

## Article

# From Cold War Regional Dynamics to Contemporary Foreign Policy: Lessons from Three ASEAN States

Jiaxi Wu\*

Faculty of art and social science, National University of Singapore, 119077, Singapore.

\*Corresponding author: Jiaxi Wu, e1538691@u.nus.edu.

## CITATION

Wu JX. From Cold War Regional Dynamics to Contemporary Foreign Policy: Lessons from Three ASEAN States. *Cognitive Global-Regional Sociology*. 2025; 1(2): 203.

<https://doi.org/10.63808/grs.v1i2.203>

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 5 September 2025

Accepted: 11 September 2025

Available online: 16 September 2025

## COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2025 by author(s).

*Global-Regional Sociology in Study* is published by Wisdom Academic Press Ltd.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

**Abstract:** This paper examines how the distinct regional dynamics of the Cold War era continue to play the most important role in defining the present foreign policy decisions of ASEAN member nations. The essay draws on a comparative case study analysis of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam to demonstrate the various historical trajectories that have led to a convergent strategy of "hedging" in the face of modern Sino-American strategic conflict. The Philippines, a historic US ally, shows a pattern of oscillation between alignment and autonomy. Malaysia shows a consistent approach to non-alignment and careful balance. Vietnam, a former member of the Eastern Bloc, has been effective in promoting international integration and reconciliation. The analysis contends that, despite their divergent Cold War experiences, all three states now use the ASEAN platform as an essential framework for presenting a unified front on shared regional challenges, particularly the South China Sea disputes, and engaging major powers through multilateral dialogue and consensus-building. The conclusion proposes that the Cold War's legacy provides the necessary historical backdrop for understanding modern Southeast Asian state behavior, while ASEAN serves as the institutional vehicle for converting this historical experience into effective diplomatic practice.

**Keywords:** Cold War; ASEAN; foreign policy; hedging strategy; South China Sea Disputes; US-China Competition; Philippines; Malaysia; Vietnam

## **1. Introduction**

The Cold War was a period of intense rivalry, power projection in support of their respective interests, and proxy-wars over different regions of the world by the two super powers of the time- the United States of America and the Soviet Union- from after the end of the second world war till the dissolution of USSR in 1991. The fierce contention that lasted for more than forty years, was based on the antagonistic political ideologies of Democracy and Communism, and on the opposite economic systems of Capitalism and Command Economy. The era of the Cold War was characterized by said two main proponents of Democracy and Communism entrenching the respective systems in the core regions of dominance of either, while attempting to expand their spheres of influence in other regions including South East Asia, Africa, and Latin America. A sizable number of states, though, chose not to be allied with either the USA or the USSR, but rather lead a balanced foreign policy. The three blocks of international alliances, alignments and allegiances came to be known as the Western bloc, the Eastern bloc, and the Non-Aligned Movement. Led by the USA, the Western bloc included countries in Western Europe, North America, and some countries in Asia including Japan, South Korea plus Australia and New Zealand. Led by the USSR, the Eastern bloc included countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and some countries in Asia and Latin America including China and North Korea. The Non-Aligned Movement mostly included newly independent countries that sought to maintain their independence and neutrality in the Cold War, and included India, Egypt, Indonesia and Yugoslavia among many others (Acharya, 2003; Jones and Smith, 2012).

## **2. Objective**

This essay aims to examine how the precarious Southeast Asian regional development during the Cold War is the most crucial factor in determining the foreign policy choices of present ASEAN member states (Emmers, 2006; Lee and Tang, 2014). First, let us understand the circumstances under which ASEAN was founded

and the broad limitations and considerations that influenced the foreign policies of the member states.

### **3. ASEAN- Foreign Policy Considerations**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was established in August 1967 with the signing of the Bangkok Declaration by the founding member states, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. Southeast Asian region at the time was characterized by political tensions, conflicts and the lingering effects of the decolonization process. The founding member states sought to address those challenges and build a framework of regional cooperation. A primary geopolitical motivation for the formation of ASEAN was to contain the spread of communism sponsored by the USSR, that had already gained a strong foothold in some upper South East Asian countries including Vietnam and North Korea accompanied by armed conflicts (Mauzy, 2000; Snyder, 2010). USA considered military intervention and support the right policy to counter the expansion of communism, operating under the 'Domino policy' that proffered the notion of countries succumbing to communism like dominos if one country adopted communism as its political and economic system. The active military involvement in support of the respective factions had led to the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975). The five founding member states had each been struggling with communist influences in their internal politics, and considered containing the spread of communism a common objective (Acharya, 2003; Jones and Smith, 2012).

As per the ASEAN Declaration (1967), the basic principles of the association were cooperation, amity, and non-interference, with a view to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region, and to promote regional peace, collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest. In 2007 as the international order had largely given way to a multi-polar world, the ASEAN Charter was signed by the ten member states. The charter lays out a more structured framework of cooperation between the member states, building on the founding principles. The charter turned ASEAN into a legal entity to create a single free-trade region, and aimed to transform ASEAN into a closer-knot association along the lines of the European Union (Emmers, 2006; Ha, 2019).

The foreign policy aspect of current ASEAN countries can be analysed in two groups: the founding member states (including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines as well as Brunei) and the later member states (including Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia that joined between 1995 and 1999). While the former group had contended with stemming the rise of communism during the Cold War, the latter group had experienced much intense impact of the Cold War. In the following paragraphs, this analysis will consider three countries vis-a-vis their respective foreign policies during the Cold War, as well as in recent years, and discuss the influence and support of ASEAN in helping these countries achieve their foreign policy objectives. These countries have been selected for their unique as well as similar challenges, representative of the foreign relation limitations and paradigms of the ASEAN member states. The three countries are the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam (Lee and Tang, 2014; Acharya, 2003).

## **4. The Philippines**

Among the founding member states of ASEAN, the Philippines was a pivotally involved state in the Cold War in Southeast Asia. While it maintained a central position as a US ally during the cold war, it also sought to expand its regional cooperation, and with the rise of China, to maintain favorable relationship with China. The latter aspect of the foreign policy has been a tightrope walk given the territorial disputes between China and ASEAN member states, the Philippines included (Ha, 2019; Storey, 2021).

### **4.1. The Philippines and the USA**

#### **4.1.1 Cold War Era**

Having been a US colony from 1898 till 1946, the Philippines had developed a complex but close relationship with the US that played out during the Cold War. For a short period after its independence, the Philippines chose to join the Non-Aligned Movement as it was eager to demonstrate its independence and sovereignty in the face of internal and external challenges. At the same time, the 1947 Military Bases

Agreement gave the United States a 99-year lease on a number of Philippine military and naval bases in which U.S. authorities had virtual territorial rights. In August 1951, a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) was signed between representatives of the Philippines and the United States. The accord dictated that both nations would support each other if either the Philippines or the United States were to be attacked by an external party.

The most urgent and important challenge the Philippines faced was the threat of communism in Southeast Asia. The rise of communism in neighboring countries like Vietnam and China posed a security threat to the Philippines. In response, the Philippine government sought to enhance its strong ties with the United States and joined the US-led security organization Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, which was considered a barrier against communist expansion in the region. The Philippines along with Thailand was the only two SEATO member state actually located in the Southeast Asia region (Mauzy, 2000; Jones and Smith, 2012).

## **4.1.2 Recent Years**

While the Philippines has historically maintained its close cultural, trade and military relations with the USA, between 2016 and 2022 the Philippines was under the leadership of Rodrigo Duterte who advanced a foreign policy less dependent of the United States, and more collaborative with China and Russia. During this period, the Philippines adopted a more reconciliatory approach with China and chose not to strongly assert its claim in the South China Sea dispute. Despite Duterte's shift in the foreign policy, the Filipino population in general have continued to hold a strongly favorable perception of the USA while expressing a low trust rating of China. The current administration led by president Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has pursued the policy to normalize and reinvigorate ties with the USA, driven by the expansion of China's military presence in the South China Sea. To counter China's assertive posturing, the US has stepped up efforts to expand its Indo-Pacific security options recently. Subsequently, operating under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement of 2014, the Philippines has as recently as February 2023 agreed to provide expanded access to its military and naval bases. The recent development is being considered a high impact move in the US-China contention, as US forces return to Philippines after 30 years (a, 2019; Storey, 2021; Ciorciari, 2019).

## **4.2. The Philippines and China**

The two countries have a multi-faceted relationship. Since after the Cold War and as China has expanded its regional influence, the relationships have been characterized by evolving dynamics, with a mix of cooperation and disputes. Whereas China has become a major investor in infrastructure projects, concerns have been raised about the terms and conditions of some of those projects and their impact on Philippine sovereignty. Most critically, the Philippines and China have had long-standing disputes over territorial claims in the South China sea. In 2016, an international tribunal ruled in favor of Philippines, that China rejected, and the Philippines have faced challenges in enforcing. Concomitantly, the two countries have engaged in bilateral dialogs such as the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea. Nevertheless, disputes over territory, fishing rights, and maritime resources continue to be a point of contention, accompanied by occasional spike in tensions.

## **5. Malaysia**

Over the years since its independence, Malaysia has pursued a balanced foreign policy. The most important foreign policy objectives of Malaysia during the cold war period can be distilled in four points: (1) non-alignment, (2) anti-communism, (3) de-colonization and self-determination, and (4) regional security and cooperation (Emmers, 2006; Liow, 2005).

### **5.1. The Cold War Era**

While Malaysia avoided aligning itself with either the Western or the Eastern bloc, it placed significant importance on regional security during the Cold War. The country sought to foster cooperation and build alliances with neighboring countries to address common security challenges. In pursuit of regional defense and security, Malaysia actively participated in regional security frameworks and initiatives, including the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The FPDAs, established in 1971, built upon the ties formed with the Commonwealth members that once

belonged to the British Empire, and include the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia (Jones and Smith, 2012; Liow, 2005).

Malaysia adopted a strong anti-communist stance during the Cold War, shaped in no small part by its internal political dynamics. Malaysia faced a communist insurgency from 1940s till the 1980s led by Malayan Communist Party. The insurgency, known as the Malayan Emergency, posed a significant internal security challenge for Malaysia over the formative years of the state. In response to the communist threat, Malaysia forged alliances with the Western powers aimed at receiving training and assistance to combat the communist threat. Malaysia's active participation in the formation of ASEAN was also to a large extent driven by the shared concern of member states about communism (Mauzy, 2000; Acharya, 2003).

## **5.2. Post Cold War Era**

Malaysia's foreign policy post-Cold War has been characterized by balance and caution, seeking to maintain constructive relations with both the United States and China. Malaysia has continued to uphold its policy of non-alignment in its relations with major powers, including the US and China (Ha, 2019; Liow, 2005).

US has remained an important trade partner and investor for Malaysia. Malaysia has also made effective use of the ASEAN platform for discussions with the US on shared security concerns. On the other hand, Malaysia has significantly increased its post-Cold War economic engagement with China. China is Malaysia's largest trade partner and both countries have deep economic ties through investment, trade agreements, and infrastructure projects. Malaysia is also actively participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative, viewing it as a vehicle for economic growth and development (Emmers, 2006; Ha, 2019).

Malaysia has sought to balance its security concerns and interests with both US and China. To that end, Malaysia has made effective use of its regional ties, having been involved in the ASEAN-led mechanism of ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework that also includes US and China. Malaysia has also navigated the contentious regional issues particularly the South China Sea territorial disputes with caution and diplomacy. Malaysia supports a peaceful resolution of the dispute based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to uphold



freedom of navigation and the principles of international law (Thayer, 2020; Storey, 2021).

## **6. Vietnam**

Among all the current ASEAN member states, Vietnam has suffered the longest period of violent conflict in recent history. Vietnam won independence from France after the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and was divided into the communist North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam), an ally of the Western bloc. Shortly afterwards, war broke out between the North, supported by the Soviet Union and China, and the South, supported by the United States. In 1975 upon the victory of North Vietnam, the country unified as a socialist state under the Communist Party of Vietnam (Womack, 2006; Thayer, 2010).

The joining of Vietnam as a member state of ASEAN 1995 following the end of the Cold War was a watershed moment in the history of ASEAN as a formally socialist state had joined an effectively anti-communist association (Acharya, 2003; Emmers, 2006).

### **6.1. The Cold War Era**

After the unification, Vietnam aligned itself politically and ideologically with the Soviet Union and China. As a key member of the Eastern bloc, it received significant economic aid, military assistance, and diplomatic support. Vietnam actively aimed to exert influence and promote solidarity among the fellow communist and socialist states in the region, supporting the communist parties in Cambodia and Laos (Womack, 2006; Thayer, 2010).

Vietnam's foreign policy during the Cold War era after the unification was complex, attempting to reconcile opposing objectives. While on the one hand, Vietnam attempted to justify its hard-won position among the communist bloc, on the other hand it sought international integration and regional cooperation, aimed at post war reconstruction.

To that end, Vietnam's efforts were largely successful: Vietnam became a member of the United Nations in 1977, and actively participated in regional and international organizations including ASEAN, APEC and WTO. Vietnam's efforts to



normalize relations with former adversaries including US and China, with whom Vietnam has a number of border disputes, were largely successful as the country managed to develop mutually beneficial partnerships. Over the years, Vietnam strengthened its standing as a responsible member of the international community (Thayer, 2010; Ciorciari, 2019).

## **6.2. Post Cold War Era**

Following the collapse of the Eastern bloc, Vietnam actively sought to normalize its relations with the US. In 1995, the two countries official established diplomatic relations. Since then, the two countries have expanded their cooperation in various fields including trade, investment, education, and security. While maintaining a policy of non-alignment, Vietnam has welcomed the United States' increased engagement in the region to counterbalance China's influence (Womack, 2006; Ha, 2019).

On the other hand, Vietnam has a closely integrated cultural history with China over the past millennia, one aspect of which in the present times is border disputes between the two countries, the most notable of which is over territorial claims in the South China Sea.

China is one of Vietnam's largest trading partners and economic cooperation between the two countries has expanded significantly since the early 1990s. More recently, Vietnam has sought to diversity its economic dependencies on China. Since the COVID lockdowns of China, the world has found Vietnam as one of the alternatives to move their low-cost supply chain sources, along with India and countries in Africa.

Vietnam walks a delicate balance in its relations with China: it recognizes the importance of economic cooperation with China, and it is wary of China's territorial assertiveness and growing influence. To that end, Vietnam has pursued diplomatic channels, engaged in multilateral forums and sought support for other countries to resolve the disputes based on international law.

Pursuing these objectives of foreign policy, Vietnam has efficiently utilized the frameworks and mechanics of ASEAN for regional cooperation and consensus to expand its economic potential and capability, to address its security challenges shared with other member nations, and to seek a peaceful resolution of border disputes through dialog and negotiation.

## **7. Conclusion**

The complex and dynamic international geopolitics as well as historical and internal characteristics of the Southeast Asian nations made them an active front of the Cold War in all its intensities, from domestic fractiousness to violent, armed conflicts that threatened to embroil neighboring states and the region. Subsequently, the foreign policy choices made by each of the member state of ASEAN in their individual capacity as well as part of a polity of nations facing a common threat, have had long lasting impacts of those nations. We have considered three representative examples of the spectrum. The Philippines has been a staunch US ally for most of its post-independence history, driven by the strategic choice of protection and stability during the Cold War. Malaysia has walked a balancing act underscored by temperance and caution, while seeking to maximize its economic capability. Vietnam on the other end of the spectrum was an important member of the Eastern bloc. Since the end of the Vietnam war, and later, since the collapse of the Eastern bloc, Vietnam has successfully pursued policy of domestic reconciliation and international integration. All these three nations are, at the same time, confronted with a common regional dispute of China's territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea. The platform of ASEAN has afforded these states the means to present a unified front to the dispute, to engage with larger stakeholder states on shared concerns, and to achieve mutually acceptable terms of resolution for the counter-parties through dialog and negotiations (Acharya, 2003; Ha, 2019; Emmers, 2006).

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

## References

- [1] Acharya, A. (2003). Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order. In M. Alagappa (Ed.), *Asian security practice: Material and ideational influences* (pp. 199–220). Stanford University Press.
- [2] Ciorciari, J. D. (2019). *The limits of alignment: Southeast Asia and the great powers since 1975*. Georgetown University Press.
- [3] Emmers, R. (2006). Southeast Asian security in the new millennium: In search of a regional order. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 28(1), 1–25.  
<https://doi.org/10.1355/CS28-1A>
- [4] Ha, H. T. (2019). *ASEAN's balancing act: Navigating US-China competition*. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
- [5] Jones, D. M., & Smith, M. (2012). *Southeast Asia and the new international relations of Asia-Pacific*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- [6] Lee, J., & Tang, S. M. (2014). *Southeast Asia and the rise of China: The search for security*. Routledge.
- [7] Liow, J. C. (2005). *The politics of Indonesia-Malaysia relations: One kin, two nations*. Routledge.
- [8] Mauzy, D. K. (2000). ASEAN's Cold War legacy: Southeast Asia's search for a community of nations. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 27(1), 7–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00927670009598839>
- [9] Snyder, S. (2010). Revisiting Cold War history: The United States and the creation of ASEAN. *Diplomatic History*, 34(5), 823–853.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00897.x>
- [10] Storey, I. (2021). *Southeast Asia and the rise of China: The search for security*. Routledge.
- [11] Thayer, C. A. (2010). *Vietnam: People, politics, and prospects*. Routledge.
- [12] Thayer, C. A. (2020). *The United States, China, and Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- [13] Womack, B. (2006). *China and Vietnam: The politics of asymmetry*. Cambridge University Press.