

# The Breaking Point of China's Geopolitics and Its Comparative Advantages

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**Abstract:** Geopolitical competition is a power competition between countries to maintain the balance of power or establish hegemony in key geographical areas. At present, the mainstream geostrategic research in academic circles, including American global strategic research, American Asia Pacific strategic research, Japanese geostrategic research, Indian geostrategic research, Russian geostrategic research, and EU geostrategic research, are mainly large country research, and there are few regional research, such as Southeast Asia. At present, China has developed to a specific historical node. While economic interests have spread worldwide, the international situation is becoming more and more complex, and peripheral relations are tense. Therefore, it is urgent to achieve a strategic breakthrough in the world. Although The Belt and Road have pointed out the direction of development for China's grand strategy, it is impossible to pay attention to every aspect of more than 60 countries along the route. This paper will explain which region will be the breakthrough of China's Geopolitics in the future and need to focus on management.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Southeast Asia, The Belt and Road

## 1. Introduction

“Big countries are the shapers of the international geostrategic pattern, and only the vast land can incubate great countries and great civilizations, which determines that only Eurasia is the center of the world political stage” [1]. As Brzezinski, a contemporary American strategist, proposed, “whoever firmly controls Eurasia can dominate the world” [2]. From the history of international politics, the rise and fall of the Vienna system, the Versailles system, and the Yalta system take Eurasia as the stage. Today, Eurasia has 75% of the world's population, 60% of the total wealth, and 75% of fossil energy. It has two of the world's three major economic centers—the European Union and East Asia. There are four power centers of China, Russia, Europe, Japan, and regional powers such as India, Indonesia, Turkey, and Iran distributed. The forms of religion and civilization are highly complex. The geographical interests of major powers and various belief systems collided violently here, forming a complex, fierce competition situation. In his Rimland theory, Spykman described in detail that the “Rimland of Eurasia has a large population, rich natural resources, and a large amount of wealth, and further proposed that such areas are the key to ruling the coastal zone. Thus, he advocated that the geopolitical center of the United States should be located in Eurasia” [3]. Therefore, no matter how the world situation evolves in the future, the basic pattern of global strategic resources concentrated in Eurasia will not change. Participating in the game of great powers in Eurasia will be a test that China must withstand in rising and rejuvenating. There is no doubt that the rising China needs to formulate a grand strategy in line with the requirements of the times to deal with complex internal and external challenges.

According to the realistic international political theory, rights are defined by power. “The status of a country in the power pyramid of the international system and the radius of its rights depend on the number of strategic resources, capabilities, and means it has” [4]. If China wants to accurately formulate its national grand strategy, including correctly evaluating the strategic environment, strategic objectives, strategic contents, and strategic means, it must accurately recognize and judge its international status and identity. After the end of the cold war, the United States has been using the suspicion of small Asian countries towards China, taking Japan, Australia, and India as the pivots, striving to weave a strategic containment net and use various means to obstruct China's rise. The historical experience of the great power game shows that the ultimate fate of the late developing countries is no more than two: either breaking the containment and completing the rise or being

strangled in the cradle of the rise by the hegemonic countries. As a nation with strategic aspirations, a great nation cannot be stuffed into a narrow space forever. For the needs of national survival and development, rising China must break the Western containment.

## **2. The Breaking Point of China's Geopolitics**

### ***2.1 the Direction of China's Strategic Breakthrough***

Space is the fundamental way for anything to exist. All political processes must be implemented within a specific space, and the national strategy must have a clear spatial direction. As a world power in an incomplete sense, China's current strategic radiation can only focus on Eurasia, and its ability to guide and control the regional strategic situation is mainly limited to the surrounding areas of China. "The Belt and Road" basically coincides with the Second Eurasian Continental Bridge and China's westbound ocean route on the space. It runs through almost all the critical strategic areas of Eurasia from the east to the west in the northern and eastern heartland and the southern rimland, respectively, and closely links two of the three major economic sectors—West Europe and East Asia in the world economic map. By allocating strategic resources along the "The Belt and Road," China will steer the fundamental trend of geopolitics in Eurasia and thus create a more favorable strategic posture at the global level.

### ***2.2 Which Region Will be the Key to China's Break?***

"The Belt and Road" have been identified in five directions according to the joint release of Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century and by China National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of foreign affairs, and Ministry of Commerce. "The Silk Road economy has three major trends: 1, from the northwest and Northeast China to Europe and the Baltic Sea through Central Asia, Russia; 2, from Northwest China to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean through Central Asia and West Asia; 3, from Southwest China to the Indian Ocean through Indochina Peninsula; And the 21st century Maritime Silk Road has two major trends: one is from China's coastal ports to the South China Sea, through the Strait of Malacca to the Indian Ocean and Europe, and the other is from China's coastal ports to the South China Sea and the South Pacific"[5]. Among the above five directions, only Southeast Asia is the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt (from China to the southwest Peninsula to the Indian Ocean) and the two lines of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (from China's coastal ports to the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, extending to Europe; from China's coastal ports to the South China Sea to the South Pacific Ocean).

## **3. Geostrategic Significance of Southeast Asia to China**

From a geopolitical perspective, Southeast Asia is located between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean and on the connecting belt between the Asian continent and Oceania. It forms a "crossroads" between the two continents. It is a necessary place for maritime navigation between Asia, Africa, Europe, and Oceania and a place for material exchanges between North and South America and Southeast Asian countries, shipping bustling areas. There are also many critical international straits in this region, such as the Strait of Malacca, the transport of goods to the Middle East, Africa, and Western Europe is heavily dependent on it; The transportation of goods to Australia and Southeast Asia relies heavily on the Bashi Strait, Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait. They are the maritime shipping channel from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean, which is strategic. In addition, Southeast Asia is also located at the edge of Eurasia, which is an integral part of the first island chain in the east of Eurasia. To sum up, the above geographical characteristics make southeast Asia an important direction for China to expand international space, and also a strategic hinterland must manage well in the future.

Therefore what does Southeast Asia mean to rise China? According to the principle of geographical attrition in Geopolitics: "to measure a country's influence on other countries, especially the war power, we must consider two factors: distance and geographical accessibility because they will wear and weaken the influence and war power in the transmission process [6]." Therefore, a country is different from other countries because of its distance and geographical accessibility, and their mutual geopolitical effects are also different. In other words, neighboring regions play the most fantastic role

in their geography. That is, the number and strength of a country's neighbors and its relationship with these countries have an important impact on the country's security. "A country that is friendly to you and brings benefits to you will multiply such benefits because it is your neighbor; similarly, a country that is not friendly to you and brings damage to you will multiply such damage because it is your neighbor [7]." Thus, when formulating its geostrategy, any country pays attention to the vital influence of its surrounding areas on its own. From this point of view, China must establish its strategic frontier areas to safeguard its interests and security. "The so-called strategic frontier refers to the area where national strength and influence can extend or reach; it is different from natural territory or geographical frontier, which is the field under the actual jurisdiction of any country and is expressed by national boundaries [8]." As the embodiment of the degree and level of the combination of a country's strategic thinking, geostrategic concept, and national strength. It can enable a country to expand the outer diameter of security, exert necessary influence on situations beyond its territory but endangering its security, and increase its ability to resist aggression or control the world situation.

China's land territory is wedged into the inner depth of Eurasia from the east coast to the west. It is adjacent to the four plates of Northeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Compared with the strategic security and accessibility of other regions, for example, in the regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, although China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and other major countries participate and have a high degree of international influence, it has been challenging to achieve a substantive breakthrough for a long time due to the impact of the North Korean nuclear issue; while Central Asia has long been affected by terrorism and religious extremism, and the main topics focus on the security situation and energy; As for South Asia, the adjacent areas are still underdeveloped. International transportation is affected by the Himalayas and other terrain and is likely hindered by India. In contrast, Southeast Asia has a significant position in the world's maritime transportation. It is rich in natural resources, densely populated, and has a large number of Chinese descent. It has excellent industrial development potential and is in urgent need of infrastructure investment. More importantly, as a land-sea cross country, this geographical location determines that China has land and sea interests and faces threats from land and sea. Therefore, China's strategic frontier must consider both land and sea, seeking survival on land and seeking development on the sea. As mentioned above, Southeast Asia, as an area adjacent to China on land and sea at the same time, is not only an essential part of China's maritime geographical line and geographical landline but also an important area that China's strategic frontier must take it.

#### **4. Comparative Advantages of Southeast Asia**

It has previously analyzed why Southeast Asia is more important than the other three neighboring regions from the perspective of geopolitical strategy. Then from the perspective of realism, when it comes to the political and economic situation, Southeast Asia also has the following advantages compared with the other three regions:

First of all, "Southeast Asia stretches some 4,000 miles at its greatest extent (roughly from northwest to southeast) and encompasses some 5,000,000 square miles (13,000,000 square km) of land and sea [9]". Vast territory and depth mean a strong demand for infrastructure. More than 670 million populations, and approximately 3.08 trillion U.S. dollars of GDP in 2020. A large population represents a rich labor force and a vast market. It is an important area for China's production capacity cooperation. The booming economy has also laid a solid foundation for cooperation. Initially, only Singapore had a high level of economic development in Southeast Asia, while other countries were generally poor and backward and lacked development power. However, since the 1990s, the economies of Southeast Asian countries have developed rapidly. Malaysia, Thailand, and other countries have become emerging economies with substantial regional impact in the Asia Pacific. The Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, and other countries have also achieved economic take-off. Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other countries have gotten rid of the shadow of war, and economic development momentum is strong. All countries in Southeast Asia are developing countries with similar needs and interests. Under the intense development demands of common needs and interests, ASEAN, the only regional, national organization in Asia, emerged. China and ASEAN are each other's largest trading partners. Exports to ASEAN are mainly capital and technology-intensive products, and imports from ASEAN are mainly resource and labor-intensive products. From the perspective of trade composition, bilateral cooperation is complementary; All these have laid a good foundation for China to carry out infrastructure interconnection and investment and trade cooperation in Southeast Asia and are conducive to promoting the integration process between China and Southeast Asia.

Secondly, although there is still the possibility of inter-state conflict in Southeast Asia, there are no major international disputes. Especially with the acceleration of economic integration, ASEAN countries have achieved relatively stable peace and established a more effective conflict resolution mechanism. "First, through consultation, create a good environment for the development of ASEAN countries with different national conditions and achieve common prosperity; second, adhering to harmony ensures the unity of ASEAN and ensures that ASEAN can make progress step by step; third, cooperation. If the development of ASEAN is compared with the regional joint road of Europe, the EU depends on the "hard way" of legislation, while ASEAN adopts the "soft way" of cooperation. [10]" Thanks to the above "ASEAN approach," the great power ambitions of Vietnam and Indonesia have been effectively limited by the ASEAN political framework. While rich countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore have been able to have an impact on Vietnam and Indonesia through soft power such as economy and culture. Especially in recent years, the latest feature of the "ASEAN approach" is "ASEAN center", that is, "all relevant meetings must be held in ASEAN countries; ASEAN sets the agenda of the meeting, and other countries can make suggestions, but the final decision-making power lies in ASEAN; All issues should be agreed within ASEAN before discussing with other countries [11]." The establishment of this cross-regional and multilateral integration mechanism makes the integrity of Southeast Asia better. Even in the future, through the construction of the free trade area with ASEAN, China can start from ASEAN and Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and other countries to roundabout coordinate its possible strategic competition with Vietnam and India.

Moreover, the economic environment in Southeast Asia is more conducive to the integration of regional economics. At present, China's capital export is based on infrastructure and basic projects, such as constructing railways, ports, and mines. Even China's high-tech enterprises, like Huawei and ZTE, its overseas expansion is still based on the laying of base station, lines and hardware. Although there are still anti-Chinese forces in local countries or folk, the local economic and cultural conditions are suitable for many small and medium-sized private enterprises to enter. This enables China's economic development to form a favorable situation of combining large-scale national infrastructure construction with the export of private capital. Therefore, many scholars believe that the key to the success of the Belt and Road strategy is the success of enterprises. This is an all-around social exchange that can promote regional integration from bottom to top and cultivate Pro Chinese interest groups in the local society. The Belt and Road strategy focuses more on economic and cultural integration rather than military hegemony. This means that Chinese enterprises and citizens going out often lack the direct and robust protection of the state, and their economic security and personal security must be implemented mainly through the local security mechanism. Although there are many disadvantages to the judicial environment in Southeast Asian countries, their central government's control over the whole country is still relatively effective. Establishing intergovernmental cooperation through bilateral or multilateral negotiations can ensure the basic safety of Chinese enterprises and personnel. More importantly, ASEAN borders Southwest China. Although its economic conditions and infrastructure cannot be compared with those of the eastern coastal areas, it is closer to China's population and economic hinterland than the traditional northwest frontier areas, which means that even in the worst case of civil strife in ASEAN, due to the close connection between the dense population in the southwest frontier areas and China's economically developed areas, For example, under the influence of CAFTA(China and ASEAN Free Trade Area), the Pan-Pearl River Delta in southern China and the regional cooperation of Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand in Southeast Asia, China is fully capable of intervening, calming down and maintaining regional security and overseas assets.

## 5. Geopolitical Risks in Southeast Asia

Benefits often coexist with risks. The grand strategy should not only see the benefits of the grand vision but also need to have the bottom line thinking, seriously consider and anticipate the inevitable risks and challenges in its implementation. China has to face at least the following two geopolitical risks in resource allocation for Southeast Asia.

Firstly, there is a trust deficit between China and Southeast Asian countries. Whether intended or not, China's rise has caused a significant adjustment in the global geopolitical and economic landscape since the end of the cold war, which will attract the attention of major powers and lead to the vigilance and anxiety of neighboring countries. A powerful neighbor is not only an opportunity but also a threat. Therefore, since the 21st century, Southeast Asian countries have actively maintained the presence of foreign powers such as the United States and Japan in Southeast Asia while promoting trade and

investment relations with China. "ASEAN states are engaging in a form of pragmatic "hedging" behavior, this is principally motivated by the need to optimize economic benefits and minimize security risks in response to an environment of uncertainty, primarily driven by the rise of China as an economic and military power.[12]" Hedging essentially reflects the distrust of Southeast Asian countries towards China, which comes from the uncertainty brought by the rapid development of China's economy and military power to the external environment of Southeast Asian countries. From the perspective of Southeast Asian countries, as a rising nation-state, it also has the painful experience of colonization. Therefore, it attaches great importance to sovereignty and is extremely sensitive to the rise of neighboring powers. The "hedging" behavior of Southeast Asian countries is more like a "balance of power" diplomacy to maintain national security.

At the same time, the South China Sea issue is also heating up under the joint agitation of countries inside and outside the region. Although it will not have a substantive impact on China's rise in a certain period, it will damage China's international reputation and image, consume a lot of diplomatic costs to deal with the increasing maritime friction, and further deepen ASEAN countries' strategic doubts about China. Countries in Southeast Asia were wary and skeptical of China's projects such as the Belt and Road initiative, believing it would go far beyond infrastructure construction, believing it is "a historical tipping point in the geopolitical balance, as China finally turns its relatively muted economic clout into more grandiose global power and leadership [13]. " And considering China's economic influence in Southeast Asia, "SREB/MSR is too China-centric, and that other participating states will reap only marginal benefits [14]." Have to admit that the current image of China in the international community's reputation is not very practical to support a grand strategic initiative like The Belt and Road. Therefore, only through the implementation of the project can it further improve its international image and reputation, and it cannot afford to consume a lot of international image and reputation in this process.

Secondly, due to its important strategic position and rich resources, Southeast Asia has become the focus of interest competition among major powers and international geopolitical competition, especially regarded as the sphere of influence of the United States. After World War II, the United States built a multi-group bilateral military alliance system centered on the United States in the Asia Pacific. Among them, the Philippines and Thailand are the military allies of the United States in Southeast Asia, and once prepared to establish the Southeast Asian collective defense treaty organization, which can see the long operation time of the United States in Southeast Asia. After entering the 21st century, focusing on the geopolitical changes in Southeast Asia, the consideration of the United States to safeguard its hegemonic interests in the Asia Pacific region and even the world has gradually increased the containment side of its China policy and has continuously strengthened its penetration into China's surrounding areas in recent years. Southeast Asia close to China has naturally become an essential link for the United States to contain China.

For example, after Barack Obama took office in 2009, the United States began to put forward the strategies of "Returning to the Asia Pacific" and "Asia Pacific Rebalancing," proposing the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) excluding China, which accelerated the pace of containing China. And began to consolidate its relations with allies and partners such as the Philippines and Singapore, improve its relations with Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia to balance China's growing influence in Southeast Asia; especially supports the Philippines to compete with China in the South China Sea, and increases the military presence of the U.S. military in the South China Sea with freedom of navigation. It aims to build the Asia Pacific regional economic order dominated by the United States. Although the TPP was abolished after Donald Trump came to power in 2016, the U.S. government immediately implemented a new "India Pacific strategy." It began to form the four Nation Alliance of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia to conduct an all-round confrontation with China in the security and economic fields, resulting in a sudden increase in China's strategic pressure around the broader India Pacific region.

Against this background, the United States will continue to use its military superiority to exert pressure on China in the future. At the same time, it will also use the dissatisfaction or misunderstanding of countries along the route to incite Anti China sentiment in the southeast edge of Eurasia (Malay islands and Indochina Peninsula) and the southern edge (South Asia and the northern Indian Ocean) and create difficulties for the construction in 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. In the South China Sea, the main means may include increasing political and military support for Vietnam and the Philippines, further intensifying the maritime contradictions between the two countries and China to contain the cooperation between China and ASEAN. In the northern Indian Ocean region, the main means may include: deeper involvement in Myanmar's internal affairs, creating chaos by

supporting the local democratization process, such as the war between Myanmar government forces and ethnic minority armed forces, and blocking China's convenient access to the Indian Ocean from Southeast Asia; Win over India through arms sales and military exercises and exert pressure on China's interests in the northern Indian Ocean. Especially after Indian Prime Minister Modi came to power, the rise of nationalism in India wants to enhance India's great power status with the help of the India Pacific strategy. The frequent conflicts between China and India in the border areas also constantly remind China that under the Indian Pacific strategy and the rise of India, China has to manage Southeast Asia well. This is not only the gateway for China's southbound and westbound routes to and from the mainland but also the outpost of strategic defense in Southeast China and the maritime barrier in South China. In case of conflict, the strategic defense can be pushed hundreds of kilometers to the south to resist the enemy outside the country to maintain a stable domestic economic market; third, it can also suppress India strategically, making the Indian Ocean roughly within the coverage of China's military power.

## 6. Discussion

Southeast Asia is located at the junction of the two oceans and connects the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Efforts to improve and develop relations with Southeast Asian countries will help ensure the smooth flow of China's maritime transport channels and China's development of marine space. As a sizeable coastal country, China's development is naturally inseparable from the development and utilization of the ocean. However, due to its geographical location, there is an island chain consisting of Japanese islands, Ryukyu Islands, Bay Islands, and Southeast Asian islands between China's offshore and ocean, the first island chain. If China wants to enter the ocean that must go through this island chain. At present, the northern part of the island chain is controlled by the US-Japan alliance, while the front is blocked by Taiwan, which has not yet been reunified with the motherland. These areas are effortless to be blocked in wartime. Therefore, at present, China's access to the ocean is relatively safe, and the only channel less restrained is Southeast Asia. Through this region, China can go out of the Pacific Ocean in the East and into the Indian Ocean in the west, which is very beneficial to China's development and utilization of marine space in the new century.

## 7. Conclusion

Although some Southeast Asian countries welcome the entry of U.S. forces to varying degrees, their primary purpose is to use U.S. funds and technology to develop their economy and hope to use the United States to balance the influence of other major powers. Based on the memory of colonial history, countries attach great importance to sovereignty. They do not want to see the United States completely crowding out other major powers to form an exclusive right to the region. Of course, they do not want to get involved in the dispute between the United States and China and become part of the U.S. strategic encirclement of China. Therefore, the future exchanges between China and ASEAN must rely on the existing China ASEAN cooperation framework, dialogue, and cooperation between China ASEAN defense ministers and justice ministers to solve regional security problems, explore the establishment of regional security cooperation mechanism in dialogue and cooperation, and realize creative involvement in regional security problems on the premise of non-interference in internal affairs and nonalignment; In terms of economic cooperation, based on CAFTA's construction consultation and overall planning of the construction planning and operation path and strategy of geo-economic zones, jointly determine the quantity, scale, regional layout and operation mode of cooperative development of geo-economic zones, to promote the process of regional economic integration.

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