansion process and China was

experiencing a rapid rise could generate suspicions amongst international powers. In the aforementioned joint declaration, the two parties emphasized the nature of their Strategic Partnership in the region as "non-aligned, non-military, and non-exclusive, and does not preclude the parties from forming all-oriented relations of friendship and cooperation with other nations" [Yeung \(2006\)](#). The objective of defining the nature of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership is to make it plain to the outside world that ASEAN and China have no intention of forging a military alliance against any other nation. Outside the region, those nations participating in this strategic partnership may maintain or build new cooperative ties with countries, so long as these ties are based on the principles of friendliness and cooperation.

The legal basis of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership is the Charter of the United Nations, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the 5 Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and internationally recognized standards. The 1997 ASEAN-China Summit and other cooperation documents signed by the two sides include the Joint Statement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and China and the ASEAN-China Joint Declaration on Cooperation in non-traditional security (2002). The above documents are on political - security, economic - social cooperation. This once again affirms the non-military nature of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership. This relationship is "comprehensive and forward-looking cooperation, focusing on political, economic, social, security and international and regional issues" [Wattanapruittipaisan \(2003\)](#). The establishment of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership has brought relations between the two sides to a new and higher stage of development, "clearing the way for an enhanced and more substantive interaction between ASEAN and China" [Van \(2015\)](#).

The birth of the ASEAN-China strategic partnership is a major diplomatic victory for China in Southeast Asia. In just over a decade, China has succeeded in turning countries in this region, which see their rise as a threat to the peace and security of Southeast Asia as whole many ASEAN member countries in particular, to become its strategic partner. The ASEAN-China strategic partnership is also a great success of Chinese diplomacy. This alliance has supplied China with vital evidence of its good relationship with a group of Southeast Asian developing nations. Other developing countries in Africa and Latin America might look to this partnership as a model for expanding and deepening their cooperation with the People's Republic of China. This would expand China's influence in the third world and give China another instrument to increase its negotiating position with other large countries, such as India.

At the same time, the economic connection between China and ASEAN is constantly developing. Under the impact of tax cuts, two-way trade between ASEAN and China has increased markedly. In 2004, the total trade turnover between ASEAN and China reached 105.8 billion USD ([Urban, 2006](#)). Since 2009, China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner.

Additionally, the two parties collaborate to promote a green economic relationship and expand the sustainable utilization of marine resources. 2020 is also the year of ASEAN-China digital economic cooperation, emphasizing developing areas, including 5G networks, e-commerce, scientific and technological innovation, and smart cities. In the first two months of 2020, the total value of ASEAN-China trade-in products amounted to around \$84.8 billion, a 2% increase over the same time in 2019 and equivalent to 14.4% of China's total foreign trade value [W. Wang \(2015\)](#).

ASEAN has surpassed the European Union to become China's top trading partner. Investment cooperation between the two sides also developed relatively quickly. Foreign direct investment (FDI) flowing from China to ASEAN amounted to US\$10.2 billion in 2018, accounting for 6.6% of ASEAN's total FDI. Compared to ASEAN's dialogue partners, China ranks third in terms of foreign investment capital in ASEAN. China's investment capital and construction contracts in the ASEAN region continuously increased sharply, reaching 11 billion USD in the first six months of 2019, double that of the last six months of 2018. Generally, from 2014 to 2018, Chinese investment projects in the ASEAN region accounted for 35% of the total number of projects under the "Belt and Road" framework (BRI). Malaysia receives the most investment capital, up to 27.5 billion USD, accounting for 7.2% of the total value. In Cambodia, Chinese investment in real estate skyrocketed to \$4.6 billion in the first seven months of 2019, 53% higher than the same period in 2018 [E.-Y. Lee and Park \(2019\)](#). In general, the economic development of ASEAN, significantly since the 2008 world financial crisis, has depended heavily on China's economic growth. Assessing the influence of China's economic growth, Philippine researcher Walden Bello said that "Ultimately, demand from the Chinese economy grows at a dangerously fast rate is the main factor. The key to Southeast Asia's economic growth began around 2003, following low growth after the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and 1998" [\(Bello, 2010\)](#).

As China's economic and political strength has strengthened, it is evident that ASEAN's position in China's diplomatic policy has also grown significantly. Countries participating in the Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, require ASEAN as a partner to restrain China. China, in turn, requires the assistance of ASEAN or, at the very least, a neutral stance from ASEAN in its regional diplomatic policy to counter the increasing pressure from the United States and its allies. In addition, Southeast Asia plays a significant part in other China-led regional cooperation programs, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Before the official establishment of ASEAN-China relations, China's status and influence in the six ASEAN member states (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Brunei) were only bolstered by Mao Zedong-influenced political opposition. Even though some of the founding members of ASEAN (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the

Philippines) have formed links with China, China's economic influence has not been significant. Since establishing the ASEAN-China Summit mechanism in December 1997, Beijing has attempted to use this mechanism to increase its influence over ASEAN and its member states in particular. Beijing is always the initiator of cooperative initiatives between ASEAN and China, while ASEAN is mostly the recipient. Since the two sides began establishing a strategic alliance in October 2003, this reality has become more apparent. Not to mention significant initiatives such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), cooperation in the field of non-traditional security, the development of a Code of Conduct of Parties in the East Sea (DOC), and the establishment of the ASEAN - China Strategic Partnership was proposed by Beijing in 2002 and 2003, the cooperation initiatives in the process of constructing the ASEAN - China Strategic Partnership were also primarily proposed by China.

The initiative to organize the China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit (CABIS) was launched by Premier Wen Jiabao at the 7th ASEAN-China Summit held on October 8, 2003, in Bali. At the meeting, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao proposed to organize the annual China-ASEAN Trade Expo. He also brought the initiative to meet the Communications Ministers Conference in 2006, environmental cooperation on a bilateral basis, and set up China - ASEAN Investment Fund; China-ASEAN Infrastructure Development Fund. China's new leaders also continue the trend. In October 2013, President Xi Jinping, during his first visit to Southeast Asia after taking office, launched a series of important initiatives to promote the strategic partnership with ASEAN. These initiatives have been developed by Premier Li Keqiang and generalized into the China-ASEAN "2+7 Cooperation Framework". China also supports the performance of the above initiatives.

With the above active and active role, China had played a leading role in developing ASEAN-China relations, especially since 2003, when the two sides realized the ASEAN-China strategic partnership. This role has helped China enhance its influence in Southeast Asia, especially from 2003 to 2008. China's political-diplomatic presence appears everywhere. At the regional level, a Chinese delegation to ASEAN has been established. At the national level, in addition to Chinese embassies in the capitals of ASEAN countries, Chinese consulates have been present in most cities and major economic centers in ASEAN countries. Chinese leaders are welcome in most Southeast Asian capitals. Because they represent an increasing power, they also carry large amounts of aid on every trip. Through assistance, China has transformed itself into one of the significant financial resources many Southeast Asian countries look to. From 1997 to 2010, many Southeast Asian leaders praised China and its help to their country. Even the Philippines declared, "We are delighted to consider China as our eldest brother"[Jia \(1998\)](#). This shows the tremendous political influence of China in Southeast Asia in the above period.

Since 2003, China's cultural influence in Southeast Asia has expanded significantly. In numerous ASEAN nations, cultural centers of Chinese origin have been established. Up to 2010, 32 Confucius Institutes had been constructed in this region. Thailand is home to 23 of these institutes. The remaining institutions are dispersed around Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Confucius Institutes are locations for propagation, cultural exchange, and teaching Chinese. Through the operations of these academies, China's soft influence in Southeast Asian nations has increased. In addition to bolstering the creation of Confucius Institutes, China grants scholarships for international students to study in China, with Southeast Asia receiving priority. China has recently awarded the Mekong Sub-region countries 1,000 scholarships for five years and substantial funds for Chinese language instruction. According to the figures, 951 students from ten ASEAN member states got full scholarships from the Chinese government in 2007. The Chinese government awarded 50 full scholarships to member nations in 2009. In addition, a substantial amount of China's cultural industry items are exported to ASEAN nations. China Radio International and Guangxi Radio Foreign Affairs founded "Voice of the Gulf of Tonkin" in 2009. (BBR). The radio show is transmitted from Guangxi, in the direction of Southeast Asia, in five languages: English, Thai, Vietnamese, Cantonese, and Mandarin, for 17 hours every day, from 7 am to 24 am. The government also actively uses television programs to promote China in Southeast Asia ([Otmazgin, 2012](#)).

In terms of foreign policy, China declares its willingness to build a friendship with all countries globally, especially neighboring countries, on equality, mutual benefit, openness to trade, scientific and technical cooperation, cultural exchange, and cooperation for development. An essential part of China's periphery diplomacy is promoting regional cooperation in the service of economic and strategic considerations. China's active participation and economic integration processes are evidence that China is trying to reassure its neighbors that its "peaceful rise" strategy is not threatening. East Asian economy, joining ASEAN + 3, increasing leadership position in East Asia Summit (EAS), etc. The country's pursuit of multilateralism to take on a more significant regional and world economy initiative has shown considerable progress in enhancing strategic goals through external activities. China is increasingly showing its ambition through stricter steps in the East Sea regarding the East Sea issue. In this regard, ASEAN is almost no longer as central as the Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS). Researcher Zeng Zhang assessed that China has "understood" ASEAN both strategically and tactically [Vo \(2017\)](#) and bluntly stated that ASEAN does not have a central position in the East Sea issue.

China's general East Sea strategy is to "keep a low degree of tension" to control the situation in the region and gradually "gnaw" the South China Sea while avoiding large-scale confrontation. China has taken steps such as asserting sovereignty, repeatedly making claims, bolstering diplomatic propaganda, modernizing its Navy, enhancing its management of the

occupied islands, and using its economic influence to exert pressure on ASEAN to split the organization. Maintaining the status quo, rejecting internationalization, and upholding the principles of bilateral agreements are the "immutable" principles that China is imposing on the area as a great power. It can be seen that China's sovereignty claims in the East Sea are becoming increasingly unyielding. A partnership with ASEAN is necessary, but controlling three-quarters of the South China Sea's territory is more crucial. This explains why China can reach compromises with ASEAN on various subjects but never alters its position on resolving the South China Sea issue bilaterally with relevant nations. According to this opinion, China buys time to prolong the sovereignty debate until it can monopolize the South China Sea. ([Le Lan Huong et al., 2015](#)).

Thus, the development of ASEAN - China relations in recent years has created opportunities for China to increase its influence in most of the main fields in the life of Southeast Asian countries, creating more favorable conditions for China to develop conditions to help China have the ability to compete fairly with other major countries, including India.

Impact of China-India Competition on Southeast Asia

As the twenty-first century begins, the rivalry among the world's leading nations becomes increasingly severe to reposition the new global order. The battle for influence among significant countries in Southeast Asia, where there is a strong expanding ASEAN Community with an important geo-strategic area, is hotter than ever. In many complex changes, India and China have emerged and found many ways to draw ASEAN into their dominant orbit, creating a position of mutual restraint while the relationship between the two sides is developing. From a political and security standpoint, the rivalry for influence between China and a large number of ASEAN members, including India, has significantly strengthened ASEAN's position in the area. The fact that ASEAN discussed the question of expanding the ASEAN + 3 mechanism into the ASEAN + 4 mechanism at the ASEAN Summit and the ASEAN + 3 Summit in 2000 demonstrated ASEAN's multilateralization and diversity of partners in its foreign policy. Although ASEAN + 3 has not been increased to ASEAN + 4, it is evident that the 2002 ASEAN-India Summit established a framework for collaboration that goes beyond the scope of ASEAN + 1 or ASEAN + 3. (China, Japan, and Korea). In other words, the ASEAN's status and function are more generally acknowledged when the ASEAN + 1 mechanism extends beyond the Asia-Pacific region to South Asia.

The strategic struggle between India and China raises the value of ASEAN in the strategies of nations such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. In June 2019, ASEAN announced the ASEAN Vision for the Indo-Pacific, which affirms the central role of ASEAN as the fundamental principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with mechanisms led by ASEAN; a vision based on the principles of strengthening ASEAN's centrality, open, transparent, inclusive, rules-based framework, and good

governance, resp. Interestingly, immediately after ASEAN presented its vision for the Indo-Pacific, the Quartet countries reaffirmed their strong support for the central role of ASEAN and the ASEAN-led regional architecture during November 2019 meetings [Leguizamón Moncaleano \(2021\)](#). In other words, one of the Quartet's primary objectives is to restrain China's aggression and compel it to conform to international law. In this group's vision of the growing regional architecture, ASEAN's pivotal role in the region is still acknowledged. In terms of economy, the competition between India and China in Southeast Asia in this area, although not prominent, is a vital driving force promoting ASEAN's central role in economic integration in the Asia-Pacific, a goal that ASEAN strives to achieve through negotiations to build free trade agreements (FTAs) and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPs) (Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015).

Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, April 2009, p.37). Suppose the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) is ASEAN's internal economic integration mechanism. In that case, the FTAs between ASEAN and significant partners are efforts to form a network of ASEAN free trade agreements externally, strengthening ASEAN's central role in the region. ASEAN's partners in the EAS have also supported ASEAN's central role in regional economic integration. The 2nd EAS Presidential Statement in 2007 affirmed: "We reiterate our support for ASEAN's driving role in economic integration in the region. For further integration, we most position to launch research on channel 2 on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA) among EAS participants" [Fukunaga \(2015\)](#). Not long after CECA between China and ASEAN was signed in 2002, India quickly signed CECA with ASEAN in 2003. A similar FTA between ASEAN and Korea was signed in 2005. Economic Partnership Agreement ASEAN - Japan Banr Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEPA) was born in 2008.

The ASEAN - Australia - New Zealand FTA started negotiations in 2004, concluded negotiations in 2019, signed in 2019, and took effect from January 1, 2020. With this system of AFTAs, the central role of ASEAN as it desires has become a reality with the system of ASEAN-centered FTAs with partners China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Despite the absence of India's participation since 2019, with the signing of RCEP at the end of 2020, a new generation of a free trade agreement with ASEAN as the center has been born, just like the principles and the guiding objective of the RCEP negotiations point out: "The RCEP negotiations will recognize ASEAN's central role in the emerging regional economic architecture" [Hong \(2013\)](#). This role was also previously set by ASEAN as soon as this idea was born in 2011 [Fukunaga \(2015\)](#). Although there are still views that ASEAN's leadership role in the RCEP negotiations is more symbolic than substantive, it is clear that FTAs and RCEPs are creating a system of FTAs in the region Asia-Pacific centered by ASEAN.

However, besides strengthening ASEAN's major role, China-India competition in Southeast Asia also contributes to the division of ASEAN,

especially on sensitive issues such as the East Sea. It can be seen that there is a specific competition between India and countries with interests in Southeast Asia, such as China, the US, Japan, South Korea, Australia, etc., especially in terms of economic interests, in which the highlight is the competition in the investment market, investment attraction as well as the import and export market of goods. However, on issues such as politics and security, India shares with the US, Japan, and Australia's security challenges, especially in the South China Sea issue, or shares democratic values and principles of law, which is an element China takes a contrarian approach. At the same time, India and countries such as the US, Japan, and Australia make efforts to unite ASEAN sharing its commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight, the rule of law, and the settlement of disputes by peaceful means under the law. Under international law, including UNCLOS 1982, on the contrary, China tried to divide ASEAN in the East Sea issue to carry out a plot to monopolize this sea. The fact that ASEAN did not issue a joint statement at the 2012 Foreign Ministers Meeting or the organization had to withdraw the joint statement on the 2016 PCA ruling affirms China's intense involvement in this issue.

In addition, India's withdrawal from RCEP negotiations at the end of 2019 can be partially attributed to the intense competition between India and China. According to India's viewpoint, the initial RCEP negotiation principles were altered favor of China and a few other nations, while India incurred significant losses. India's withdrawal from RCEP is advantageous to China. India's participation in RCEP can assist this agreement in attracting a considerable market, offsetting the disadvantages that ASEAN nations suffer from the Chinese market.

Conclusion

The strategic competition in India-ASEAN-China ties is becoming more intricate due to these countries' rising-great-power foreign policies. China may be gaining more significant benefit and weight in economic, political, and diplomatic connections with Southeast Asian countries in the Sino-Indian strategic race, even though India and China have long-standing traditional ties with ASEAN. In most ways, India lags well behind China in terms of strength, and events in Southeast Asia demonstrate that China's influence continues to overshadow India's. Therefore, ASEAN countries will face a significant challenge shortly since the attractiveness of major powers will be contingent on the cohesiveness and efficacy of the consensus system. In the meantime, the US Indo-Pacific approach is supported by the Quartet of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. There has been coordination between the four nations listed above. But to truly establish a footing in the area and earn popular trust, the procedure mentioned above must have the backing of ASEAN, which is seen as the linchpin of the current regional security architecture. ASEAN has been the site for many contacts and dialogues between East Asian nations (China, Japan, and Korea), Russia, and South Asian countries. If there is a large international cooperative security structure covering this region in the

future, ASEAN will undoubtedly play a central role. Oppositely, China exerts pressure on ASEAN to draw it through diplomacy, economics, and politics, even going "underground" with each country in ASEAN to seduce them in China's path. How therefore can ASEAN retain its accomplishments and its prominent position in the region? Whether ASEAN is capable of ensuring that the values of the Community do not erode in the face of intense competition between the world's leading countries. This is an important topic that requires consideration.

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