

# The Ascendancy of China in Geopolitics and the Reactions of Southeast Asian Nations

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**Abstract:** *This research investigates the geopolitical rise of China and examines the responses elicited from Southeast Asian countries in the face of China's increasing influence. As China's prominence grows on the global stage, particularly in Southeast Asia, this study aims to analyze the multifaceted interactions and reactions of nations in the region. The research delves into the diplomatic, economic, and strategic dimensions, providing insights into the evolving dynamics and potential implications for regional geopolitics. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the era of bipolarity concluded, ushering in a period of US hegemony. However, the rapid ascent of China in the geopolitical landscape emerged as a counterforce to the NATO pact, reintroducing a bipolar dynamic to the world. While the consequences may appear straightforward, the tangible developments in Chinese military and economic power on the ground indicate its potential hegemony in the relevant region.*

**Keywords:** *China, Geopolitics, Southeast Asia, Diplomacy, Regional Responses, Economic Relations*

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the era of international geopolitics, China occupies a singular position due to the fact that it is the country with the highest population and the third-largest land area. China's strategic location and expanding power have made it a prominent focus in international politics. China has borders with fourteen countries across its northern, western, and southern frontiers, and it faces the Korea Bay, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea to the east. In addition, China faces the South China Sea.

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The term "geopolitical rising of China" encapsulates the country's evolving role as a central player in the global village. This transformation is underpinned by China's prowess in both military and geo-economic domains, positioning it as a compelling force in international affairs. Notably, China's allure extends to countries like Pakistan, Myanmar, Malaysia, North Korea, driven in part by its influential standing as a permanent member with VETO power in the United Nations Organisation.

Security considerations play a pivotal role in China's growing influence, marked by its status as a nuclear power, surpassing major nations in air force and naval capabilities. Boasting around 400 nuclear warheads and 1400 ballistic missiles, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) stands as the world's largest army, complemented by a formidable air force equipped with fourth-generation fighter planes. The extensive 18,000 km-long coastline is guarded by a modern naval fleet comprising aircraft carriers, submarines, and auxiliaries.

Economically, China has emerged as a juggernaut, outpacing the United States in terms of Purchasing Power Parity with an estimated economy of around 27 trillion US\$. Its Nominal GDP of approximately 15 trillion US\$ underscores its economic might. With trade relations extending to about 80% of the world, involving 121 nations importing goods and services from China, the country plays a central role in the global economic landscape. Exports range from electrical appliances, machinery, textiles, rubber, fuel, fertilizers to agricultural products.

The significance of Geo-economy is underscored by historical events like the Russia-Ukraine war. The imposition of sanctions by NATO members on Russia, despite having a GDP of around 1.5 Trillion US\$ [PPP], failed to halt the crisis in the European region, illustrating the profound impact of economic factors on geopolitical dynamics. This serves as a pertinent example highlighting the paramount importance of the economy in contemporary geopolitics.

## **2 | UNVEILING CHINA'S STRATEGIC MOVES: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA CONUNDRUM**

Despite the fact that China's growing assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, has prompted regional and international worries, the country's rise to prominence as a global force has had far-reaching effects from its inception. The policies that China has implemented towards its neighbouring regions have brought up problems regarding ethics and compliance with international law, despite the fact that China's economic and geopolitical rise is noteworthy. China's actions occasionally violate the regulations established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which controls the usage of international marine zones. This means that the issues that involve Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong stretch beyond the scope of regional disputes. These new developments shed light on the intricate relationship that exists between national aspirations and international legal standards.

China's coastline stretches approximately 18,000 km, but its ambitions extend far beyond its territorial borders. The South China Sea, a region with strategic significance due to its role as one of the world's busiest sea routes connecting Eastern Asia with South Asian countries, has become a focal point. China's controversial move involves the illegal construction of an artificial island on Fiery Cross Reef, a clear violation of international norms.

In 2014, China initiated the acquisition of land to construct a massive artificial island featuring a 3,300-meter runway, a port, and a military base. The project incurred a staggering cost of \$11.5 billion, emphasizing the strategic importance China places on this disputed territory. The completion of the Fiery Cross runway in January 2016 marked a critical milestone, with both civilian and military aircraft making test landings. By April 2016, Chinese military aircraft, including jet fighters, were reported to be stationed there. In late 2016, reports emerged that anti-aircraft guns and a Close-In Weapons System (CIWS) had been installed on the Fiery Cross Reef, heightening international apprehension.

***Motivations Behind China's Actions:***

1. **Strategic Control:** The South China Sea's pivotal role as one of the busiest sea routes, connecting the highly populous Eastern Asia with South Asian nations, is a primary motivation for China's strategic maneuvers.
2. **Resource Exploration:** China's pursuit of hydrocarbon resources, including crude oil, within the South China Sea, adds an economic dimension to its actions, further complicating the geopolitical landscape.
3. **Historical Claims:** A complex historical dimension is added to the current territorial conflicts by China's assertion of substantial claims over the South China Sea. These claims are based on historical rights that extend back to the Xia Dynasty, which lasted from 2000 to 1600 BCE.

**3 | RESPONSES FROM SOUTH-ASIAN COUNTRIES**

**Vietnam's:** Vietnam swiftly submitted a diplomatic protest to China in reaction to the event in which a Chinese coast guard ship collided with and sank a fishing boat belonging to the Vietnamese people. By asserting its own territorial claims, Vietnam brought attention to the fact that the lives, safety, and legitimate interests of Vietnamese fisherman were being put in jeopardy of being endangered. The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesman, Le Thi Thu Hang, emphasised that China's actions threatened Vietnam's sovereignty. She said this in a statement. The Vietnamese government asserted that historical justice had been served on Fiery Cross Reef, highlighting the country's dedication to preserving territorial integrity.

**Philippines:** During the year 2019, a boat from the Philippines sank after colliding with a ship from China, which resulted in similar tensions in the Philippines. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China have struggled to maintain their regional relations as a result of instances of this nature. As a reflection of the persistent difficulties in cultivating solid regional ties, the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines emphasised the significance of safeguarding and enhancing the nation's sovereignty.

**Indonesia:** As a result of China's coast guard and fishing vessels entering Indonesian waters, particularly in the vicinity of the Natuna islands, Indonesia launched a diplomatic protest against China in December of 2019. The fact that Natuna is an essential component of Indonesian territory was reaffirmed by President Joko Widodo, highlighting the fact that Indonesia's sovereignty is not something that can be negotiated. Strong reactions were voiced by Indonesia in response to China's efforts, which included the declaration of administrative regions, the deployment of naval energy research vessels, and the announcement of new "research stations" for military sites.

**4 | REGIONAL IMPACT**

The South China Sea tensions have reverberated across the region, affecting countries like Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, and Brunei. The announcement of administrative regions by China and continued naval militia deployments around the Spratly Islands intensified concerns. The involvement of non-claimant countries, prompted by the Fiery Cross Reef discussions, underscores the broader implications of China's actions in the South China Sea. The international community, including the United States, has called on China to halt its expansionist activities and respect the sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations in the region.

**5 | CHINA'S RISE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON GLOBAL SECURITY**

Scholars are investigating the potential consequences that China's expanding influence may have for global security and world peace. This is a subject that has become the subject of substantial investigation. Realist perspectives are utilised by Glaser (2011) in his argument that China's growing

power could result in a more aggressive pursuit of borders, which would invite pushback from the United States of America and other states. There are similarities between this scenario and the dynamics that existed between the United States of America and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. These similarities raise concerns about the possibility of a hegemonic war.

Many Western neorealist scholars in international relations (IR) have painted a pessimistic picture of regional security in East Asia, perceiving a significant Chinese risk. The emergence of China's control in the region is considered a threat to its neighbors, and discussions within Western IR academic circles and among policy experts highlight the potential challenges in the coming decades.

The concept of changing control structures suggests that as a country becomes richer and more powerful, it naturally seeks increased regional and global political influence, potentially altering power structures both locally and globally. The newly established control structure resulting from China's rise is viewed as a long-term threat to regional security and global stability. Analyzing this control structure, China is seen as a potential threat to the security of the East Asian region, the United States, and its key partner in East Asia, Japan.

According to Lemke and Warner (1996), the likelihood of war increases when the control of an emerging, frustrated state equals that of a dominant state. In this case, the United States is perceived as the dominant state, and China, as a rising power, is seen as challenging the existing status quo in East Asia. China's aspirations to change the global status quo are attributed to its historical memory, the desire to restore the Middle Kingdom status, eliminate a century of national depreciation, and reproduce a traditional Chinese central world order.

Moreover, China's economic expansion during the 1970s has included the modernisation of its armed forces through the procurement of powerful equipment. There are concerns that this might lead to a hegemonic struggle with the United States compensating for China's increasing weight. While there are those who say that China is not aiming hegemony just in East Asia, there are also those who argue that China is expanding its influence globally. Especially with regard to territorial claims in the South China Sea, the situation raises the spectre of potential confrontation if it is allowed to continue developing without being addressed.

## 6 | CHINA'S RISE: PERSPECTIVES ON GLOBAL SECURITY AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

The discourse surrounding China's ascent onto the global stage has prompted diverse views among scholars, with some expressing concerns about its potential threat to global security. However, there exists a contingent of scholars, particularly those aligned with liberal perspectives, who perceive China's rise as a pivotal factor in fostering global economic engagement and international peace.

Friedman (1999) posits that the contemporary framework of globalization has supplanted the Cold War, fundamentally altering the dynamics of global interactions. Globalization, characterized by market integration and rapid cross-border interactions, has effectively reduced the world to a much smaller and interconnected entity. This transformative force influences domestic politics, economic policies, and foreign relations in nearly every nation, irrespective of its size or standing in the international arena.

In contrast to historical examples like Germany in the late 1800s and early 1900s or Japan between the two world wars, where emerging powers pursued consolidation through questionable means, China is seen as actively engaging with globally accepted regimes such as the WTO or the IMF. Ye (2002) advocates for China's participation and alignment with global standards, emphasizing the importance of adherence to international norms. Unlike the past, where global governance was hindered by the

absence of effective international organizations, China has actively integrated itself into institutions like the WTO, IMF, and World Bank.

China's shift from self-sufficiency to active participation in the global economic framework signifies a departure from traditional approaches. The global community, including China, has recognized the need for collaborative efforts and shared governance. China's involvement in international organizations that it once criticized underscores its willingness to contribute positively to the global economic landscape. This shift in approach is evident in China's membership in the IMF, World Bank, and other international economic bodies.

In essence, China's changing stance from self-sufficiency to active participation reflects a more integrative approach to global economic governance. The desire to align with international standards and actively engage in global economic institutions demonstrates China's commitment to adapting to the evolving landscape of globalization. This perspective challenges the narrative of China solely representing a threat and suggests a more cooperative and integrative role in shaping the future of international relations.

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