

## Asia

### *China and Southeast Asia in the Xi Jinping era*

Edited by ALVIN CHENG-HIN LIM and FRANK CIBULKA

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Southeast Asia's relations with China have been much-studied, and the authors of *China and Southeast Asia in the Xi Jinping era* contribute to this field through country-by-country accounts. In addition to the Introduction and Afterword, this volume contains 12 chapters. After a brief historical overview of China–Southeast Asia relations in chapter 1, the other chapters present studies of individual countries, focusing on selected Chinese-funded and built infrastructure projects. Reflecting their geographical proximity to China, the chapters proceed from the mainland to the maritime Southeast Asian countries.

In contrast to many volumes on Sino–Southeast Asian relations that focus on China's view of the region as a whole, the country-specific chapters presented in this edited volume bring readers a nuanced picture of how Southeast Asian countries have perceived and reacted to rising Chinese influence under Xi Jinping through adaptation, negotiation and counterreaction.

To the surprise of many China watchers, Xi Jinping has become the strongest and most powerful Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping, or even Mao, through rapidly consolidating his personal power and recentralising power within the national government. Xi is also tough; to paraphrase Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew: 'Xi has iron in his soul'. China has fundamentally reshaped its foreign policy and taken a more assertive or even confrontational stance on regional and international affairs in the Xi era. Xi's policies have far-reaching implications for Southeast Asia.

A takeaway from reading this book is evidence of China's deepening engagement with the Southeast Asian states. China has become the region's largest trading partner and an important export market. The chapters detail resilient bilateral economic ties and Chinese-built infrastructure projects, vividly demonstrating both China's close ties with and its rising clout in the region. For example, Chinese investment, engineers and technological knowhow have helped Laos and Cambodia to implement large-scale infrastructure projects to improve physical connectivity.

Nothing makes Southeast Asia more aware of China's clout than the high-profile Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Given that the BRI, which was first announced by Xi in 2013, is at the heart of China's foreign policy, the individual chapters devote a great deal of discussion to this initiative, in particular, the chapters on Thailand, Laos, Malaysia and Singapore.

The BRI is motivated by China's attempt to boost infrastructure connectivity in Southeast Asia, to ease industrial overcapacity at home and thus to achieve sustainable domestic economic growth. Given a combined population of 650 million, and potential huge domestic market with a rising middle class, the geographically proximate region is an important external outlet for China's overcapacity of steel, cement and other

products. Based on its view of Southeast Asia as both a huge market and a strategic destination for investment, China is keen to further strengthen ties with the region.

The chapters illustrate how democratic governments and military regimes alike are constantly reminded of China's growing power and influence as reflected in its economic prowess and military might. Both maritime and mainland Southeast Asian nations are aware of an asymmetrical relationship that might swing in China's favour. The authors, however, have crafted a view that Southeast Asian countries have adopted a sophisticated hedging strategy to reap the benefits of economic cooperation while maintaining independent foreign policies and avoiding economic overdependence.

This book details the various countries' differing views on China's economic and political influence and their relations with China. China under Xi presents both opportunities and threats. On the one hand, as discussed in the chapters on Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia, Chinese investment is an important source for accelerating local infrastructure development. On the other hand, as the chapters on Vietnam and the Philippines indicate, there is a concurrent perception of China's rising influence as a threat to sovereignty and national security given its aggressive actions in the South China Sea. China's increasingly assertive unilateral actions have undermined its attempts to mount a charm offensive in the region.

In fact, many Southeast Asian nations try to safeguard their national security by deploying a 'balance of power' strategy to keep China's growing influence in check. Thailand's protracted negotiations with China on a railway project and Vietnam's reluctance to finalise infrastructure deals with China under the BRI are cases in point.

Nevertheless, an important omission in this book is its inadequate coverage of the historical, cultural and security dimensions of relations between China and Southeast Asia. Although an examination of contemporary trade, infrastructure development and economic ties is important to understanding bilateral relations between the region and China, it is not the whole story. History, culture, and national security are all indispensable factors that have influenced Southeast Asia's perceptions and engagement with China. Southeast Asian states never have and never will structure their relations with China solely on the basis of economic interest.

From research and professional perspectives, this book is a joy to read. Despite the abovementioned omission, this volume deserves the attention of students of Southeast Asia's relations with China, as well as observers of domestic and foreign policymaking in the region.

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## Southeast Asia

*Southeast Asia's modern architecture: Questions of translation, epistemology, and power*

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