

Book Review

Where The Great Powers Meet

David Shambaugh (Oxford University Press, 2021)

In recent decades, Southeast Asia has been an area of competition between the United States and China. Although some argue that American dominance in the region has been declining, its footholds remain strong partly due to the reliance on the US of several regional countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, particularly in the military sphere. At the same time, nowhere in the world is China's economic, military, and cultural presence more apparent than in Southeast Asia. While these countries respond to the China-US rivalry with justified alarm, their responses differ vastly. According to Professor Cheng-Chwee Kuik from the University of Malaya and Evelyn Goh from the Australian National University, ASEAN countries have a high capacity to implement hedging behavior: ASEAN countries can take advantage of the US-China competition without incurring the hostility of the two powers. It seems Southeast Asian nations view the US as a military ally, while China is seen as an economic partner.

Against this backdrop, the well-known China specialist David Shambaugh tries to explain in a new book, *Where the Great Powers Meet*, the shift from "engagement" to "competition" to characterize in broad strokes US's and China's dealing with Southeast Asia. He argues that the US has been trying to increase its influence in Southeast Asia since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) in 2013. In addition, after the 2008 financial crisis, China and ASEAN held a Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference, which was allegedly a form of enhancing China's influence in Southeast Asia. To summarize his analysis, Shambaugh projects the composition of the US-Beijing competition through a well-researched book with four main parts consisting of 7 chapters.

The first part (p.19-61) sets out to sketch the history of US' and China's engagement in Southeast Asia. Shambaugh begins with a fascinating historical analysis of the US' presence in the region, from its early ties with the British Empire in Singapore to its colonization of the Philippines. He also mentions the US' interactions with regional countries during the First and Second World Wars, such as inviting Thailand to the Versailles Conference in 1919 and the presence of American companies in Indonesia's oil and rubber productions during 1920-1940. This was followed by the Vietnam War to curb the expansion of communist ideology between 1958 and 1975.

Shambaugh elaborates clearly on the US's position in Southeast Asia from the Carter, Clinton, to Bush administrations. The rest of the first part focuses on the policy orientations undertaken by Obama and Trump administrations (p.63-104). In his explanation of Obama's policy of "Pivot" or "Balance" in Southeast Asia, Shambaugh called Obama a "Pacific President" based on several policies made by the latter, such as signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and appointing the first US

Ambassador to ASEAN based in Jakarta in 2011. Obama also visited 9 out of 10 ASEAN countries, which led to the strengthening of military and economic cooperation. US presence in Southeast Asia, however, declined with Trump's victory in 2016. Shambaugh mentions a survey of over 1,000 respondents on Trump's Southeast Asia policies, whereby 51.2 percent thought that the US' foothold in the region had shrunk from what it was in the Obama era. One of the factors was Trump's anti-immigration policy which contributed to the decline of trust in the US among Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Trump also implemented a policy transformation toward "gift diplomacy," which may be seen, for instance, in the context of US-Malaysia relations. In the visit of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak 2017 to the White House, Malaysia agreed to buy 25 Boeing jetliners from the US.

The second part of the book specifically chapters 4 and 5 (p.107-178), explains China's presence in Southeast Asia. Shambaugh's research was augmented by a number of interviews. For example, Shambaugh mentioned the views of Nie Dening, a historian from Xiamen University, to highlight the early history of Chinese interactions with Southeast Asia, possibly traceable to the early Han Dynasty period. The reciprocal trade made China-Southeast Asia relations prolonged until there was an expeditionary mission in the Ming Dynasty era. Similar to the US, China's policies towards Southeast Asia have been evolving. China established relations with ASEAN countries from the 1950s until the 1970s, for example, with Vietnam (1950), Indonesia (1950), Malaysia (1974), and Thailand (1975). While the cooperation was limited in the early years, it has considerably expanded recently with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and various Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreements. The Southeast Asian countries' attitude to China's growing roles has been largely positive, with the majority having close relations with China. Despite the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea, China-Southeast Asia relations strengthened from 2011 to 2020. It is shown in the increased diplomatic interactions, economic activities, and cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries.

In chapter 6 (p.179), Shambaugh discusses critically how ASEAN countries respond to the US-China rivalry in the region. Generally, regional countries treat both powers cautiously by taking a middle path. Shambaugh uses the word "ambivalent" to explain how the countries of Southeast Asia attempt to take advantage of the two major powers to meet their national needs. While focusing on defense cooperation with the US to upgrade their military capabilities and to deter China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea, simultaneously, they work hard to attract China's trade, investment, and vaccines. The book ends thoughtfully with an analysis of the future of US-China competition in Southeast Asia. Shambaugh proposes four potential scenarios: 1) bandwagoning, whereby regional countries would take a neutral position instead of inclining to one party; 2) continued soft rivalry, where the US and China would adopt a policy to fulfil their common national interests rather than responding to one another's policies; 3) polarization and hard rivalry, which refers to increased militarization in the region, especially in the

South China Sea; and 4) regional countries would prefer to side with one party to get rid of another party.

Overall, this cogently written work is a thoughtful contribution to the burgeoning discussions on the rivalry of great powers in Southeast Asia. Shambaugh's in-depth research on the topic makes the book a must-read for academia and policymakers interested in understanding the historical and contemporary presence of the US and China in the region.

Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat and M Habib Pashya
Universitas Islam Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia