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BOOK EXCERPT

ANG CHENG GUAN

*Southeast Asia After the Cold War: A Contemporary History*  
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## **Old and New Risks, Rivalries, and Conflicts**

As the Cold War recedes further into the past, the old security order dominated by the United States and the regional structure created by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is increasingly under siege, with a new global strategic rebalancing underway. The Southeast Asian region is forced to contemplate new risks and the emergence of new rivalries and conflicts. In his new book, *Southeast Asia After the Cold War*, Ang Cheng Guan offers a complete, analytically informed contemporary history that covers the whole region, tracing developments from 1990 till around 2018–2019 and highlighting change, continuity, and the larger context in

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which decisions have been made.

“*Seismic 2016 ... The Year Asia’s Power Balance Shifted.*”<sup>1</sup>

“... *the old is dying and the new cannot be born.*”<sup>2</sup>

## An “ASEAN Community”

Southeast Asia entered the year 2016 ostensibly as a single “ASEAN community”. Most analysts, however, agreed that the region was still far from what it proclaimed to be. Muthiah Alagappa spoke for many when he wrote that ASEAN was “unlikely to become a single community any time soon. ASEAN integration and community building should remain long-term aspirations for decades to come.”<sup>3</sup> Politicians did not disagree but preferred to focus on the positive side, noting that it was a historic juncture in ASEAN’s development and, in the words of Barry Desker, “a demonstration of its institutional maturity”. Amidst the celebration, there was the acknowledgement that it was “by no means the end point”—if there is one at all. Rather, it was a “journey”, beginning with the establishment of the AEC [ASEAN Economic Community], which would contribute significantly to the region’s competitiveness and growth, to be followed by the two other pillars—

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<sup>1</sup> Headline in the *Straits Times*, 31 Dec. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections of the Prison Note-books of Antonio Gramsci*, transl. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 556.

<sup>3</sup> Muthiah Alagappa, “Community Building: ASEAN’s Milestone?” *RSIS Commentary*, 24 Mar. 2015; Endy M. Bayuni, “At 50, Asean Is a Neighbourhood, Not Yet Community”, *Straits Times*, 29 July 2017; Barry Desker, “Is ASEAN a Community?” *RSIS Commentary*, 2 Aug. 2017.



the Political–Security Community and the Socio–Cultural Community.<sup>4</sup> The AEC itself is also “hampered”, its development hindered by ageing populations, weak institutions, rising nationalistic arguments and protectionist policies within ASEAN.<sup>5</sup> In short, the ASEAN Community should be seen as a work in progress. At the same time, there is an urgent need for greater integration in order to insulate and keep ASEAN above the growing US–China fray. The issue and subsequent retraction of a joint statement after the ASEAN–China Special Foreign Ministers Meeting in Kunming in June 2016, whose cause remains murky, pointed to a lack of unity within ASEAN, particularly over the South China Sea issue, as well as the huge pressure exerted by China.<sup>6</sup> While ASEAN–China relations are indeed multifaceted, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang urged his ASEAN counterparts not to view the South China Sea dispute as “the sum of China–ASEAN ties”,<sup>7</sup> the reality is that Beijing does link the South China Sea to the broad range of ASEAN–China interactions, such as the RCEP, OBOR and AIIB [Regional

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<sup>4</sup> “Asean Community Set to Be Formed in ‘Historic Milestone’”, *Straits Times*, 31 Dec. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Keynote speech by former ASEAN Secretary–General Ong Keng Yong, Selangor International Business Summit 2017 and Selangor–Asean Business Conference, 11 Sept. 2017, <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/asean-economic-integrationprogress-hampered>, accessed 14 Sept. 2017.

<sup>6</sup> This episode was reported in most regional newspapers. Perhaps the most revealing account, based on Vietnamese sources, is Carlyle Thayer, “The ASEAN–China Special Meeting Mystery: Bureaucratic Snafu or Chinese Heavy–Handedness?” *The Diplomat*, 17 June 2016. See also the postscript “Revealed: The Truth Behind ASEAN’s Retracted Kunming Statement”, *The Diplomat*, 19 June 2016.

<sup>7</sup> “Asean Stresses ‘Serious’ S. China Sea Concerns”, *Straits Times*, 15 June 2016.

Comprehensive Economic Partnership, One Belt One Road, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank].

The year, however, has a greater significance. On looking back, the reorientation of the international politics of Southeast Asia can be traced back to 2016, although it is still too early to tell whether the change (which is still ongoing) will be short-lived or more long-lasting. The first major development, which had implications for the international politics of the region, was the electoral victory of Rodrigo Duterte in May 2016; he was inaugurated the 16th president of the Philippines on 30 June. Duterte is a controversial leader because of many of his policies and actions, both domestic and foreign. The latter concern us here. As Gregory Poling observed, Duterte appeared to be “deeply skeptical of the value of the US alliance because he doesn’t believe the US will really back the Philippines against China if push comes to shove”. The new president also went on record, as the *Global Times* (considered the occasional mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party) noted, to say that he “opposes the idea of going to war with China, wants direct negotiation with Beijing about the South China Sea, and doesn’t believe in solving the conflict through an international tribunal”.<sup>8</sup> With the election of Duterte (apart from the fact that Obama was in his lame-duck year as president), the two-day US-ASEAN Special Summit held in Sunnylands in early 2016 would be relegated to a mere footnote in the annals of US-Southeast Asian relations. Duterte had reportedly called Obama “son of a whore” in response to the US president’s criticism of his anti-crime campaign and extrajudicial killings. A scheduled meeting between the two presidents on the sidelines of the 28th and 29th ASEAN Summit in Laos in September 2016 was cancelled. Duterte also did not attend the US-ASEAN dialogue,

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<sup>8</sup> “Questions over Duterte’s Foreign Policy”, *Today*, 12 May 2016.



signalling his intention “to lessen his nation’s dependence” on the United States.<sup>9</sup> He is on record as having said that he was “not a fan of the Americans” and that in the Philippines’ relations with the world, Manila would pursue “an independent foreign policy”.<sup>10</sup>

## ASEAN States and China

The second major development was the much-anticipated 12 July 2016 ruling by the arbitral tribunal that China had no legal basis or historic claim to the Nine-Dash Line, and that no country could claim any “historic rights” in the sea. The ruling also stated that none of the features in the Spratlys could generate a continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone.<sup>11</sup> The ruling was “far more comprehensive and decisive than many legal experts had predicted”.<sup>12</sup> Beijing’s rejection of the ruling was, of course, to be expected. The Southeast Asian response to the ruling is worth noting: ASEAN was unable to issue a joint statement because of a lack of consensus. Indeed, in April 2016 it was reported that Brunei, Cambodia and Laos had reached a four-point consensus with China on the South China Sea issue in which all four countries opposed any attempt to “unilaterally impose an

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<sup>9</sup> “Philippines Not Cutting Ties with Its Allies: Duterte”, *Straits Times*, 14 Sept. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> “Duterte Says He Is ‘Not a Fan’ of the US”, *Straits Times*, 11 Sept. 2016; “Manila Right to Diversify Alliances, Says Russian Envoy”, *Straits Times*, 5 Jan. 2017; “Russia Navy Visits Philippines as Part of Duterte’s Pivot away from US”, *Today*, 21 Apr. 2017.

<sup>11</sup> For details, see Clive Schofield, “A Landmark Decision in the South China Sea: The Scope and Implications of the Arbitral Tribunal’s Award”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, 3 (Dec. 2016).

<sup>12</sup> See “Roundtable: The Arbitral Tribunal’s Ruling on the South China Sea”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, 3 (Dec. 2016).

agenda on other countries". Singapore's diplomats Bilahari Kausikan and Ong Keng Yong accused Beijing of splitting ASEAN.<sup>13</sup> Cambodia, even before the ruling was announced, made clear that it would not participate in expressing any common position with regard to the Sino-Philippine dispute. Individual countries such as Laos, Indonesia and Thailand also did not make any public statement about the ruling but chose to reiterate the general aspiration of resolving the dispute peacefully, based on previous ASEAN-China agreements as well as ASEAN norms. Countries that responded to the ruling, such as Singapore and Myanmar, did so "with extreme care not to touch any sensitive Chinese nerves".<sup>14</sup> At the commemorative summit in September 2016 marking 25 years of Sino-ASEAN dialogue relations, no ASEAN leader even suggested that China should comply with the ruling. The joint communique also made no mention of it.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, although the Philippines had won a "landmark legal victory", in the words of Heydarian, "not only has China managed to tame the response of the international community, but Asean itself also has missed a historic opportunity to reassert any semblance of relevance in the South China

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<sup>13</sup> "South China Sea Consensus 'Shows up Asean Faultlines'", *Straits Times*, 25 Apr. 2016; "China's Pact with Cambodia, Laos and Interference in ASEAN's Domestic Affairs: Former Sec-Gen", <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/chinas-pact-with-cambodia-laos-an-interference-in-asean-s-domes-8095812>, accessed 14 Aug. 2017; "China Responds to S'pore Diplomats' Remarks", *Straits Times*, 28 Apr. 2016; "China's Actions Lent Themselves to Misunderstanding: Bilahari", *Today*, 29 Apr. 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Termsak Chalermphanupap, "No ASEAN Consensus on the South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, 21 July 2016.

<sup>15</sup> "Tribunal Ruling on S. China Sea Is Binding, Stresses Obama", *Straits Times*, 9 Sept. 2016.



Sea”.<sup>16</sup> Most significantly and surprisingly, Manila, which under Benigno Aquino had initiated the arbitral tribunal in 2013, now under Duterte decided to put aside the arbitral tribunal’s ruling and agreed to resolve the South China Sea dispute with China through bilateral negotiations. In return, Beijing pledged US\$24 billion in loans and investments and lifted the 2012 ban on Filipino anglers in the Scarborough Shoal area. Manila hoped for more Chinese financial assistance to fund various infrastructure projects, such as the railway line connecting Manila to Legazpi City in Albay province in the southern part of Luzon. As Philippine Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez said, “the generous assistance offered by China to the Philippines is among the concrete results of the president’s foreign policy re-balancing”.<sup>17</sup>

The non-confrontational approach adopted by the Southeast Asian states after the tribunal ruling brought about some positive results in the form of an agreement reached with China on the use of a hotline during maritime emergencies, the application of the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea, and—perhaps most importantly—an agreement to complete a draft framework for the COC by mid-2017. In April 2017 ASEAN held its 30th Summit in Manila under the chairmanship of the Philippines. While the South China Sea issue was mentioned in the Chairman’s Statement, it merely reiterated the call for a “peaceful resolution” to the dispute and did not mention the arbitral tribunal’s ruling. The Chairman’s Statement was also silent on the issue of Chinese land reclamation and island building in the South

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, “Asean Fails to Rise to the Occasion”, *Straits Times*, 28 July 2016.

<sup>17</sup> “Manila Seeks Billions in Loans from China”, *Straits Times*, 28 Jan. 2017.

China Sea. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, satellite pictures showed that China was still building in the South China Sea, particularly in the Paracels.<sup>18</sup> The general view was that the ASEAN countries adopted a “softer stance” in view of the agreement to draft a framework for negotiating the COC.<sup>19</sup> The United States, Japan and Australia had tried to persuade ASEAN to issue a stronger response. The straight-talking Duterte said before the summit that it was pointless discussing Beijing’s contentious activities in the South China Sea as no one dared to pressure China anyway.<sup>20</sup> As a quid pro quo, Beijing apparently dropped its insistence on a “non-legally binding” COC. (ASEAN’s preference had always been for a “legally binding” COC.) At the 6 August meeting, the ASEAN–China Joint Working Group on the Implementation of the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties agreed on a framework for the COC. In September representatives from ASEAN and China met to begin discussions of the “working approach” that could lead to negotiations of the COC.<sup>21</sup> It had taken 15 years since the signing of the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea in 2002 to reach this stage. In August 2017 Beijing also assured Manila that it would not build new features or occupy more territories in the South China Sea.<sup>22</sup> The reality is that over the years, China had already

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<sup>18</sup> “China Still Building in S. China Sea”, *Straits Times*, 12 Aug. 2017.

<sup>19</sup> For the full text of the Chairman’s Statement, see <http://asean.org/chairmansstatement-30th-asean-summit/>, accessed 31 Aug. 2017.

<sup>20</sup> “Pointless Discussing Beijing’s South China Sea Activities at Asean Meet: Duterte”, *Today*, 28 Apr. 2017. For a more diplomatic perspective, see “Vivian: Asean Focused on Code of Conduct in S. China Sea”, *Straits Times*, 6 May 2017.

<sup>21</sup> “Work Starts on Code of Conduct for S. China Sea”, *Straits Times*, 2 Sept. 2017.

<sup>22</sup> “Beijing Vows Not to Occupy New Territory in S. China Sea: Manila”, *Straits Times*, 16 Aug. 2017.





taken over a number of the disputed islands and features, of which at least three were capable of accommodating fighter jets.<sup>23</sup> Despite all the assurances, satellite evidence showed that Beijing had been “moving ahead steadily” and undeterred with its land reclamation and construction in the South China Sea.<sup>24</sup>

As for the Philippines’ relations with its old ally the United States, as well as China, even if one discounts some of Duterte’s more extravagant statements such as his country’s “separation from the United States” or “there are three of us against the world—China, Philippines and Russia”, it is true that the trajectory of Sino-Philippine relations was the inverse of US-Philippine ties. As the former soared (from the depths during the Aquino III administration), the latter plummeted (from the peak before June 2016). As Heydarian pointed out, “this is where a lot of countries were caught off guard. Duterte could actually make a huge impact, not only on Philippines foreign policy, but also the broader regional geopolitical dynamics”.<sup>25</sup> China’s Foreign Minister Wang described relations between China and the Philippines as having “entered a golden period of fast development”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; “Justice Carpio Bares Invasion of PH Islet”, 20 Aug. 2017, *Inquirer.Net*, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/159857/antonio-carpio-maritime-dispute-south-chinasea-west-philippine-sea-sandy-cay-pag-asa-island>, accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

<sup>24</sup> “Beijing Moving Ahead Steadily with S. China Sea Construction”, *Straits Times*, 27 Dec. 2017.

<sup>25</sup> See Steve Mollman, “Political Scientist Richard Javad Heydarian on Rodrigo Duterte, US-Bashing, and the South China Sea”, 17 Oct. 2016, <https://qz.com/807203/political-scientist-richard-javad-heydarian-on-rodrigo-duterte-us-bashing-andthe-south-china-sea/>, accessed 11 Aug. 2017.

<sup>26</sup> “China Hails ‘Golden Period’ in Ties with Philippines”, *Today*, 30 June 2017.

Duterte's radical shift towards Beijing led many analysts to question its impact on ASEAN centrality.<sup>27</sup>

The Philippines is not the only ASEAN country that has moved closer to China in recent years. It stands out because of its traditional ties with the United States during the Cold War years and President Duterte's proclamations. Manila is also the outlier amongst the original five ASEAN member countries in this regard, although one should not exaggerate Manila's swing to China. A 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center showed that Filipinos still favoured the United States over China, but the gap was narrowing.<sup>28</sup> As noted in earlier chapters, of all the ASEAN countries, Cambodia has by far the closest ties with China and the poorest relations with the United States. Beijing has been strengthening its economic as well as defence ties with Cambodia. In February 2016 both countries carried out a joint exercise for training in rescue operations. The Tianjin Union Development Group, a Chinese company with connections to the People's Liberation Army, signed an agreement with the Phnom Penh government in September 2016 to build a port along the coast of the Gulf of Thailand, a few hundred kilometres from the disputed islands in the South China Sea. It was reported that the new port would be deep enough to handle ships, both cruise and naval, up to 10,000 tonnes in weight. To the Chinese, Cambodia is an important transportation hub in Southeast Asia. As Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia Xiong Bo noted, "Cambodia holds a

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, "Duterte and End of Asean Neutrality?" *Straits Times*, 12 Jan. 2017; "Philippines Pledges to Uphold Asean's Values as New Chair", *Straits Times*, 16 Jan. 2017.

<sup>28</sup> "Filipinos Favour US over China, but Gap Narrowing", *Straits Times*, 22 Sept. 2017. The survey revealed that four out of five Filipinos still favoured the US, but the percentage was below the Obama period of 92 per cent surveyed in 2015.



key position on the ancient maritime Silk Road connecting the East and the West.”<sup>29</sup> This is just one example of the many infrastructure projects built with Chinese money. Beijing also sold military equipment to Cambodia, such as shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles and helicopters, and provided military training. As a *Financial Times* investigative report noted, big investment deals had cemented Beijing’s relations with Phnom Penh, which had also yielded political dividends for China.<sup>30</sup> Sino-Cambodian relations have indeed come a long way from the Cold War years. In 1988 Hun Sen described China as “everything that is evil in Cambodia”,<sup>31</sup> but in 2017 China was perceived to be Cambodia’s most reliable friend. Chinese President Xi, who visited Cambodia in October 2016, for the first time since becoming president, described both countries as “good neighbours, real friends who are loyal to each other”.<sup>32</sup> Compared to China’s generosity, the United States continued to pursue a 45-year loan worth US\$500 million (obtained during Sihanouk’s tenure) and blocked the International Monetary Fund from lending to Phnom Penh until the debt was repaid. There were fears that the US State Department budget cut, if approved by the Trump administration, would result in American development

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<sup>29</sup> “Xi Praises Cambodia for Being a Good Neighbour”, *Straits Times*, 14 Oct. 2016.

<sup>30</sup> “Cambodia and China to Hold Naval Drills”, *Straits Times*, 18 Feb. 2016; “Beijing Draws Cambodia Closer in Diplomatic Embrace”, *Today*, 2 Sept. 2016; “FT Investigation: How China Bought Its Way into Cambodia”, *Financial Times*, 8 Sept. 2016; “The ‘Chinazation’ of Cambodia”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 16 Mar. 2017.

<sup>31</sup> “China, Cambodia Cosy up Ahead of Xi’s Visit to Phnom Penh”, *Today*, 7 Oct. 2016.

<sup>32</sup> “Xi Praises Cambodia for Being a Good Neighbour”.

assistance to Cambodia being reduced to zero.<sup>33</sup> As it happened, assistance was reduced, but not to zero. In January 2017 Phnom Penh cancelled an annual joint US military exercise ostensibly because it was “too busy with domestic commitments”, and in April it scrapped a nine-year-old US military aid programme.<sup>34</sup> In August 2017 the Hun Sen government closed down the National Democratic Institute office in Cambodia and expelled its foreign staff from the country. The institute, which is supposedly “nonpartisan in its work to promote democracy and strengthen democratic institutions” worldwide and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, USAid and the US State Department, was accused of attempting to instigate a “color revolution” against the Hun Sen government.<sup>35</sup> Overall, the state of Cambodia-US relations is the inverse of the state of Sino-Cambodian relations.

Beijing is buying its way not just into Cambodia but also into Laos and Myanmar. On 25 December 2016 work started on the controversial China-Laos high-speed railway, which when completed would link Kunming to Vientiane. The Chinese envisioned this to be part of a larger transportation system that would link Yunnan province to key markets in Southeast Asia. This project falls under the OBOR or

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<sup>33</sup> “Breaking News: US Development Assistance to Be Slashed to Zero, Document”, *Phnom Penh Post*, 25 Apr. 2017, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/breakingnews-us-development-assistance-may-be-slashed-zero-document>, accessed 5 Sept. 2017.

<sup>34</sup> “Cambodia Scraps Joint US Military Exercise”, *Financial Times*, 18 Jan. 2017; “Cambodia Scraps US Military Aid Deal in Latest Snub to Washington”, *Financial Times*, 5 Apr. 2017.

<sup>35</sup> “US and Cambodia Fire Diplomatic Shots After Closure of NGO”, *Southeast Asia Globe*, 24 Aug. 2017; “US Denies Conspiracy to Topple Cambodian Government”, *Phnom Penh Post*, 30 Aug. 2017.



Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Given that the proposed railway lines in Vietnam and Myanmar had been shelved, the Kunming–Vientiane railway line was even more important to the Chinese. How beneficial this railway project would be to Laos is not so clear.<sup>36</sup>

Obama was the first–ever sitting US president to visit landlocked Laos, which he did in September 2016. There were reports of that country attempting to tilt away from China towards the United States. However, this is unlikely to become a reality given the amount of Chinese investment in Laos. In contrast, Laos is “not a strong investment draw” for the United States. Beijing views Laos as “a key gateway to Southeast Asia”.<sup>37</sup> As Edgar Pang noted, Cambodia and Laos are perceived to be the “most trusted allies” of China in Southeast Asia. However, unlike Cambodia, Laos tries “to keep some semblance of balance” and even–handedness when dealing with China.<sup>38</sup>

As for Myanmar, Yangon is very dependent on Chinese assistance to manage, if not resolve, its ethnic insurgency problems.<sup>39</sup> Although Beijing stressed that it would “consistently persevere in not interfering in other countries’ internal affairs and respect the entirety of Myanmar’s sovereign rights and territory”, Sino–Myanmar relations have often been strained over Chinese support of the ethnic rebels located at the Sino–Myanmar border. Many observers share the view

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<sup>36</sup> See “China Starts Controversial Lao Rail Project”, *Asia Sentinel*, 7 Mar. 2017.

<sup>37</sup> “Laos Signals a Tilt away from China as Obama Visits”, *Today*, 29 Aug. 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Edgar Pang, “‘Same–Same but Different’: Laos and Cambodia’s Political Embrace of China”, *ISEAS Perspective* 66, 5 Sept. 2017.

<sup>39</sup> “China Captures Myanmar’s Peace Process”, *Asia Times*, 3 June 2017. See also Enze Han, “Borderland Ethnic Politics and Changing Sino–Myanmar Relations”, in *War & Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire, 1994–2011*, ed. Mandy Sadan (Amsterdam: NIAS Press, 2016), chapter 6.

that Beijing uses ethnically Chinese insurgent groups “as a means of leverage over Myanmar”.<sup>40</sup> In April 2017, after almost a decade of talks, both countries reached an agreement on the 770km pipeline that would serve as an alternative route to send oil from the Middle East to China, bypassing the Strait of Malacca. As Kavi Chongkittavorn noted, “with both the oil and gas pipelines now in operation, Myanmar has suddenly become a connectivity route for China’s Belt and Road Initiative”.<sup>41</sup> Beijing sees Myanmar as a land bridge to the Indian Ocean.<sup>42</sup> China is also Myanmar’s largest trading partner, accounting for almost 40 per cent of total trade in 2016. The Chinese are also building a special economic zone, power plant and deep-sea port on Myanmar’s west coast.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the optimism during the time of rapprochement in Myanmar-US relations in 2011, which the Chinese then perceived as a “strategic setback”, did not seem to have borne much significant fruit. Myanmar did not, or could not, turn away from China towards the West as many had then hoped or anticipated.<sup>44</sup> Although President Obama visited Myanmar twice, in 2012 and 2014, Washington did little to build on the new relationship whereas Beijing was “energetically bringing more nations into its orbit, wooing

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<sup>40</sup> “Myanmar Praises China for Action on Rebels”, *Straits Times*, 23 Mar. 2017.

<sup>41</sup> “Policy Shifts in Myanmar’s Ties with Major Powers”, *Straits Times*, 22 Apr. 2017.

<sup>42</sup> “China Gains Upper Hand in Myanmar”, *Bangkok Post*, 27 May 2017, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/world/1257494/china-regains-upper-hand-in-myanmar>, accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

<sup>43</sup> “China’s Investments Changing Its Neighbours”, *Straits Times*, 8 Dec. 2016.

<sup>44</sup> The Chinese described the US–Myanmar rapprochement with a Chinese proverb: “The cooked duck flew out of the window” (the “cooked duck” was Myanmar).



American friends and allies with military hardware, infrastructure deals and diplomatic attention”.<sup>45</sup> Analysts do not think the Trump administration will do any better than its predecessor. China’s “charm offensive” has helped China regain its foothold in Myanmar.<sup>46</sup>

Like the Philippines, Thailand has been diversifying its relations in the wake of the May 2014 coup and the consequent cooling of US–Thai relations—but, unlike the Philippines, not in a dramatic way. Besides China, Bangkok also reached out to Russia, capitalizing on Moscow’s ambition to develop its position as an Asian power. In early 2016 the head of Russia’s Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, visited Bangkok, and shortly after two Thai deputy prime ministers visited Moscow.<sup>47</sup> But it is the development of Sino–Thai relations that is most significant at this stage. In April 2017 it was reported that Thailand had agreed to buy tanks as well as a submarine from China, replacing its US-made M41 with Chinese VT-4 tanks.<sup>48</sup> In June Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha rammed through the Sino–Thai high-speed train project, which had stalled since the signing of the memorandum of understanding on rail cooperation in 2014. The rail project is part of China’s long-term plan to link Kunming by rail to Laos, Thailand and eventually Singapore. Political analysts viewed Prayuth’s act as a strong

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<sup>45</sup> “As U.S. Attention Wanes in Southeast Asia, China Woos Myanmar”, *New York Times*, 19 July 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Aung Zaw, “China’s Charm Offensive Regains Its Foothold in Myanmar”, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 Aug. 2017; Amara Thiha, “How China Is Courting Myanmar”, *The Diplomat*, 12 Aug. 2017.

<sup>47</sup> “From Russia to Thailand, with Love”, *Straits Times*, 7 Apr. 2016.

<sup>48</sup> “Thailand and Cambodia Strengthen Ties with China”, *Straits Times*, 5 Apr. 2017.

and further example of Bangkok's definite tilt towards China.<sup>49</sup> That was before Prayuth's visit to the United States in October 2017, when he met President Donald Trump. The visit marked a "normalization of Thai-US relations after the coup of 2014. Above all, US endorsement helps boost the regime's international legitimacy."<sup>50</sup>

Sino-Malaysian relations have also improved considerably. There was such a significant influx of Chinese investment into Malaysia that the Najib government was accused, rightly or wrongly, of allowing China to "come here with tonnes of cash to buy up Bandar Malaysia and make us work for them". One prominent critic is former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.<sup>51</sup> Malaysia, like the Philippines, has benefited considerably from tilting towards China. President Duterte managed to obtain US\$24 billion in investment and soft loans during his visit to China in October 2016. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak secured RM144 billion worth of investment and soft loans from Beijing during his November 2016 visit to China.<sup>52</sup> Both Manila and Kuala Lumpur also successfully secured Chinese funding for railway projects in their respective countries. Sino-Malaysian relations

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<sup>49</sup> See "Prayuth Will Invoke 'Absolute Powers' to Push Through Railway Deal with Beijing", *Today*, 14 June 2017; "Prayut Fast-Tracks Sino-Thai Rail Project", *Straits Times*, 17 June 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Shopping Diplomacy: The Thai Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and Its Implications for Thai-US Relations", *ISEAS Perspective* 78, 20 Oct. 2017.

<sup>51</sup> "Mahathir Takes Aim at China Investments in Key Party Speech", *Sunday Times*, 15 Jan. 2017; "Beijing Rebutts Critics Who Say It Is Stealing Locals' Rice Bowls", *Sunday Times*, 15 Jan. 2017; "Beijing, KL to Meet over Port Projects and Bandar Malaysia", *Straits Times*, 31 Mar. 2017. See also "Former Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohamad on the Rise of China", *Financial Times*, 26 May 2017.

<sup>52</sup> "Manila Seeks Billions in Loans from China", *Straits Times*, 28 Jan. 2017.





have moved beyond trade and investment. In April 2017 Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein announced that a high-level defence committee would be set up between Malaysia and China to boost security cooperation. Kuala Lumpur also committed to buy four littoral ships from China.<sup>53</sup> In late August 2017 President Xi described relations between China and Malaysia as the “best ever” in history, repeating Najib’s remark made in November 2015.<sup>54</sup> Not everyone agrees that Kuala Lumpur has fallen into the Chinese camp. In a 2017 essay Elina Noor and T.N. Qistina attempted to show that Malaysia had “sought to expand and deepen ties with China and the United States simultaneously, consistent with its longstanding policy of maintaining an equidistance between the great powers”.<sup>55</sup> In September 2017 Prime Minister Najib visited Washington, DC, where he met President Trump. However, analysts were of the view that Najib was using the visit to shore up his own reputation amidst the 1MDB controversy, which has been an albatross hanging around his neck. As one Malaysian politician noted, “on the one hand, there is ‘FDI’ from China into Malaysia and

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<sup>53</sup> For details, see Prashanth Parameswaran, “What’s Behind the New China-Malaysia Defense Committee?” *The Diplomat*, 25 Apr. 2017.

<sup>54</sup> “Healthy China-Malaysia Ties Could Hurt Ethnic Chinese”, *Today*, 28 Aug. 2017; “Najib: China-Malaysia Bilateral Ties at Its Best Now”, *The Star Online*, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/11/17/malaysia-china-bilateral-ties-at-its-best/>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017.

<sup>55</sup> See Elina Noor and T.N. Qistina, “Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Malaysian Foreign Policy”, *Asian Security*, Sept. 2017, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14799855.2017.1354568?tab=permissions&scroll=top>, accessed 14 Sept. 2017.

now Malaysia makes ‘investments’ into the US economy” (which was what Najib committed to do).<sup>56</sup>

Among all the Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia and Singapore have not succumbed to Beijing’s cash diplomacy. Indonesia has so far been able to “compartmentalize” its claim over the Exclusive Economic Zone around the Natuna Islands and its economic relations with China.<sup>57</sup> Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said, “we have a good relationship with China. We will strive to maintain our good relations along with international laws.”<sup>58</sup> On 25 August 2017 China sent an official note to the Indonesian embassy in Beijing demanding that Jakarta rescind its 14 July 2017 move to rename the disputed southwest part of the South China Sea as the North Natuna Sea. The change in an “internationally accepted name”, the Chinese insisted, would result in a “complication and expansion of the dispute, and affects peace and stability”. The note added that the bilateral relationship was developing in a “healthy and stable way”, the South China Sea dispute was being properly managed, and any unilateral name change was not “conducive to maintaining this excellent situation”.<sup>59</sup> In the case of Singapore, relations went through a low

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<sup>56</sup> “Leong Malaysia”, <https://www.facebook.com/liewchintong.my/posts/10154842221445911>, accessed 14 Sept. 2017.

<sup>57</sup> “Indonesia Balances Maritime Sovereignty, Economic Ties to China”, 25 Nov. 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/a/indonesia-china-south-china-sea/3611198.html>, accessed 6 Sept. 2016.

<sup>58</sup> “Indonesia’s Complicated Relations with China”, *Asia Sentinel*, 5 Aug. 2016.

<sup>59</sup> “China Demands Indonesia Rescind Decision to Rename Part of South China Sea”, 2 Sept. 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/china-demandsindonesia-rescind-decision-to-rename-part-of-south-9179992>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017.



period because of China's perception that Singapore was focusing unduly on the arbitral tribunal result even though the Philippines had put it aside. However, from August 2017 the relationship appeared to have improved. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong paid, by all accounts, a successful visit to China in September 2017 at the invitation of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, where he met four of the top Chinese leaders, including President Xi.<sup>60</sup> That said, it is worth noting that Singapore-US relations are close and deep—indeed, one could argue, more so than US relations with the Philippines and Thailand. As Campbell wrote, “Singapore is perhaps the most defining example of a country that has stretched the definition of partner by providing uncommon capacity and support to the United States. Singapore is a uniquely strong partner that offers the United States strategic advice and military access.”<sup>61</sup> In August 2016 President Obama described the US-Singapore relationship as a “solid-rock” partnership and said that Singapore was “an ‘anchor’ for US presence in the region”.<sup>62</sup> More recently, in May 2017, on announcing the appointment of a new US ambassador to Singapore, the White House described Singapore as “one of America’s great allies”.<sup>63</sup>

Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted how far ties had come in the decades since founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew

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<sup>60</sup> “China Lauds Singapore’s ‘Positive’, ‘Constructive’ Role as Asean Coordinator”, *Straits Times*, 6 Aug. 2017; “China Places Great Importance on Ties with S’pore: Premier Li”, *Straits Times*, 20 Sept. 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Campbell, *The Pivot*, pp. 220–1.

<sup>62</sup> “Singapore a Solid-Rock Partner, Says US President Obama”, *Straits Times*, 3 Aug. 2016.

<sup>63</sup> “Trump Nominates KT McFarland as US Ambassador to Singapore”, 20 May 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/trump-nominates-ktmcfarland-as-us-ambassador-to-singapore-8867110>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017.

first visited the United States in 1967. In August 2016 he said, “Singapore’s own ties with the United States have remained steadfast through nine US presidents—five Republican and four Democratic—and three Singapore prime ministers ... We will maintain these bipartisan links with whichever party wins the elections in November.”<sup>64</sup> Although it is still too early to ascertain the Trump administration’s Asia policy (it is somewhat wobbly at this point), going by President Trump’s remark about Singapore, the relationship will remain steady and sturdy. In June 2017, leaders of the bipartisan Congressional Singapore Caucus stressed the importance of maintaining the close relationship between the United States and Singapore.<sup>65</sup> Despite the South China Sea dispute and “despite courting the United States, Vietnam won’t break up with China”, as Tuong Vu argued. While this author would not agree with Tuong Vu that the ideological connection glues Vietnam and China together, geographical proximity would certainly require Vietnam to manage adroitly its relations with its large neighbour.<sup>66</sup> As Thayer explained, although

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<sup>64</sup> “Singapore a Solid-Rock Partner”.

<sup>65</sup> “Singapore Key to US-Asia Relations: Congress Leaders”, *Straits Times*, 8 June 2017. For an exposition of the geopolitics of the region and Singapore’s relations with the United States and China, see speech by K. Shanmugam, minister for home affairs and minister of law, Asia Economic Forum on “The One-Belt One-Road Initiative: Impact and Implications”, 28 Aug. 2017, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/Pages/Asia-Economic-Forum-on-The-One-Belt-One-RoadInitiative-Impact-and-Implications.aspx>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017

<sup>66</sup> Tuong Vu, “Vietnam and China: Balancing Geography and History”, *YaleGlobal Online*, 24 Aug. 2017, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/vietnam-and-chinabalancing-geography-and-history>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017. See also Do Thanh Hai, “Vietnam: Riding the Chinese Tide”, *Pacific Review* 31, 2 (2018), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09512748.2017.1377282>, accessed 12 Apr. 2019.



there had been calls for Vietnam to come out from China's shadow, that was impossible because the two countries shared a common border and because Vietnam had a huge trade deficit with China, in excess of US\$32 billion.<sup>67</sup>

## Enter President Donald Trump

The third major development in the international politics of Southeast Asia was the electoral victory of Donald Trump (over Hillary Clinton) on 8 November 2016 to become the 45th president of the United States. Much has been said and written about the Trump presidency. What is most pertinent for us is its impact on US–Southeast Asia relations and the international politics of the region. A 275-page report commissioned by the US Congress, prepared by the Center for Strategic Studies and published in January 2016, noted that the United States needed to expand its military presence in Asia–Pacific “to balance the shift in military power” in the region. It further noted that while Washington had taken steps “to reinforce its Asia rebalance”, that was insufficient to protect US interests. The report criticized the Obama administration for its failure “to articulate a clear and coherent strategy”. In sum, the report painted a bleak picture of the United States’ position in the region.<sup>68</sup> If the situation in early 2016 was bleak, it became worse by early 2017. It is common knowledge that the Trump victory came as a shock to Southeast Asia. In the words of Ian Storey and Mustafa Izzuddin, “many, perhaps most, had expected Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton to emerge as the victor, and thus, by and large, see a continuation of the policies implemented by President

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<sup>67</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Background Briefing: ASEAN at 50: Still a Work in Progress”, *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, 17 Aug. 2017.

<sup>68</sup> “Military Power in Asia–Pacific ‘Shifting Against US’”, *Straits Times*, 21 Jan. 2016.

Barack Obama, including his signature ‘pivot’ to Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular”.<sup>69</sup> On his first working day in the Oval Office, President Trump killed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), “the signature economic pillar”<sup>70</sup> of the pivot, as he had promised to do on 21 November 2016 during the election campaign. While this was not devastating in the sense that it would not roll back the global free trade momentum, in the words of the six United States ambassadors who took the unusual step to send an open letter to the US Congress to support the TPP:

[T]he blow to our strategic position is even more worrisome. This is not speculation. To turn our back on our allies and friends at this critical juncture, when the tectonic plates of regional power are shifting faster than ever, would undermine our credibility not only as a reliable trade partner, but as a leader on both sides of the Pacific. It would also create a potentially destabilizing void that might even lead to conflict, an outcome which would hurt everyone in the region, including China.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> “Roundtable: The Trump Presidency and Southeast Asia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, 1 (Apr. 2017): 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ankit Panda, “Straight from the US State Department: The ‘Pivot’ to Asia Is Over”, *The Diplomat*, 14 Mar. 2017.

<sup>71</sup> “Final Plea for the TPP”, *Today*, 19 Jan. 2017. The TPP was eventually revised and signed without the United States in March 2018 and is now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. The region still harbours hope that Washington will join in the future.



In the first 100 days of the new administration the White House showed little interest in Southeast Asia, focusing much of its attention on Northeast Asia. Evan Medeiros, Obama's top adviser on Asia, anticipated that US-ASEAN ties were heading into a "strategic drift" and advised the Southeast Asian states to "have patience, not overreact and keep engaging with the Trump administration".<sup>72</sup> Jonathan Stromseth wrote in May 2017 that the Trump administration "seemed to have little time" for the ten ASEAN countries "which figured prominently in the 'rebalance' policy of President Obama".<sup>73</sup> Washington's focus on the South China Sea also had more to do with US-China rivalry than Southeast Asia per se. In January 2017, nominee for secretary of state Rex Tillerson during his confirmation hearing said that the United States would "have to send China a clear signal that first, the island-building stops", and second, China's "access to those islands is also not going to be allowed", raising concerns that the region would enter a period of volatility.<sup>74</sup> US Secretary of Defence James Mattis subsequently clarified that diplomacy should be a priority in the South China Sea dispute and that "major US military action was not being considered to contend with China's assertive behavior there".<sup>75</sup> A very gradual change apparently began with Vice President

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<sup>72</sup> "US-Asean Ties Headed for Strategic Drift, Says Obama's Asia Adviser", *Straits Times*, 19 Jan. 2017.

<sup>73</sup> "Trump Reassures ASEAN, Previews a Broader Asia Policy", <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/05/12/trump-reassures-asean-previews-a-broaderasia-policy/>, accessed 29 Aug. 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Heydarian argued that if the Trump administration followed through on what Tillerson said, Manila could "outsource the costs of constraining Beijing's maritime assertiveness to Washington". See "Asean Braces for Trump", *Straits Times*, 27 Jan. 2017.

<sup>75</sup> "Beijing Welcomes US Call for Diplomacy on South China Sea Issue", *Straits Times*, 7 Feb. 2017.

Mike Pence's visit to Indonesia in April, followed by a number of phone calls to Southeast Asian leaders by the president. In Jakarta, Pence issued a statement that President Trump would visit Southeast Asia to attend both the US-ASEAN Summit and EAS (in the Philippines) and APEC Summit (in Vietnam) in November 2017.<sup>76</sup> However, the Trump administration's interest in Southeast Asia had mostly to do with developments in the Korean Peninsula, which was reminiscent of the Bush administration's renewed interest in Southeast Asia in the wake of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.<sup>77</sup> Washington wanted the support of the ASEAN countries in dealing with Pyongyang, which had persisted in its missile tests, beginning with the firing of four ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan on 6 March 2017.

Two polls conducted in March–April 2017, one by the Asian Research Network<sup>78</sup> and the other by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore),<sup>79</sup> revealed the following: There was a general perception that American influence in the region was diminishing vis-à-vis China. China was seen to be the most influential player in Southeast Asia, but there was little trust that Beijing would be a good leader in maintaining peace and stability in the region. The United States, on the other hand,

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<sup>76</sup> “Trump to Visit SE Asia, Attend US–Asean Summit in November”, *Today*, 21 Apr. 2017. See also Thitian Pongsudhirak, “Trump’s Pragmatic Pivot back to Asia”, *Straits Times*, 6 June 2017; “Tillerson Visits Thailand with Focus on Ties and Pyongyang”, *Straits Times*, 9 Aug. 2017; “US to Enlist Malaysia’s Help to Rein in N. Korea”, *Straits Times*, 9 Aug. 2017.

<sup>77</sup> “US Wants Asean to Review Relations with N. Korea”, *Straits Times*, 6 May 2017.

<sup>78</sup> “The Asian Research Network: Survey on America’s Role in the Indo-Pacific 2017”, <https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/the-asian-research-network-survey-on-americas-rolein-the-indo-pacific>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017.

<sup>79</sup> “How Do Southeast Asians View the Trump Administration?” <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/centres/asc/pdf/ASCSurvey40517.pdf>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017.





was no longer seen as a dependable ally and could not be relied on to uphold free trade, human rights and international law in the region. Everyone, however, viewed trade with the United States as “overwhelmingly positive” and wanted the United States to remain in the region to balance China. Hugh White was not wide of the mark when he wrote that the Trump administration’s “narrowly defined ‘America First’ approach towards Asia has effectively ceded US leadership in the region to a rising China”.<sup>80</sup>

## **On Terrorism, Southern Philippines and the Rohingya Crisis**

Two other issues that need to be discussed before the end of this narrative are (a) the terrorist threat in Southeast Asia, and (b) the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, which have consequences that could affect the cohesion of ASEAN.

When the issue of terrorism first appeared, ASEAN and its constituent parts managed, if not resolved, the threat. Then, the threat was from Al Qaeda. Writing in 2008, Daljit Singh noted that Southeast Asia had had “important successes in the fight against terrorism” and while “the threat has by no means been eliminated, it has been reduced compared to its peak in 2001–02”.<sup>81</sup> From 2014, the threat from Al Qaeda was replaced by that from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which grew out of Al Qaeda and became a force of its own in early 2014. ISIS, disowned by Al Qaeda, became known to be “more brutal and more effective at controlling territory it has seized” and

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<sup>80</sup> Hugh White, “Dawn of the Post-American Order in Asia”, *Straits Times*, 30 Dec. 2017.

<sup>81</sup> “Asean Strategy Works in Keeping Terrorism at Bay”, *Straits Times*, 4 Aug. 2008.

“more cold-blooded than Al Qaeda”.<sup>82</sup> Some revisionist scholars, such as Stephen Walt, viewed ISIS as “a revolutionary state-building organization” as opposed to the conventional view that “its evil ensures its eventual destruction”.<sup>83</sup>

In September 2014, ASEAN foreign ministers issued their first joint statement (although individual Southeast Asian states had condemned ISIS and its actions before) expressing concerns about the situation in Syria and Iraq, which had wrought ISIS. The ISIS threat was moving closer to Southeast Asia. The Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines had pledged allegiance to ISIS, and a number of Malaysians were reported to be heading to Syria to fight alongside ISIS. Young Indonesians were reported to have been radicalized and recruited by ISIS. In the following years, more Muslims from various Southeast Asian countries would be arrested for supporting the organization.<sup>84</sup> In March 2015 ASEAN defence ministers signed a joint declaration to strengthen regional security, especially against threats posed by ISIS.<sup>85</sup> In November 2015 it was reported that wanted Malaysian militants hiding in the southern Philippines were planning to form an “official” faction of ISIS in Southeast Asia by bringing together terrorist groups

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<sup>82</sup> “ISIS: Everything You Need to Know About the Rise of the Militant Group”, 25 Sept. 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/09/world/isis-explained/>, accessed 13 Sept. 2017; “Islamic State Transforming into Functioning State with Terror as Tool”, *Today*, 23 July 2015.

<sup>83</sup> “Islamic State Transforming into Functioning State with Terror as Tool”.

<sup>84</sup> “Asean Issues First Joint Statement on ISIS Crisis”, *Sunday Times*, 28 Sept. 2014; “Malaysian ISIS Suspects Are ‘Fresh Recruits’”, *Sunday Times*, 28 Sept. 2014.

<sup>85</sup> “ASEAN Ministers Sign Joint Declaration to Fight Security Threats”, *Today*, 17 Mar. 2015.



in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, including Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf.<sup>86</sup> The objective was to create a caliphate in Southeast Asia. The ISIS threat appeared imminent when a series of deadly suicide bombings occurred in Jakarta on 14 January 2016, which ISIS claimed responsibility for. Analysts were divided as to whether this episode was evidence that a full-blown ISIS campaign in Southeast Asia had started. However, they agreed on two points. One, Southeast Asia was “fertile ground” for ISIS to operate given its enormous Muslim population, which made it a rich recruiting ground for disaffected Muslims. Mindanao (southern Philippines), where there has been a long-running Islamic insurgency, was flagged as a particularly soft spot that the ISIS leadership was targeting. There had also been an insurgency in southern Thailand since 2004, but so far the Thai-Muslim separatists had not shown an interest in linking up with ISIS. However, that did not mean it would never happen. Indeed, analysts warned that ISIS could exploit the present low-grade insurgency in southern Thailand.<sup>87</sup>

In 2016–17 the Jakarta bombings, a grenade attack outside Kuala Lumpur and an unsuccessful plot to launch a rocket attack on Marina Bay in Singapore by a Batam-based ISIS cell all brought terrorism back to the headlines.<sup>88</sup> The terrorism threat in Southeast Asia appeared to

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<sup>86</sup> “Malaysian Militants Plan to Start ISIS Faction in S-E Asia”, *Straits Times*, 15 Nov. 2015.

<sup>87</sup> “Conflict in Thai South Could Be Exploited by ISIS, Warn Analysts”, *Straits Times*, 10 June 2017.

<sup>88</sup> “Jakarta Attacks: Is ISIS’ Presence in South-east Asia Overstated?” *Straits Times*, 16 Jan. 2016; “Jakarta Attacks Could Mark Start of ISIS Campaign in S-E Asia”, *Straits Times*, 20 Jan. 2016; Joseph Chinyong Liow, “ISIS Reaches Indonesia: The Terrorist Group’s Prospects in Southeast Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, 8

get more serious as ISIS lost ground in its fight in Syria and Iraq. Towards the end of 2016, ISIS was fighting to hold onto its last stronghold in Iraq, the city of Mosul.<sup>89</sup> In January 2017 it was reported that there was a rise in the number of Malaysians arrested for trying to join ISIS.<sup>90</sup> In September 2017 ISIS issued a recruitment video featuring a Singaporean fighter (who left Singapore in 2014 for the Middle East, where he—one of three Singaporeans so far—was supposedly radicalized). Terrorism experts were of the view that the video showed that ISIS was focusing on Southeast Asia.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, analysts noted that Jemaah Islamiyah, which was prominent in the early 2000s and was responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings, was “regaining strength” in Indonesia, and while it was not an immediate threat it “could spawn a new generation of extremists”.<sup>92</sup>

In May 2017 fighting flared up in Marawi, a mainly Muslim city in the southern Philippines, after security forces raided an apartment to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, who analysts believed to be the top ISIS representative in Southeast Asia. This led President Duterte to declare

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Feb. 2016; “‘JI, Not ISIS, Is Bigger Threat’ to South-east Asia”, *Straits Times*, 29 Apr. 2016; “ISIS ‘May Set up Caliphate in S-E Asia’”, *Straits Times*, 30 Apr. 2016; “S-E Asia Could Be Next ISIS Battleground, Say Experts”, *Straits Times*, 26 Oct. 2016; “ISIS Plan for Mindanao Poses Threat to Indonesia”, *Straits Times*, 8 Dec. 2016; “Manila Finds Strong Links Between ISIS and Rebels in South”, *Straits Times*, 11 Feb. 2017.

<sup>89</sup> “ISIS Losing Ground, but Extending Reach”, *Sunday Times*, 20 Nov. 2016; “ISIS Terror Threat Greater Now, Says Shanmugam”, *Straits Times*, 3 Dec. 2016.

<sup>90</sup> “Rise in Number of Malaysians Arrested for Trying to Join ISIS”, *Straits Times*, 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>91</sup> “Latest Video a Sign of ISIS’ Focus on South-east Asia: Experts”, *Straits Times*, 25 Sept. 2017.

<sup>92</sup> “JI ‘Regaining Strength’ in Indonesia”, *Today*, 28 Apr. 2017.



martial law across Mindanao. Abu Sayyaf and a new group known as Maute, both allied to ISIS, were fighting together in Marawi. It was reported in June that Indonesian militants were fighting alongside Maute combatants.<sup>93</sup> There was a fear that if the Islamic militants were not contained, the terrorist threat might spread to Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. At the same time, if defeated, the militants could escape to the neighbouring states.<sup>94</sup>

Finally, there is the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. Like the insurgencies in southern Thailand and southern Philippines, the Rohingya crisis is a domestic issue with a long history that has regional, if not international, ramifications. Space does not allow us to delve into the origins and history of the Rohingya issue here, except to note that the Myanmar government does not recognize the Rohingya as one of its 135 ethnic groups and there has been a long-standing animosity between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. For our purposes, a convenient place to begin would be Myanmar's transition to relative democracy from 2011. One unintended consequence was the rise of extremist Buddhist groups, which led to the revival of sectarian violence between the Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State in June 2012. Three Muslims, two of whom were allegedly Rohingya, raped a Rakhine woman, which led to revenge attacks. The

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<sup>93</sup> "Indonesian Militants' Presence in Marawi City Sparks Alarm", *Straits Times*, 12 June 2017.

<sup>94</sup> "Defeat of Rebels in Marawi Could Spell More Trouble for S-E Asia, Say Analysts", *Today*, 30 May 2017. In August 2018 President Duterte signed a law (that enforced the 2014 peace deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front) granting greater autonomy to Muslims in the southern Philippines. The autonomous region is known as Bangsamoro.

Myanmar government took the side of the ethnic Arakan Buddhists.<sup>95</sup> The conflict simmered and flared up again on 9 October 2016, when a few hundred men crossed from Bangladesh into Rakhine State and attacked three border guard posts, killed nine police officers and stole thousands of bullets. The Myanmar government came down heavily on the Rohingya, as it had always done since 1962. Kuala Lumpur went as far as to accuse the Myanmar army of “genocide”.<sup>96</sup> Apart from human rights concerns— there were reports in late 2016 of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya being displaced and crossing over into Bangladesh; complete villages being razed to the ground; rape, torture and murder by the Myanmar military—there was the worry that ISIS could exploit the Rohingya crisis if the issue was not resolved.<sup>97</sup> In its December 2016 report, the International Crisis Group warned that continued use of disproportionate force without any effort at reconciliation could create “conditions to further radicalize sections of the Rohingya population that transnational jihadists could exploit for their own agenda”.<sup>98</sup> The situation has only worsened. In September 2017 UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in a letter to the Security Council, warned of the “risk of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar”.<sup>99</sup> UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, in fact,

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<sup>95</sup> “The Government Could Have Stopped This”, 31 July 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/07/31/government-could-have-stopped/sectarian-violence-andensuing-abuses-burmas-arakan>, accessed 15 Sept. 2017.

<sup>96</sup> “UN Calls on Suu Kyi to Visit Crisis-Hit Rakhine”, *Straits Times*, 10 Dec. 2016.

<sup>97</sup> “ISIS Could Exploit Rohingya Crisis: KL”, *Straits Times*, 9 Dec. 2016; “Malaysia Warns of ISIS Threat to Myanmar”, *Straits Times*, 5 Jan. 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Cited in Jera Lego, “Why Asean Can’t Ignore the Rohingya Crisis”, *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2017.

<sup>99</sup> “Myanmar Crisis Could ‘Unsettle Region’”, *Straits Times*, 7 Sept. 2017.



described the actions of the Myanmar military as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.<sup>100</sup>

ASEAN has so far not been able to play an effective role in addressing the crisis. As Hoang Thi Ha noted, “For years, Asean’s response to the Rohingya problem has been mute and passive, constrained by its nonintervention principle ... It is increasingly untenable for Asean to insulate itself from this thorny matter behind the shield of non-interference”, particularly “as the region is getting more connected and integrated”.<sup>101</sup>

It was against the above setting that ASEAN celebrated the 50th year of its founding in 2017. It is also where we end this book. Not surprisingly, celebrations were muted given the immense and difficult challenges faced by the organization, internal and external. The pursuit of a post-Cold War order centred on ASEAN remains the goal. As this book has shown and others have pointed out, “it has to be earned rather than simply assumed or proclaimed ... there can be no ASEAN centrality without ASEAN unity and ASEAN neutrality”.<sup>102</sup> Can ASEAN stay united? Kishore Mahbubani, in his commemorative book marking ASEAN’s 50th year,<sup>103</sup> wrote that the things holding the organization together were fear, luck and golf. Of the three, fear and luck remain

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<sup>100</sup> “UN Official Slams ‘Textbook Ethnic Cleansing’ in Myanmar”, *Straits Times*, 12 Sept. 2017

<sup>101</sup> “What Can Asean Do About the Rohingya Crisis?” *Today*, 22 Dec. 2016. See also Lego, “Why Asean Can’t Ignore the Rohingya Crisis”.

<sup>102</sup> Acharya, “Myth of ASEAN Centrality?”: 279; “ASEAN’s Biggest Challenge Is to Stay United: Tommy Koh”, 8 Aug. 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/asean-s-biggest-challenge-is-to-stay-united-tommy-koh-9105084>, accessed 22 Sept. 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017).

pertinent. The fear of China, for one, will keep ASEAN intact. As George Yeo eloquently put it:

We [ASEAN] are being driven together not so much by a natural affection for one another as by the huge challenges which confront us collectively. Either we accept a common destiny, or we will be cast aside with individual Asean countries having to strike separate deals with different major powers. A divided Asean will see all of them jostling for power and influence in the region.<sup>104</sup>

As for ASEAN neutrality, much depends on the actions of external powers (which are outside the control of the ASEAN countries), particularly the United States, and this is where perhaps luck will play a part.

### ***Note on the Author***

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<sup>104</sup> George Yeo, "Repositioning Asean for a New World", *Straits Times*, 8 Sept. 2005.





sequel, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010); *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013); and *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodia Conflict, 1979-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013). Most recently, he co-edited *Perspectives on the Security of Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific and London: Imperial College Press, 2015), which includes a chapter on "Singapore's Conception of Security." He has published in edited volumes as well as in journals including *Asian Survey*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, *War and Society*, *War in History*, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *Security Dialogue*, *Southeast Asia Research*, *Cold War History*, *Asian Security*, *Asian Studies Review* and the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. He was a Gerald R. Ford Foundation Research Grant Award recipient (Fall 2005), Fulbright Singapore Researcher award recipient (2006-2007), and a Woodrow Wilson Public Policy Scholar (2006-2007). He is also a recipient of the Public Administration Medal (Bronze) and the National Institute of Education Excellence in Teaching Commendation (2013). He was a member of the Resource Panel, Government Parliamentary Committee for Defence & Foreign Affairs (2002-2006). His most recent publications are *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018) and its sequel, *Southeast Asia after the Cold War: A Contemporary History* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019). His next book on the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization will be published in 2021. He is currently writing a book on Singapore's Grand Strategy.