

# STRATEGI AMERIKA TERHADAP ASIA TENGGARA MENDUKUNG “STRATEGI PENYEIMBANGAN”

## AMERICAN STRATEGY TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA TO SUSTAIN “REBALANCING STRATEGY”

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**Abstrak** -- Salah satu bagian penting dari kepentingan strategis AS di Asia terletak di kawasan Asia Tenggara, yang semakin terancam oleh pengaruh dan dominasi China; sementara cengkraman Cina di wilayah ini menguat, AS tampaknya melonggarkan cengkramannya. Setidaknya ada dua isu utama yang berkontribusi terhadap perubahan ini. Yang pertama adalah ketidakpastian dalam persengketaan di Laut Cina Selatan (LCS); tekanan AS pada Tiongkok baik secara diplomatis maupun kehadiran militer hanya menunjukkan dampak terbatas, dan kurang meyakinkan bagi para pemimpin di Asia Tenggara. Dan yang kedua adalah strategi AS yang tidak jelas untuk mengimbangi peningkatan hubungan ekonomi China dengan kawasan ini. Kebijakan AS dalam dua masalah ini akan menentukan masa depan hubungan antara AS dan kawasan Asia Tenggara, dan secara signifikan mempengaruhi strategi *rebalancing* AS di Asia, makanya, harus ditangani dengan tepat. Studi ini menemukan bahwa AS harus mengadopsi strategi TAMPIL BESAR tetapi DAMAI di Laut Cina Selatan, dan menjadi mitra LEBIH BAIK untuk negara-negara Asia Tenggara. Inilah strategi kemenangan AS yang lebih mungkin terhadap Asia Tenggara, dan yang akan menopang strategi *rebalancing* AS di Asia Pasifik.

**Kata Kunci:** Strategi Kemenangan dan Penyeimbangan, Wilayah Asia Tenggara, Kekuasaan dalam Hubungan Internasional

**Abstract** -- An important part of the U.S.' broader strategic interests in Asia lays in the Southeast Asian region, which is increasingly threatened by China's growing influence and domination; while the China's grip on the region is strengthening, the U.S seems to be loosening its grip. At least there are two central issues that have contributed to the change. The first is an uncertainty in the South China Sea (SCS) dispute; the U.S.' pressures on China both diplomatically and by military presence have shown only a limited impact, and have been less convincing to the Southeast Asian leaders. And the second is an unclear strategy of the U.S. to balance against the growing importance of China's economic ties with the region. The outcome of these two issues would determine the future relations between the U.S. and the Southeast Asian region, and significantly affect the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia, therefore, should be properly addressed. The study

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found that the U.S. should adopt the strategy of going BIG but PEACEFUL in the South China Sea, and being a BETTER partner for the Southeast Asian countries. This seems more possible to be a winning strategy towards Southeast Asia, and critical to sustain the U.S.'s rebalancing strategy in Asia Pacific.”

**Keywords: Winning and Rebalancing Strategy, Southeast Asia Region, Power in International Relations**

### Introduction - Understand the Context

The U.S.-Southeast Asian relationship is not isolated but considerably shaped by various international and domestic contexts, the interplay of which would be determined by the behavior of China, the U.S., and the countries of the Southeast Asian region. Simply, the relationship is happening in the context of China emerging as a regional power and seeking hegemony; at the same time, U.S. global leadership is facing growing security challenges, and domestically somewhat inward-looking tendencies; whereas the Southeast Asian region is expecting to balance between keeping U.S. security assurance and China's economic support.

### International: China, U.S., Southeast Asia

The World Bank forecasted that China will continue to have a high economic growth despite consistent declines over years, from 6.7% in 2016, to an estimated 6.5% in

2017, and 6.3% in 2018 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> IMF World Economic Outlook 2015 estimated that China PPP GDP will be more than \$23 trillion, bigger than the U.S. GDP of \$19.37 trillion, and has been the biggest world trading country with an amount of \$4.2 trillion in 2014, compared to the U.S. total trade which is \$3.94 trillion.<sup>3</sup> As part of its economic development, China is launching a mega infrastructure project of One Belt One Road (OBOR), which would better connect China's economy by sea and land with Europe, Asia, and Africa. The South China Sea and the Southeast Asian region hold an important portion and location of this OBOR project. Not only they would serve as its major trade routes, but the Southeast Asian countries provide a big market for Chinese products and important sources for raw materials to boost its giant economy.

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<sup>2</sup> “Global Economic Prospects: Weak Investment in Uncertain Time”, *The World Bank*, A World Bank Flagship Report January 2017, [worldbank.org](http://worldbank.org).

<sup>3</sup> “Gross Domestic Product”, *IMF World Economic Outlook*, October 2015. [imf.org](http://imf.org).

Here lies the strategic importance of its military stronghold in the middle of the South China Sea to project the Chinese military capability to the whole region. Therefore, despite a rejection by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in July 2016 to its claim over the South China Sea, China has continued to build massive infrastructure for its military bases in the islands. China has ignored repeated calls by the U.S. and international community to abide with internal norms and rules. When the U.S. began to conduct the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to protect its interests in the region, China reacted strongly and warned that the FONOPs are a violation against its sovereignty.

On the other hand, the U.S. continued low economic growth, from 2.4% in 2014 to an estimated 1.9% in 2019,<sup>4</sup> a growing global security challenges stretching from Eastern Europe to Middle East and North Africa to Asia could overstretch the U.S. strategic capability. In Europe, Russia has posed an increasing challenge, as in the case of Ukraine, annexation of Crimea, growing threats to

Baltic states. Recently Russia expanded its involvement in Syria by protecting President Bashar Al-Assad and fighting against rebel groups that the U.S. has been supporting. Continued U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and unclear future of Syria and nuclear Iran, along with Israel-Palestinian difficult peace process and Yemen crisis, all require serious attentions. The U.S. is still and may continue to be the biggest and strongest military power in the next decade or two, but the growing geopolitical strategic challenges, as well as the U.S. global war on terror could compromise the effectiveness of the U.S. to respond simultaneously.

In Asia, the U.S. rebalancing strategy toward China has been inevitably marked by security confrontation and economic cooperation. For the U.S., the military confrontation has seemed to be mainly interpreted by the growing military presence to ensure the issues of Korean peninsula, Taiwan and the South China Sea properly controlled.<sup>5</sup> Whereas for China, it responds by what it called as “New Great Game”, by strengthening its nuclear arsenal and military bases in the

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<sup>4</sup> This is despite a slightly better economic growth than other world’s industrial states, *ibid*.

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<sup>5</sup> “Barack Obama Says Asia-Pacific Is ‘Top US Priority’”, *BBC News*, November 17, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15715446>

South China Sea, that would also protect its sovereignty over Taiwan, and other important interests in the region.<sup>6</sup> In the issue of North Korea's nuclear programs, the U.S. relies heavily on China, North Korea's only ally, to find a diplomatic solution<sup>7</sup>; this could potentially compromise the U.S. military opposition to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, the economic cooperation has been imperative with the vast expansion of U.S.-China economic interdependence, especially as the biggest trade partners for one another. The U.S. Census Bureau noted that in 2016, U.S. total exports to China were \$116 billion, while total imports were \$463 billion.<sup>8</sup> The fact that China is holding a significant amount of U.S. debt, \$1.059 trillion as of February 2017, equal to 27.8 percent of the \$3.8 trillion in treasury bills, notes, and bonds held by foreign

countries;<sup>9</sup> and on the other hand, China's economic growth depends greatly on the regional stability; this means, it needs reasonably stable relations.

Most Southeast Asian countries seem to be trapped in the need to keep both the U.S. security assurance and China's economic support. None of them see themselves as strong enough to challenge Chinese militarily, therefore they rely heavily on the U.S. presence in the region to balance China's growing military. Meanwhile, all countries in the region have seen their economic relations with China a vital interest. The China-ASEAN Free Trade Area was signed on 4 November 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and came into effect on 1 January 2010. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area is the largest free trade area in terms of population and third largest in terms of nominal GDP.<sup>10</sup> And China,

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<sup>6</sup> Yang Razali Kassim, "The New Great Game: ASEAN's Balancing Act?" RSIS Commentaries, January 17, 2012, at <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/RSIS0142012.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> During the recent visit by the Chinese President Xi Jinping to the U.S., President Donald Trump urged China to play a greater role to stop the North Korean nuclear test. "Calls for calm as US dispatches naval might to Korean waters", CNN, Alert News Alert, Politics, April, 12, 2017, [cnn.org](http://cnn.org)

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Foreign Trade, 2016 Trade in Goods with China, [census.gov](http://census.gov)

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Amadeo, "U.S. Debt to China: How Much Does It Own? Exactly How Much U.S. Debt Does China Own? And Why?," *The Balance*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.thebalance.com/u-s-debt-to-china-how-much-does-it-own-3306355>

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Walker, "China and Asean free trade deal begins", *BBC News* January 1, 2010; Liz Gooch, "Asia Free Trade Zone Raises Hopes, and Some Fears About China", *The New York Times*, December 31, 2009.

followed by Japan and the U.S., is the largest trading partner of ASEAN.<sup>11</sup>

However, U.S. security protection seems to be uncertain; the U.S.' repeated call for China to comply with the international norms and rules, combined with FONOPs in the SCS have not deterred China. China has kept strengthening its military capability in the SCS, and denying the rights of other claimants. One of important obstacles is that the U.S. has refused to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which China then cites as a reason to ignore U.S. protests.

The region's common interest is the U.S. playing an effective, but constructive role, meaning that they want to see more U.S. actions, but without resorting to a dangerous conflict. For example, in 2016 the Jakarta Post wrote that Indonesian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Arrmanatha Nasir said that, "maintaining stability in the South China Sea is a shared responsibility between China, ASEAN, and other countries related to the water," and in a joint statement by Cambodia, Laos and Brunei that, "countries outside

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<sup>11</sup> ASEAN Merchandise Trade Statistics Database, [http://asean.org/storage/2015/12/table20\\_as-of-10-June-2016.pdf](http://asean.org/storage/2015/12/table20_as-of-10-June-2016.pdf), accessed April 27, 2017.

the region [including the U.S.] should play a constructive role..."<sup>12</sup> This is actually convergent with the U.S. and China's interests, to avoid a nuclear war and to secure economic cooperation, but has yet to be properly interpreted into a strategy.

### **Domestic Context: U.S. and Southeast Asian Nations**

The U.S. foreign policies under President Donald Trump has taken a very different direction, partly marked by the U.S. withdrawal from various multilateral arrangements. It has canceled the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnerships) trade agreement, begun evaluating other agreements such as North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and threatened to reduce its contribution to the United Nations. U.S. security allies, such as NATO, Japan, south Korea have increasingly questioned the future of U.S. commitment to their respective alliance. The U.S. administration has shown more interested in bilateral approaches by prioritizing U.S. national interests, with an "America First" slogan. Trump's administration is prioritizing more efforts to fulfil Trump's campaign promises in domestic issues, such as repeal and

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<sup>12</sup> Anggi M Lubis, "RI Wants China-ASEAN Talks", *Jakarta Post*, April 26, 2016.

replace Obamacare, immigration regulations, including a controversial U.S.-Mexico border wall, which all seem to be difficult. Current military operations in Syria and more military posturing on the Korean peninsula have given no clear signs, whether as a change in priority, or as a temporary escape from growing frustrations over domestic politics. Especially with North Korea, the U.S. needs more cooperation from China, and could consequently soften U.S. pressure on China over the SCS issues.

Similar self-interested tendencies are also found in the Southeast Asian region. For example, current Indonesian President Joko Widodo, is less interested in playing a leading or brokering role to find a broader solution for the SCS dispute, and more focused on its national interest in securing Indonesia's portion of disputed area located in the northern part of Natuna islands. Jokowi has been the leader of ASEAN, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines too, is less interested in having military alliance with the U.S. in favor of securing economic relations with China. He has abandoned the PCA ruling. The leaderships in Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei are disappointed with the U.S. government's decision to cancel the TPP, and are

uncertain about the future engagements with the U.S. While Singapore, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, which are not claimants, are concerned more about regional instability caused by major power competitions, thus, tend to choose passive positions on the SCS issues.

The importance of the Southeast Asian region to the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia is debatable. Unlike during the Cold-War period on which the U.S. had supported its containment policy by helping to establish the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), today ASEAN is much different. The membership has grown from original 5 in 1967 to 10 members since 1998 that include all countries in the Southeast Asian region. And although ASEAN has achieved a wide range of intra-ASEAN and extra-ASEAN cooperation, it remains a loose regional cooperative amongst countries with different national interests, political system, and levels of development. Unlike Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia that are claimants, non-claimant countries, especially Cambodia and Laos, refuse to use ASEAN as a vehicle to approach the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN's passive position provides little, if no help for advancing

the U.S. interests. Therefore, like previous Obama administration, there has not been any significant sign of the new administration's interest in advancing cooperation with ASEAN.

However, without better cooperation with the region, the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia will become less effective. During the Obama administration, diplomatic pressure on China by using international norms and rules was weakened by the fact that the U.S. has not ratified the UNCLOS. Its multilateral approach, such as by initiating TPP, failed after being cancelled by the Trump administration. The Trump administration's military approach has seemed to rely only on the FONOPs, which has not been effective, and less interested in stressing the international legal norms and values. A more holistic solution to the SCS dispute and a stronger engagement with the region will effectively sustain a broader rebalancing strategy toward Asia. The status-quo, meaning ineffective FONOPs, weak diplomatic pressures on China, a divided Southeast Asian, and a lack of U.S. engagement with the region, will continue to benefit China. To benefit the U.S., all of these must be reversed in the next U.S. strategy.

### **Assumptions**

China is likely to continue the development of military base and infrastructure projects in the South China Sea. It will likely to utilize this to enforce its maritime territory by implementing Access Denial (AD) in a new Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) within the nine dashed line. U.S. FONOPs are not likely to reverse the Chinese development of military infrastructure in the disputed area. A maximum result that the U.S. is likely to achieve peacefully is to deny China's claim over maritime territory by using its man-made islands as ruled by UNCLOS, but let China keeping the existing infrastructures on these islands. This would secure the U.S. demand for the Freedom of Navigation, and deter the Chinese from launching military operations against other claimants from the islands. Although China is more likely to insist on bilateral dialogues with all claimants, to give its more time building stronger military capability in the disputed region, FONOPs will help prevent China from forcing other claimants to accept its unilateral claim. This will likely to be more effective if the U.S. Senate ratifies UNCLOS and mobilizes international diplomatic

pressures on China to uphold the PCA ruling.

Whereas, direct military engagements with certain countries, similar to previous arrangements with the Philippines, will be likely to divide the region more deeply, and encourage resistant from other countries, like Cambodia, Laos, or Burma. This division will likely to benefit China. The U.S. is strong enough to conduct FONOPs unilaterally, or joint patrols with other external powers, such as Japan or Australia, will be beneficial. These FONOPs will work under the U.S. nuclear deterrent, that China will not likely to take risk a nuclear war with the U.S. should FONOPs develop into a limited military conflict.

Meanwhile, China's economic relations with Southeast Asian countries is likely to deepen, thus, help achieving China's long term influence and domination in the region. However, the countries in the region are likely to welcome U.S. greater engagement too. Especially as China's economic slowdown hurts also their economies, they will likely to keep diversifying their trade partners and sources of investments, instead of relying too much on China; the U.S. just needs to engage more.

### **Interests**

The U.S. has a vital interest in the Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea, not only because it is the main trade route of the U.S., its allies and friends, but also crucial to the effectiveness of U.S. presence in the Asian Pacific region. Therefore, it is one of the core components of the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia. Meanwhile, the U.S. has an important interest to strengthen its relations with Southeast Asian countries for a long term, a broader objective of maintaining U.S. influence in the region, and balancing against China's growing domination. The region's population of more than 620 million combined provide a big market which should not be dominated by China, and their rich natural resources are useful for the U.S. economy. Consequently, the U.S. also has an important interest in the promoting free market economies, democracy, and human rights, to ensure that American values are protected and projected in the region.

### **Threats/Opportunities**

The U.S. interest in the Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea is threatened by China's claim and military buildup in the disputed SCS area. It is



building military base and infrastructures in the area from where it is enforcing Access Denial (AD), and may declare an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). If fully implemented in this ADIZ, U.S. ships and aircrafts will no longer have free access to this main trade route. The U.S. could just ignore it as it did in East and Southeast Asia, but when China's military has become more powerful, the potential for incidents from ignoring it will become more dangerous. In December 2016 the Chinese Navy captured a U.S. underwater drone, demonstrating that it has the capability to impose law enforcement in the area,<sup>13</sup> and in February 10, 2017 the Diplomat reported that the Chinese surveillance aircraft flew in unsafe distance to U.S. surveillance aircrafts.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, because of strategic location in the middle of the SCS that China is claiming, the U.S. protection for its allies and friends in the region, such as

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<sup>13</sup> "Chinese warship seizes US underwater drone in international waters", *The Guardian*, December 16, 2016, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com)

<sup>14</sup> "US, Chinese Military Aircraft See Close Encounter Over South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/us-chinese-military-aircraft-see-close-encounter-over-south-china-sea/>

Taiwan and the Philippines will be greatly compromised.<sup>15</sup>

China's growing economic cooperation with the region also challenges U.S. influence and leverage. China is offering investments and funding for the development of mega-infrastructure projects in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia, providing low interest rate loans for Cambodia and Laos, building a high speed rail from Laos to China, and offering other economic support in line with its OBOR project. This demonstrates China's commitment.

The U.S. has various opportunities to pursue a better strategy towards Southeast Asia. China's claim in the SCS dispute has been rejected by the PCA in July 2016. This rejection provided an opportunity to impose stronger diplomatic pressures on China and justify its FONOPs in the disputed area. The U.S. government proposed to ratify UNCLOS, and there may be possibility in the future that the discussion be re-opened to restart the process of ratification. But even without ratifying UNCLOS, the U.S.

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<sup>15</sup> Several incidents have happened between the Chinese coastguards and the Philippines navy, "Armed Clash in the South China Sea", *Council on Foreign Relations, Contingency Plan Memorandum No. 14*, <http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/armed-clash-south-china-sea/p27883>

has an opportunity to use other allied countries like Japan and NATO countries that have ratified UNLOS to mobilize international pressures on China. In addition, the U.S. has traditional strong relations with the Southeast Asian region, and through ASEAN Community programs, the U.S. can engage more intensively with ASEAN in security, economic and value projection. The U.S. however will need to determine which fields of cooperation that suit the U.S. objectives, either economically or in security.

### **Goals/ Objectives**

The main objective of the U.S. strategy toward the Southeast Asian region is to ensure the U.S. interest in Freedom of Navigation in the SCS, to deny China from using its man-made islands as a legal argument to enforce its maritime territorial claim over the SCS, and to deter China from using its military bases in the islands to threaten other countries in the region. Another objective of the U.S. strategy is to prevent the region from being dominated by China economically and politically, so that the U.S. rebalancing strategy to protect its wider interest in Asia in the long term.

The U.S., however, has two negative objectives to prevent a dangerous U.S.-China military conflict from happening in the region, and to prevent negative effects of the strategy to the U.S.-China economic relations. This major military conflict will be disadvantageous to the U.S., China, and the whole region. Therefore, FONOPs must be aimed mainly as deterrent and backup for diplomatic pressures, in order to persuade China to agree with the PCA ruling.

### **Ways & Means**

#### “Theory of Victory”

More effective FONOPs by U.S. military, supported by its major allies, and stronger U.S.-led international diplomatic pressures on China, as well as a greater U.S. engagement with Southeast Asian countries, will protect the international freedom of navigation in the SCS and persuade China to comply with international norms and rules, thus to compromise its unlawful territorial claims over the SCS, as well as to ensure the U.S. strong influence in the region. This strategy will be pivotal to sustain the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia Pacific.

OIP 1 - Ensure the U.S. Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea by conducting a more intensive FONOPs, supported by diplomatic and economic instruments.

Although the U.S. is mainly interested in freedom of navigation, achieving this objective can potentially lead to a broader solution to the SCS dispute. FONOPs should aim at a maximum level to delegitimize the Chinese maritime territorial claim in the South China Sea. This will have a secondary effect on excessive claims by Vietnam or the Philippines, which are also beyond the UNCLOS guidelines. Although undoing Chinese infrastructure in the South China Sea islands is unrealistic, the U.S. must stop China from using the artificial islands as a legal argument to claim territorial water, or from using them as the military bases to threaten other countries.

The U.S. should also encourage its major allies, such as NATO, Japan, or Australia to conduct unilaterally or joint FONOPs in the SCS. However, the U.S. should not involve ASEAN member countries in FONOPs, even the claimants. The U.S. only need to ensure that there is no resistance from them against FNOPs, as well as to gain supports for PCA ruling. Let them continue with internal dialogues

among claimants, which however will unlikely to work. The U.S. should go big with FNOPs, act as a super power, send a clear message to China that if it uses the military bases in its artificial islands to threaten other countries, the U.S. will destroy them as legitimate military targets in a matter of hours or less. That is how FONOPs as deterrent will work, and it will work under a bigger U.S. nuclear deterrent.

In economic cooperation, the U.S. can also encourage joint explorations of natural resources with the Southeast Asian countries in the disputed areas. Besides being beneficial economically, these joint explorations will also support the objective of undermining China's unilateral claim and treating the disputed area as international water, except the area within which is ruled by UNCLOS.

Along with FONOPs, the U.S. should also mobilize stronger international call for China to abide with international norms and rules. For this call to be effective, the U.S. should, however ratify UNCLOS. Ratification will give the U.S. more credibility and gain more supports from the international community. While waiting for the U.S. Senates to ratify UNCLOS, the U.S. should mobilize its major allies and friends such as EU/ NATO

countries, Japan, India, or Australia, most of which have ratified UNCLOS persuade China. China's lawless claim must be degraded worldwide; any narrative from China about territorial sovereignty must be immediately rejected because legally the SCS is not its territorial water, but an international water.

OIP 2 – Strengthen the U.S. influence in Southeast Asia by increasing the U.S. engagements with Southeast Asian countries using military, economic and diplomatic means.

U.S. influence and domination in the region cannot be achieved by the U.S. retreating from the region, such as with the withdrawal from the TPP. Nor can the U.S. expect the approaches or initiatives coming from the region, simply because the countries in the region will not want to upset China that offers economic supports. Therefore, like China's proactive economic approaches to the region, the initiatives should come from the U.S., to persuade the region by using the resources (military, economics, diplomatic, or information) that the U.S. has.

With regard to the approach, the U.S. should focus more on multilateral than bilateral course of actions to achieve

a long term effect. As domestic context shows, it may be argued that, this will be unlikely under Trump. However, President Trump complains about multilateral free trade agreements because they are thought as unfair; other countries unfairly take advantages from tax and tariff reductions. This strategy does not advocate any free trade agreement, but is designed for other purposes.

One of the purposes is to strengthen U.S. influence in the region by establishing strong connections with the whole ASEAN members in regional security issues, for example, through U.S.-ASEAN joint exercises, sharing best practices, and assisting ASEAN capacity building in counter terrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping forces, and transnational crime prevention. Limited joint exercises and operations among them, such as joint maritime operations between Indonesia and the Philippines in the Sulu Sea, have existed; however, they have not been effective, due to limited capacities in technology and resources. The U.S. should use this opportunity to intensify such cooperation by offering possible assistances. Although the approach should be more to ASEAN as a whole, bilateral approaches can also be

taken as complementary efforts. But too much on bilateral approaches may divide the region, and to encourage other countries like Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, to disturb the U.S.' objective of having a full regional influence, just like what China has always wanted. Therefore, when choosing the programs or activities of engagement, the U.S. should choose common issues, and avoid conflicting issues, such as South China Sea disputes.

In order to get economic benefits from its security cooperation, the U.S. can persuade ASEAN to establish interoperability in SOPs and equipment to be purchased from U.S. producers. To justify the needs for interoperability, the U.S. can persuade ASEAN to establish a multilateral standing force for non-military operations such as ASEAN Peacekeeping Force or Joint Maritime Task Forces. These kinds of task forces have been an ongoing discussion among ASEAN member countries, as part of their programs to realize Asean Political and Security Community; the U.S. just need to give them more support.

Economically, it is to disturb China's market in ASEAN member countries. This will be done by investing in the region to establish manufactures that would

produce similar products imported from China, but with better quality and lower prices. Better quality is possible because of U.S. better technologies; while lower prices because of locally-produced with cheaper labors. The production should be scalable by taking advantage of AFTA (Asean Free Trade Area). This is not a U.S.-AFTA, but the U.S. should make use of AFTA. Since the products are not for U.S. consumptions, they will not influence the U.S. trade balance, while the U.S. harvesting revenues from doing business overseas as new business models, as well as helping ASEAN's economy, thus strengthening the influence. Unlike China's investments, which are mainly in energy sectors to exploit their natural resources, and in infrastructures which are long term investments, U.S. investments should be different, focus more on manufactures to compete against imported products from China.

The U.S. should promote and protect free market economies, democracy, and human rights in the region. ASEAN member countries have various political cultures, from a democratic consolidation in Indonesia and the Philippines, semi-democracies in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, democratic transitions in Burma and

Cambodia, and Monarchy in Brunei Darussalam, to Communist in Vietnam and Laos, however, all countries support free market economies, including Vietnam and Laos. Human rights is a sensitive issue; therefore, it should come along with economic engagement. China's engagements in the region does not care about values, the U.S.' should and could bring positive changes. Continued supports for NGOs for democracy projects and good governance in the region will help strengthen the U.S. influence at the grassroots level, and allow more peaceful but more sustainable changes in a positive direction.

OIP 3 - Prevent a dangerous major power conflict from happening in the region through by military and diplomatic means.

The U.S. must ensure that FNOPs aimed at denying China from using its artificial islands for illegally claiming the international water as its maritime territory, deterring it from using the military bases in the islands to threaten other countries using the international water. Therefore, in doing so, FNOPs should not be allowed to develop into dangerous military conflicts, especially

nuclear war. Therefore, diplomatic channels and senior leader engagements between U.S. and China should be effectively used to communicate each other's positions. However, the strategy of deterrent should not be constrained by the U.S. fears of China's retaliation. On the contrary, it should be based on the China's fear of a more dangerous war. This can only be achieved when the U.S. still has obvious military superiority. Therefore, timing and scale will be key to the U.S. deterrent strategy in the SCS; so, go big before it becoming too late.

The same efforts should also be made to protect the U.S.-China economic relations, including by avoiding any type of economic sanction because it will hurt also the U.S. economy. Similarly, the U.S. should not fear too much, that China will initiate an economic war against the U.S., because China needs the U.S. good economy and vice versa.

#### **Costs/Risks/ -lities Test.**

The cost for conducting FONOPs, diplomatic pressures against China, and intensified engagements with ASEAN will be reasonably low and very affordable, although more effective FONOP will need more money and resources (ships).

The risk to strategy is likely to come from the Senate if it is to involve the ratification of UNCLOS. But this risk would be partial, because it is only an additional force to the strategy. Another risk to strategy is also likely to come from an escalation in the North Korean issue, that China might use its role that the U.S. expects it to play as a leverage to soften the U.S. pressure over the SCS issue. However, the U.S. should be consistent with its positions in both issues. China wants stability in the Korean peninsula just as much as the U.S. and its allies do. President Trump's position in the North Korean nuclear program is clear, if China does not play its role properly, the U.S. will go alone. This should be the same with the SCS.

The greatest risk from the strategy is the failure of deterrent because of undetected cause of accidents encountered at sea during the FONOPs. This can be mitigated by better operation planning, and communication with all parties involved in the operations. The highest risk that the U.S should accept is a minimum cost of a quick, and limited military operation to destroy China's military bases in the artificial islands. Nuclear deterrent must be ensured to stop it from escalating further.

Feasibility (high) – FONOPs have been an ongoing operation and intensifying them is highly feasible. Similarly, increasing U.S. engagement with Southeast Asian countries is highly feasible as U.S. generally has good relations with all countries in the region, with some of them are traditional allies (Thailand and the Philippines), or Singapore and Vietnam, with which the U.S. relations are getting stronger.

Desirability (high) – The strategy will be highly desirable to serve the higher level of U.S. national interest in the region and in Asia.

Suitability (high) – The strategy will suit both U.S. government and governments in the Southeast Asian region because the engagements will be based on mutual benefits for the interests of all parties.

Acceptability (high) – Domestically as well as internationally, U.S. strategy toward Southeast Asian countries will be highly acceptable because of low cost both financially and morally.

Sustainability (high) – The strategy is highly sustainable because FONOPs has international and domestic support. Similarly, U.S. increased economic engagements with the Southeast Asian region will be welcome.

## Conclusion

### **Strategic Leaderships Challenges**

One of the most important challenges for the U.S. strategic leaderships would be to convince U.S. domestic public and stakeholders about the importance of the U.S. ratifying UNCLOS. Not only that this ratification will give the U.S. the strongest position in the SCS dispute, but also the biggest gains, because all the claimants that are UNCLOS non-complying will lose their claims. For a long-term goal, this ratification will help restore the U.S. global leaderships based on international rules and norms. Another challenge for the U.S. leaderships is how to convince the current administration about the importance of long term relations with the Southeast Asian region. The relations which might be difficult to understand for short-term-minded politicians. Therefore, the U.S. leadership will need to communicate with them to give this long term policy perspective.

As suggested by domestic contexts, both of these challenges seem difficult to overcome with the current U.S. administration, especially with its cynical toward international norms and rules, and multilateral approaches. Therefore, strategists at all spheres of the national security should speak up to warn the U.S.

leadership even louder. A good strategy should not merely serve to satisfy a domestic popularity of the current leaderships, but should be based on a holistic, deliberate thinking. In addition, the first priority for the U.S. strategy towards Southeast Asia is to resolve the SCS problem, and going BIG seems to be compatible with the current administration. Whereas a broader relation with the countries in the region is a long term objective; if the current administration is not interested, the next administration perhaps may be interested in pursuing it.

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