



## POLICY BRIEF

# Democracy at a crossroads in Southeast Asia: Great power rivalry meets domestic governance

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**The escalating struggle for influence between the United States and China is playing out in Southeast Asia—often to the detriment of democratic trends in the region.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores how growing geopolitical competition in Asia, increasingly defined by Sino-U.S. rivalry, is affecting governance trends in Southeast Asian countries. The paper begins by describing the geopolitical context itself—especially China’s rising influence and related policy initiatives in the region, as well as changes in U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia under the Trump administration. Then the paper examines how this competition is affecting two states in Southeast Asia representing different population sizes and regime types: Cambodia (small and increasingly autocratic) and Myanmar (medium-sized and struggling with democratic transition and consolidation). Finally, the paper concludes by assessing the relative weight of these external drivers on domestic governance trends in the region, as compared to long-present domestic currents within the countries themselves.

Analysis of escalating Sino-U.S. rivalry has focused largely on the security realm and divergent efforts to define the broader regional order, but this great power competition may also be impacting political trends in individual Southeast Asian countries. Despite its official policy of non-interference, China is becoming more involved in the domestic affairs of Southeast Asian countries and is presenting itself as a “new option” for other countries wanting to speed up their development. These efforts appear to be reinforcing or encouraging authoritarian trends (as in Cambodia) and inhibiting democratic consolidation (as in Myanmar), but aren’t necessarily causing other countries to emulate the Chinese model in particular. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has labeled China a strategic competitor and warns countries in the region that Beijing is using economic inducements and influence operations to advance its political and security agenda. At the

same time, the administration has downgraded the pro-democratic posture of the United States and no longer presents America as a beacon of democratic governance, in Asia or elsewhere.

Yet, irrespective of these trends in Chinese and American foreign policy, we see domestic drivers in Southeast Asian countries fueling a democratic resurgence in Malaysia and continued democratic practice and consolidation in Indonesia. At the same time, deeply rooted internal drivers are helping to move things in the opposite direction in the countries discussed in this paper. For instance, the political role of the Burmese military has been institutionalized over many decades and probably exceeds that of the Indonesian military under Suharto, which took many years to unwind. It is therefore critical to keep these internal drivers in mind when considering the impact of U.S.-China rivalry on domestic governance trends in Southeast Asia, or the likely effects of U.S. foreign policy initiatives more specifically.

## INTRODUCTION

The conventional wisdom among Southeast Asia watchers is that democracy has been declining in the region for several years. Observers point to the military coup in Thailand in 2014, Rodrigo Duterte's drug war and extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, Hun Sen's dissolution of opposition parties and muzzling of the media in Cambodia, and the rise of religious and political intolerance in Indonesia. Even the glow of Aung San Suu Kyi's historic electoral victory in Myanmar in 2015, ending decades of outright military rule, is dimming as nearly 800,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled to Bangladesh to escape ethnic cleansing by the Burmese military. This "democratic decline," or "regression to authoritarianism," is typically attributed to such chronic problems as political corruption, weak electoral and justice systems, and high levels of inequality.<sup>1</sup>

Other scholars view this issue through a different lens—that of *durable* authoritarianism. While concerned that several countries may tumble like dominos into a 1970s-style democratic abyss, Dan Slater writes that "most of the region is enduringly authoritarian to begin with," so it is already "most of the way there."<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pepinsky echoes this theme, saying that the "real story of the state of democracy in Southeast Asia is not the threat of contemporary reversal—it is the strength of durable authoritarianism in the non-democracies."<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the region is also witnessing some conspicuous glimmers of democratic hope. Most notably, in May 2018 elections in Malaysia, the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) lost power for the first time since the country won independence from the British in 1957. The electoral outcome catapulted Dr. Mahathir Mohamad back into the role of prime minister in an unusual alliance with Anwar Ibrahim, who fueled the opposition campaign from his prison cell after he was convicted of charges that many saw as politically motivated.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, despite concerns about rising intolerance in Indonesia, the country remains the most consolidated democracy in the region and is currently witnessing a heated presidential political campaign in advance of planned national elections in April 2019. Even the Thai military has signaled it will finally hold elections in 2019, albeit within constitutional parameters that will protect its entrenched political role.

Against these political crosscurrents, Southeast Asia is witnessing a dramatic rise of Chinese power and influence throughout the region. At the same time, the Trump administration has launched a new Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy that explicitly challenges China's expanding influence, asserting that Beijing "seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony" and "displacement of the United States."<sup>5</sup> Analysis of this growing Sino-U.S. rivalry has focused largely on the security realm and divergent efforts to define the broader regional order. However, the evolving "pull of power" from Beijing and Washington may also be impacting

political trends in individual Southeast Asian countries as China offers a governance model that could appeal to leaders seeking economic growth opportunities without commensurate political liberties or constraints on their power.<sup>6</sup>

## THE NEW GEOPOLITICS: SINO-U.S. RIVALRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

### *Beijing introduces a more assertive regional policy*

In late 2013, a year after ascending to power, Xi Jinping redirected Chinese foreign policy by introducing a proactive neighbor-centric policy, known as “peripheral diplomacy,” which aims to turn China’s neighborhood into a “community of common destiny.” China emphasizes inclusiveness and win-win cooperation when describing its “common destiny” concept, but also appears to be fostering a Sino-centric network of economic, political, cultural, and security relations.<sup>7</sup> Beijing relies on economic statecraft to carry out peripheral diplomacy and advance its strategic objectives in the region. It does so through new institutions and projects, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative, while mobilizing overseas Chinese to promote these projects and “realize their dreams.”<sup>8</sup> China is also establishing new subregional initiatives, such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism, to realize its economic and political ambitions and pressure individual countries to be more accommodating on security issues.

Alongside this evolving foreign policy doctrine and far-reaching economic initiatives, China is becoming more involved in the domestic affairs of Southeast Asian countries. Officially, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries has been a core principle of Chinese foreign policy since the 1950s. While principle and practice have sometimes diverged, Beijing has generally sought to maintain good relations with whatever type of regime is in power in countries where China does business or has diplomatic or security interests.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, however, China has stepped up influence activities

in target countries to achieve outcomes that are “favorable to Chinese Party-state preferences, both in its standing at home and its strategic interests abroad,” according to Bates Gill and Benjamin Schreer.<sup>10</sup> These activities generally fall into three baskets:

1. educational operations (e.g., establishing Confucius Institutes and monitoring Chinese students studying abroad);
2. media operations (e.g., expanding China’s state-run media footprint through broadcast, print, and digital platforms); and
3. political operations (e.g., cultivating political leaders and other elites through financial and other inducements).<sup>11</sup>

Widely reported in Australia and New Zealand, these activities are present in Southeast Asia as well. Chinese media operations are expanding in the region, as are officially sponsored efforts to recruit Southeast Asians to China for short-term or long-term study. Khin Khin Kyaw Kyee, author of *China’s Multi-layered Engagement Strategy and Myanmar’s Realities*, estimates that between 1,000-2,000 Burmese citizens have participated in exposure trips, friendship visits, study tours, and capacity-building training programs in China since 2013.<sup>12</sup> China is also establishing and funding new think tank networks with top research institutions in Southeast Asia to promote academic exchange and provide intellectual guidance for the LMC.<sup>13</sup>

There is little question that China is undertaking these activities to advance its foreign policy goals and promote its strategic interests in Southeast Asia. But is it actually taking proactive steps to promote a Chinese political model as well? Xi Jinping seemed to hint at this direction in his speech at the 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in October 2017, when he said China offers a “new option” for other countries wanting to speed up their development.<sup>14</sup> One new training and educational platform suggests there may be some efforts in

this direction—the Baise Cadre Academy in Guangxi province, bordering Vietnam, which was established in 2016 to provide training to government officials from both China and Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup> According to the academy’s website, subjects for Southeast Asian trainees include the leadership mechanism of local CCP committees, interpreting the 19th Party Congress report, and the operation of the CCP disciplinary inspection system.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Washington launches Indo-Pacific strategy***

In response to China’s rise and related activities in the region, the Trump administration launched its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy in late 2017. The strategy was reflected prominently in the administration’s National Security Strategy (NSS) released in December of that year. The NSS refers to China as a strategic competitor, and warns countries in the region that Beijing is “using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to head its political and security agenda.”<sup>17</sup> As initially conceptualized, FOIP was first and foremost a maritime strategy offering a counterbalance to Chinese expansion in Asia, both in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.<sup>18</sup>

FOIP offered little economic content, following President Trump’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement in early 2017, aside from the possibility of bilateral trade deals that few countries seemed interested in negotiating. At an Indo-Pacific Business Forum in July 2018, however, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo did announce \$113.5 million in new U.S. economic initiatives that aim to improve digital connectivity and cybersecurity, strengthen energy security and access, and promote sustainable infrastructure development.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. Congress also recently passed the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (or BUILD) Act. This act is creating a new U.S. development finance institution with a budget of \$60 billion, designed to help developing countries prosper while advancing U.S. foreign policy goals.<sup>20</sup> Only time will

tell whether these initiatives will be carried out in robust and effective ways, and whether they will help to dilute the power of Chinese economic statecraft in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Meanwhile, FOIP has begun to exhibit some aspirational qualities in the values realm. Still aimed at China, these values include protection from coercion, good governance, transparency, respect for fundamental rights and liberties, access to seas and airways, peaceful resolution of disputes, fair and reciprocal trade, open investment, and connectivity.<sup>21</sup> In January 2018, then-Director of Policy Planning at the State Department Brian Hook characterized this “values and rules-based order” as the “foundation of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and also around the world. When China’s behavior is out of step with these values and these rules we will stand up and defend the rule of law.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the Trump administration hasn’t refrained from criticizing undemocratic practices in the region. After Cambodia’s flawed parliamentary elections in July 2018, the White House released a statement saying the elections were “neither free nor fair and failed to represent the will of the Cambodian people,” adding that the United States will consider steps “to respond to the elections and other recent setbacks to democracy and human rights in the region.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, critics argue that President Trump has embraced dictators, spurned democratic partners, and shown indifference to democracy’s fate around the world. Unlike previous presidents, he hasn’t articulated a general vision for how his administration could promote democracy’s global advance. Although democracy assistance budgets have remained steady, high-level policy has begun to undermine the continued implementation of American democracy programs.<sup>24</sup> Trump barely mentioned human rights when he met with President Duterte in 2017 in Manila, for instance, while other Southeast Asian leaders openly celebrate Trump’s attacks on the media and parrot his constant criticism of “fake news” in the American political landscape.<sup>25</sup>

## COUNTRY EXAMPLES

### *Cambodia*

Cambodia has grappled with competing American and Chinese influence for decades. The country was at the intersection of great power rivalry and destruction during the Cold War period, withstanding unprecedented levels of U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War. Following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh in 1975 and waged a Maoist-inspired attempt at total societal restructuring, resulting in well over a million deaths. The Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in December 1978 and ousted the Khmer Rouge, at which point Chinese forces invaded Vietnamese territory to “teach Vietnam a lesson” and check Hanoi’s regional ambitions.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has ruled the country in one form or another since 1985, when he became leader of the Vietnamese-backed Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). Over time, Beijing has become a staunch supporter of Hun Sen’s regime, which in turn has supported and promoted Chinese interests within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2012, for instance, Cambodia used its position as ASEAN chair to block a joint statement critical of China’s actions in the South China Sea, preventing the group from issuing a joint communiqué for the first time in its history following an annual summit.<sup>26</sup> In June 2016, Cambodia again backed Beijing’s position at the ASEAN-China Special Foreign Ministers Meeting in China’s Yunnan province, blocking the issuance of another joint statement containing language on the South China Sea that China found objectionable.<sup>27</sup> The next month, at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Vientiane, Laos, Cambodia opposed any reference to the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling against China’s claims in the South China Sea. Beijing had pledged \$500 million in aid to Cambodia only one week earlier.<sup>28</sup>

Leading up to the July 2018 national election, Hun Sen ensured there would be no viable opposition. Authorities arrested Kem Sokha, who had taken over as head of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) after longtime party leader Sam Rainsy was forced into exile, together with other opposition party members, on charges of treason. The Cambodian Supreme Court then dissolved the CNRP altogether. The Trump administration cut roughly \$8.3 million in election assistance in response,<sup>29</sup> but Beijing quickly stepped in to provide \$20 million worth of equipment for the elections.<sup>30</sup> It had already donated equipment worth \$11 million a month earlier.<sup>31</sup> When the election was over, the CPP claimed to have won all 125 seats in parliament.<sup>32</sup> The White House criticized the elections, as noted above, and condemned the government’s suppression of Cambodia’s media and civil society.<sup>33</sup> The State Department also expanded visa restrictions on Cambodian government officials.<sup>34</sup>

Hun Sen and the CPP appear to face little to no electoral opposition in the near future. Hun Sen has severely curbed the independent press that had been developing in Cambodia since the early 1990s. In 2017, the government ordered the independent newspaper, *The Cambodia Daily*, to close and demanded that both *Radio Free Asia* and *Voice of America* stop broadcasting in the country.<sup>35</sup> Around the same time, the Hun Sen government banned the National Democratic Institute, an American election monitoring organization funded by the U.S. Congress, from operating in Cambodia.<sup>36</sup>

China is Cambodia’s largest source of foreign direct investment and largest aid donor, and reportedly gave nearly four times the amount of bilateral aid provided by Washington in 2016.<sup>37</sup> Chinese tourists are now inundating the country,<sup>38</sup> and some estimates hold that 40 percent of Cambodian debt (over \$4 billion) is owed to China.<sup>39</sup> China’s growing influence is not uncontroversial among Cambodians. Many view China unfavorably according to press reports: among older Cambodians, suspicions date back to Chinese support during the Khmer Rouge

period, whereas younger Cambodians often prefer American products.<sup>40</sup> According to one survey, 85 percent of Cambodians still regard the United States positively, while 46 percent actually maintain that the United States has more influence in the region at large, compared to 27 percent that see China as more influential.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, the United States has diminishing influence in Cambodia from a policy perspective. The influence deficit is particularly acute in light of the massive investment and foreign aid that Beijing provides. The Hun Sen government has been consistently willing to support China's interests in Southeast Asia despite the considerable acrimony this produces among ASEAN member states, as well as from the United States.

Despite the Hun Sen regime's unpopularity among Cambodia's youth, the CPP retains support among rural constituencies that Hun Sen has controlled and placated for decades through a mix of development projects, state propaganda, and authoritarian governance practices. Hun Sen appears more confident than ever in his political position. He seems destined to remain in place for as long as he is healthy enough to govern. Meanwhile, he appears to face little opposition to his widely observed desire to transfer power to his eldest son, Hun Manet.<sup>42</sup>

### **Myanmar**

The case of Myanmar may highlight Sino-American rivalry even more directly. In 2010, the country's ruling junta paved the way for the first multiparty elections in two decades. Many observers noted that the decision reflected the military regime's desire for economic development and reduced dependence on Chinese money and diplomatic protection, in the context of debilitating Western sanctions and international isolation.<sup>43</sup> The Obama administration enthusiastically backed these electoral plans and sent high-level visitors to the country, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011 and President Obama himself in 2012, to signal strong support.<sup>44</sup>

In 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, contested national elections and won an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats—largely pushing the incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) aside. Roughly a year later, Washington announced it would suspend all sanctions on the government soon after.<sup>45</sup> However, the military continues to exercise significant influence over Myanmar politics due to constitutional provisions that grant it authority to appoint the ministers of three security-related ministries. According to the 2008 constitution, 25 percent of seats in both houses of parliament and regional parliamentary bodies are reserved for active duty soldiers, while the armed forces control six of 11 seats on the powerful National Defense and Security Council.<sup>46</sup>

Myanmar held by-elections in November 2018 to fill 13 vacant seats. The country is now preparing for national elections in 2020, when it is expected that coalitions of ethnic political parties may make a modest comeback in contesting the overwhelming parliamentary position of the NLD, though Aung San Suu Kyi continues to enjoy popular support. This popularity rests on her long-cultivated status as a champion for democracy throughout the 1990s and 2000s. To protect and help sustain her political position, she has also proven unwilling to confront the military over allegations of ethnic cleansing committed against the country's Rohingya Muslim minority—nearly 800,000 of whom have fled western Rakhine State across the border to Bangladesh to escape what the Burmese military calls counterinsurgency operations.

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State has isolated Myanmar from the international community. Worse, the eruption of xenophobic and nationalist vitriol directed by Burman Buddhists against the country's Muslim population threatens to tear the country apart, and could even provoke the military to intervene in politics if it deems the civilian government unable to maintain control. (The 2008 constitution allows the armed forces to take power if the president declares a state of

emergency.) Beijing has shielded Myanmar from international condemnation where possible and has gained political influence in Naypyidaw as a result. In September 2018, for instance, China warned against actions taken by the United Nations to condemn Myanmar's military and said the crisis should not be "internationalized."<sup>47</sup> In August 2018, U.N. countries accused Beijing of blocking moves to prosecute Myanmar military leaders.<sup>48</sup> Beijing's role in the Rohingya crisis indirectly supports Myanmar's military while stymying the country's democratic consolidation.

Beyond lending de facto protection in multilateral international institutions such as the United Nations, China is also Myanmar's largest source of foreign investment and is funding massive infrastructure projects in the country under its Belt and Road Initiative. These projects include the Kyaukphyu Port in western Rakhine State as well as an oil and gas pipeline pumping energy overland to China's southern Yunnan province (part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor).<sup>49</sup> Amid the fallout over Western condemnation of the ongoing Rohingya crisis, Aung San Suu Kyi has cultivated positive relations with Beijing's leadership, while Western engagement and investment have lapsed in the wake of the country's internal conflicts.

The United States has issued statements critical of Aung San Suu Kyi's response to the Rohingya crisis and voiced concerns over atrocities committed by the military. It has also enacted targeted sanctions against several military commanders, including former Major General Maung Maung Soe, who oversaw clearance operations in Rakhine State as head of Myanmar's western command.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Washington has declined to reinstitute broad-based economic sanctions on the country. Although Burmese elites may be uncomfortable with their country's de facto "tilt" back toward China, many citizens have expressed gratitude, given the West's ostracism of the struggling democracy, for China's uncritical support in light of what they see as internal issues that the United States and other critics have

misunderstood. For now, Myanmar finds itself in a delicate geopolitical balance, caught in China's orbit of influence and pulled away from the liberalizing path it had undertaken in recent years, which Washington and other Western partners had encouraged.

## **CONCLUSION**

The above country examples show that China is actively promoting its strategic and foreign policy interests in Southeast Asia through greater engagement with domestic actors in countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar. Beijing has secured Cambodia's support for its South China Sea position by becoming an indispensable ally of Hun Sen and the CPP, and appears to be improving conditions for its Belt and Road projects in Myanmar by providing diplomatic cover for the Burmese government and military over the Rohingya issue. These efforts may reinforce or encourage pre-existing authoritarian trends (as in Cambodia) or inhibit democratic consolidation (as in Myanmar), but it does not necessarily mean that China is proactively promoting an authoritarian model of development in the region, or trying to convince other countries to emulate the Chinese model in particular. Beijing may be playing a facilitating role by offering training and exposure to authoritarian techniques of governance, at the Baise Cadre Academy or elsewhere, but so far the evidence is anecdotal.

It does appear, however, that China is helping to ensure the survival of authoritarian regimes that are key economic and strategic partners.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, Eric Heginbotham has it about right when he writes: "Although China has not actively undermined democratic rule in Southeast Asia, it has exploited economic and political circumstances in weak non-democratic states to build effective patron-client relations," especially along its immediate periphery.<sup>52</sup> Put another way, China seems more interested in creating a sphere of influence, particularly in mainland Southeast Asia, than in transforming the domestic political structures of individual countries.

## DEMOCRACY & DISORDER

### DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: GREAT POWER RIVALRY MEETS DOMESTIC GOVERNANCE

For its part, the Trump administration has downgraded the pro-democratic posture of the United States and no longer presents America as a beacon of democratic governance, in Asia or elsewhere.<sup>53</sup> To the contrary, Trump's own authoritarian behavior at home, particularly his demonization of the American media, has been mimicked and exploited by authoritarian rulers in the region. Yet, irrespective of these trends in American politics and foreign policy, we see domestic drivers in Southeast Asian countries fueling a democratic resurgence in Malaysia and continued democratic practice and consolidation in Indonesia. At the same time, deeply rooted internal drivers are helping to move things in the opposite direction in the countries discussed in this paper. Hun Sen's iron grasp on the Cambodian countryside is a powerful legacy of an earlier Leninist system, on which the CPP is based, that infiltrated every aspect of rural political life and social organization. Meanwhile, the political role of the Burmese military has been institutionalized over many decades and probably exceeds that of the Indonesian military under Suharto, which took many years to unwind. This transition will be all the harder in Myanmar as Buddhist nationalism flares in the country, reinforcing the military's position.

It is therefore critical to keep these internal drivers in mind when considering the impact of U.S.-China rivalry on domestic governance trends in Southeast Asia, or the likely effects of U.S. foreign policy initiatives more specifically. So, what can be done?

First, the Trump administration should accelerate and expand implementation of its already announced economic initiatives for the Indo-Pacific region—especially the Infrastructure Transaction Assistance Framework, designed to assist recipient countries to better evaluate the terms and conditions of major infrastructure deals. The rapid growth of Chinese investment and lending has tended to increase corruption and shield authoritarian leaders from political accountability in Asia, and these initiatives could mitigate those effects while advancing U.S. policy goals. Second, the administration should work with allies and partners, multilateral institutions, and civil society groups to encourage good governance practices in the areas of transparency, accountability, and participation, since poor governance often leaves countries vulnerable to democratic reversals or decline.



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