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14. ABSTRACT

The U.S. can achieve its Indo-Pacific strategy of maintaining the prosperous, rules-based international order through which all nations can continue to benefit by enhancing its "sticky" economic system and expanding educational outreach with Southeast Asian countries. This liberal engagement model will not attain influence and access by the end of the next presidential term but makes a play for the long game over the coming decades in the great power competition.

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Drawing Allies in Southeast Asia Closer Without Antagonizing Beijing

A common refrain among nations that feel caught in the middle of the competition between great powers is that they do not want to choose sides. Consider a few recent examples from Asia and Africa: Richard Haydarian asserts that "[no] self-respecting Asian country wants to be trapped, or to be a vassal or, worse, to be a theater for proxy battles."¹ Max Boot avers, "Today, like most other Asian states, Indonesia is trying to triangulate between Beijing and Washington."² And, "Africa has suffered enough from the burden of history," Macky Sall, the African Union chairman, said. "It does not want to be the breeding ground of a new Cold War."³ U.S. allies in Southeast Asia seek to maintain strong security alliances with America but also want to reap the benefits of economic relationships with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Choosing one side over the other would limit their progress militarily or economically, which is a decision they do not want to make. Furthermore, many states were members of the Non-aligned Movement in the 1950s, so their separateness is a matter of identity rather than merely a strategic calculation.

Local distrust of Beijing's intentions has caused many Southeast Asian states to turn to the U.S. for security assistance. The American commitment to international law to maintain freedom of navigation and trade appeals to the open economies in the region. Consistent economic growth in Southeast Asia since the 2008 financial crisis has lifted the standard of living. The PRC's explosive growth in that time has spurred much regional development, and

¹ Richard Javad Heydarian, "SE Asia Summitry Finally Serves a Useful Purpose," *Asia Times*, November 19, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/11/se-asia-summitry-finally-serves-a-useful-purpose/>.

² Max Boot, "Why Indonesia Matters to Both the U.S. and China," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/02/20/indonesia-geopolitics-china-us-indopacific/>.

³ Declan Walsh, "A 'New Cold War' Looms in Africa as U.S. Pushes Against Russian Gains," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/19/world/africa/chad-russia-wagner.html>.

local leaders do not want to threaten that growth. Thus, while Southeast Asian nations seek U.S. security assurances, a massive, US-led military build-up would surely raise the ire of Beijing and threaten the stability that has provided such growth. While understanding the concerns of Southeast Asian leaders, Washington prefers to draw allies in the region closer without antagonizing Beijing to the point of a military conflict.

This paper explores options for drawing allies closer to Washington without provoking a negative response from Beijing by highlighting the strategic importance of Southeast Asia and why it makes sense for the U.S. to prioritize engagement in the region. It argues that the U.S. can achieve its Indo-Pacific strategy of maintaining the prosperous, rules-based international order through which all nations can continue to benefit by enhancing its "sticky" economic system and expanding educational outreach with Southeast Asian countries. This liberal engagement model will not attain influence and access by the end of the next presidential term but makes a play for the long game over the coming decades in the great power competition. These policies are benign and preempt any avenue of attack from Beijing. In fact, an adverse reaction from the PRC would only play into the narrative of Beijing as a bad actor in the region and make a closer relationship with the U.S. more attractive for regional states.

WHY SOUTHEAST ASIA?

Southeast Asia is a critical geopolitical zone that warrants increased engagement for three reasons: First, the ten nations comprising the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) constitute the fourth-largest export market for the U.S. and are collectively the world's fifth-largest economy.⁴ Cooperation in the region is too lucrative to cede to Beijing, and failing to do

⁴ Scott Marciel, "In Southeast Asia, the United States Needs to Up Its Economic Game," July 6, 2022, <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/southeast-asia-united-states-needs-its-economic-game>.

so would negatively impact American economic growth. Second, the Biden administration assesses several areas where it can advance its mutual interests in Southeast Asia. Its Indo-Pacific strategy identifies potential cooperation in "health, climate and environment, energy, transportation, and gender equity and equality."⁵ Lastly, the PRC poses a more significant threat in Southeast Asia than other regions due to its proximity and territorial claims. "Nearly every Asian country, from Japan to Vietnam, fears Chinese coercion and seeks a robust American balance to Beijing's growing naval power and projection capabilities."⁶

Economically, the PRC overtook the U.S. as the leading trading partner in Southeast Asia in the last 20 years. The U.S. share of the region's total merchandise trade fell from 16.1% in 2000 to 11.6% in 2020, while China's share rose from 4.3% to 19.4%.⁷ More recently, Asian nations inked two new trade agreements, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, PRC, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which includes three ASEAN members.⁸ The lack of U.S. participation in either of these trade partnerships risks the U.S. falling further out of favor with Asian trading partners and ceding more influence to the PRC.

The Biden Administration is taking a liberal approach in Southeast Asia to maximize alliances and avoid antagonizing the PRC. Rejecting the realist view of relative gains, the current administration seeks the absolute advancement of allies in the Indo-Pacific. The updated Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in 2022, mostly avoids antagonizing China while emphasizing

⁵ Ibid, p 9.

⁶ Evan A. Feigenbaum, "Meeting the Challenge in Asia," Text, *The National Interest* (The Center for the National Interest, December 22, 2020), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/meeting-challenge-asia-174917>.

⁷ Scott Marciel, "In Southeast Asia, the United States Needs to Up Its Economic Game."

⁸ David Dollar and Jonathan Stromseth, "The US Must Urgently Rethink Its Economic Policies in Asia," *Brookings* (blog), February 17, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/17/us-must-urgently-rethink-its-economic-policies-in-asia/>.

alliances. In 14 pages, it only directly addresses the PRC in two paragraphs while using the terms "allies" or "alliances" 33 times.⁹ While pledging to maintain "peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," the current administration believes the U.S. can help ASEAN outside the typical security paradigm on issues as varied as "health, climate and environment, energy, transportation, and gender equity and equality."¹⁰ Southeast Asia is particularly prone to natural disasters, and the U.S. recognizes it can build goodwill by developing mechanisms to meet humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief needs.

China's only territorial ambitions outside Taiwan are in Southeast Asia. The aggressive tactics of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), and the Maritime Militia (MM) inside the nine-dash line around the South China Sea (SCS) are well known. Their forces shadow transiting U.S. and allied naval vessels. They preclude Filipino and Vietnamese fishermen from harvesting in what are legally their territorial waters. They also obstruct the exploration and extraction of the bounteous hydrocarbons.¹¹ The PRC has built up and weaponized three islands in the SCS, turning them into sprawling air bases with accompanying port facilities. Beijing placed anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems along with laser and jamming equipment threatening all maritime and air traffic in the SCS. U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Aquilino characterized the build-up as "offensive" rather than merely defensive as Beijing claims and said it destabilized the region.¹² The Philippines has particularly felt the brunt of Beijing's bullying after a MM ship deliberately crashed into and sank a Philippine fishing vessel. Additionally, a CCG ship targeted a Philippine Coast Guard

⁹ Joseph Biden Jr, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," The White House, February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid, p 9.

¹¹ "China's Put-upon Maritime Neighbours Are Pushing Back," *The Economist*, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/02/01/chinas-put-upon-maritime-neighbours-are-pushing-back>.

¹² Guardian article sent while driving.

vessel with a "military-grade laser," temporarily blinding several crew members. Chinese ships have also obstructed Philippine resupply missions to the small contingent of Marines on board the intentionally grounded BRP Sierra Madre at Second Thomas Shoal.¹³

Similarly, the PRC has harassed Vietnamese oil exploration efforts inside Hanoi's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Hanoi accused Chinese vessels of "camping out near Vanguard Bank and zigzagging throughout Vietnam's EEZ" to obstruct Vietnamese attempts to drill for oil, even though the ships were operating within Vietnam's continental shelf.¹⁴

These three factors of economic importance, the potential for progress, and Chinese territorial ambitions reflect the region's importance to U.S. national interests. It suggests the U.S. has local partners who are receptive to a closer relationship with the U.S. that will help them as they pursue their national interests. While Beijing views any U.S. actions regarding Taiwan as provocative and considers U.S. recognition of Taiwanese independence a red line, Washington has great latitude to operate in Southeast Asia. Because Beijing's defenses have long focused on large U.S. bases in Japan and South Korea, Southeast Asia could be considered the soft underbelly of the PRC. It is a region wherein the U.S. can make more tangible progress with partners than any other in the Indo-Pacific Command.

SOFT POWER

Though the PRC is now the dominant economic power in Southeast Asia, the U.S. maintains predominant power in the global system. It must increase its economic influence to benefit itself

¹³ "Philippines Says China Ship Used Laser against Coast Guard," AP NEWS, February 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-philippines-government-manila-china-8ee5459dcac872b14a49c4a428029259>.

¹⁴ Ankit Panda, "US Slams China's 'Bullying' Amid Vanguard Bank Oil Exploration Standoff With Vietnam," accessed April 16, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/us-slams-chinas-bullying-amid-vanguard-bank-oil-exploration-standoff-with-vietnam/>.

and its Southeast Asian partners. The U.S. generates its impact through hard, soft, and "sticky" tools. The military provides hard power, while our culture, values, ideas, technologies, and habits are soft tools. The U.S. derives its sticky power by shepherding the economic institutions and policies that constitute the liberal rules-based order that has provided the conditions for unprecedented wealth since WW2. Other nations also want access to that system, and when they begin to experience similar growth, they are "stuck" in it and become advocates for the system themselves.¹⁵

The U.S. cannot take its stickiness in the global economy for granted in the face of growing Chinese influence. It risks being absent as rules are changed or adapted in Southeast Asia through new trade agreements. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was a proposed trade deal between the U.S. and 11 partners along the Asia-Pacific rim that combined made up almost 40 percent of global gross domestic product, though significantly did not include the PRC. The TPP would have eliminated or reduced nearly all tariffs among participants, including on services and manufactured goods. It would have made foreign direct investment easier while strengthening intellectual property protections and maintaining high labor and environmental standards. Significantly, it was the first agreement of its kind to include rules on digital commerce, which would have facilitated the flow of information across borders and mandated privacy protections.¹⁶ Presidents Bush and Obama believed it would reinforce America's influence in the region by bolstering U.S. leadership and allowing the U.S. to help write the rules governing the 21st-century economy in Asia.

¹⁵ Walter Russell Mead, "America's Sticky Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 141 (2004): 46–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4147548>.

¹⁶ "What's Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-trans-pacific-partnership-tpp>.

However, President Trump had a different view and pulled out of the TPP on his first day in office, thus depriving the U.S. of a critical avenue of influence in Asia. The remaining 11 members of the original TPP negotiations did sign the deal now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Beijing negotiated a separate agreement with 15 Asian nations, including key U.S. allies Japan, South Korea, and Australia, called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020. Though not as comprehensive as the CPTPP, it is another integrative agreement in which the U.S. has no sway. Furthermore, Beijing has requested membership in the CPTPP. Though it would take years of negotiations to join, the PRC may become a member of two large trading blocs in Asia while the U.S. is in neither. "The United States has huge stakes in how rules are shaped," averred one Southeast Asian scholar:

Especially in quickly evolving sectors such as technology, financial services, and digital trade. High standards for intellectual property, environmental, and labor protections also give the United States advantages and would have driven U.S. and Southeast Asian economies closer together. Similarly, TPP standards would have been a way to maintain a free and open internet and fair competition by imposing regulations on [Chinese] state-owned enterprises.¹⁷

Just like President Trump before him, President Biden is caught in a two-level game dilemma regarding the CPTPP and other regional trade agreements. The agreements provide tariff-free access for U.S. goods and services to partners and do the same for foreign goods entering America. While American purveyors of high-tech goods and services would surely benefit, blue-collar manufacturers would bear the brunt of any negative impact. Those workers are the

¹⁷ Brian Harding and Kim Mai Tran, "U.S.–Southeast Asia Trade Relations in an Age of Disruption," June 27, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-southeast-asia-trade-relations-age-disruption>.

audience of both Presidents' rhetoric on economic policy, and thus neither could politically afford to lose their votes.

Though politically fraught, President Biden needs to get a seat at the table to negotiate the rules shaping the future global economy and could do so with what one trade expert has called "sectoral deals." Rather than an all-encompassing trade agreement, the U.S. could start with bilateral agreements with CPTPP countries in specific sectors such as digital commerce, medical equipment, or environmental considerations. Ideally, the administration would negotiate these agreements within existing laws, so they would only require executive arrangements with congressional consultation rather than a time-consuming congressional vote.¹⁸ If he succeeds, President Biden could use the smaller-scale agreements to make a domestic case for broader agreements to maintain U.S. influence in the region. Each new deal in which Washington plays no part erodes some of America's stickiness in Asia and draws partners closer to Beijing.

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

In 1957, the Soviet Union launched its Sputnik satellite into space and set off alarm bells in Washington that the USSR was threatening American scientific dominance. In response, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 to inject massive federal funds into the educational system. Those funds were not solely focused on STEM fields, however. The NDEA also helped establish area studies centers at many universities to increase the number of academic experts in regions across the globe.¹⁹ Beijing's rise in the current

¹⁸ "Can Biden Return the US to TPP? Does It Matter? 2 Experts Explain," Nikkei Asia, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Can-Biden-return-the-US-to-TPP-Does-it-matter-2-experts-explain>.

¹⁹ David L. Szanton, "The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines," 2002, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/59n2d2n1>.

atmosphere of global competition is setting off similar alarms. However, Beijing is now almost as assertive financially as the U.S., a feat the USSR never came close to accomplishing, so relying on economic dominance to maintain our influence will not suffice. The U.S. must encourage educational outreach with its partners worldwide to develop human capital and gain goodwill and cultural affinity among the intellectual elites who will set their country's foreign and economic policies for decades. Southeast Asia is a region in which the U.S. can naturally focus due to the relative room for growth in the U.S. and partners who already have the same goal of increased outreach to the U.S. in place.

In its Indo-Pacific strategy, the Biden Administration declared its intention to increase US-ASEAN ties. Specifically, the strategy emphasized " increasing connectivity and deepening people-to-people ties."²⁰ The administration can do this immediately by increasing the budget for Fulbright Programs through the Department of State (DOS) and providing Department of Education (DOE) grants to existing Centers for Southeast Asian Studies at U.S. universities. These relatively small expenditures will allow more American and Southeast Asian students to study the region, thus increasing ties beyond the economy.²¹

Each year between 800 to 900 foreign scholars receive Fulbright Scholarships to conduct advanced research and lecture at U.S. universities for an academic year or term. These intellectuals are encouraged to broaden their networks and experience the diversity of American higher education.²² It is difficult to quantify the cultural affinity derived from providing

²⁰ Biden, "Indo-Pacific Strategy," p16

²¹ There are currently 10 degree-granting Centers for Southeast Asian Studies in the US at Cornell, Northern Illinois, Ohio University, UC Berkeley, UCLA, Hawaii, Michigan, Washington, Wisconsin, and Yale. The author is a proud graduate of Wisconsin's CSEAS, class of 2002.

²² Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program, <https://fulbrightscholars.org/non-us-scholars/fulbright-visiting-scholar-program>, accessed on 27 April 2023.

scholarships for study in America, but two anecdotes from this academic year at the Naval War College (NWC) will suffice.

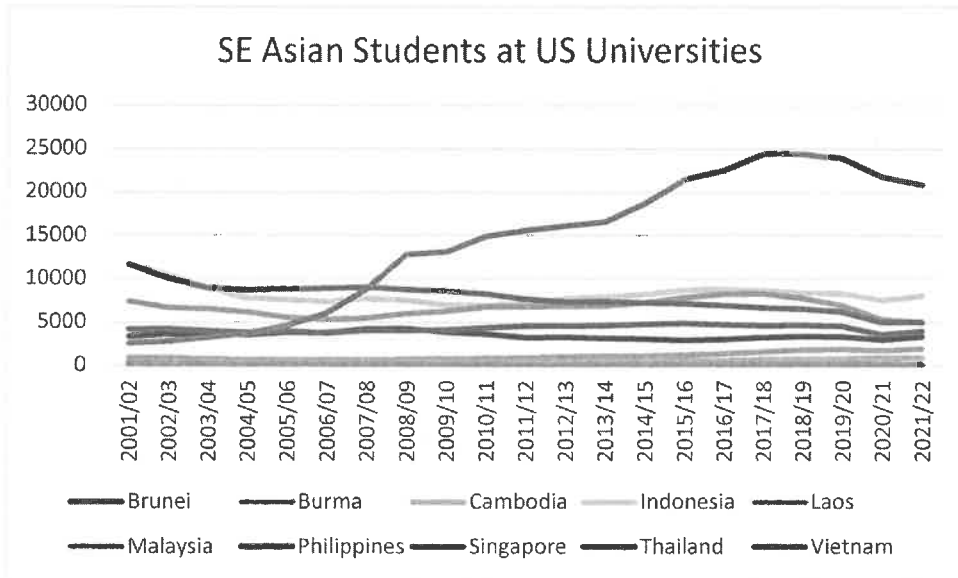
Dr. Jay Batongbacal, a law professor at the prestigious Ateneo de Manila and expert on maritime security in the SCS, was a Visiting Fellow at the NWC Stockton Center for International Law in the fall of 2022, funded through the Fulbright program. He is a prominent voice in Filipino security policy vis-à-vis the PRC in the SCS.²³ Dr. Batongbacal strongly advocates for closer ties between the Philippines and the U.S. During his time at the NWC, he worked with like-minded American colleagues and strengthened his ideological understanding of the U.S.-Philippines alliance.

Dr. Jennifer Oreta was a panel member at the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Conference in April 2023. Dr. Oreta was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar in 2021 at George Mason University and served as Assistant Secretary for Policy in the Office of the Presidential Adviser in the Philippines. She described the Fulbright program as a critical mechanism for making people-to-people connections to increase American soft power. She further advocated the program as a means of "elite capture," wherein great powers woo intellectual leaders to create cultural affinity.²⁴ She is one such intellectual who has helped develop Philippine foreign policy and is precisely the kind of scholar the U.S. wants to influence.

²³ Ashley Westerman, "The U.S. and the Philippines Agree to a Larger American Military Presence," *NPR*, February 2, 2023, sec. Asia, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/02/1153727888/the-us-philippines-american-military-presence>.

²⁴ Interview with author, US Naval War College, 28 April 2023.

ASEAN is a willing partner in the Biden administration's attempt to focus more on Southeast Asia. In its last strategy document, ASEAN called for "Promot[ing] better understanding of ASEAN among the general public...in Third Countries and International Organizations" through academic conferences, workshops, and seminars. U.S. and ASEAN interests thus converge at the



Centers for Southeast Asian Studies at U.S. universities. In the academic year ending in 2022, nearly 49,000 students from

Southeast Asia were studying at U.S. universities. While the number of students from most ASEAN states stayed relatively static since 2001, the number of Vietnamese students has risen



dramatically to over 20,000 last year.²⁵ Unfortunately for U.S. interests, the PRC has an advantage in this area. The Chinese

²⁵ Institute of International Education. "International Students by Place of Origin, Selected Years, 1949/50 - 2021/22." Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. Retrieved from <https://opendoorsdata.org/>

Ministry of Education lists the top 15 nations from which students came who were studying at Chinese universities in 2018, the last year for which statistics were available. Five ASEAN nations were on the list, and all had more students studying in China than in the U.S., except Vietnam.²⁶ Thus, a large pool of students would benefit from increased U.S. funding of educational exchange opportunities.

The U.S. has an advantage over Beijing in this area because Beijing's similar soft-power outreach in the US have largely floundered. Beijing's failings were most visibly through their Confucius Institutes on American universities and provided Washington a valuable lesson on transparency. Investigations of the Confucius Institutes found no evidence of illegal activity and confirmed the centers were productively engaged in language instruction. Even so, mistrust of Beijing's intentions soured the American public, politicians, and even educators forcing all but 13 of the 120 Confucian Institutes to close.²⁷ Through its educational outreach, Washington can avoid a similar fate by encouraging open discussion of ideas, as is standard on U.S. campuses.

THE REALIST REBUTTAL

Realists contend that international organizations do not change the global system's fundamentally anarchic and hostile nature and that nations will naturally seek relative gains. They would further argue that because the U.S. cannot compete economically with the PRC in Asia, it is folly to spend resources on soft power such as educational outreach, as outlined above. In an anarchic international system, those seeking hegemony must exude toughness, develop

²⁶ PRC Ministry of Education, "Statistical Report on International Students in China for 2018," http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201904/t20190418_378692.html; accessed 28 April 2023.

²⁷ "Confucius Institutes in the United States | US-China Institute," accessed May 9, 2023, <https://china.usc.edu/confucius-institutes-united-states>.

overwhelming military power, and do so *now*, not in the long term. Under that same rationale, the middle powers, including every Southeast Asian nation, would seek to balance against or bandwagon with a great power, in this case, either the PRC or the U.S. This balancing or bandwagoning, in the realist reckoning, is primarily executed through a military alliance.²⁸ For example, when a middle power such as Vietnam feels threatened militarily by the PRC, it can bandwagon with the PRC to avoid confrontation or balance against the Chinese threat by allying with the U.S. Vietnam could seal the alliance by allowing U.S. military basing rights or access, buying American military equipment, sharing intelligence, and forming a defense alliance stating the U.S. will come to its aid if the PRC attacks. This perspective prioritizes the hard power of military options above all else and avers that security is the *sine qua non* that will trump all other aspects of international relations.

Liberals contend, however, that states can also balance against or bandwagon with a great power through soft power means by creating bonds that are every bit as strong as a military alliance. Cooperation in multinational economic organizations, ties formed through cultural and educational exchanges, and common concerns voiced by immigrants from middle states to great powers all contribute to solid links. Each of the above may not be as strong as a military alliance alone, but the aggregate association is. The states surrounding the SCS (Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines) form a security community with territorial claims overlapping with Beijing's nine-dash line. However, none wants to fight a military battle with Beijing over these claims. Instead, they seek diplomatic solutions with backing from the U.S. The leaders who will decide which system to favor are the very elite the U.S. seeks to win over with the sticky

²⁸ Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 156–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339708442901>.

economic system prioritizing absolute gains over relative gains and the same people the U.S. seeks to educate in American universities. For every Sayyid Qutb who comes to America to experience our culture and political system and rejects it, several Shinzo Abe study in our universities and recognize the bounteous benefits of the US-led rules-based international order.²⁹

The general acceptance of and adherence to the rules-based order makes the egregious PRC actions in the SCS counterproductive to its aims and justifies the liberalist long game. When the PRC objects to an ASEAN state's actions with economic repercussions by banning certain imports or limiting tourist travel, it increases the open U.S. system's attractiveness and stickiness. When ASEAN students experience an American university with its free exchange of ideas, it makes Beijing's policies of internet policing and lack of personal freedom that much more unacceptable. If ASEAN members followed the realist framework and veered strongly to the U.S., Beijing could feel justified in flexing its military muscle and claiming self-defense. No such excuse is valid against the American offering of economic prosperity, an open discussion of ideas, and personal liberty. Thus, America would draw the ASEAN states closer without forcing them to make a decision to which Beijing could object.

²⁹ Larry Gordon, "Japanese Leader Shinzo Abe Visits USC, Where He Was a Student," Los Angeles Times, May 2, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-ln-usc-japan-20150502-story.html>.