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# DEFENCE & SECURITY ALERT

AUGUST 2022 | VOLUME 13 | ISSUE 11 | ₹150

The First and Only ISO 9001:2015 Certified Defence and Security Magazine in India  
The Only Magazine Available On The Intranet Of Indian Air Force

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## CHINA'S INTERFERENCE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

### A TURNING POINT IN GEOPOLITICS



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ISSN 0974-726X

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# CHINA'S INTERFERENCE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

While South-East Asian elites are fearful of the growing power and ambition of China, they are also aware that it is an inescapable partner and an economic powerhouse on many of the region's pressing issues.

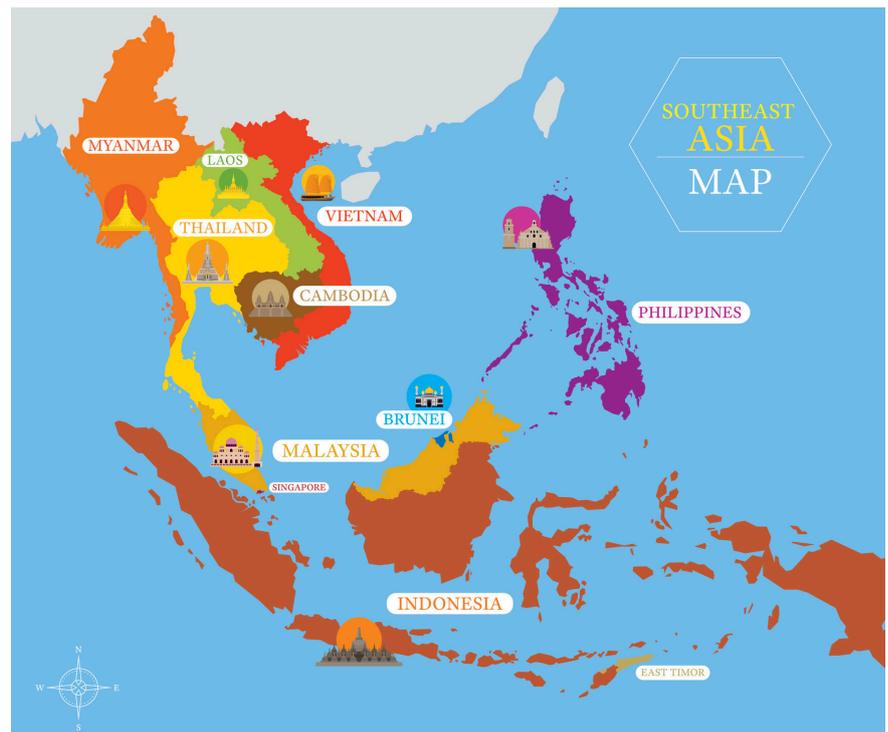


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The top eight most terrifying words that any developing or the least developed nation can hear in this day of age are "I'm from China and I'm here to help". Spreading to a vast area of 4.5 million sq km, South-East Asia (SEA) is one of the densely populated regions, which comprises 11 states i.e., Brunei, Burma (Myanmar),

Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.



Zhōu Dáguān.

It was in 1296, when a Chinese envoy Zhōu Dáguān arrived at Angkor, the ancient Cambodian capital ruled by Khmer Empire. His major purpose for the visit, as documented in the instances of Sino-Khmer diplomacy, was to secure tributary for the Chinese empire, further enhancing the self-proposed ideology of Chinese rule over *tiānxià* – “everything under heaven.” China extended this tributary system from South-East Asia to Japan. This was the major reason that a prominent number of ethnic Chinese dispersed across the South-East Asia. China today claims this historical narrative to its advantage of subduing the entire region to its own benefit.

**The Middle Kingdom**

Traditionally, these states had a tributary relationship with China in the Qing Dynasty and before. It massively imbued them with a Chinese way of life. Some states drafted their manuscripts with the aid of Chinese intellectuals. The transmission of Buddhism and Confucianist ideas accommodated effectively in these regions, producing a deep and longstanding ancient socio-cultural bond with China. Economically, the region was in heavy contact with Chinese traders via the Maritime Silk Road. The Chinese misidentified the South Asian region as ‘India’, because of the Indian influence

in the region. India was referred to as Shendu (name derived from the Sindhu River) by the Chinese and was considered as the land of great wealth. The maliciously constructed history of China being the Middle Kingdom and the concept of *tiānxià* bears no credible evidence historically. The Chinese authority bolstered these narratives to justify expanding the region and preserve themselves from the foreign entities which they called as the ‘barbarians’.

Today, apart from the Chinese diplomats and the state representatives, a significant number of non-state actors like civil societies, NGOs, students and scholars have a considerable presence and influence within the SEA region. We cannot overlook the effects of these Chinese members in the daily lives of the South-East Asian region.

The **Chinese misidentified** the South Asian region as **‘India’**, because of the **Indian influence** in the region



China's maritime pathway through the Arctic, if it were to come to fruition, might look something like this, connecting China with Western Europe.



Chinese President Xi Jinping chairs the Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations via video link on 22 November 2021 in Beijing.

**Autonomy Isn't For Sale**

Today, China contributes massively to the region, both economically and militarily. Despite that, a recent survey run by Singapore's ISEAS-Yosuf Ishak Institute revealed China to be the least trusted nation in the region, yet the most influential one. This does not appear as a surprise given the principles of deception, denial, distortion, and disinformation that China thrives upon. Constant Chinese intervention in the territorial and maritime disputes has led to irreparable damage among these nations with China.

A trade of \$443 billion in 2013 to \$878 billion in 2021 is a massive spurt between China and ASEAN. Beijing has entirely militarized three islands in the South China Sea region. China's debt trap and sanctions are no peculiar concepts

to these regions who are fully aware of the outcomes when one shakes hand with the devil. This annoys China, which believes that any sum of wealth should oblige the nations to trade their sovereignty.

Rakhahari Chatterji, in his issue brief in the Observer Research Fellow, has painstakingly analysed each ASEAN nation-state vis-à-vis China concerning the degree of collaboration and mutual trust among the two.

**The Conformists**

Since the 2014 military coup, Thailand has deepened its links with China despite being USA's ally. Thailand's regime has much to benefit by maintaining themselves in the good books with the Chinese. Despite the people protest on anti-China, pro-Hongkong, pro-Taiwan, the effects on Sino-Thai relationships are still intact.

Being the second largest palm oil producer globally, Malaysia in 2020 accounted for 25.8 per cent and 34.3 per cent of world's

Bandwagoning with China	Hesitant hedging	Active hedging
Cambodia	Thailand	Singapore
Laos	Indonesia	Vietnam
Brunei	Philippines	
	Malaysia	
	Myanmar	

Figure 1: ASEAN members' responses to China.



Protesters hold placards as they take part in a rally against the Extradition Bill on 26 June 2019 in Hong Kong, China.

palm oil production and exports, respectively. China is Malaysia's largest trading partner, making up approximately 19 per cent total trade in 2021. China employs this kind of economic leverage frequently to satisfy its own interest. Recently, China and Malaysia lauded their 48 years of diplomatic ties. Wang Yi, Chinese Foreign Minister, also mentioned that China would boost its import of palm oil from Malaysia.

### The Balancers

The Sino-Vietnamese War in early 1979 had profoundly influenced the relations between the two nations for decades. The Vietnamese government has cautiously managed the nationwide distrust regarding China among the Vietnamese.

**Vietnam** is also being **perceived as a threat** to China, which could **replace it in global manufacturing** in the nearby **future**

Leveraging this discontent, Vietnam has often raised its voice against Chinese interference in the South China Sea. Vietnam is also being perceived as a threat to China, which could replace it in global manufacturing in the nearby future.

Considering South-East Asia as its natural realm of influence, Indonesia is among the most aggressive for standing against Beijing. Neither being extremely close to China nor the USA,

Jakarta weighs itself in the middle of the spectrum. Despite the issues, Jakarta has recently pressed for a major landmark project for transportation with Beijing.

### Not China's Backyard

It was in Hanoi, during ASEAN regional forum meeting, when then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi commented, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that's just a fact." Historically,



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (third from left) with his counterparts from the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in Bagan, Myanmar on 14 July 2022.

South-East Asia was never exclusively under China’s sphere of influence. Diplomatic slogans like ‘commonality’ between partners, ‘Community of Common Destiny’ and most recently, the Global Security Initiative are futile ‘discourse powers’ used by the Chinese Communist Party to increase their clout over the region. China is boosting up its diplomatic efforts to tame the region politically and economically, mostly to counter Washington’s influence.

On 14 July 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi concluded an eleven-day tour to the five nations in the region - Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Malaysia. The tour wound up into Wang’s participation in the 7th Lancang-Mekong Cooperation meeting, G20 Foreign Ministers’ summit, and the ASEAN conference. The primary objective of this tour was to offset Washington’s influence and instil a geostrategic momentum in the highly contended Indo-Pacific region. Beijing also commented that South East Asian nations should avoid becoming “chess pieces” referring to Washington’s

## Indonesia is among the most aggressive for standing against Beijing

influence in the region. Wang also signed multiple bilateral agreements with nine Pacific islands to further strengthen Beijing’s security in the Indo-Pacific.

### **The Way Forward**

Do not expect China to shy away from engaging with South-East Asian nations multilaterally like in the BRI Joint Consultation Conference to further its economic and military agenda in the imminent future. China will boast its economic reforms, political stability, poverty alleviation and cultural unity to ASEAN states. However, USA’s disengagement from Afghanistan to concentrate more on Indo-Pacific, South-East Asia and China will be an issue that China needs to manoeuvre.

China could adopt the principles expressed by our EAM Jaishankar, that ‘mutual

trust, mutual sensitivities and mutual respect’ are the keys to restoring immediate and long-term relationships. Decades of colonialism and imperialism in the South-East Asian region have made sovereignty sacrosanct. China should abandon its attitude of ‘buying’ autonomy and understand that sovereignty is not for sale. Beijing’s futile attempt to subdue the entire region to its own falsely constructed narrative is difficult to turn into realisation. While South-East Asian elites are fearful of the growing power and ambition of China, they are also aware that it is an inescapable partner and an economic powerhouse on many of the region’s pressing issues. But to expect South-East Asia to trade their sovereignty is naïve of China and the region clearly does not view itself to be the community of Common destiny, a destiny designed by China for China. **DSA**