

Viktor Eszterhai,¹ Éva Dóra Druhalóczki²

China and the U.S. in Southeast Asia

Competing Visions, Divergent Approaches

This study examines U.S. and Chinese strategic communication in Southeast Asia during 2025, a year shaped by Donald Trump's second presidential term. Focusing on Xi Jinping's April 2025 visit and Trump's October 2025 trip, the analysis compares how each leader's messaging was formulated and received across the region. Drawing on official messages and Southeast Asian responses, the study finds that regional actors often perceived China's communication as aligning with their development and connectivity priorities, while viewing the United States as an indispensable security and diplomatic partner. These perceptions illustrate how Southeast Asian states navigate the coexistence of China's regional messaging and the U.S.' continued strategic presence, informing their hedging and alignment strategies.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, China, United States, strategic competition, diplomacy

Introduction

Southeast Asia has emerged as a central arena for competition between China and the United States. The region lies at the crossroads of major maritime trade routes and global supply chains, with key sea lanes such as the Strait of Malacca facilitating a substantial share of international commerce and energy transport. Its strategic importance is multifaceted: for China, Southeast Asia represents a traditional sphere of influence, deeply embedded in historical, economic, and political ties; for the United States, regional alliances intersect here and across East Asia, creating a high-stakes environment where security commitments, economic interests, and diplomatic signalling converge.³ In this respect, Southeast Asia plays a role in today's great-power competition analogous to Europe during the Cold War, acting as a pivot region whose alignment has significant implications for regional and global order.

Although competition between China and the United States in Southeast Asia has long existed, it became particularly pronounced in 2025. Two high-profile presidential visits underscored the region's strategic significance: in April, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, visited Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia

¹ Viktor Eszterhai is a Research Fellow at the John Lukacs Institute for Strategy and Politics, Ludovika University of Public Service. E-mail: eszterhai.viktor@uni-nke.hu

² Éva Dóra Druhalóczki is a PhD candidate at Corvinus University of Budapest, Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science. E-mail: e.d.druhaloczki@gmail.com

³ Marston, Hunter S. (2024): *Navigating Great Power Competition: A Neoclassical Realist View of Hedging*. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 24(1), 29–63.

to project Beijing's vision for Southeast Asia and its role in shaping the regional order.⁴ Subsequently, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth attended the Shangri-La Dialogue in May⁵ – marking the second Trump administration's first ministerial-level engagement in an international forum – followed by President Donald Trump's visit to the region in October to communicate Washington's strategic priorities. These engagements provide a unique lens for assessing how each power seeks to influence Southeast Asia, through economic initiatives, security commitments, and broader narratives of governance, identity, and cooperation.

The central research question guiding this study is: Who delivers what to Southeast Asia, and which great-power approach aligns more closely with the region's strategic and economic priorities? This question is not only descriptive but also theoretically significant, as it illuminates how Southeast Asian states navigate great-power pressures through strategies such as hedging, bandwagoning, and regional coalition-building. By examining which incentives and narratives resonate with local actors, the study contributes to broader debates in international relations about the effectiveness of economic versus security-focused diplomacy and the conditions under which smaller states maintain autonomy amid competing influences.

To address this question, the study employs a comparative case-study approach, concentrating on the official visits of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, alongside the Shangri-La Dialogue. The research proceeds in four stages: first, China's diplomatic initiatives are analysed in terms of narrative, objectives, and tools; second, U.S. messaging is examined, considering both ministerial and presidential engagements; third, the two approaches are compared to highlight convergence, divergence, and regional resonance; and fourth, the study analyses the content of these messages based on the leaders' official statements during the Southeast Asian visits, assessing how they shape the strategic positions of both great powers and influence the broader regional situation. By doing so, the paper offers a nuanced understanding of how great-power signalling affects Southeast Asian perceptions, choices, and the evolving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

Theoretical framework

Southeast Asia has long been recognised as a strategic theatre where great-power competition becomes particularly visible, due to the intersection of vital economic corridors, maritime chokepoints, and diverse political systems. The region's significance is heightened by the concentration of smaller states that, lacking the independent capacity to balance major powers militarily, adopt sophisticated survival strategies to preserve sovereignty and autonomy. These strategies often include hedging – engaging with multiple great powers without full alignment – and bandwagoning, in which states align more

⁴ *Xi's Southeast Asia Visit Deepens Shared Commitment to Neighborhood Amity, Cooperation*. [online], The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 21.04.2025. Source: en.cppcc.gov.cn [26.05.2025].

⁵ *Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (As Delivered)*. [online], U.S. Department of Defense, 31.05.2025. Source: defense.gov [04.06.2025].

fully with a dominant power. From a theoretical perspective, such behaviours are closely connected to balance-of-power and neorealist frameworks, illustrating how smaller states navigate systemic constraints while maximising security and economic returns.⁶ Regional integration initiatives, facilitated primarily through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), provide an additional tool for collective bargaining, helping states mediate disputes and preserve strategic flexibility.⁷

A second dimension of scholarly focus lies in the ways great powers seek to project narratives and influence the strategic calculus of these smaller states. Both China and the United States employ economic incentives, ideological framing, and cultural diplomacy to present their governance models as desirable, leveraging shared histories, developmental paths, and identity markers.⁸ Recent studies⁹ highlight narrative diplomacy between 2023–2025, showing how high-level visits, multilateral forums, and strategic media messaging are used to shape regional perceptions. China's discourse often invokes historical regional ties, non-interference principles, and 'shared development' to portray its rise as a cooperative alternative to Western-led frameworks. The United States, conversely, emphasises rules-based order, liberal norms, and security commitments, seeking to position itself as the guarantor of stability while highlighting the risks of unbalanced alignment with China.

The advent of Donald Trump's second presidential term introduced a particularly acute lens for examining these dynamics. Trump's transactional, unpredictable foreign-policy style functions as an independent variable that alters the interpretive environment for Southeast Asian states.¹⁰ Scholars have noted that unpredictability – manifested in shifting priorities, ad hoc bilateral deals, and personalised diplomacy – intensifies strategic uncertainty, making the 2025 high-level engagements especially revealing for both the effectiveness of U.S. narrative diplomacy and the relative appeal of China's long-term engagement. Methodologically, analysing Trump-era rhetoric and public addresses allows researchers to track how deviations from traditional U.S. diplomatic norms affect smaller states' hedging and alignment strategies.

In sum, the literature underscores three interconnected insights: 1. Southeast Asian states employ diverse hedging and alignment strategies to manage great-power pressures, consistent with balance-of-power theory; 2. China and the U.S. actively deploy narratives, economic tools, and cultural diplomacy to shape the region's strategic environment; and 3. the peculiarities of Trump-era U.S. diplomacy – particularly unpredictability and transactionalism – amplify the stakes of these engagements, making 2025 an exceptionally

⁶ Mearsheimer, John J. (2001): *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (updated edition). New York: WW Norton & Company; Christensen, Thomas J. – Snyder, Jack (1990): *Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity*. *International Organization*, 44(2), 137–168.

⁷ Acharya, Amitav (2001): *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*. London: Routledge.

⁸ Shambaugh, David (2021): *Where Great Powers Meet. America & China in Southeast Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Marston 2024.

¹⁰ Khong, Yuen Foong – Liow, Joseph Chinyong: *Southeast Asia Is Starting to Choose. Why the Region Is Leaning toward China*. [online], *Foreign Affairs*, 24.06.2025. Source: [foreignaffairs.com](https://www.foreignaffairs.com) [02.12.2025].

revealing year for assessing regional responses and alignment patterns. This framework provides the foundation for analysing the April and October diplomatic visits and understanding their implications for regional order, sovereignty, and influence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case-study approach focused on high-level diplomatic engagements in Southeast Asia during 2025. The cases include China's April visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia, as well as the U.S. Shangri-La Dialogue in May and President Trump's October tour of the region. The primary sources comprise official speeches, press releases, joint statements, and public addresses by key leaders. These sources were selected to capture both the stated intentions of the great powers and the content of their strategic messaging.

The research applies discourse analysis to examine how narratives are constructed and communicated. Particular attention is paid to the articulation of economic, security, and identity-based incentives, as well as efforts to shape perceptions of regional order, sovereignty, and partnership. Messages are investigated along five thematic axes: 1. economic cooperation and development initiatives; 2. security assurances and military engagement; 3. identity and historical framing; 4. regional integration and multilateralism; and 5. strategies aimed at constraining the rival power. This framework allows systematic comparison of the tools, objectives, and rhetorical styles employed by China and the United States.

Regional reception was inferred from official statements, media coverage, and publicised responses of the host governments. By cross-referencing these responses with the content and style of great-power messaging, the study assesses both the effectiveness and resonance of each diplomatic approach. This methodological approach ensures that the analysis is empirically grounded, transparent, and directly connected to observable diplomatic behaviour, rather than relying on secondary interpretations or speculative commentary.

China: visit and message

Between 14 and 18 April 2025, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of China, made an official state visit to three Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia. This was Xi's first foreign trip in 2025,¹¹ which was directly preceded by the Central Conference on Work Relating to Neighbouring Countries, held in Beijing on 8–9 April, where China emphasised the strategic importance of its relations with neighbouring states.

- Vietnam (14–15 April): During his visit, Xi met with Tô Lâm, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, and Lương Cường, President of Vietnam. The parties signed 45 cooperation agreements covering infrastructure development,

¹¹ *Xi's First Overseas Visits This Year are of Great Significance: Spokesperson*. [online], The State Council. The People's Republic of China, 11.04.2025. Source: english.www.gov.cn [08.06.2025].

artificial intelligence, supply chain integration, and joint maritime patrols.¹² Xi emphasised the importance of building a ‘community with a shared future’ between China and Vietnam, as well as strengthening inter-party relations between the two countries.¹³

- Malaysia (15–17 April): In Malaysia, Xi met with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and the two leaders issued a joint statement on maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea, as well as on cooperation within international institutions.¹⁴ During the visit, 31 agreements were signed,¹⁵ covering areas such as infrastructure, the digital economy, artificial intelligence, and green development.
- Cambodia (17–18 April): During his visit to Cambodia, Xi met with King Norodom Sihamoni and Prime Minister Hun Manet. The two governments signed 37 cooperation agreements covering education, healthcare, tourism, agriculture, and infrastructure development.¹⁶ The construction of the Funan Techo Canal was mentioned as a significant project aimed at promoting Cambodia’s economic development.¹⁷

During the visit, China conveyed a clear, multi-layered narrative that was evidently aimed at reshaping the regional and global status quo. This was clearly reflected in the route: Vietnam is one of China’s most significant regional critics, especially on the South China Sea issue;¹⁸ Malaysia, as the rotating chair of ASEAN, holds a mediating position,¹⁹ while Cambodia is Beijing’s most loyal partner.²⁰ The selection of these countries thus provided China with the opportunity to convey a unified yet nuanced message to three states in different regional positions. This message was built on three main thematic pillars: the necessity of multipolarity, the benefits of economic partnership, and the principles of shared development and mutual respect. Together, these served to form China’s self-positioning – not as a dominating great power, but as a reliable partner – while strategically aiming to reduce U.S. influence by fostering long-term engagement in the region through the announced projects.

Throughout these visits, China consistently avoided sharp confrontational rhetoric. Instead, it outlined the possibility of an alternative world order, in which, in contrast

¹² Mai, Lauren – Poling, Gregory B.: *The Latest on Southeast Asia: Xi’s Visit to Southeast Asia*. [online], CSIS, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 24.04.2025. Source: csis.org [08.06.2025].

¹³ Vietnam News Agency: *Vietnam, China Reaffirm Top Strategic Ties during Xi Jinping’s State Visit*. [online], The Investor, 15.04.2025. Source: theinvestor.vn [23.05.2025].

¹⁴ *Joint Statement Between the People’s Republic of China and Malaysia on Building a High-level Strategic China-Malaysia Community with a Shared Future*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 17.04.2025. Source: mfa.gov.cn [17.05.2025].

¹⁵ Mai–Poling 2025.

¹⁶ Mai–Poling 2025.

¹⁷ Cheang, Sopheng: *China and Cambodia Agree on Financing for a 94-Mile Canal Linking the Mekong to the Gulf of Thailand*. [online], AP News, 19.04.2025. Source: apnews.com [08.06.2025].

¹⁸ Dinh, Hau: *Vietnam Condemns China for Assault on Its Fishermen in the Disputed South China Sea*. [online], AP News, 04.10.2024. Source: apnews.com [08.06.2025].

¹⁹ Singh, Gurjit: *High Expectations of Malaysia as ASEAN Chair*. [online], Gateway House, 13.02.2025. Source: gateway-house.in [08.06.2025].

²⁰ Peck, Grant – Cheang, Sopheng: *China’s Leader Xi Jinping Holds Talks in Cambodia to Wrap Up His 3-Nation Southeast Asia Tour*. [online], AP News, 17.04.2025. Source: apnews.com [08.06.2025].

to the Western dominance, sovereign, partnership-based relations prevail. The idea of ‘South–South cooperation’ was particularly emphasised, which envisions horizontal and mutually beneficial collaboration as opposed to the U.S.-led liberal order. China consciously positioned itself as a partner rather than a dominating power. This was reflected partly through restrained references to historical memory and the cultural heritage of the tributary system, and partly through the strong use of the concept of a ‘community with a shared future’. In Chinese communication, joint infrastructure development, educational scholarships, digitalisation, and healthcare programmes all served the purpose of presenting the Chinese presence as acceptable, stable, and predictable in the long term. In doing so, China deliberately held up a mirror to the policies of the second Trump administration, which signalled to the region betrayal by allies, disregard for their interests, and withdrawal of resources.²¹

From a strategic perspective, the narrative served multiple purposes:

- Marginalising the United States: China seeks to displace the United States from the region not through open confrontation, but by offering competitive, alternative proposals. This is particularly evident at the level of economic and infrastructure cooperation. This is an area where the U.S. offers truly little to the region, despite its crucial importance for regional development.
- Offering an alternative to the Western world order: China’s diplomatic language is based on the principles of sovereignty, mutual respect, and non-interference, contrasting these with the Western values-based frameworks.
- Establishing long-term engagement: economic support, the renegotiation of BRI projects, and flexible Chinese lending terms all aim to bind the countries of the region to Beijing in the medium term and reduce their dependence on the United States or other Western powers.

With this strategic communication, China not only strengthened bilateral relations but also conveyed its universal value proposition – a worldview in which the Chinese economic and political model appears not as a challenge, but as an alternative.

The regional reception of the Chinese visits

The reception of China’s diplomatic efforts by Southeast Asian countries can be characterised as cautious openness. Each country’s response reflected its strategic position and existing ties with Beijing.

- Vietnam: Demonstrated a reserved but constructive approach. While avoiding overt alignment, official statements highlighted the importance of economic cooperation.²² Vietnam’s cautious tone reflects its strategic need to balance engagement

²¹ Ng, Eileen: *Southeast Asian Nations Want to Discuss Tariffs with Trump as a Unified Bloc, Malaysia PM Says*. [online], AP News, 26.05.2025. Source: apnews.com [26.05.2025].

²² *China, Vietnam Support Multilateral Trade Regime amid U.S. Tariff Pressure*. [online], Reuters, 15.04.2025. Source: reuters.com [08.06.2025].

with China against concerns over sovereignty and territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

- Malaysia: Received the Chinese narrative diplomatically, appreciating the economic initiatives and acknowledging the possibility of a multipolar world order, while maintaining strategic neutrality.²³ The visit reinforced Malaysia's mediating role in ASEAN and its preference for flexible foreign policy positioning.
- Cambodia: Openly supported China's initiatives, repeatedly invoking 'shared development' and 'mutual respect'.²⁴ Phnom Penh's alignment with Beijing underscores Cambodia's dependency on Chinese economic and political support.

Overall, China's messaging created room for cooperation, enhancing its regional influence without forcing alignment. The cautious engagement of Southeast Asian countries also indicates the careful balancing act required in response to the U.S. presence and the potential repercussions of economic or security choices.

U.S.: visit and strategic message

The 2025 U.S. diplomatic and strategic outreach to Southeast Asia unfolded through two major events: the participation of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May, followed by President Donald Trump's official tour of the region in October. Together, these engagements illustrate the United States' attempt to reaffirm its influence in the Indo-Pacific through a combination of security assurances, alliance-building, and selective economic messaging.

Shangri-La Dialogue (May 2025)

At the Shangri-La Dialogue, Hegseth framed the Indo-Pacific as a 'priority theatre' for the United States and reaffirmed Washington's commitment to regional stability. He emphasised the potential threats posed by China's military activities near Taiwan and in the South China Sea, describing them as 'real and potentially imminent'. Southeast Asian partners were urged to enhance defence capabilities, including increasing defence spending up to 5% of GDP – mirroring NATO-style burden-sharing logic.

Beyond warnings, Hegseth outlined practical initiatives to strengthen U.S.-regional security cooperation: expanded access to U.S. logistical and repair facilities, joint exercises, and greater interoperability between U.S. and partner forces. He presented the U.S. as a respectful partner, committed to cooperation rather than ideological imposition: "we are not here to preach... we respect your traditions and your militaries."²⁵ While this

²³ Azhar, Danial – Tang, Ashley – Wang, Ethan: *China's Xi, in Malaysia, Calls On Asian Nations to Resist Confrontation and Protectionism*. [online], Reuters, 16.04.2025. Source: reuters.com [08.06.2025].

²⁴ Nimol, Seoung: *Cambodia Upholds Neutrality Amid Chinese Deals; U.S. Affirms It's Not Forcing a Choice*. [online], Cambodia News, 21.04.2025. Source: cambodianews.com [08.06.2025].

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense 2025.

approach aimed to reassure allies, it largely relied on security-centric tools, with limited economic or infrastructural incentives.

Trump's visit (October 2025)

Efforts to advance U.S.–Southeast Asia relations were already underway in July 2025: President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. visited the United States to discuss a potential bilateral trade agreement and enhanced defence cooperation with Trump.²⁶ The meeting was driven primarily by concerns over the severity of the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration.²⁷ Ultimately, the two sides concluded that the United States would impose a 19% tariff on imports from the Philippines.²⁸ Nevertheless, Trump's broader Southeast Asian trip did not occur until October. In addition to his participation in the ASEAN–U.S. Summit,²⁹ Trump also sought to emphasise the United States' role as a peacemaker. In this context, he presided over a peace agreement between Thailand and Cambodia aimed at easing tensions in their conflict.³⁰ Additionally, between 26 and 29 October he conducted a state visit to Southeast Asia, including stops in Vietnam and Malaysia. This was the United States' major follow-up to China's April diplomatic tour, aiming to reaffirm U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific and offer tangible security and economic engagement.

Vietnam (26–29 October): Trump met with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh at the ASEAN–U.S. Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 26 October. During the meeting, the two leaders underscored the importance of the countries' comprehensive strategic partnership and economic ties, while also highlighting the value of mutual trust and respect.³¹ Trump also met with State President Lương Cường on October 29, where, along with similar discussions, he also emphasised the United States' support for ASEAN centrality.³²

Malaysia (27 October): Trump met with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The meeting covered a review of recent Malaysia–U.S. bilateral discussions and addressed strategic cooperation in trade, technology, and regional security. It also highlighted the U.S. role

²⁶ Esguerra, Darryl John: *Marcos Leaves for US, to Tackle Trade, Defense with Trump*. [online], Philippine News Agency, 20.07.2025. Source: pna.gov.ph [30.11.2025].

²⁷ Brunnstrom, David – Lema, Karen: *Philippines' Marcos to Meet Trump Hoping to Secure Trade Deal*. [online], Reuters, 22.07.2025. Source: reuters.com [30.11.2025].

²⁸ Tang, Didi – Price, Michelle L.: *Trump Says US will Impose 19% Tariff on Imports from Philippines in Deal Struck with Leader Marcos*. [online], AP News, 23.07.2025. Source: apnews.com [30.11.2025].

²⁹ Wong, Tessa: *Trump Gives 'Toothless' Asian Summit Its Moment in the Sun*. [online], BBC, 27.10.2025. Source: bbc.com [30.11.2025].

³⁰ Goldsmith, Adam: *Trump Flaunts 'Peace Deal' While Trade Talks with China Rumble On*. [online], BBC, 26.10.2025. Source: bbc.com [01.12.2025].

³¹ Quang, Minh: *Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh Meets President Donald Trump in Malaysia*. [online], Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Government News, 26.10.2025. Source: en.baochinhphu.vn [30.11.2025].

³² Thuy, Dung: *State President Luong Cuong Meets U.S. President Donald Trump in South Korea*. [online], Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Government News, 29.10.2025. Source: en.baochinhphu.vn [30.11.2025].

in supporting the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord and the Gaza Peace Plan.³³ Through the meeting, Trump signed critical minerals deals with Malaysia (and Thailand too).³⁴

President Trump's tour complemented Hegseth's security-heavy messaging with a broader diplomatic and economic narrative. The visit aimed to respond to China's April initiative by demonstrating that the United States remains a reliable partner across security, economic, and diplomatic dimensions.

Throughout his speech at the ASEAN Summit,³⁵ Trump placed less emphasis on sharpening the image of an external enemy. Rather, he reflected primarily on domestic political change in the U.S., which also signified a transformation in America's role on the international stage. In this context, he articulated messages such as "the United States is with you 100%" and "it's a golden age of the United States". Although Trump's rhetoric gave greater prominence to the idea of building shared prosperity, security and strategic messaging remained the key. He reinforced U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific, emphasising peace, stability, maritime freedom, and the protection of international norms. While China was not named explicitly, the subtext was clear: the U.S. intended to maintain influence and prevent unilateral dominance. Trump framed America's role as mutually beneficial, presenting security guarantees not as impositions but as instruments for shared regional stability.

Trump also sought to highlight U.S. contributions to economic development. Speeches emphasised trade facilitation, supply-chain resilience, and support for digital infrastructure. He acknowledged regional achievements and portrayed U.S. investment as a vehicle for long-term growth. Nevertheless, compared with China's April visits – featuring detailed infrastructure agreements and extensive project-based commitments – U.S. economic proposals remained largely conceptual, reinforcing the incentive for Southeast Asian states to pursue hedging strategies, balancing tangible Chinese economic engagement against U.S. security guarantees to preserve strategic flexibility and autonomy.

The tour personalised messages to each country, recognising national achievements and aspirations. This contrasted with Hegseth's technical security-focused discourse and made the U.S. presence appear more approachable. The combination of security, economic reassurance, and recognition of sovereignty was intended to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relationships, especially through ASEAN and regional institutions.

Regional reception of U.S. engagement

Regional responses were cautious and heterogeneous, reflecting historical sensitivity toward great-power intervention and the preference for strategic autonomy:

³³ Tan, Tarrence et al.: *Anwar Holds Brief Bilateral Meeting with Trump on Monday Morning*. [online], The Star, 27.10.2025. Source: thestar.com [30.11.2025].

³⁴ *President Trump Opens Asia Trip by Securing Landmark Wins for America*. [online], The White House, 27.10.2025. Source: whitehouse.gov [30.11.2025].

³⁵ *Remarks: Donald Trump Attends a Working Lunch at the ASEAN Summit in Malaysia – October 26, 2025*. [online], Roll Call, 2025. Source: rollcall.com [30.11.2025].

- Vietnam: Welcomed U.S. security assurances but remained cautious about military alignment, balancing deterrence with economic ties to China. The call for increased defence spending was sensitive given domestic priorities.
- Malaysia: Affirmed neutrality, acknowledging U.S. security guarantees while resisting strategic pressure, maintaining a balanced ASEAN-centric approach.

Across Southeast Asia, many states expressed concern about increased militarisation and potential entanglement in a new bipolar rivalry. While U.S. security messages were noted, they resonated less strongly and less uniformly than China's April diplomatic and economic initiatives. The immediacy and tangibility of Chinese development projects, combined with a discourse respectful of sovereignty and partnership, aligned more closely with regional priorities of economic growth, stability, and strategic hedging.

Comparative strategic messaging: China and the United States in Southeast Asia, 2025

Both China and the United States undertook high-profile diplomatic engagements in Southeast Asia in 2025 with the overarching goal of shaping regional perceptions and influence. While both powers sought to assert leadership and signal their strategic priorities, their approaches, tools, and regional resonance differed markedly.

The American approach, though symbolically significant, often appeared less attuned to the political, economic, and cultural realities of Southeast Asian states. Although Washington now sought to present itself as a peacemaker actor – and, similar to China, emphasised the importance of peace and prosperity, most countries in the region, informed by historical experiences of colonisation, great-power rivalry, and strategic vulnerability, remain hesitant to align explicitly with any major power, opting instead for hedging strategies that balance engagement with multiple powers, occasional band-wagoning when short-term gains outweigh risks, and selective balancing to prevent dominance by a single actor.³⁶ Their primary priorities – strategic hedging, economic stability, and the safeguarding of sovereignty – align more with China's multi-layered and incremental messaging than with the U.S.'s predominantly security-focused narrative. While President Trump's October 2025 visit incorporated more nuanced economic and diplomatic language, the depth of engagement with local concerns remained limited relative to the extensive material and symbolic incentives offered by China.

China, conversely, leveraged a combination of economic, political, and identity-based tools to foster regional receptivity. These included invoking shared experiences of colonialism, showcasing examples of non-Western modernisation, and in certain cases referencing communist historical legacies. Through such strategies, Beijing tried

³⁶ Khoo, Nicholas (2022): *Great Power Rivalry and Southeast Asian Agency: Southeast Asia in an Era of US-China Strategic Competition*. *Political Science*, 74(2–3), 141–154; Kamaruddin, Nurliana – Kuik, Cheng-Chwee (2023): *ASEAN's Agency in the US-China Rivalry: Small-State Hedging Across the Twin Chessboards*. In Roberts, Kari – Bano, Saira (eds.): *The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary US-China Relations: Rethinking the Great Power Rivalry*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 113–133.

to position itself as a long-term, predictable partner, demonstrating the practical application of soft power and identity-based diplomacy theories, whereby cultural, historical, and normative affinities are leveraged to build credibility, trust, and regional influence.³⁷ By contrast, U.S. references to respect for sovereignty – while present in both Hegseth’s and Trump’s addresses – were often perceived as formal gestures rather than substantive integration into policy proposals. Similarly, the “Indo-Pacific” conceptual framework, intended as a shared strategic space, failed to meaningfully resonate with Southeast Asia’s historical experiences and domestic priorities.

The policy options offered by the two powers diverged sharply:

- China advocated economic partnership, infrastructure development, and mutually beneficial cooperation, presenting Southeast Asia as a co-shaper of regional and global futures. Beijing deliberately avoided forcing alignment, instead enabling countries to hedge and preserve strategic flexibility.
- The United States focused predominantly on security assurances, alliance obligations, and the maintenance of U.S. military presence. Tangible economic incentives were limited, despite their importance amid ongoing trade tensions and supply chain vulnerabilities. U.S. messaging implicitly discouraged countries from economically aligning with Beijing while relying on U.S. security guarantees, a position that clashes with Southeast Asia’s hedging strategy.

Table 1: Chinese and U.S. approaches towards the Southeast Asian region

	China	United States
Visitor	Xi Jinping	Pete Hegseth (May), Donald Trump (October)
Platform of the visit	Separately organised route	Shangri-La Dialogue (May), ASEAN Summit (October)
Position of the visitor	The General Secretary of the CCP	The United States’ Secretary of Defense (May); President (October)
Reference for the great power competition	Cautious criticism: the U.S. rewrites the rules, causing damage	Portraying China as the aggressor
Description of the international order	A joint transformation of the international order is favourable	Maintaining American leadership is a shared priority
Focus of communication	Cooperations	The United States’ goals, presence, and enhancement of military power
Importance of military might	Not or barely mentioned	Dominant
Emphasis of supports	Emphasis on economic, political, and ideological support	Not detailed American support; military support, in October: mentioning of economic relations
Tools of influence	Collaborations, support, seeking common grounds	Military support, the U.S. as part of the Indo-Pacific region, U.S. role in the international system
Worldviews and the style of narrating goals	Reshaping the international system	Status quo (U.S. leadership) maintenance

Source: compiled by the authors

³⁷ Shambaugh 2021.

This divergence reflects not only the difference in tools and priorities but also the underlying assumptions about the region's needs. China, as a permanent neighbour and major economic partner, can rely on a combination of material inducements and culturally attuned diplomacy. The United States, in contrast, projects power primarily through military presence and alliance frameworks, which may be less immediately relevant to Southeast Asian governments seeking balanced development and autonomy.

Conclusion

The 2025 diplomatic engagements of China and the United States in Southeast Asia reveal fundamentally different approaches to influence, regional integration, and trust-building. China's visits – led by Xi Jinping to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia – demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of the region's historical experiences, cultural contexts, and strategic sensitivities. By combining economic incentives, infrastructure projects, cultural and identity-based diplomacy, Beijing positioned itself as a predictable, attentive, and long-term partner. This approach resonates more effectively with Southeast Asian priorities, facilitating confidence-building and offering states the flexibility to hedge between powers rather than commit unconditionally.

In contrast, the U.S. approach – through Hegseth's May Shangri-La Dialogue speech and President Trump's October tour – remained primarily security-centric and transactional. American messaging emphasised alliance obligations, burden-sharing, and military guarantees, while economic and developmental initiatives were comparatively abstract or limited. This approach reflects a departure from the post-Cold War U.S. regional logic, which previously combined security guarantees with political legitimacy and economic opportunities (trade, investment, and development projects). While the United States continues to serve as a stabilising force capable of constraining unmitigated Chinese expansion, its transactional style and emphasis on self-interest are less suited for immediate trust-building and regional alignment.

Several key insights emerge from this contrast:

- China's regional attunement enables trust: By respecting Southeast Asian cultural norms and historical experiences, China is able to build more durable and credible partnerships. Its messaging allows countries to participate as co-shapers of regional futures rather than as passive recipients of aid.
- U.S. transactional logic and conditional security: American security guarantees, framed as conditional and exchange-based, offer immediate deterrence but are less capable of fostering deeper regional trust. The U.S. must weigh alliance obligations against sovereignty concerns and economic needs, limiting the appeal of Washington's approach.
- Strategic implications for balancing: Despite the comparative attractiveness of China's multifaceted engagement, Southeast Asian states remain interested in maintaining U.S. security guarantees as a counterweight to Chinese influence. This enables a hedging strategy that preserves autonomy and mitigates the risks of unbalanced alignment.

- Divergent visions of regional order: China promotes a long-term, cooperative, and multipolar vision, integrating the region into development and infrastructure networks, while the U.S. emphasises the status quo and military-led reassurance, occasionally at odds with regional economic and political priorities.

In conclusion, the 2025 visits underscore that China's nuanced, culturally aware, and development-oriented diplomacy is more effective at building trust and long-term influence, while the U.S. approach, focused on security and transactional guarantees, remains vital for strategic balancing but is less persuasive as a vehicle for comprehensive regional partnership. The differing strategies highlight a persistent dynamic: Southeast Asian states will likely continue hedging between Beijing and Washington, maximising benefits from both powers while preserving sovereignty and strategic flexibility.

References

- Acharya, Amitav (2001): *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia. ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*. London: Routledge.
- Azhar, Danial – Tang, Ashley – Wang, Ethan: *China's Xi, in Malaysia, Calls On Asian Nations to Resist Confrontation and Protectionism*. [online], Reuters, 16.04.2025. Source: reuters.com [08.06.2025]
- Brunnstrom, David – Lema, Karen: *Philippines' Marcos to Meet Trump Hoping to Secure Trade Deal*. [online], Reuters, 22.07.2025. Source: reuters.com [30.11.2025]
- Cheang, Sopheng: *China and Cambodia Agree on Financing for a 94-Mile Canal Linking the Mekong to the Gulf of Thailand*. [online], AP News, 19.04.2025. Source: apnews.com [08.06.2025]
- China, Vietnam Support Multilateral Trade Regime amid U.S. Tariff Pressure*. [online], Reuters, 15.04.2025. Source: reuters.com [08.06.2025]
- Christensen, Thomas J. – Snyder, Jack (1990): Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity. *International Organization*, 44(2), 137–168. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300035232>
- Dinh, Hau: *Vietnam Condemns China for Assault on Its Fishermen in the Disputed South China Sea*. [online], AP News, 04.10.2024. Source: apnews.com [08.06.2025]
- Esguerra, Darryl John: *Marcos Leaves for US, to Tackle Trade, Defense with Trump*. [online], Philippine News Agency, 20.07.2025. Source: pna.gov.ph [30.11.2025]
- Goldsmith, Adam: *Trump Flaunts 'Peace Deal' While Trade Talks with China Rumble On*. [online], BBC, 26.10.2025. Source: bbc.com [01.12.2025]
- Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia on Building a High-level Strategic China-Malaysia Community with a Shared Future*. [online], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 17.04.2025. Source: mfa.gov.cn [17.05.2025]
- Kamaruddin, Nurliana – Kuik, Cheng-Chwee (2023): ASEAN's Agency in the US-China Rivalry: Small-State Hedging Across the Twin Chessboards. In Roberts, Kari – Bano, Saira (eds.): *The Ascendancy of Regional Powers in Contemporary US-China Relations. Rethinking the Great Power Rivalry*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 113–133. Online: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-37612-2_7
- Khong, Yuen Foong – Liow, Joseph Chinyong: *Southeast Asia Is Starting to Choose. Why the Region Is Leaning toward China*. [online], Foreign Affairs, 24.06.2025. Source: foreignaffairs.com [02.12.2025]
- Khoo, Nicholas (2022): Great Power Rivalry and Southeast Asian Agency: Southeast Asia in an Era of US-China Strategic Competition. *Political Science*, 74(2–3), 141–154. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00323187.2023.2186251>
- Mai, Lauren – Poling, Gregory B.: *The Latest on Southeast Asia: Xi's Visit to Southeast Asia*. [online], CSIS, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 24.04.2025. Source: csis.org [08.06.2025]

- Marston, Hunter S. (2024): Navigating Great Power Competition: A Neoclassical Realist View of Hedging. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 24(1), 29–63. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcad001>
- Mearsheimer, John J. (2001): *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (updated edition)*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Nimol, Seoung: *Cambodia Upholds Neutrality Amid Chinese Deals; U.S. Affirms It's Not Forcing a Choice*. [online], Cambodia News, 21.04.2025. Source: cambojanews.com [08.06.2025]
- Ng, Eileen: *Southeast Asian Nations Want to Discuss Tariffs with Trump as a Unified Bloc, Malaysia PM Says*. [online], AP News, 26.05.2025. Source: apnews.com [26.05.2025]
- Peck, Grant – Cheang, Sopheg: *China's Leader Xi Jinping Holds Talks in Cambodia to Wrap Up His 3-Nation Southeast Asia Tour*. [online], AP News, 17.04.2025. Source: apnews.com [08.06.2025]
- President Trump Opens Asia Trip by Securing Landmark Wins for America*. [online], The White House, 27.10.2025. Source: whitehouse.gov [30.11.2025]
- Quang, Minh: *Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh Meets President Donald Trump in Malaysia*. [online], Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Government News, 26.10.2025. Source: en.baochinhphu.vn [30.11.2025]
- Remarks: Donald Trump Attends a Working Lunch at the ASEAN Summit in Malaysia – October 26, 2025* [online], Roll Call, 2025. Source: rollcall.com [30.11.2025]
- Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (As Delivered)*. [online], U.S. Department of Defense, 31.05.2025. Source: defense.gov [04.06.2025]
- Shambaugh, David (2021): *Where Great Powers Meet. America & China in Southeast Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190914974.001.0001>
- Singh, Gurjit: *High Expectations of Malaysia as ASEAN Chair*. [online], Gateway House, 13.02.2025. Source: gatewayhouse.in [08.06.2025]
- Tan, Tarrence et al.: *Anwar Holds Brief Bilateral Meeting with Trump on Monday Morning*. [online], The Star, 27.10.2025. Source: thestar.com [30.11.2025]
- Tang, Didi – Price, Michelle L.: *Trump Says US will Impose 19% Tariff on Imports from Philippines in Deal Struck with Leader Marcos*. [online], AP News, 23.07.2025. Source: apnews.com [30.11.2025]
- Thuy, Dung: *State President Luong Cuong Meets U.S. President Donald Trump in South Korea*. [online], Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Government News, 29.10.2025. Source: en.baochinhphu.vn [30.11.2025]
- Vietnam News Agency: *Vietnam, China Reaffirm Top Strategic Ties During Xi Jinping's State Visit*. [online], The Investor 15.04.2025. Source: theinvestor.vn [23.05.2025]
- Wong, Tessa: *Trump Gives 'Toothless' Asian Summit Its Moment in the Sun*. [online], BBC, 27.10.2025. Source: bbc.com [30.11.2025]
- Xi's First Overseas Visits This Year are of Great Significance: Spokesperson*. [online], The State Council. The People's Republic of China, 11.04.2025. Source: english.www.gov.cn [08.06.2025]
- Xi's Southeast Asia Visit Deepens Shared Commitment to Neighborhood Amity, Cooperation*. [online], The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 21.04.2025. Source: en.cppcc.gov.cn [26.05.2025]