

How Asia Navigates the U.S.-China Rivalry

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Introduction

As the era of engagement comes to a close, the U.S.-China relationship has, with remarkable and dizzying speed, deteriorated to perhaps its lowest ebb since normalization in 1979. For the foreseeable future, the defining characteristic of the relationship is likely to be intensifying competition across a wide range of policy domains. Disputes over trade, technology, territorial waters, and China's political trajectory under Xi have merged to bring us to this point, producing an unstable and combustible relationship that Asia is now watching warily. For the region's states, a position of exquisite balance between the two vying superpowers is a pose that is difficult to sustain; nevertheless, when Asian states are asked whether they will choose the United States or China in this test of titans, the most common answer across the region is simply, "both."

To compound matters, not only have Sino-American relations become more contentious, but the very nature of policy making is changing in both capitals. Although these shifts are largely unrelated to the larger Sino-American tensions, they are nonetheless exacerbating them. President Xi has emerged as the lone arbiter of policy in China after systematically deconstructing the mostly moderating features of collective leadership. President Trump views the "operating system" that the United States has painstakingly labored to create and sustain over decades—weaving trade, diplomacy, defense, and fledgling institutions into a stabilizing framework—as less a sail that has propelled the United States forward but more an anchor that has pulled America down.

The sudden reemergence of intense geopolitical competition has left analysts harkening back to the last great power contest to make sense of the present one. References to a new "Cold War" are proliferating, but the associated intellectual residue of that bygone era actually harms U.S. efforts in Asia. Asia today is a far cry from Europe forty years ago, and it lacks neatly delineated lines that separate rival ideological blocs. Indeed, there is no discernable Berlin Wall or "Checkpoint Charlie." Asian countries are not monoliths, and the lines of demarcation run not along the borders but often through capitals and corporate boardrooms. Increasingly, Asia is a contested and blended region that remains deeply in flux. And even as Washington and Beijing increasingly pressure states to align with them on a variety of policies, Asian nations have taken opportunities to maneuver between them.

Rivalry and Autonomy in a Contested Asia

Although the emerging standoff between Washington and Beijing is far from the existential stakes and nuclear brinkmanship of the Cold War, there is little question that the bilateral relationship is increasingly rivalrous. In October 2018, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence gave a stinging indictment of China's behavior and declared that President Trump "will not back down" from the threat that Beijing poses. This stubborn approach is apparent across U.S. agencies: the Justice Department is prosecuting Chinese citizens accused of technology theft; the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) is scrutinizing Chinese investments in U.S. companies; and

the Defense Department is reorienting to address the new great power threat that China poses. On Capitol Hill, Democrats and Republicans who are bitterly divided on most issues nonetheless find common cause on China—with members of both parties occasionally criticizing the Trump administration for being too lenient, especially on issues related to the U.S. government’s campaign against Chinese telecommunications provider Huawei. Against this backdrop is the continuing U.S.-China trade war, which probably puts a ceiling on the bilateral relationship. Despite multiple summits between President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, and repeated lower-level negotiations, a fundamental, far-reaching trade deal seems unlikely.

On the other side of the Pacific, Chinese President Xi Jinping has taken China in a more confrontational direction, hastening the collision with U.S. interests and values. On the political level, he has made it clear that China will not pursue even moderate liberalization and will instead invest in perfecting the technologies behind a new and virulent digital authoritarianism. On the economic level, President Xi has recommitted China to its state-led industrial policy model and allowed intensified cyber-theft against U.S. companies. And at the security level, President Xi has accelerated China’s blue-water modernization, constructed islands in the South China Sea, meddled consistently in the domestic politics of neighboring states, and used military coercion short of war against China’s neighbors in territorial disputes—notably Vietnam and the Philippines. These are the actions of a more bold if not openly brash rising power, and they suggest that the pressures on the old model of Sino-American relations comes from both sides of the Pacific.

The intensifying Sino-American rivalry has revealed that Asia is in many ways an increasingly contested region with an uncertain political future, which has affected Asian autonomy in complex and sometimes paradoxical ways. On some issues, Asian states see an opportunity in playing Beijing and Washington off one another in an effort to extract better terms on infrastructure financing or security cooperation. But on other issues, Asian states have seen their freedom to maneuver sharply reduced as Washington and Beijing become more comfortable wielding pressure to force alignment with their priorities. Perhaps the clearest American cases are Washington’s assertive campaign to persuade Asian states to exclude Huawei from building telecommunications infrastructure as well as its lobbying efforts against the Belt and Road Initiative and, even earlier, the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). For its part, China has aggressively lobbied countries throughout Southeast Asia to minimize collective efforts to challenge Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea—essentially neutralizing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an effective multilateral body along the way (“splitting us like a cord of wood” is how one senior Southeast Asian diplomat put it). Most recently, both the U.S. and China sought to mobilize competing coalitions of states to either condemn or defend China’s camps in Xinjiang.

It is important to note that although both Washington and Beijing are dialing up the pressure on Asian states, they are often pursuing different approaches to do so. The United States’ strategy is often more public and confrontational, loudly encouraging countries to join its efforts against China and sometimes linking key benefits (e.g., intelligence cooperation) to their choices. China’s strategy is less public and arguably more sophisticated because it involves the multifaceted use of diplomatic channels, influence efforts, and quiet pressure through issue-linkage. Despite a more subtle overall approach, Beijing is in some cases becoming increasingly comfortable with open pressure. The detention of two Canadians—former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor—over Ottawa’s compliance with Washington’s request to extradite Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou is an example of Beijing’s interest in more conspicuous punishment. So too is China’s growing willingness to embrace coercive economic statecraft, including against South Korea, Canada, and nearly a dozen other states.

How have Asian states responded to the opportunities and constraints created by an intensifying U.S.-China rivalry? Asia is a diverse region comprised of over three billion people and a wide variety of differing political systems, historical backgrounds, cultural traditions, geostrategic circumstances, and economic structures—accordingly, there is no singular “Asian” response to cope with the arrival of a U.S.-China strategic rivalry.

Based on their responses, Asian states can be divided into roughly four broad, if somewhat imperfect, categories. The first category consists of the “balancers,” notably Japan, India, Australia, and Vietnam, all of whom have strong reservations about China. Despite seeking closer ties with the United States, these countries continue to hedge against U.S. unreliability through investments in themselves and ties with their neighbors. The second group consists of the “swing states” of maritime Southeast Asia. These states have fewer troubles with China than the “balancers” and are able to play Washington and Beijing off each other more effectively for better benefits. The third group consists of the “reluctant bandwagoners” of continental Southeast Asia. Despite a desire for greater autonomy, these states are constrained given China’s geographic proximity and are falling under its encompassing sphere of influence. The fourth set of states includes unique outliers like South Korea and the Philippines, whose approaches are more idiosyncratic given their respective political circumstances.

The Balancers—The Quad States and Vietnam

With the region caught between the United States and China, the balancers all share difficult relations with Beijing but match this with a refusal to surrender their interests to China even amid growing concerns over U.S. reliability. These states are the least likely to visibly bandwagon with Beijing and the most inclined to pursue balancing.

The Quad is Australia, India, Japan, and the United States and has occasionally met on the sidelines of major summits. Like an aging rock band, there have occasionally been long stretches between appearances. The Quad was not explicitly designed to balance China’s influence but is nonetheless seen as an anti-China grouping by Beijing. Vietnam is not a member of the Quad, but it is accumulating political influence in Southeast Asia and similarly views China’s power with skepticism and occasional alarm.

These states do not approach their alignments with Washington and Beijing entirely in a vacuum; historical context, cultural connections, and longstanding rivalries animate the fundamental decisions of each state. For instance, among a certain strain of Japanese nationalists, there is a sense of resentment toward the United States for its handling of Japan’s postwar status; toward China, there is a deep and growing anxiety about an Asia in which Japan would play a secondary role. For India, there is a compatible sense of suspicion and envy toward China, but for a certain group of prominent Indians, including the fading postcolonial Nehruvians and the rising Hindu nationalists, there remains a matching wariness toward the United States. For Australia, the dominant feature animating its attitudes toward global politics is its geographic and almost existential distance from the great powers. Toward China, Australia continues to have a strong commercial and, at times, romantic draw that is balanced by a deep historical regard for the United States based on culture and a shared history of standing together in every major conflict over the last century. Finally, the Vietnamese have a centuries-long history of complications and conflict with China that in some ways overshadows—but cannot fully dislodge—the more proximate and searing experience of war with the United States.

As uncomfortable as these states are with Sino-American rivalry, the situation has ushered in a period of remarkable maneuvering for Canberra, Delhi, Hanoi, and Tokyo. These states have sought to cultivate and flatter President Trump where possible and have avoided directly challenging him even when their own interests are threatened by new and unpredictable turns in U.S. policy. If there is one uniform “Asian” response, it is this tendency to tread carefully around President Trump. But given concerns about U.S. unreliability, these four have also worked to build ties with other similarly situated states—and especially each other—to proactively shape their strategic situations and at times have even pursued quiet outreach to China. A paradox of the Sino-American rivalry is that the middle powers have accumulated greater influence and room to maneuver, and their actions have likely temporarily stabilized some features of the region’s great power politics.

Japan

Perhaps more than any other leader, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has developed a nuanced approach to the new strategic circumstances emanating from the U.S.-China rivalry.

The core of Prime Minister Abe's approach is to maintain close ties to the United States, including through deeply personal touches. For example, Prime Minister Abe eschewed traditional norms by meeting with then President-elect Trump in Trump Tower and gifting him a gold golf driver. (A senior Asian diplomat likened the search for extravagant gifts that President Trump might approve of to "laying baskets of fruit before the volcano.") Since this initial, unorthodox offering, Prime Minister Abe has visited with President Trump multiple times in his search to find areas of common cause, particularly on North Korea and China. The approach has had mixed success. President Trump has spent more time in relaxed settings with Prime Minister Abe than any other leader, but the Trump administration has also imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Japan and is considering far more consequential tariffs on auto parts as well, even over stiff Japanese protests.

Wary of overreliance on an unpredictable American president, another key component of Japan's approach has been to proactively shape the region's security and economic dynamics and boost its own independent capacity for action. This has even meant sustaining elements of pre-Trump American strategy—including resuscitating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the U.S. withdrawal—in the hope that the United States might slowly return to its previous patterns of engagement. It has also meant using institutions like the G20 to push for higher regulatory standards in infrastructure and technology in response to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Japan has also sought to improve ties with other powers, including the other Quad states and Vietnam, by deepening cooperation across the full range of policy domains, especially security. Finally, in pursuit of greater freedom to maneuver, Japan has sought to bolster its own defense spending by pursuing more offensive capabilities (including aerial refueling and longer-range strike capacity). While some of these investments are complementary with current U.S. systems in the region, many of them are redundant, suggesting a desire to pursue more independent capacities over time.

A final component of Prime Minister Abe's regional strategy has been to pursue improved relations with China, including through breakthrough accords with President Xi that will strengthen bilateral ties between the two states. The two countries have discussed cooperation on some Belt and Road projects; meanwhile, Japanese trade with China grew substantially in 2017 and 2018 before stalling in 2019. Despite lingering security tensions, both countries see an advantage in a modest rapprochement given the uncertainty of their respective relations with the United States.

India

India's response to Sino-American rivalry shares some features with Japan's, but its circumstances are arguably more challenging given that it has no formal alliance with the United States and that it shares a long-contested border with China. Like Japan, India under Prime Minister Modi has embraced closer ties with the United States, tightened relations with other regional states, and pursued a broader improvement in its relationship to Beijing. And yet, New Delhi is removed from East Asia and its flashpoints. Consequently, India can afford to pursue a more nuanced position that primarily challenges Beijing most consequentially in continental South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Like Prime Minister Abe, Prime Minister Modi believes that building a strong working relationship with President Trump is essential. After President Trump's election, Modi publicly embraced "Make America Great Again" as a slogan similar to his vision for "New India," and the two have met regularly since. Although this personal diplomacy has brought some success on issues ranging from defense cooperation to counterterrorism, as in Japan's case, personal touches did not prevent President Trump from terminating India's benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) or tightening H-1B enforcement. At the same time, Indian policy in

Kashmir has led to criticism from Capitol Hill—though not the executive branch—that has further complicated the U.S.-India relationship and left some Hindu nationalists increasingly wary of the United States.

Prime Minister Modi shares with Prime Minister Abe a belief that U.S. unpredictability requires India to increasingly make its own way in the Indo-Pacific. Modi dramatically increased India's engagement with its neighbors—especially those that had courted Chinese influence and beneficence, such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Modi has similarly significantly increased defense ties with Southeast Asian states like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and he has rejoined the Quad while pursuing steadily growing cooperation with Japan and India on security and economic matters.

India has also pushed back on China's assertiveness more quietly but firmly than any other Asian country (with Vietnam close behind), though these efforts are confined almost entirely to its home region. Indian and Chinese forces wage an almost daily “grey zone” conflict on the Sino-Indian border. India refuses to back down from the skirmishes, and in 2017, the two sides came close to open conflict in an obscure region called Doklam. India has also pushed previously China-friendly governments in Sri Lanka and the Maldives to pursue greater political equidistance and has handsomely rewarded pro-Indian successors in both countries. And like Japan, India has sought to improve its own defense capabilities so that it might independently deter Chinese adventurism. Prime Minister Modi has increased defense spending, including by 6.6 percent in 2019, and has purchased a wide array of technology from states around the world. Finally, U.S. sanctions on Russia mean that purchases of Russian defense equipment risk incurring heavy sanctions; nevertheless, India has been unfazed by this possibility and proceeded to purchase essential Russian equipment, including its S-400 air defense system, which could complicate some defense cooperation with the United States.

India's regional focus, its concerns over American leadership, and its desire to avoid being pulled into a wider Sino-American rivalry has led it to also seek improved relations with Beijing. Perhaps the largest breakthrough in China-India ties came in April 2018 when Xi hosted Modi in Wuhan—an informal summit that allowed the countries to reset ties after a difficult 2017. The two leaders met in Bishkek on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in June 2019 and again in Mamallapuram in October 2019.

Australia

Australia enjoys the advantages of distance when contemplating the contours of increased U.S.-China rivalry. On the one hand, China is a preferred export destination and an increasingly dominant player in the surrounding region. Recent revelations, however, over Chinese influence in Australian politics have complicated the larger relationship. On the other hand, Australia enjoys strong defense and intelligence cooperation with the United States, which has helped anchor the country to the West for the last century.

Canberra has sought to avoid any overt choice between the United States and China. Like India and Japan, Australia has sought a closer relationship with Washington—though with varying degrees of success. Most recently, and after his surprise election last year, Prime Minister Scott Morrison sought to establish a strong rapport with President Trump—a relationship that his predecessor, Malcolm Turnbull, struggled to develop after a rocky phone call shortly after Trump's inauguration. In September 2018, Prime Minister Morrison lauded President Trump as a “very practical leader,” praising the president's ability to connect with Americans who have not enjoyed the benefits of globalization. The flattery seems to have paid off, and President Trump invited Prime Minister Morrison for a state visit in September 2019, making Morrison the first Australian prime minister to receive the honor since 2006.

In contrast to India and Japan, Australia's relationship with China has been more profoundly and publicly intertwined with domestic politics, scandal, and concerns over Chinese influence operations. These issues retained

a relatively low profile until 2016-2017, when Australian Senator Sam Dastyari was found to have accepted contributions from and offered counter-surveillance advice to donors connected to China. Journalists began to document how Australia's relatively permissive election financing regime had allowed China to shape Australian politics, and in response, Australian legislators passed sweeping anti-influence laws—a rare example of a state with close economic ties standing up to Beijing's assertive behavior. Relations with China deteriorated shortly thereafter in public, with Beijing cutting Australian coal imports. Driven in large part by its concern over Chinese influence, Australia effectively banned Huawei from participation in the country's telecommunications systems.

Just as Japan and India have more purposefully engaged the region in the aftermath of intensifying rivalry, so too has Canberra—particularly with the Pacific Islands. Growing Australian concern over China's influence in these strategically located states has led Prime Minister Morrison to launch a multidimensional campaign to increase Australian engagement with them, especially given fears of a future Chinese military base there.

With less success than Japan and India, Australia has sought to improve its relationship with China following these disputes—including through a new multi-stakeholder effort to engage China across government and private domains. The imperative is largely economic: China's trade with Australia dwarfs the combined value of Australia's trade with the United States and Japan, and nearly one-third of all Australian exports go to China. Although these exports create a dependence on Beijing, the relationship is not entirely asymmetric because Beijing cannot easily locate other ready sources for crucial commodities to power its industrial engine.

Canberra has also sought to bolster its own defenses, pursued greater cooperation with Japan and India (including through the Quad), and pursued a multi-year effort to increase defense spending to 2 percent of its GDP by 2021.

Vietnam

Vietnam and China have a long and troubled history dating back centuries that manifested more recently in the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 and the ongoing skirmishes in the South China Sea. In 2014, protests over China's deployment of an oil rig in contested waters turned deadly, with Chinese and even Taiwanese factories inside Vietnam attacked by rioters.

Given these tensions, Vietnam has generally sought closer ties with the United States, and defense cooperation has expanded dramatically in recent years. Under President Nguyễn Phú Trọng's leadership, Hanoi has strengthened its relationship with President Trump, hosted the U.S. president's second summit with Kim Jong-un, and even opposed Huawei's participation in the country's telecommunications networks. And yet, Vietnam retains some ambivalence toward the United States, fearing that Washington's support for liberal values and human rights could at some point pose a more existential threat to the regime than China. That same wariness extends to the economic domain, where Vietnam is heavily reliant on the U.S. as an export market and investor and has benefited enormously from the U.S.-China trade war, which has rerouted supply chains to Vietnam, boosted the country's exports, and could add more than 2 percent to its GDP. Against that opportunity, the Trump administration's criticism about currency and trade could curtail what Vietnam sees as a unique economic moment.

To hedge against these risks, Vietnam has looked across the region. It has increased security ties with Japan and India and invested in its own defense capabilities. It has remained in the TPP despite the U.S. withdrawal, in part to diversify its economic options. And it has also pursued closer ties with China. Both countries have handled the July crisis in the South China Sea—during which a Chinese survey vessel joined by Chinese Coast Guard ships entered disputed waters—with a degree of restraint. Vietnam has pursued steadily closer defense exchanges and joint patrols with China's military, all of which is intended to improve bilateral ties.

The Swing States—Maritime Southeast Asia

In contrast to the balancers, the “swing states”—especially Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei—all have fewer significant disputes with Beijing and maximal freedom to maneuver in the U.S.-China rivalry. Whereas the balancers are in many ways players in the strategic competition between the United States and China, the maritime states (as well as the continental states) are perhaps the object of Sino-American competition. Indeed, these states sit astride critical trade routes and boast vibrant or growing economies.

Though these states have all adopted different approaches for dealing with the U.S.-China rivalry, they have generally shared three common features. First, these “swing states” are essentially trading states, and their prosperity will depend not only on their security and the safety of the region’s waterways, but also on the relative openness of the regional and global economic system. Accordingly, states like Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia continued on with TPP even after Washington left the negotiations. Like Japan, many of these countries hope that the United States may rejoin the pact. But even absent direct U.S. participation, the restored TPP (renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP) provides an opportunity for these countries to send a signal to China that they expect the continuation of a rules-based operating system, even if the United States is unwilling to fully support it for the moment.

Second, these states—notably Malaysia and Indonesia—are looking to avoid major disputes with China over their contested sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. While Beijing continues to militarize parts of the disputed waterways, the maritime states have sought to avoid conflict with China. Instead, they have relied on freedom of navigation patrols from the United States and other countries to send a message to China that these moves are destabilizing. As U.S.-China competition increases, these countries may need to make more overt decisions about what they are willing to sacrifice for these claims and how vocal they are willing to be.

Third, these states have been better able than most others to harness the opportunities that strategic rivalry offers. Despite concerns about China’s behavior in the South China Sea, they recognize that China is a vital trading partner as well as a critical investor through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which President Xi himself announced during a 2013 visit to Indonesia as a way of solving Asian connectivity challenges. The BRI has at times seemed inexorable and relentless—backed by a notional USD 1 trillion in infrastructure financing—but it has often failed to live up to some of its lofty ambitions, as overpriced and substandard projects in places like Malaysia and Sri Lanka come to light. Problems of graft, low standards, high-interest loans, and poor follow-through have afflicted many BRI projects. Yet, these setbacks—especially within the context of U.S.-China rivalry—offer Southeast Asian maritime states some maneuverability in extracting concessions.

Most notably, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad suspended the construction of the BRI-financed East Coast Rail Link shortly after coming to power last year. And yet, once Beijing agreed to a 30 percent reduction in the cost of the previously USD 20 billion rail line, Prime Minister Mahathir reversed his suspension. In April 2019, speaking at the BRI Forum in Beijing, Mahathir pledged his “full support” for the BRI.

Other states have been able to benefit from U.S. efforts, however modest, to match Beijing’s BRI. Washington’s infrastructure plan for the Indo-Pacific was unveiled in July 2018 and involves the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), an agency that will support digital economy, energy, and infrastructure investments around the Indo-Pacific. Although these efforts and China’s BRI together offer states more choices, there is some evidence that some countries (e.g., Sri Lanka) are at times reluctant to accept assistance from one state for fear of angering the other.

The Reluctant Bandwagoners—Continental Southeast Asia

States in continental Southeast Asia have a limited ability to move outside of China's orbit, especially as they continue to play substantial roles in Beijing's BRI. Although they share with the region's maritime swing states a degree of concern about China's behavior and the growing competition between China and the United States, they are generally less developed and more dependent on China and therefore unable to as effectively navigate some of the opportunities that the current rivalry could provide. Some states, notably Cambodia and Laos, have fallen largely within China's sphere of influence, making concerted outreach to the United States challenging. Others, like Myanmar and Thailand, have greater independence but behave as if they do not, in part because tensions with the West over the treatment of minorities or democratic backsliding complicate their options. Taken together, the states increasingly appear to be bandwagoners, albeit reluctant ones.

Geography in particular has forced the continental states, even more so than the maritime states, to proceed cautiously as U.S.-China tension grows. For example, Chinese dams on the Mekong River have significantly disrupted Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam's food security, with the Lower Mekong dam network reducing fish populations by almost 50 percent. As worrying as the situation already is now, these states realize that China's control of dams in the Tibetan Plateau and Yunnan make a rift with China politically unwise. Beijing will have the advantage of geography in any Southeast Asian influence competition with Washington.

Moreover, both Chinese private and public investment in continental Southeast Asia has made China a more attractive partner than the United States in many states. Through the BRI, Beijing has ambitious plans in the region that will strengthen its own influence networks and that could provide sorely needed connectivity. For example, Kunming-Singapore railway (also referred to as the Pan-Asia railway) would run through all of the continental states in Southeast Asia.

Finally, while many in the region view these states as hopelessly behind Chinese lines, they all desire more engagement from Washington. Continental ASEAN states traditionally welcome U.S. investment, especially amid concerns about the strings attached to Chinese funds, and have tried to shape the region's affairs when possible. This year, as the rotating chair of ASEAN, Thailand has sought to sharpen the institution's role in developing an Indo-Pacific strategy that would keep Southeast Asia in the center of the region's politics. Although these efforts are unlikely to be successful, they demonstrate a desire to cultivate more vivid strategic options.

The Outliers—South Korea and the Philippines

As in all complex circumstances, some countries in the region fail to fit neatly into clear categorizations. Both South Korea and the Philippines have approached the new strategic climate differently due to their respective political situations.

South Korea

Under President Moon Jae-in, South Korea's overriding focus has not been on the U.S.-China strategic rivalry—though some of the country's multinational firms may benefit from trade diversion away from China. The Blue House has instead been focused on how to effectively build bridges to North Korea. Because of Washington's influence over this issue, President Moon has had to prioritize maintaining a positive relationship with President Trump. President Moon helped convince President Trump to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. After the collapse of the second such summit with Kim in Vietnam, President Moon flew out to Washington to advocate against abandoning the fledgling diplomatic effort.

As with other Asian states, South Korea does share some concerns about U.S. reliability relating to President Trump's tough talk on trade and his insistence that South Korea pay a greater share of the costs for basing U.S. troops within the country. As part of its hedging strategy, and to improve its ability to handle North Korea, South Korea has looked to maintain good ties with Beijing even as the U.S.-China rivalry intensifies. At the start of his term, President Moon said that his government would not deploy an additional Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system or agree to an integrated missile defense network with the United States—concessions to Beijing that were intended to bolster South Korea's meager ties with China. But even after these soft attempts to hedge, diplomacy with China remained tense. For instance, despite Seoul's willingness to prevent another THAAD deployment, Beijing has continued to ban group tours to South Korea—one of the penalties that it initially imposed after President Moon's predecessor agreed to install a THAAD system.

The Philippines

Unlike other maritime Southeast Asian states that sought to avoid offending Washington or Beijing, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has vacillated between ingratiating President Xi and assuaging Washington—at times unnecessarily offending both. The country's foreign policy has appeared to be more a product of Duterte's mercurial, personality-based approach to diplomacy than any clear and consistent overriding strategic sense or logic in dealing with the U.S.-China rivalry.

In contrast to his rocky relationship with the Obama administration, President Duterte has praised President Trump, even serenading him with a Philippine love ballad during President Trump's November 2017 trip to the region. At the same time, he has denigrated U.S. alliances and aggressively courted China even to the point of risking Philippine interests. For example, although the Philippines initiated the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitration case against China, which it won in 2016, President Duterte has downplayed his own country's claims in order to improve ties with Beijing. In June 2019, his government determined that China's sinking of a Philippine boat in Reed Bank, which endangered the lives of twenty-two crew members, was simply a maritime mishap and not worthy of a robust response.

Forced to Choose?

In the current stage of the U.S.-China rivalry, Asia remains a contested region that is in flux, with the lines of competition running as much within countries as between them. The competition for influence will be subtle, nuanced, and long term, with neither Washington nor Beijing likely to score a decisive victory that would irreversibly change the alignments of critical states.

For now, the balancers are likely to resist Beijing's assertiveness but carefully hedge against U.S. unreliability by working with each other, strengthening their independent capacities, and carefully managing relations with China. Southeast Asia's maritime swing states will continue to maneuver for advantage, while its continental bandwagoner states will struggle to balance their engagements between China and the United States. Finally, outlier states like South Korea and the Philippines will see their response to the U.S.-China rivalry driven by overriding domestic concerns or competing international priorities.

In the period ahead, the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry will affect every Asian country. There will be opportunities to extract concessions from Washington and Beijing, but in other cases, Washington and Beijing may endeavor to force a choice. It has long been a truism of the region's politics that Asian states would not choose a side; whether that precept continues in the next decade will be the driving question behind Asian politics for the period ahead.

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