

# Will SE Asia become a battleground?

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By Tommy Koh



Illustration: Sun Ying

Recently the foreign ministers of China and the US met with their ASEAN counterparts in Phnom Penh. Several thought-provoking questions were raised. First, are China and the US competing for influence in Southeast Asia? Second, can Southeast Asia manage this competition without compromising ASEAN's neutrality and jeopardizing regional peace? Third, will China and the US turn Southeast Asia into a battleground?

First, China and the US are certainly competing for influence in Southeast Asia. They are, however, not alone in this competition. Japan, India, Russia and the EU are also involved.

Who is ahead? It is hard to say. In the area of trade, for example, China has become the top trading partner for some ASEAN countries. In recent years, China has also substantially increased its FDI in ASEAN, especially in Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Myanmar and

Cambodia. As for overseas development assistance (ODA), my impression is that, in recent years, China has overtaken Japan as the No. 1 provider of ODA to ASEAN. In the area of peace and security, the US remains the pre-eminent military power. The US also enjoys great prestige because of its attractive soft power. Many in the region look to the US for comfort when faced with China's challenges.

But the US has lost a lot of ground in Southeast Asia in recent decades. I think one of the objectives of the pivot to Asia is to recover lost ground. But can this lost ground be regained?

Second, individual ASEAN members have their own foreign policies. Some are closer to China. Others are closer to the US. ASEAN, as a group, is non-partisan and does not wish to take sides. ASEAN members are fully aware they must remain neutral. The perceptions by some in China that ASEAN is pro-US and by some in Washington that ASEAN is pro-China, are mistaken.

However, can ASEAN remain neutral when four of its members have disputes with China in the South China Sea? These are Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. The remaining six members of the ASEAN family have not endorsed the claims of the four claimant states.

ASEAN's position on the South China Sea is that the disputes should be resolved by peaceful means. The disputes should be resolved in accordance with international law and, specifically, with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This will help prevent an escalation of tensions, maintain regional stability and preserve the freedom of navigation. It is up to the claimants to decide which particular modality of dispute settlement they wish to follow.

Third, are China and the US on a collision course? The two cooperate where their interests coincide and compete where they do not. There is an increasingly inter-dependent relationship between the two countries. It makes no sense for them to view each other as adversaries.

There is a deficit of mutual trust between China and the US. As a result, some in China view the Obama doctrine and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) with suspicion. They think that the US intention is to encircle and contain the rise of China. They also suspect that the US is stirring up the waters of the South China Sea.

At the same time, some in the US view China as posing a long-term threat to their global leadership. They believe China wants to exclude the US from the region.

I do not believe that China and the US are on a collision course. If rational minds continue to prevail, in China and the US, the two countries will continue to cooperate and compete in a peaceful manner. Where differences arise, the two sides have succeeded in resolving them amicably. I do not think either party wishes to start a new Cold War and to use Southeast Asia as their battle ground. The traumas and sufferings of the recent past are still fresh in the memories of Southeast Asian countries. They are determined to stay united and for the region to remain open, inclusive and peaceful.

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