

Expressions and Challenges of ASEAN's "Centrality" in the Context of China-US Strategic Competition

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Abstract: ASEAN covers ten countries in Southeast Asia, and its "centrality" is the key to ASEAN's positioning, and the "talisman" that allows it to play a key role in the regional security architecture and regional order arrangement. ASEAN makes use of its unique role to develop a unique "ASEAN way", establish an ASEAN-centered multi-mechanism platform, and use the strategy of "balanced diplomacy" to effectively maintain the interaction between regional and extra-territorial countries and maintain its own "centrality". However, due to the special characteristics of Southeast Asia, with the new development of Sino-US relations, ASEAN is becoming an important force in the power game between China and the US, and with the escalation of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, ASEAN will face the risk of being decentered and marginalized in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, while the ASEAN organization has made great diplomatic achievements in recent years, it is also accompanied by numerous challenges to its future development.

Keywords: ASEAN, China, Indo-Pacific

1. Conditions for the formation of "centrality" in ASEAN

1.1 Geographical location of ASEAN

From the geopolitical point of view, ASEAN has unique inherent advantages, and its geographical location can be regarded as the basic condition for the formation of ASEAN's "centrality". Geographically, ASEAN countries are located in Southeast Asia, which is not only connected to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, but also to Asia and Oceania, and is at the natural center of the "crossroads" of the two oceans and two continents. In terms of strategic value, the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea are one of the most important sea routes in the world, with about 50,000 ships passing through each year, accounting for 40% of the world's commodity trade and 25% of the world's oil supply chain, so the Southeast Asian region is of great importance for the transportation of energy and commodities. It is a "must-have place for soldiers". Therefore, as the maritime pivot point and strategic center of the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN is actually at the center of the competition between "One Belt, One Road" and "Indo-Pacific Strategy".

1.2 Multi-mechanism platform established by ASEAN

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN-centered and ASEAN-led mechanisms and platforms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, ASEAN+1, and ASEAN+3, have been formed in Southeast Asia, which are more mature frameworks for cooperation and place ASEAN at the center of regional cooperation. ^[1] These mechanisms and platforms serve as "functional centers" that provide opportunities for exchange and cooperation among countries to work together on regional affairs; through these ASEAN-created platforms and other mechanisms led by ASEAN, ASEAN countries are able to exchange and cooperate on relevant issues and work together to promote common regional development and These mechanisms and platforms further ensure ASEAN's "centrality" and "independence" by jointly maintaining the stability of relations among regional countries. More importantly, this "platform centrality" also contributes to ASEAN's legitimacy and credibility, enabling it to play a better leadership role in regional agenda-setting, which in turn means that ASEAN will become a key hub connecting all the major powers in the region, and thus can facilitate consensus on important issues among the countries concerned. It could even initiate and coordinate collective regional

action on this basis.

1.3 ASEAN's unique "ASEAN Way"

The ASEAN Way is a unique norm that has been developed in the course of ASEAN's development. "The ASEAN Way not only sustains the unity within the organization, but also serves as the guiding principle and the main blueprint for regional cooperation mechanisms. [2]The "ASEAN Way" refers to the important role played by consensus-based decisions, non-interference in the internal affairs of the other party, and voluntary cooperation in mitigating regional conflicts, facilitating exchanges among countries, and promoting regional cooperation. In the ASEAN Way, ASEAN has always played the role of a "norm provider" and a "process designer". "The ASEAN Way is essentially a product of its interaction with external players, and its formation and survival depend on two integration processes at the same time, of which internal integration is the basis and core for its emergence, while external integration is the main implementation platform and operating space. [3]In the former case, the "ASEAN Way" has played a central role as the "glue" that keeps ASEAN countries united internally, effectively contributing not only to the development of cooperation among member countries, but also to a large extent to the spillover of the benefits of such cooperation, thus becoming the main model for cooperation in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. In the latter case, the absence of any one major power in the region has naturally created a "leadership vacuum" and a state of regional parity based on this, which provides an "objective" guarantee for the smooth development of ASEAN and provides the key conditions for it to play a "central" role in it.

2. ASEAN Preserves its "Centrality" in the Context of Strategic Competition between China and the U.S.

2.1 ASEAN implements a "balanced diplomacy" strategy

Under the role of the current competition among major powers in the international community, a "concordant security order" has been created in Southeast Asia, meaning a mutually adaptive model of relations among ASEAN countries based on unequal power and cultural differences. [4] In this security order or relationship model, the relative autonomy of each country in ASEAN is maintained and the emergence of hegemonic states is avoided, and the so-called "shared leadership system", in which the weak and the strong share regional leadership, can be formed. A basic premise for the existence of the "shared leadership system" is that no single country can truly lead the East Asian region, and the respect of the big powers for the small ones is manifested in two aspects: first, they seek to establish a balanced relationship in the region; second, they maintain their own strategic space as much as possible on this basis. The special geopolitical environment in East Asia is such that the policy choices of each country are limited to different degrees of cooperation on specific issues, while the most fundamental strategic issues are in a state of mutual suspicion. [5] In this context, ASEAN, as a group of small states, is more likely to gain the trust of major powers in the balance-of-power system due to its long-established neutral status and relatively low threat level, and thus gains an opportunity to perform "balanced diplomacy" among major powers.

As the strategic rivalry between China and the U.S. intensifies, the two countries seek political, economic and strategic advantages in Southeast Asia by establishing formal multilateral arrangements or by bringing in countries in the region to respond to or even confront each other's actions as if they were directed against them. [6]The ASEAN strategy of "balanced diplomacy" is specifically applied in the face of competition between China and the U.S. ASEAN wants to maintain a further balance between the two countries, while trying to highlight its "centrality", ASEAN is willing to see China and the U.S. competing for its favor, and to adopt a topical strategy of choosing sides in the great power game to maximize its interests. First, most Southeast Asian countries adhere to balanced diplomacy on economic and security issues. ASEAN countries welcome the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy's investment and infrastructure plans for Southeast Asia and actively participate in China's "One Belt, One Road" construction. The "One Belt, One Road" initiative has deepened economic cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries, with a large number of flagship projects in Southeast Asia, including the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail link, and China signing agreements with Cambodia and Laos to build a community of destiny. Economic ties have deepened, and with the formal implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP) on January 1, 2022, the two sides have further deepened regional economic cooperation and become each other's top trading partners. In the Indo-Pacific partnership network that the U.S. has worked to build in recent years, it includes both strengthening

traditional alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines and expanding partnerships with Singapore, Taiwan, New Zealand and Mongolia. In addition, the United States has focused on defense partnerships with India in South Asia and has sought to develop emerging partnerships with countries such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal. In Southeast Asia, the United States has focused on security partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Laos and Cambodia. ^[7]In the process, U.S. relations with ASEAN countries have achieved a rapid warming through intensive high-level visits, and the United States has also significantly increased its arms sales and military assistance to ASEAN countries through direct commercial sales and foreign military financing, aiming to provide weapons and equipment and financial support for the latter's defense buildup. But ASEAN has also shown caution in its security cooperation with China and the U.S. China held its first joint maritime exercise with ASEAN in 2018, but on the occasion of the joint exercise, ASEAN announced that it would hold a joint maritime exercise with the U.S. in 2019 to demonstrate to the outside world that its military relationship with the U.S. has not been affected. And in the 2019 joint exercise with the United States, ASEAN was carefully designed in terms of the scale, location, and objectives of its participation, and did not show a clear preference.

2.2 ASEAN maintains independence on defense issues

Southeast Asian countries maintain their independence on defense issues. Among the major U.S. security cooperation partners, Thailand and Indonesia currently do not allow U.S. troops. On February 11, 2020, the Philippine government notified the United States that it would terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement, which allows U.S. troops to enter Philippine territory. Vietnam has adopted a pragmatic foreign policy of great power balance in recent years, actively involving the U.S. in the South China Sea, but due to historical barriers, institutional and ideological differences, Vietnam intentionally avoided the U.S. proposal to upgrade bilateral relations from "comprehensive partnership" to "strategic partnership" during Austin's visit to Vietnam. ^[8] During Austin's visit to Vietnam, Vietnam deliberately avoided the U.S. proposal to upgrade the bilateral relationship from "comprehensive partnership" to "strategic partnership". Malaysia was even more outspoken in expressing its dissatisfaction with the big powers playing in the South China Sea. Although ASEAN countries in the South China Sea dispute are interested in "pulling the U.S. to control China," they are also trying to prevent the U.S.-China game from triggering conflicts in the South China Sea. The policy of Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea has changed from preventing China from "bullying the small with the big" to trying to prevent the United States from "exerting too much force" in the South China Sea. ^[9] Currently, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other countries still cooperate with the U.S., but act in a low-key and cautious manner, intended to avoid causing strategic misjudgment by the U.S.

2.3 The ASEAN Indo-Pacific Vision emphasizes the centrality of ASEAN

ASEAN strengthens internal solidarity and launches ASEAN's version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Since 2018, Indonesia has led ASEAN countries to develop an ASEAN version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and formally launched the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific at the 34th ASEAN Summit on June 23, 2019. As a "response" to the U.S. Department of Defense's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, the document emphasizes that cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region should be conducted under the existing ASEAN-led structure and institutional arrangements, and should follow the principles of openness, transparency and inclusiveness that ASEAN has always advocated, respect for sovereignty, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and respect for international law and the United Nations Charter, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The main objectives of cooperation and development in the Indo-Pacific region should remain centered on promoting economic growth and enhancing people's well-being, and the focus of cooperation should remain on economic and social areas, including South-South cooperation, promotion of trade and services facilitation, connectivity, small and medium-sized enterprise development, science and technology and research development, deepening economic integration, climate and environmental governance, etc, and must be able to promote mutual trust and win-win situations among regional countries. ^[10] These policy ideas in fact indicate that ASEAN will not take sides in the growing strategic game between China and the United States, but will continue to adhere to the basic spirit, principles and rules it has always advocated, and continue to play the role of a "middleman" in a regional strategic environment where conflicting interests are becoming more and more prominent. It emphasizes that the ASEAN-led mechanism is a platform for dialogue and cooperation aimed at building an open and inclusive regional order, and highlights the importance of ASEAN's centrality. In other words, ASEAN will support an Indo-Pacific of dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation, an Indo-Pacific of prosperity and development for all, provided that its

"centrality" is ensured.

3. Risks and challenges facing ASEAN in the context of strategic competition between China and the United States

3.1 The defects of the "ASEAN Way"

From an objective point of view, ASEAN has some inherent shortcomings, both in terms of its organizational rules of procedure and in the construction of regional cooperation mechanisms, and the so-called "ASEAN Way" has already shown its shortcomings in practice. While the "ASEAN Way" has helped the group's connectivity, it has also severely hampered the organization's ability to address difficult issues and take action when needed. "The ASEAN Way", which allows ASEAN to maintain a balance of power strategy and balance of power precisely because no single power has achieved absolute dominance, emphasizes the mistrust and checks and balances among the major powers in East Asia. Although ASEAN has certain advantages in promoting dialogue and consensus, the narrative of these consensus often seems too ambitious, repeating certain basic principles or common norms of inter-state cooperation, especially because it is keen to convene "lengthy and ineffective meetings", and is therefore often referred to as a "talk shop".^[11] It is often called a "talk shop". ASEAN is more concerned with regional cooperation and economic development than with the effective resolution of conflicts between parties, and the so-called "ASEAN Way" is not designed to eliminate real disputes and conflicting views among ASEAN countries, so it is even less likely to be used to directly resolve conflicts among other countries or even major powers. In this sense, the "ASEAN Way" has its own limitations, and its existence itself can even be said to have hindered the realization of deeper integration within ASEAN and the East Asian region to some extent. Especially in the context of the obvious intensification of the strategic competition between China and the United States, the "ASEAN centrality" is already facing the real crisis of being deconstructed by the "Indo-Pacific strategy", and the so-called "ASEAN Way" is simply incapable of including all the major powers in the region and beyond, let alone playing a role in alleviating the conflicts between major powers. To put it in layman's terms, the "ASEAN Way" can only "add flowers to the cake" but cannot "send charcoal to the snow" in maintaining regional balance of power and competing relations among major powers.

3.2 The geopolitical environment on which the "centrality" of ASEAN is based will be affected

In addition to risks to its own institutions, ASEAN faces the risk of having its autonomy and flexibility and its centrality in the Southeast Asian region eroded as China's power and influence in the region grows and as U.S. concerns in the region suddenly take hold, against the backdrop of competition between China and the United States.

Southeast Asia is an important region in the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy. The Obama administration had promoted the "Asia-Pacific rebalance" strategy, intensified its "return" to Southeast Asia, and strengthened economic and security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. However, Trump's "America First" policy has led to a lot of discontent and complaints from Southeast Asian countries, and a significant decline in U.S. strategic influence in the region. After Biden took office, in the face of Southeast Asia's growing geopolitical, economic and security influence in the Indo-Pacific region, and recognizing the importance of Southeast Asia to the U.S. implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Biden administration adjusted its Southeast Asia policy, actively and clearly expressing the U.S. commitment to Southeast Asian countries, clearly stating that it is a strategic partner of ASEAN. The Biden administration firmly supports the ASEAN-centered regional cooperation mechanism to become the core structure of the Indo-Pacific, improves the relationship between the U.S. and major countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia, alleviates the doubts of all parties, and consolidates and enhances the influence and credibility of the U.S. in Southeast Asia.^[12] In addition, the Biden administration also regards ASEAN and other regional organizations as an important pulling force for U.S. competition with China, and intends to use issues such as the new crown epidemic, economic development, supply chain security, climate change, democracy and human rights, and maritime disputes to guide and shape the focus and development direction of ASEAN and other regional organizations, so as to prompt Southeast Asian countries to jointly implement strategic encirclement and political pressure on China with the United States.^[13] For the U.S., actively promoting the "quadrilateral security dialogue" between the U.S., Japan, India and Australia while strengthening its security relations with ASEAN countries will obviously help it build a more organic security system in the Indo-Pacific region. However, these actions will not only objectively worsen the regional security situation, but also largely change the

power dynamics, which will seriously impact the long-standing regional balance of power, in which case the geopolitical environment on which the "ASEAN centrality" is based is bound to be destroyed.

3.3 ASEAN may fall victim to the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy"

According to German scholar Lukas Maximilian Mueller, under the impact of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, ASEAN's leadership and "centrality" in promoting regional trade and developing emerging policies represented by "infrastructure connectivity" has been declining in recent years.^[14] The reason for the decline in ASEAN's leadership and "centrality" in promoting regional trade and formulating emerging policies represented by "infrastructure connectivity" is that "regional countries prefer to use bilateral mechanisms to coordinate their relations than the multilateral diplomatic and trade platforms provided by ASEAN. "In particular, under the Trump administration, the U.S. has vigorously pursued protectionist policies and initiatives in the economic sphere, which have largely impacted the "ASEAN Way" with multilateralism at its core and the ASEAN-led regional cooperation process, and have had a wide impact on the economic and political relations between the U.S. and Southeast Asia. Given their trade surpluses with the United States, most ASEAN countries are wary of the U.S. "tariff stick" and generally choose to buy more U.S. products to prevent retaliation. At the same time, because of their heavy reliance on trade ties with China, ASEAN countries are also generally concerned about spillover effects from U.S. protectionist policies and unilateral measures against China that could have an impact on the global economy. Clearly, given the important role that free trade based on multilateralism has played in shaping the "centrality of ASEAN," the realist economic policies of the United States and the counter-globalization trend it has set in motion not only run counter to the regionalist approach of Asian countries to trade, but also seriously undermine ASEAN's regional leadership and the legitimacy of the mechanisms at its core. The legitimacy of the mechanisms centered on it. It is also important to note that while ASEAN and its affiliated multilateral forums have been described by the United States as the institutional core of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the corresponding multilateral security policy initiatives have not really been implemented so far, and the U.S. preference for bilateralism, especially for the priority countries listed in the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, has become more pronounced in recent years. This has undoubtedly had a serious impact on ASEAN's internal unity, and has become the most serious challenge to "ASEAN centrality" in the current and future period. According to incomplete statistics from the U.S. Department of Defense and the South China Sea Strategic Situational Awareness website, the U.S. conducted 12 bilateral military exercises and 5 multilateral military exercises with ASEAN member states in 2017. In addition, many of the ASEAN member states that the U.S. considers to be the focus of the Indo-Pacific Strategy have conflicting interests with China over the South China Sea. The U.S. intends to use these conflicts for its own purposes to worsen China's neighborhood security environment, reflecting the "Southeast Asianization of the Indo-Pacific Strategy" against China. The combination of similar internal and external problems has put ASEAN in an unprecedentedly passive situation, and it may even fall victim to the U.S. "Indo-Pacific strategy", and the "centrality" it is trying to protect will face the crisis of being deconstructed as a result.

4. Conclusion

The Biden administration's Southeast Asia policy, which is actively promoted by the Biden administration, intends to use Southeast Asia to further promote the "Indo-Pacific strategy", reshape the regional order, and maintain U.S. hegemony, making the region once again the focus of great power games. Against the backdrop of Southeast Asia's enhanced strategic status and increased strategic autonomy, the strategic competition between China and the United States has largely undermined the conditions for the survival of ASEAN's centrality and even put it at risk of being deconstructed. Although ASEAN is committed to ensuring its "centrality", it has shown difficulties and limitations at multiple levels in practice due to some inherent deficiencies. In this context, China should take ASEAN as an important grip to deal with U.S. strategic competition and work with ASEAN to promote the institutionalization of regional cooperation, because China cannot maintain the stability of the regional environment without cooperation with ASEAN, and ASEAN cannot maintain its "centrality" in the regional framework without China's Support .For China, how to work together with ASEAN countries to build the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" and how to jointly maintain ASEAN's "central position" in regional cooperation in the context of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" is obviously the most important issue we have to face in the future. It is obvious that we have to solve a problem in the face of strategic competition between China and the United States. In the face of common challenges and pressures, China must continue to work with ASEAN to consolidate good neighborly relations and uphold multilateralism

and free trade. In fact, China and ASEAN can make use of existing mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Belt and Road Initiative to strengthen exchanges with more countries and expand broader areas of cooperation, and even promote joint initiatives between ASEAN-led cooperation mechanisms and China-led regional mechanisms. Similar initiatives would not only help China "break the ice" against U.S. strategic competition, but would also directly contribute to the maintenance of "ASEAN centrality."

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