

GREAT POWER POLITICS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE COLD WAR AND THE POST-COLD WAR SETTINGS

Noor Mohammad Sarker*

Abstract

Over the decades, Southeast Asian subsystem has gradually emerged as a significant strategic place for the major players of the contemporary international relations. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the entire region had constantly been influenced by the great power politics played mainly by the then three major world powers: United States, former Soviet Union (now Russia) and China. However, in the post-Cold War period, these powers, including Japan and India, are applying different strategic and tactical policies to pursue relative gain instead of zero-sum or absolute gain. On the other hand, the Southeast Asian countries are following the great power strategies to serve national and regional interests.

Introduction

The Southeast Asian subsystem is becoming an increasingly important unit of the contemporary international system. Throughout history, the region has got extensive importance for its significant geopolitical location and the abundance of natural resources. That is why a number of external powers, like the United States of America, China, Japan, Russia and India, have engaged heavily to Southeast Asian affairs. Centuries of Chinese and Indian influence, colonial rule, and more recent imperial interventions have left ineffaceable ideational legacies all over the region.¹ Even in the modern era of independent nation-states, outside powers remain vital to the developments of the area. Therefore, the entire region has now become a theatre where great power rivalries and competitions for influence are being played out.

* **Noor Mohammad Sarker**, Research Assistant for International Affairs, Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA). He graduated with Honours and Masters from the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka. Email: nmsrdu@gmail.com

¹ Fenna Egberink and Frans-Paul van der Putten, "ASEAN and Strategic Rivalry among the Great Powers in Asia", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2010, pp. 132-141.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the entire region has constantly been influenced by the great power politics played mainly by five major world powers: United States, Russia, China, India and Japan. Since the middle of the last century, they have consistently been attempting to pursue their individual goals and interests about the region.² These world powers continue to poke and prod around the region, seeking ways to increase their influence, but usually avoiding moves that would raise military tensions among them. In the economic, military and institutional dimensions, Southeast Asian states also appear to have settled into a strategy of preserving middle ground among these key international actors.³

The present study thus attempts to provide a comprehensive review of the great power politics in Southeast Asian region, especially focusing the role played by the United States of America, China, Russia, India and Japan. While giving a spotlight on the individual interests and goals of these world powers about the region, the paper attempts to evaluate the Cold War-period great power politics within the area based on some important historic events that had so much implications to the world politics. The study then provides an insight on the post-Cold War great power politics in Southeast Asia focusing on the individual roles of the five world powers. Concluding remarks follow in the end.

Understanding Southeast Asia as a Region

Southeast Asia is a sub-region of the Asian continent. The term 'Southeast Asia' is of recent origin. German writers of the late 19th century occasionally used the term. It became popular during the Second World War, when the British created Southeast Asia Military Command under the command of Lord Louis Mountbatten headquartered in Ceylon, at present Sri Lanka.

At present, geographically the area is situated at the south of China, east of India, west of New Guinea and north of Australia. Southeast Asia

² Lt. Cdr. Dinesh Yadav, "Major Powers in Southeast Asia: In Strategic Crosshairs", 2010, at <http://www.mafsc.edu.my/administrator/uploads/publications/1318394894712133_LINK_MAJOR%20POWERS%20IN%20SOUTHEAST%20ASIA%20%20IN%20STRATEGIC%20CROSSHAIRS.pdf> (accessed on March 19, 2013)

³ Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies", *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2007, pp. 113–115.

can be seen as two geographical sub-regions: mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.⁴

- “Mainland Southeast Asia” also known as “Indochina”, comprises Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.
- “Maritime Southeast Asia” commonly known as “Malay Archipelago”, encompasses Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines.

Map 1: Southeast Asia



Source: <http://www.southchinasea.org/files/2011/08/Southeast-Asia-Political-Map-CIA-2003.jpg>

Southeast Asia is among the world’s most ethnically, politically and economically diverse regions. However, as a region it has few commonalities also, such as the climate of the region is mainly tropical—

⁴ D.R. Sardesai, *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*, London: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 9-11.