

## Viktor Eszterhai – Éva Dóra Druhalóczki: The Promise of Two Worlds: China's Spring Diplomacy and the U.S. Response in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>

### Executive Summary

- In spring 2025, China and the United States competed to win over Southeast Asia. Beijing offered an economic partnership and a shared vision for the future, while Washington pressed for security commitments aimed at containing China.
- Xi Jinping's personal visit reinforced China's message, whereas the U.S. position was presented at a lower diplomatic level through an international forum.
- China's identity-based strategy, which emphasizes shared colonial legacies, sovereignty, and South-South cooperation, presents Beijing as a more credible partner. In contrast, the U.S. Indo-Pacific concept aligns less closely with the region's cultural experience.
- China's approach is more flexible. It does not force countries to choose sides, but rather offers an alternative world order. Meanwhile, Washington often reshapes global rules unilaterally, frequently at odds with the region's interests.
- Emphasizing military alignment without economic incentives narrows Washington's strategic room for maneuver and paradoxically accelerates, rather than slows, the region's acceptance of growing Chinese influence.

**In the spring of 2025, China and the United States each demonstrated their geopolitical visions for Southeast Asia. Beijing embarked on a diplomatic tour, offering economic and political partnerships in an effort to shape the region's visions, while Washington used the Shangri-La Dialogue to advocate for military engagement to counterbalance China. This analysis examines China's strategy in light of the American message, highlighting that although Beijing's efforts are surrounded by a trust deficit, its responses appear more effective and coherent than the U.S. approach.**

### 1. Introduction

In April 2025, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, visited three Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the visit was clear: to deliver a message to the most critical region in the U.S.-China rivalry about how China envisions the future of Southeast Asia and its own role within it. In May 2025, U.S. Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth delivered a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue<sup>3</sup> with the same objective: to convey the American vision for the region.

The aim of this analysis is to present the key elements of the visits conducted in the spring of 2025. It interprets China's offer to Southeast Asia by outlining its objectives and tools, which reflect both Beijing's pragmatic

foreign policy approach and its strategic intentions. The analysis examines Hegseth's speech in light of the

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<sup>2</sup> [Xi's Southeast Asia visit deepens shared commitment to neighborhood amity, cooperation](#). *The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference*, 2025.04.21. [Online, 2025.05.26]

<sup>3</sup> [Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore \(As Delivered\)](#). *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2025.05.31. [Online, 2025.06.04.]

Chinese narrative, arguing that China follows a more refined strategy - one that allows it to pursue its goals more effectively and gradually reshape the status quo. The study employs a comparative approach to analyse the diplomatic messages, strategic frameworks applied, and regional reception.

## 2. The details of the Chinese visit

Between April 14 and 18, 2025, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party 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,<sup>4</sup> which was directly preceded by the Central Conference on Work Relating to Neighbouring Countries, held in Beijing on April 8–9, where China emphasized 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<sup>5</sup> covering infrastructure development, artificial intelligence, supply chain integration, and joint maritime patrols. Xi emphasized 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.<sup>6</sup>
- *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.<sup>7</sup> During the visit, 31 agreements were signed,<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup> covering education, healthcare, tourism, agriculture, and infrastructure development. The construction of the Funan Techo Canal was mentioned as a significant project aimed at promoting Cambodia's economic development.<sup>10</sup>

## 3. China's message

During the 2025 visits to Southeast Asia, China conveyed a clear, multi-layered narrative that was evidently aimed at reshaping the regional and global status quo.

<sup>4</sup> [Xi's first overseas visits this year are of great significance: spokesperson](#). *The State Council. The People's Republic of China*, 2025.04. 11. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>5</sup> MAI, Lauren – POLING, Gregory B.: [The Latest on Southeast Asia: Xi's Visit to Southeast Asia](#). *CSIS. Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2025.04.24. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>6</sup> Vietnam News Agency: [Vietnam, China reaffirm top strategic ties during Xi Jinping's state visit](#). *The Investor*, 2025.04.15. [Online, 2025.05.23.]

<sup>7</sup> [Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia on Building a High-level Strategic China-Malaysia Community with a Shared Future](#). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China*, 2025.04.17. [Online, 2025.05.17.]

<sup>8</sup> MAI, Lauren – POLING, Gregory B.: [The Latest on Southeast Asia: Xi's Visit to Southeast Asia](#). *CSIS. Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2025.04.24. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>9</sup> MAI, Lauren – POLING, Gregory B.: [The Latest on Southeast Asia: Xi's Visit to Southeast Asia](#). *CSIS. Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2025.04.24. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>10</sup> CHEANG, Sopheng: [China and Cambodia agree on financing for a 94-mile canal linking the Mekong to the Gulf of Thailand](#). *Apnews*, 2025.04.19. [Online, 2025.06.08.]



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This was clearly reflected in the route: Vietnam is one of China's most significant regional critics, especially on the South China Sea issue;<sup>11</sup> Malaysia, as the rotating chair of ASEAN, holds a mediating position;<sup>12</sup> while Cambodia is Beijing's most loyal partner.<sup>13</sup> 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 to Western dominance, sovereign, partnership-based relations prevail. The idea of "South-South cooperation" was particularly emphasized, 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, digitalization, and healthcare programs 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.<sup>14</sup>

From a strategic perspective, the narrative served multiple purposes:

1. Marginalizing 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.
2. 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.
3. Establishing long-term engagement - economic support, the renegotiation of the Belt and Road Initiative 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.

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<sup>11</sup> DINH, Hau: [Vietnam condemns China for assault on its fishermen in the disputed South China Sea](#). *Apnews*, 2024.10.04. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>12</sup> SINGH, Gurjit: [High expectations of Malaysia as ASEAN chair](#). *Gateway House*, 2025.02.13. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>13</sup> PECK, Grant – CHEANG, Sopheng: [Cambodia to wrap up his 3-nation Southeast Asia tour](#). *Apnews*, 2025.04.17. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>14</sup> NG, Eileen: [Southeast Asian nations want to discuss tariffs with Trump as a unified bloc, Malaysia PM says](#). *Apnews*, 2025.05.26. [Online, 2025.05.26.]

#### 4. Regional reception

The reception of the Chinese diplomatic offensive by Southeast Asian countries can be described as cautious openness. The differing strategic positions of the three visited states and their varying relationships with China were also reflected in the differences in their responses.

- Vietnam responded to the visit with a reserved but constructive tone. Official communications emphasized the importance of economic cooperation while avoiding geopolitical positioning.<sup>15</sup>
- Malaysia, as the rotating chair of ASEAN, received the Chinese narrative in a diplomatically balanced manner. The country's leadership spoke openly about China's economic proposals and expressed a positive view of the possibility of a multipolar world order,<sup>16</sup> while refraining from openly siding with either party. For Kuala Lumpur, the visit provided an opportunity to reinforce its mediating role within ASEAN and to maintain its own strategic flexibility.
- In the case of Cambodia, the visit demonstrated clear support for Beijing. Although Phnom Penh officially refrained from taking a stance between the two great powers, it openly supported Chinese initiatives and repeatedly referred to the principles of "shared development" and "mutual respect".<sup>17</sup> This aligns well with the country's existing policy, in which China plays a key role both economically and politically.

Overall, it can be concluded that Beijing's strategy proved successful at the level of communication: each country made room for the Chinese message and showed a clear openness to further cooperation. At the same time, it is also clear that the caution of the Southeast Asian countries can largely be attributed to their concern that Washington was closely monitoring their reactions. Ahead of tariff negotiations with the United States, they did not want the Chinese visit to cause them any difficulties.

#### 5. Washington's Message Following Xi's Visits

In May 2025, the United States delivered its strategic message to Southeast Asia at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia's premier defense forum, through a speech by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. As the event closely followed Xi Jinping's April tour of Southeast Asia, countries in the region — as well as this analysis — interpreted the U.S. message primarily in light of that diplomatic context.

The communicative frameworks diverged markedly. While China organized a separate diplomatic visit with the country's highest-ranking leader, Xi Jinping, personally participating in the consultations, the United States was represented only by the Secretary of Defense at an international security forum. This indicates not only the nature of the message itself, but also that the two sides interpret the region's strategic significance in markedly different ways. According to Hegseth, China's lower-level participation at the Shangri-La Dialogue provided an opportunity for Washington to demonstrate its commitment. Southeast Asia continues to be treated as a central arena of Sino-American great power competition in foreign policy discourse. However, it is noteworthy that, since the beginning of 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has been the only cabinet-level official to conduct an official visit to the region. He visited the Philippines in late March and Singapore in May for the Shangri-La Dialogue. Aside from these two occasions, no further U.S. cabinet-level visits to Southeast Asia have occurred, raising the question of how much Washington truly regards the region as a strategic priority.

Significant substantive differences between the two powers' messages were also evident in their assessments of the international and regional situation. China's narrative emphasized the necessity of

<sup>15</sup> [China, Vietnam support multilateral trade regime amid U.S. tariff pressure](#). *Reuters*, 2025.04.15. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>16</sup> AZHAR, Danial – TANG, Ashley – WANG, Ethan: [China's Xi, in Malaysia, calls on Asian nations to resist confrontation and protectionism](#). *Reuters*, 2025.04.16. [Online, 2025.06.08.]

<sup>17</sup> NIMOL, Seoung: [Cambodia Upholds Neutrality Amid Chinese Deals; U.S. Affirms It's Not Forcing a Choice](#). *Cambodia News*, 2025.04.21. [Online, 2025.06.08.]



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multipolarity and the need to build a new international order in which Southeast Asia can participate as a partner. In contrast, Hegseth's speech advocated the defence of the status quo: the United States continues to see itself as the leader of the international order, whose "guardian" is a strategic mission. However, this mission must also be supported by Southeast Asian states - Hegseth urged his partners to increase their defence spending, up to 5% of GDP, similar to European NATO members. In other words, it is not the United States offering support but rather expecting it. Moreover, the credibility of the American narrative is also questionable: the second Trump administration had previously unilaterally rewritten international trade rules, with severe consequences for the export-dependent region. Thus, even rhetorically, the role of the United States as the "guardian" of the international order was not entirely convincing.

Another significant divergence emerged in how the "adversary" was portrayed. China implicitly referred to the United States as a destabilizing force, emphasizing that Washington acts in accordance with its own interests while disregarding regional realities. In contrast, the United States presented China as an explicit existential threat. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth specifically underscored that China's military preparations for an attack on Taiwan pose a "real and near-term" danger, one that would have "devastating consequences" for the region as a whole. In doing so, he effectively equated American and Southeast Asian security interests, while overlooking the fact that the region's complex web of relationships and its strategic priorities do not always align with Washington's. While the American argument — that aggression against Taiwan would constitute a breach of the regional status quo — is logically coherent from an American perspective, the situation appears far more nuanced in Southeast Asia. Most states in the region, particularly Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, do not regard Taiwan's immediate fate as integral to their own national security. Rather, they are primarily concerned with maintaining a stable balance of power between the major players. For these countries, Washington's rhetoric urging them to "commit now, not later" can easily be perceived as pressure — an attempt to push them into premature alignment. In this context, Taiwan often appears less as a core issue in itself and more as a strategic instrument in American thinking, serving as a rhetorical and geopolitical lever to accelerate and clarify regional alignment against China.

This divergence was both strategic and cultural. Southeast Asian political culture is deeply rooted in indirect communication, the preservation of balance, and the concept of "face" as a form of social and diplomatic authority. The United States' binary, morally framed approach — such as pressuring countries to choose sides or commit early — often clashes with the region's preference for multilateral, flexible, and quiet diplomacy. Although China's assertiveness in the South China Sea undermines its regional credibility, its messaging consistently emphasizes mutual respect and the principle of non-interference. Furthermore, Chinese diplomacy deliberately draws on identity-building tools, including references to a shared colonial past, alternative non-Western paths to modernization, and, in some cases, a common communist legacy. These narratives resonate more naturally with Southeast Asia's identity constructions than American discourse does. While Hegseth expressed respect for the region's countries, his gestures remained largely formal, lacking deeper cultural or symbolic alignment. The "Indo-Pacific" concept, for example, frames the region primarily as a geopolitical space, without meaningfully engaging with Southeast Asia's cultural self-perception or historical experience.

In light of all this, the two sides' concrete policy offerings diverged sharply. China proposed economic partnerships, infrastructure development, and mutually beneficial cooperation, positioning the region as an active shaper of the future. In contrast, the United States primarily emphasized its own security objectives and the maintenance of its military presence, while tangible economic incentives were conspicuously absent from its messaging. This discrepancy cannot be attributed solely to the fact that the United States was represented only by the Secretary of Defense. Traditionally, U.S. strategy toward East and



Southeast Asia has relied on a combination of military instruments and economic influence — including access to the American market and foreign direct investment — which, since World War II, has functioned as a cohesive force binding Washington to its regional allies. The absence of economic inducements stands in sharp contrast to the current climate, marked by tariff-related threats and growing uncertainty in global supply chains. Moreover, in his speech, Hegseth explicitly stated that Washington rejects the pattern of countries aligning economically with Beijing while relying on the United States for security. Yet the question of alignment remains one of the most sensitive dilemmas for Southeast Asian states — one that Beijing has deliberately avoided forcing to the surface.

Alongside the warnings about potential threats, there was no clear commitment regarding the long-term sustainability of U.S. security guarantees. This could be particularly troubling for a region that has already experienced Washington's occasional abrupt re-evaluation of its alliance obligations - for example, in relation to NATO or its role in Ukraine. In contrast, China — despite all its challenges — is a permanent neighbour whose presence cannot be ignored.

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

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

## 6. Conclusion

China's 2025 diplomatic tour fits well into the long-term trajectory of its foreign policy: it promoted economic partnership, cultural solidarity, and a multipolar world order, without exerting direct pressure. In contrast, the United States, through the Shangri-La Dialogue, sought a more explicit commitment from



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the region's countries, primarily on security issues, accompanied by strong military rhetoric, while paying less attention to the region's specific interests.

The differing strategies of the two powers justify several conclusions:

- Beijing's more subtle use of tools provides greater room for manoeuvre for Southeast Asian countries: it offers the possibility of balancing between powers or even delaying alignment. Under the current circumstances, U.S. pressure appears less effective.
- Both sides are building influence, but while Washington focuses on short-term security objectives, China is thinking in terms of long-term regional integration.
- China's narrative resonates more consciously with the identities and experiences of Southeast Asian countries, while the American approach often comes across as that of an outsider, especially when it overlooks economic realities or historical sensitivities.
- The two great powers convey sharply different messages regarding the international order: China offers a new alternative world order that includes a role for the region, while Washington emphasizes the joint defence of the status quo - even as it is the United States itself that unilaterally rewrites the global rules of the game (in areas such as trade, tariffs, and security costs), often to the detriment of the region's interests.

Overall, the two visits clearly reflect the differing strategies of the two great powers. China's approach - based on economic partnership, cultural relations, and nuanced diplomatic language — currently appears more effective in winning over the region. Can this dispel the concerns of Southeast Asian countries? Certainly not. However, Beijing's more sophisticated regional policy may be particularly concerning for Washington if U.S. foreign policy continues to pressure Southeast Asian states into openly choosing sides. Such an approach could not only constrain the region's strategic flexibility but may also inadvertently facilitate China's geopolitical expansion. In order to prevent the United States' regional influence from declining, it must fundamentally rethink its policy. In order to prevent the United States' regional influence from declining, it is time to rethink its policy fundamentally. If the United States wants to avoid further declines in its regional influence, it must fundamentally reconsider its policy in Southeast Asia.



# John Lukacs Analyses on Global Affairs 2025/7

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