



# DODReads Executive Summary

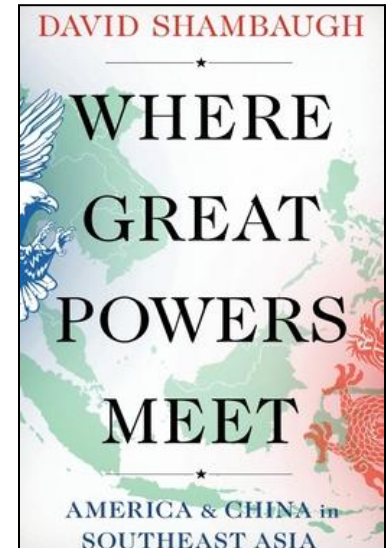
## Where Great Powers Meet

America & China in Southeast Asia

**Thesis: While the competition between the United States and China exists globally, it is most apparent in Southeast Asia.**

- **David Shambaugh:** David Shambaugh is an internationally recognized authority and award-winning author on contemporary China and the international relations of Asia. He is the Gaston Sigur Professor of Asian Studies, Political Science & International Affairs, and the founding Director of the China Policy Program in the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University. Shambaugh previously served in the Department of State and on the National Security Council staff during the Carter administration (1977-1979). From 1996-2016 he was also a Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at The Brookings Institution.

[Institution Website](#)



[Where Great Powers Meet](#)

### Why this book is important for the Military Professional:

As Shambaugh describes, the *competitive rivalry* between Washington and Beijing is arguably the most *prominent dynamic* influencing U.S. national security interests and foreign relations around the globe. The competition is wide-ranging, including traditional military security challenges and information security issues. Military and defense officials must understand the region's dynamics beyond China's borders in Southeast Asia. Beijing's political, diplomatic, economic, and military relationships and actions in the Indo-Pacific provide an excellent case study for understanding not only Chinese regional objectives but also how other countries attempt to balance relations with both the United States and China.

**competition** /kəm-pə-ti-shən/: a contest between rivals

**ASEAN** - The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration. The ten member states of ASEAN include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

### Chapter 1: Sino-American Competition in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a microcosm of the features of The United States and China's great power rivalry.

- Great power rivalry with China is different from the Cold War
  - China is more integrated into the world economy
  - China's domestic success and, subsequently, its international influence has made it a peer competitor that is more sophisticated than the Soviet Union of the twentieth century.
- Unlike during the Cold War, China and the United States are not making direct "action-reaction" decisions to counter each other.
- The relationship is a soft rivalry rather than a hard, tit-for-tat rivalry.
- Beijing and Washington compete "within and among" the ASEAN states.

## Key Findings

- China is intensively beavering away to broaden and deepen its presence in all Southeast Asian countries. At the same time, the United States neglects its attention and static in its actions.
- There is a resulting pervasive and predominant narrative across the region that China is the 'inevitable' dominant power while the United States is in an inexorable eclipse and decline.
- When examined empirically, however, this narrative is not accurate
- The United States still has deep roots and possesses far more ample power in the region than China
- The United States is an "underappreciated power," whereas China is an "overestimated one."

## The Importance of Southeast Asia

- ASEAN countries have grown closer to China, especially because many saw America's Asia "pivot" as more rhetoric than reality
- China dominates ASEAN in trade and diplomacy, while the United States' power and influence exceed China in all other domains.
- There is a tension between subjective perceptions (U.S. power is waning) and objective realities (U.S. influence in ASEAN has never been stronger) in the region.
- ASEAN countries are growing wary of China
- Conclusion: Southeast Asia is tilting towards China, but several factors could alter the region's shift

## Chapter 2: America's Legacies in Southeast Asia

The United States' relationship with Southeast Asia began with traders and missionaries, progressed to diplomatic relations, and now consists of military partnerships,

- Pre-World War II: The American legacy in Southeast Asia was positive
  - The United States genuinely favored self-determination and independence for all countries in the region
  - Southeast Asia became one of the first places to test the new American imperial ascendancy in the 1900s
- Post-World War II: Southeast Asia became one of two main theaters in which the United States sought to prevent the spread of communism
  - The Vietnam War seared the United States so traumatically that its natural inclination was to withdraw from the region and retreat into isolationism
  - President George W. Bush first introduced China as a strategic competitor
- According to Southeast Asians, the United States has often appeared distracted, arrogant, condescending, fickle, and self-preoccupied

## Chapter 3: America's Contemporary Roles in Southeast Asia

The American presence and impact in Southeast Asia is very large and significant, even if the perception of it is considerably less

- The Obama Administration's policy toward Southeast Asia can be characterized by consistent attention
  - Hilary Clinton became the first U.S. Secretary of State to visit all ten ASEAN countries
  - President Obama visited nine of the ten ASEAN countries
- The Trump Administration's policy toward Southeast Asia was largely one of "parachute diplomacy"
  - Lack of key ambassadors may have contributed to that perception
  - Southeast Asia viewed U.S. policy as creating a "strategic vacuum" in the region that China is exploiting
- U.S. security relations with ASEAN are robust
  - Almost all Southeast Asian militaries have extensive ties with the U.S. military
  - U.S. security assistance includes three main components: the International Military Education and Training program, the Foreign Military Sales and Financing program, and the Excess Defense Articles program
  - IMET allows the United States to train foreign officers

- All of this is happening, but it is not widely publicized in the media within the region
- In several SEAN countries, being perceived as close to the United States, particularly in the defense and intelligence domains, is considered a liability

## **Chapter 4: The Chinese Legacies in Southeast Asia**

The People's Republic of China and Southeast Asia (1949-2000)

- Maoist era – China's role in Southeast Asia was quite destabilizing and Beijing's relations were strained
- China was focused on undermining the American position in the region during the Cold War
- China cultivated and manipulated overseas Chinese communities to undermine non-communist states and sow revolution throughout the region
- Following the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, Beijing attempted to blunt and undermine Moscow's role in the region

The 1990s: Progressive Warming

- As China began emerging on the global stage, it lost momentum as a result of the Tiananmen Incident of June 4, 1989
- The G-7 and Western nations enacted economic sanctions against the Chinese regime
- Relations with Southeast Asia were strained
- Singapore's Prime Minister took the lead on influencing ASEAN nations to maintain ties with Beijing, arguing that it would be counterproductive in the long term to completely isolate China

## **Chapter 5: China's Contemporary Roles in Southeast Asia**

Chinese analysts see an increasingly competitive strategic dynamic between the United States and China across the Indo-Pacific region, but particularly in Southeast Asia

- China maintains consistent bilateral relations with all ASEAN member states
- Beijing conducts frequent high-level exchanges
- Priority relationships: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand
- Secondary relationships: Singapore and Vietnam

China is active in its military-to-military exchanges, but does not come close to the United States in terms of weapons sales, officer training, joint exercise, intelligence collection and sharing, and military education programs

- Malaysia and Thailand have entered into a defense intelligence-sharing arrangement with China
- Beijing's vision for Asia-Pacific Security consists of four principles:
  - Multi-layered, comprehensive, and diversified
  - Adopted as a "common cause" by all countries in the region
  - Based on consensus
  - Advanced in parallel with the development of a regional economic framework

Overall, Beijing has used diplomacy, people-to-people exchanges, commerce, and security initiatives to establish a broad and increasingly deep footprint across Southeast Asia

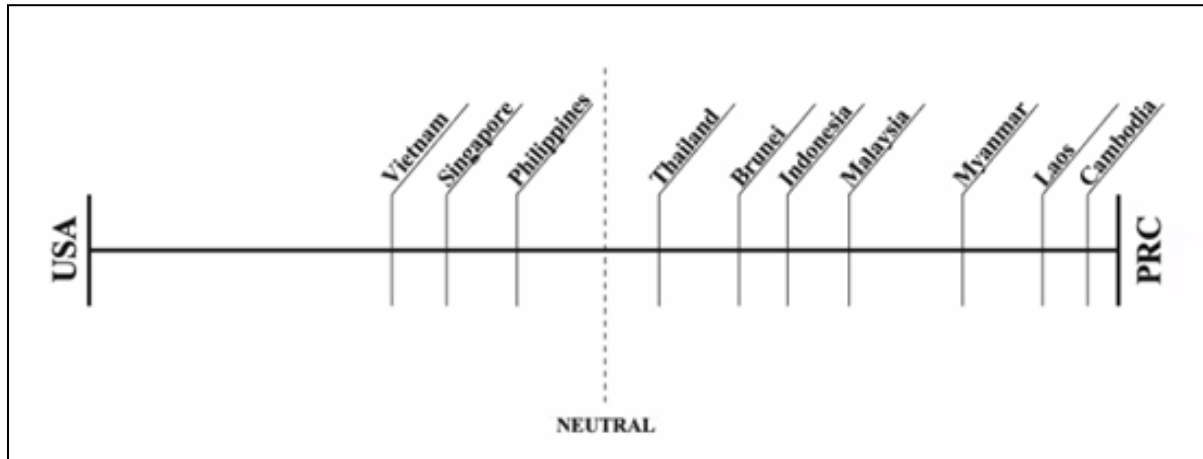
- Economically, China's influence is large and growing rapidly
- Beijing's diplomacy is impressive on paper, but not entirely substantive
- China's military position is not deep at all

## **Chapter 6: Navigating between the Giants (ASEAN's Agency)**

There has been a qualitative shift toward China on the part of the majority of ASEAN nations in recent years

- Sources of Southeast Asian ambivalence about the United States
  - Many in Southeast Asia see the United States as just another Caucasian imperialist power

- The United States was not supportive of Southeast Asian attempts at neutralism and non-alignment during the 1950s and 1960s
- The United States' war in Vietnam
- Thailand: Arguably the most important country to the U.S.-China competition
- Myanmar: America's ties to Myanmar are recent; China's are deep and longstanding
- Laos: The United States has been a relative non-factor in the country's relations
- Cambodia: Exists as a Chinese client state
- Vietnam: China is the priority, and its leaders calibrate their policies around Beijing
- Malaysia: Critically important and strategically located in the U.S.-China competition
- Brunei: Gradually shifting towards China because it sees Beijing as a clear rising power
- Singapore: Leaders do not want to be forced to choose between the United States and China
- Indonesia: The U.S.-Indonesia defense relationship has also been a notable positive dimension
- Philippines: Leadership turnover has brought changes in orientation vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing



Spectrum of ASEAN states' relations with the United States and China

## Chapter 7: Sino-American Competition in Southeast Asia

The *primary dynamic* in international affairs is a *comprehensive rivalry* between the United States and China

- While the competition between Washington and Beijing exists throughout the globe, it is most apparent in Southeast Asia
- Scholars are split on whether China desires to expel America from the Indo-Pacific entirely

Future Directions for ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific, given the U.S.-China Rivalry

- Scenario 1: Further Bandwagoning
  - China will tighten its grip on ASEAN
  - ASEAN will respond with further pro-China alignment
  - The United States could find itself ostracized across the region
- Scenario 2: Continued "Soft Rivalry" and Competitive Coexistence
  - This assumes both Washington and Beijing will continue pursuing their own interests in the region rather than directly countering each other
  - This is the "good news" scenario
  - Strategic competition will not become adversarial or kinetic
- Scenario 3: "Hard Rivalry" and Polarization
  - Increased and intensified competition
  - China would need to step up its game in the security and defense realm
- Scenario 4: More Neutral Hedging
  - This would be triggered if Beijing overreaches and ASEAN comes to resent China
  - Full bandwagoning with the United States is probably not realistic, even in this scenario

*“Competition between the United States and China is inevitable, but conflict is not. This is not the Cold War. The Soviet Union was contesting with the United States for global supremacy. China is acting purely in its own national interests.”*

*– Lee Kuan Yew, Founding Prime Minister of Singapore*

This executive summary is composed of both verbatim excerpts and summarizations from **Where Great Powers Meet** by David Shambaugh.

#### **Resources and Additional Reading**

- 1) [Council on Foreign Relations - Backgrounder: What is ASEAN](#)
- 2) [ASEAN Matters for America - Fifth Edition](#)
- 3) [Foreign Affairs - The Southeast Asian Crucible \(David Shambaugh\)](#)
- 4) [The Washington Post - Philippine President's White House Visit Reflects Sharp Upturn in Ties](#)
- 5) [U.S. DoD - Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Meeting With Southeast Asian Defense Ministers](#)

Thanks to Jason Hug for compiling this Executive Summary. Jason is a 2018 graduate of the United States Military Academy. He is transitioning from the military to pursue a joint JD/MPP program at Yale Law School and the Yale Jackson School of Global Affairs. Jason served as an intelligence officer in Germany with 2d Cavalry Regiment and in Afghanistan in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel. He is currently assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina where he is earning a MS in strategic intelligence from the National Intelligence University. Jason can be reached through [LinkedIn](#).



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