

# INTRODUCTION

Rising from the water like a frosted wedding cake, the MS *World Dream* glided into the port of Subic Bay to a characteristically sunny Filipino reception. Municipal officials lined up along the wharf to welcome the cruise ship, waving small Philippine flags and draping floral leis around the necks of disembarking passengers. A band played and a line of dancers whirled along the pier in ethnic garb. Outside, special souvenir stalls had been erected and tour buses stood idling at the ready.

For the authorities at Subic Bay, which once hosted the largest American naval base outside the United States, the arrival of the *World Dream* on the morning of January 16, 2019 was ample cause for celebration. Since 1992, the year of the base's closure, the Philippines had struggled to fill the economic hole left by the departure of thousands of American sailors and their families. Now, the gleaming German-built cruise ship towered over Subic's Alava Wharf, which once berthed the nuclear-powered aircraft carriers of the US Navy. In place of American sailors looking forward to raucous spells of shore leave, it carried some 3,000 tourists from mainland China. They came with parasols, camera phones, and—most importantly—plenty of money to spend.

As the Chinese visitors stepped off the pier, they wandered into the heart of the former American base. They strolled past Building 229, the old base headquarters, and passed ex-naval warehouses and administrative buildings, their identification numbers still stenciled in black on peeling white facades. Some visited the public restrooms next to an overgrown mini-golf course once used by US personnel. Others dragged roller suitcases down leafy Dewey Avenue, named after the US commander who defeated the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay in 1898, marking the start of the bloody American conquest of the Philippine islands.

Situated on a magnificent natural harbor on the island of Luzon, the US Naval Base Subic Bay was central to the story of America's rise as a Pacific

power in the twentieth century. Occupied by the US after its victory in the Spanish–American War, Subic had figured in every overseas US military engagement of the twentieth century, from the Boxer Rebellion to Desert Storm. With its wealth of sheltered deep-water anchorages and mammoth naval airfield, the base served as “the service station and supermarket” of the US Seventh Fleet, providing the training, repair, resupply, and recreation facilities that kept the Pacific armada afloat.<sup>1</sup> There was no more imposing symbol of Washington’s global military reach.

Today, the Subic area is still dotted with the vestiges of empire. Weathered signs hang on ragged cyclone fencing. Disintegrating Quonset huts and empty concrete ammunition bunkers slumber in the jungle. In the nearby town of Olongapo, an American Legion Office still sits amid the faded go-go bars and discos spawned by the large US troop presence. In 1992, the base was forced to close due to a fateful convergence of Filipino nationalism, the end of the Cold War, and the eruption in June 1991 of Mount Pinatubo, which severely damaged its facilities and forced the abandonment of Clark, the US Air Force base 45 kilometers to the north. The area was subsequently converted into the Subic Bay Freeport Zone, a duty-free service and logistics hub, though it never fully recovered from the American withdrawal.

Now, nearly 30 years later, the local authorities were turning to China to revive the economy. In 2018, cruise ships like the *World Dream* made 19 layovers at Subic, many of them filled with newly prosperous mainland Chinese tourists. Wilma T. Eisma, chairperson of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority, described them as a “game changer” for the area—at least until the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which brought the global cruise industry to a shuddering halt.<sup>2</sup> It wasn’t just Subic Bay that was looking to China. A Chinese firm had recently announced plans to invest \$2 billion<sup>3</sup> in an industrial park at the former Clark Air Base, while Chinese state banks had plans to fund a railway connecting the two former bases under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), President Xi Jinping’s globe-spanning infrastructure scheme. At the same time, two more Chinese companies were angling to take over a failing South Korean shipyard at Subic Bay—a worrisome prospect for the US government, given its close proximity to the hotly disputed South China Sea.<sup>4</sup>

The arrival of Chinese economic power in these former nerve-centers of the American military reflected a deeper shift in the balance of power in Southeast Asia. While the closure of Subic and Clark did not result in a

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wholesale American withdrawal from the region—the US Navy shifted its ship maintenance yards and supply depots to other Asian countries, including Japan and Singapore—it did mark an important watershed. The base closures represented the largest reduction of American forces in the western Pacific up to that point. For the first time in four centuries, there were no foreign troops in the Philippines. A strategic vacuum yawned, and the Chinese stood ready to fill it.

In February 1992, nine months before the US flag was lowered at Alava Wharf, China's legislature passed a bill laying claim to more than 80 percent of the South China Sea, the Asian seaway that serves as a major conduit of global trade. The innocuously titled Law Concerning Territorial Waters and Adjacent Regions marked the beginning of China's increasingly muscular attempts to extend its control over the important ocean expanse. That same month, China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping wound up what would later become known as his Southern Tour, which revived China's economic reforms following its violent crackdown on pro-democracy protests in 1989.

At the time of Deng's tour, few American observers thought China likely to emerge as a viable economic competitor in the foreseeable future: in 1992, the nation's per capita GDP sat at just \$366, and its exports amounted to less than \$85 billion. But 25 years later, its per capita GDP had grown more than 20-fold; the value of its exports had increased 26 times over.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, China surpassed the US to become the world's top trading nation, and the following year, overtook the US to become the world's largest economy, at least in terms of purchasing power parity.<sup>6</sup> This booming economic emergence has fueled a crash-program of defense modernization that poses the most serious challenge to US military supremacy in the Pacific since the end of World War II.

Nowhere is China's economic and military emergence more apparent than in Southeast Asia, the dynamic and diverse region straddling the critical intersection of the Indian and Pacific oceans. Since the end of the Cold War, China has risen from a mid-table power in Southeast Asia to an economic, military, and even cultural force in the 11 nations of the region: Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, East Timor, and the Philippines. Today, China is Southeast Asia's top trade partner and source of tourism, and contributes a rapidly growing proportion of its foreign direct investment. From the Mekong River to the South China Sea, China's power is rapidly reshaping the region.

I first started following this story from Cambodia, where I lived and worked from 2008 to 2016, covering Southeast Asia from the country's dilapidated capital, Phnom Penh. This small, conflict-torn country offered a unique angle on the changes that had taken place since the end of the Cold War. In March 1992, as the US Navy was leaving Subic Bay, the United Nations (UN) was arriving in Cambodia, part of a \$2 billion multinational peacekeeping mission intended to end a long civil war and rebuild the country as a liberal democracy. If Subic Bay symbolized the passing era of the Cold War, Cambodia symbolized the promise of what was to come: a world finally made safe for democracy.

With the arrival of the UN's democracy-building mission, Cambodia became a tattered vessel for the optimistic spirit of the age: a global project of betterment. But it soon became clear that Cambodia, and the world, were moving in a different direction. Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge commander who had been in power since 1985, quickly wrested control of the new democratic institutions implanted by the UN. At first, to keep Western aid flowing, he retained the trappings of democracy, granting political parties and human rights groups considerable freedom. But when opposition to his rule mounted, these spaces were hastily closed over. After a jolting loss of support at national elections in 2013, the Cambodian government dissolved the main opposition party, arrested its leader for treason, and assaulted civil society and the press. At the next election in 2018, Hun Sen's party won every seat in parliament.

Standing behind Cambodia's strongman was a new foreign ally: one with capacious pockets and little commitment to the liberal democratic norms that supposedly emerged triumphant from the Cold War with the Soviets. During the eight years I spent in Cambodia, China ticked off milestone after milestone: it became the country's top trade partner, then its leading foreign investor and aid-giver. Defense ties deepened. In 2017, China became the number one source of tourists to Cambodia, and a magnet for Chinese expatriates and businesspeople. China's backing changed the game in Cambodia. By reducing Hun Sen's need for Western support, it also lessened his need to sustain the pretense of democracy. Under his rule, Cambodia largely reverted to what it had been before 1992: an authoritarian, single-party state.<sup>7</sup>

Like the *World Dream* at Subic Bay, Cambodia's parabolic trajectory—from open authoritarianism to quasi-democracy and back again—epitomized a wider shift. Everywhere that I traveled and reported in the region, China's rising

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influence was evident. From Vientiane to Johor Bahru, China's banks, energy companies, tech firms, and real-estate conglomerates were an increasingly visible presence; so too were its students, tourists, and businesspeople. In the borderlands separating China from mainland Southeast Asia, new infrastructure and transport networks were plowing through ancient geographic barriers, opening remote areas to a transformative southward sweep of Chinese capital and immigration. In the South China Sea, which laps the shores of eight Southeast Asian nations, Beijing was asserting its naval power and constructing artificial islands, complete with airstrips and radar installations, in defense of audacious maritime claims. Meanwhile, China's cultural power was washing over the ethnic Chinese communities of the region, altering ideas of what it meant to be Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia is unusually exposed to the expanding power of the new China. Three Southeast Asian nations share land borders with China, and five are directly affected by its claims in the South China Sea. All dwell in the lengthening shadow of its power: economic, political, military, and cultural. The numbers alone tell a striking story. In 2007, China surpassed the US to become the third-largest trading partner of Southeast Asia after Japan and the European Union. Two years later, it had leapt into first position. In 2012, it became the largest source of tourists to the region as well. While Chinese investment in Southeast Asia has grown more slowly, it now sits behind just Japan as the region's second biggest source of foreign investment.

The Southeast Asian attitude to China's sudden rise can best be described as fraught. As China has become the most important economic partner to nearly every nation in the region, it has also become their thorniest foreign policy challenge. A survey of Southeast Asian regional experts and policymakers conducted in late 2019 by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore found that 38 percent of respondents thought “China will become a revisionist power with an intent to turn Southeast Asia into its sphere of influence,” while less than one-tenth saw China as “a benign and benevolent power.”<sup>8</sup> In Burma, unease about growing Chinese influence contributed to a rapid opening to the West. In Malaysia, it helped bring down a corrupt government. Beijing's aggressive actions in the South China Sea have touched off protests in Manila and riots in Ho Chi Minh City. Everywhere, peoples and governments are grappling with the question of how best to deal with the nuclear-armed super-power standing up on their doorstep.

This ambivalence grows from the region's geography. Southeast Asia begins as a southward extension of the Chinese subcontinent, before breaking apart into a scattering of islands that stretch across the mid-point of the Indian and Pacific oceans. China's size and propinquity make it both a natural source of disquiet, and a reality that no Southeast Asian nation can feasibly ignore. The starkest example is Vietnam, a nation whose history has been driven in many ways by the tension between emulating China and resisting it. But the same is true, to varying lesser degrees, of all the Southeast Asian nations.

For Southeast Asia, China's return to wealth and power carries echoes of the distant past. For more than a millennium the two regions have been closely connected by trade, tribute, and cultural transmissions. Up to the nineteenth century, China enjoyed an unassailable primacy in the lands to its south. Southeast Asian kings, sultans, and tribal princes prostrated themselves before the Chinese emperors, and the waters of the Nanyang—the “southern ocean”—supported a thriving trade between the two regions. Commerce brought waves of settlers from southern China, who spread their culture, languages, and technology throughout Southeast Asia, while retaining strong connections to their homeland. Their descendants today form significant populations in every Southeast Asian nation; in Singapore, they are a majority. In many senses, the region boasts a “longer, more varied, and more sustained history of relations with China than any other.”<sup>9</sup>

Where imperial China seldom intervened in the affairs of the Southeast Asian kingdoms and sultanates, content with their rulers' ritual genuflections, its modern successor has been less complacent. Since the founding of the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, after a century of internal chaos and ascendant Western imperialism, China has blazed a turbulent path toward a new era of wealth and power. During its first three decades, the PRC sought to achieve this through the active support of communist insurgencies across the region, poisoning its relations with many Southeast Asian governments. In the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping threw aside Maoist ideology in favor of opening and economic reform, Beijing normalized its relations with the region, declared itself a “good neighbor,” and began building its influence via trade, investment, and accommodating diplomacy. But suspicions of the PRC's intentions remain widespread. As Beijing has more aggressively moved to reclaim its former position of prominence in

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Southeast Asia, especially under President Xi Jinping, who took office in 2012, fears of Chinese coercion and subversion have revived—shadowed by a deeper, more subliminal fear of vassalage to a revived Chinese empire.

How Southeast Asia views and responds to the challenge of China's rise has global implications. The region is home to a young and growing population of 650 million, with a \$2.8 trillion economy that is the fifth-largest in the world after the US, China, Japan, and India. By 2030, it is projected to rise to fourth place. Through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which unites ten Southeast Asian countries, it is an increasingly important player on the diplomatic stage. It straddles vital arteries of global trade, including the Straits of Malacca, one of the world's busiest shipping routes. All this makes Southeast Asia of crucial strategic significance not just to China, but also to rival powers, including the US, which harbor concerns about China's waxing power and ambition.

The interests of major powers have always collided in Southeast Asia. Fate gifted the region the gentle currents and strong monsoon winds that made it a hinge of global trade and a rich prize of empire. Starting in the sixteenth century, Southeast Asia was conquered and carved up by the Portuguese, British, Dutch, Spanish, French, and Americans, each bent on the pursuit of riches and glory. In the twentieth century, the region became a crucial arena of the Cold War, split between hostile communist and non-communist camps, a conflict that turned hot in the jungles of Indochina. As China's emergence stirs up anxieties across the Western world, Southeast Asia has once again become the focus of a global contest for power.

The research and writing of this book coincided with a watershed in American attitudes toward China. Under President Donald Trump, the Obama administration's cautious "rebalance" to Asia has given way to a strident and increasingly confrontational China policy. This has since crystalized into a broadly bipartisan consensus: one of the few that pertains in Washington today. American officials speak of Beijing as a hostile power that is seeking to dominate Asia and overturn the US-backed global security order, already knocked off its axis by Trump's ascent to the Oval Office. Politicians and pundits sketch the lines of a grand ideological struggle, even a new Cold War, pitting authoritarian China against the democracies of the West.

In Southeast Asia, views of China are more anguished and complex. Dwelling in China's shadow, the region does not enjoy the luxury of simple



binaries. While Southeast Asian governments view Chinese behavior with justified alarm, China's economic centrality to the region makes it something they cannot ignore, as much as they might wish to. Indeed, there are even important questions of principle on which they agree or sympathize with it. Beyond this, it is tricky to generalize about Southeast Asian views of China. Each of its 11 nations faces similar challenges in adapting to the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, yet no two countries approach China in quite the same way. In each case, views of the Middle Kingdom have been shaped by long patterns of interaction: by the multifarious ways that China and its people have been encountered, seen, and understood through history. Like the facets of a gemstone, each splits the same light in different ways.

This consideration has dictated the book's structure, which proceeds through the region country by country, in rough order of their geographic and cultural proximity to China. Chapter 1 situates Southeast Asia in the wider context of China's geopolitical ambitions, and its long march back to national wealth and power. It sketches the long history of interactions between China and the lands to its south, and describes Southeast Asia's attempts to navigate a dawning era of superpower struggle. Chapter 2 then moves to the Southeast Asian mainland, describing the process of economic integration that is breaking down an age-old geographic barrier, opening the region to an unprecedented flow of Chinese investment and immigration. Chapter 3 turns to Vietnam, the nation with the most intimate and tortured relationship to China. Chapter 4 examines Cambodia and Laos, the two small satellites of mainland Southeast Asia, where China's economic presence is more marked than anywhere else in the region. Chapters 5 and 6 look in turn at Thailand, the anchor of the Southeast Asian mainland, and Burma, enclosed at the crossroads of Asia's two giants: China and India.

The book's attention then turns to the oceans. Chapter 7 describes the origins and nature of China's maritime ambitions, and its impact on the Southeast Asian nation perhaps most reliant on the unimpeded global flow of goods and capital: Singapore. Chapters 8 to 10 examine China's relationships with the nations of the historically more remote (from a Chinese perspective) Malay maritime world: Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Due to restrictions of time and space, this book regrettably omits detailed discussions of Brunei and East Timor, the two smallest Southeast Asian nations by population. Both countries would have undoubtedly made worthy additions



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to the story told in this book, underlining further the multifariousness of the region's responses to a rising China. Finally, a short Afterword offers some thoughts on the likely trajectory of Southeast Asia through the twenty-first century, as it seeks safe and prosperous passage through the reefs of an increasingly turbulent world.

## PIVOT OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

President Xi Jinping looked down from the rostrum as China's armed forces paraded in great waves along the Avenue of Eternal Peace. First came thousands of soldiers, marching by in great lockstep squares. Then came a display of tanks, drones, and heavy weaponry, including the world premiere of the fearsome DF-41 ballistic nuclear missile, which growled past on 16-wheeled carriers. The military spectacle was followed by floats extolling the achievements of Xi's Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Cheering youngsters shook plastic torches before a giant image of Mao Zedong. Floats marked the "Four Modernizations" of Deng Xiaoping, and the "Three Represents" of Jiang Zemin, the 2008 Beijing Olympics and China's achievements in high-speed rail.

The date was October 1, 2019, and the occasion was the 70th birthday of the communist People's Republic of China (PRC). Before the parade, President Xi had delivered a short speech, standing directly above the huge portrait of Mao that hangs from Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace. Xi wore a black Zhongshan suit similar to the one Mao had worn 70 years before, when he had stood on the same spot to proclaim the PRC's founding. "There is no force that can shake the foundation of this great nation," Xi told the crowds assembled in Tiananmen Square. "No force can stop the Chinese people and the Chinese nation forging ahead."<sup>1</sup>

The tightly choreographed parade, with its war machines and marching bands, was a compelling display of the growing power and ambition of the world's most populous nation. Shortly after taking office on November 15, 2012, Xi Jinping vowed to restore China to its ancient prominence and glory. He spoke of a "China Dream" and a "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." As Xi consolidated power at home, reinforcing the CCP's position at the heart of the nation's political and economic life, he became more assertive abroad.

Shrugging off the caution and humility of his predecessors, he openly declared China's arrival as a great power. Addressing the CCP's 19th National Congress in October 2017, Xi proclaimed a "new era" in which China would take center stage in the world and "make a greater contribution to humankind."<sup>2</sup>

In its broad outlines, Xi's goal is the same as that pursued by past generations of Chinese nationalists and political leaders, from Mao to the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek: the restoration of China's national "wealth and power" (*fuqiang*) after a long period of disunity and weakness.<sup>3</sup> This project of national renewal is driven by a profound sense of victimhood arising from what the CCP refers to as the "century of humiliation," a melancholy period of subjugation by the Western imperial powers that began with imperial China's defeat in the Opium War of 1839–42, and ended with the PRC's establishment in 1949, when Mao proclaimed, "Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up."<sup>4</sup>

If Xi's ends are familiar, however, his means are in many ways unprecedented. For the first time in half a millennium, China has taken to the seas, asserting sovereignty over most of the South China Sea on the basis of dubious historical claims, and rapidly building its navy into a "blue-water" armada capable of projecting power far from its shores. At the same time, China has pushed for the reform of key international institutions to better reflect the country's interests and preferred norms. It has established an array of new financial institutions to supplement American-dominated institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. In 2015, China launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), headquartered in Beijing, to support infrastructure development across the region. The AIIB currently counts 76 members, including nearly every Asian country.

By far the most ambitious Chinese undertaking is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013. Likened by some to a new Marshall Plan, the BRI envisions the investment of tens of billions of dollars in the construction of an international network of roads, railways, pipelines, ports, fiber optic cables, and industrial zones that will run from Vladivostok to the Atlantic Ocean. Consisting of overland and maritime components—the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—the BRI aims to bind the Eurasian landmass into a single geoeconomic zone with China at its core. In late 2014, China announced the establishment of the Silk Road Fund, endowed with \$40 billion to support BRI infrastructure projects. The BRI has

since involved into the primary rubric and organizing scheme for China's multitude of global engagements.

Western observers frequently misdiagnose these efforts as an attempt to overturn and replace the existing US-backed global security order established at the end of World War II. In reality, Chinese attitudes are more ambivalent. Few nations have benefited more from US hegemony than China, and its leaders have little interest in tearing down the very structures that have aided their country's economic advancement. Like any great power, China seeks changes in the governance of international institutions, in order that they better reflect its growing prominence, while creating new institutions and mechanisms when it senses a need. Evan Feigenbaum describes China's strategy as one of "portfolio diversification," rather than the wholesale replacement of institutions and systems. "In the majority of instances and institutions," he writes, "Beijing pursues structural change by demanding changes to the existing framework."<sup>5</sup>

While China is not seeking to replace the US as the global hegemon, it does want to reclaim something of the centrality it enjoyed in East Asia prior to its subjugation by the Western empires and imperial Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In May 2014, Xi announced that it was time for "Asian people to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia," a remark that seemed to imply China's desire to displace the US military from East Asia. While some have expressed doubts as to whether this comment amounted to a serious statement of policy,<sup>6</sup> recent Chinese actions have made it abundantly clear that Xi intends to expunge past humiliations, gain the respect of the global community, and restore China to its former and "natural" place at the center of the Asian order.

Southeast Asia occupies a pivotal role in this project of national rejuvenation. This stems from the challenging realities of China's strategic environment. Seen from Beijing, Asia is a claustrophobic place: on three sides, China is enclosed by land borders with fourteen nations, including nuclear-armed rivals India and Russia. Off its east coast, it confronts an island barrier, running from Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula in the north to the island of Borneo in the south, constraining its access to the oceanic thoroughfare. Forming part of this barrier are three US treaty allies—Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—as well as Taiwan, which enjoys close ties to Washington. As Meng Xiangqing of China's National Defense University laments, these are airless confines for an aspiring great power: China "borders on big powers on land and is encircled by

an island chain in the sea,” he writes. As such, it “has never been able to enjoy any benefit from having both the land and the sea.”<sup>7</sup>

The constraints facing the extension of Chinese power to the north, east, and west place a special emphasis on the small nations lying to the south. Sprawling across fifty sun-drenched degrees of longitude between the Pacific and Indian oceans, Southeast Asia is at once China’s backyard, and its primary vulnerability. As its economy has grown, China has become heavily reliant on the busy sea-lanes that run through the region, especially through the Straits of Malacca, the congested neck of water separating the Malay Peninsula and the east coast of Sumatra in Indonesia. Each year, nearly 90,000 container vessels—more than half of the world’s merchant fleet tonnage—pass through this narrow chute. These ships bear around a quarter of the world’s trade and a third of its crude oil and refined fuels, making the Malacca Straits the second most important global oil transit chokepoint after the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>8</sup>

As China’s economy has grown, Chinese strategists have become concerned about their nation’s heavy reliance on the Malacca Straits, both as a conduit for China’s energy supplies and as an outlet for its own exports. In November 2003, then-President Hu Jintao declared that “certain major powers” were bent on controlling the straits, and called for the adoption of new strategies to mitigate what he described as China’s “Malacca dilemma.”<sup>9</sup> Despite increased overland imports from Russia and Central Asia, China remains dependent on oil transported via the straits. In 2018, approximately 70 percent of its total oil needs came from imports, around 80 percent of which were shipped through the straits.<sup>10</sup> One of Beijing’s core strategic priorities is therefore to protect these routes from foreign interdiction, while diversifying its sources of energy.

On both these counts, Southeast Asia is paramount. Mainland Southeast Asia, a region geographically contiguous with China, presents Beijing with alternative overland routes to the Indian Ocean, and the possibility of materializing, via the construction of roads, railways, and oil pipelines, the western “coast” that China lacks. In the maritime region of Southeast Asia, China has broken with the continental orientation of the old Chinese empire and leapt out into the oceans, erecting artificial islands on rocks and low-tide elevations in the South China Sea, while rapidly developing a powerful navy capable of securing the sea-lanes that have sustained its economic renaissance. Xi’s road to rejuvenation thus runs directly through the mountain passes and island straits of Southeast Asia.

China's interest in Southeast Asia is nothing new. For more than two millennia, the region was China's imperial backyard and its main arena of commercial interaction with the outside world. Dating back at least to the Song dynasty (960–1279), Chinese trading junks crisscrossed the Nanyang, or "southern ocean," as the Chinese termed it, their sails filled with monsoon winds, while Yunnanese mule trains snaked their way through the narrow mountain passes of southern China into the Buddhist kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia. Chinese merchants exchanged silk, tea, and porcelain for a range of goods, exotic and mundane: sea cucumbers from Makassar; edible birds' nests from Sarawak; jade and gems from Burma; rice from Siam; sticklac and ivory from the Lao states.

The streams of commerce brought large numbers of people from China, including merchants and monks, coolies and literati, political rebels and refugees fleeing dynastic collapse. These arrivals helped diffuse Chinese culture and technology throughout Southeast Asia, and catalyzed the region's commercial life. Many settled and intermarried with local populations, becoming in time an integral part of the societies to which they belonged. Later, the region's ethnic Chinese would also play important roles in major events in their ancestral homeland, from the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 to the economic revolution of the post-1978 era.

For most of recorded history, the Chinese empire has had a southward drift. As China's gaze remained fixed on the fearsome steppe peoples from the wind-swept north, Chinese culture and political power expanded slowly southward from its civilizational heartland in the Yellow River basin, a movement that one historian has likened to "the westward movement of American history and the eastward movement of Russian history."<sup>11</sup> China's "march toward the tropics," a centuries-long process that involved the absorption of borderlands and the gradual sinicization of their indigenous inhabitants, brought it into prolonged contact with the lands and peoples of today's Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup> It involved direct rule over parts of modern-day Vietnam and Burma, and the annexation of regions, like the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi, which had more in common with mainland Southeast Asia than the northern empire that absorbed them. It also displaced peoples from southern China, who migrated down through the mountain passes into the fertile lowland river valleys of the Southeast Asian mainland. When this advancing frontier was halted by European imperial conquest in the nineteenth century, it continued in the

form of large-scale emigration from the ports of southern China to the labor-hungry Western colonies of the Nanyang.<sup>13</sup>

Imperial officials viewed these southern lands through the lens of China's classical worldview: one that took the empire to be the center of civilization, with an emperor who ruled "all under heaven" (*tianxia*). From this perspective, the southern lands were wild tracts populated by less civilized peoples, whom one sixteenth-century Ming emperor likened to "the birds and beasts, without human morality."<sup>14</sup> Most of the time, there was no need to dominate these "barbarians" by force. Provided they acknowledged the superiority of the Celestial Emperor, civilization would flourish and harmony would reign. The concrete manifestation of this worldview was the imperial tribute mission, in which Southeast Asian kings and sultans dispatched periodic gift-bearing embassies to the Chinese capital. In return for performing the *kowtow*, a ritual prostration at the feet of the emperor, ambassadors received imperial seals of investiture and lavish gifts—silk, sable furs, fine porcelain—symbolizing his power and largesse.

If the Chinese viewed these tributary rituals as confirmations of their virtue and supremacy, Southeast Asia's rulers participated for a more practical reason: to gain access to trade.<sup>15</sup> By the time of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), commerce with China had become so important to the region that many of its kings and sultans were willing to flatter Chinese conceits in order to gain access to China's huge market—a dynamic that has some echoes in the present. In any event, they had little alternative. As the historian Yuan-kang Wang writes, "there were no other allies of significance that could be counted upon to balance Chinese power. . . . Relative weakness, geographic proximity, and lack of a counterbalancing ally forced them to accept Chinese dominance."<sup>16</sup>

The arrival of the European powers in Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century—first as traders, then as conquerors—ended China's southward expansion and severed these tributary relationships, along with many of the complacent illusions that sustained them. France's conquest of Tonkin (northern Vietnam) in 1885 cut off China's last, and closest, tributary bond in the region, bringing the whole of modern Southeast Asia—bar the Kingdom of Siam, which remained independent—under some form of alien control. China itself was reduced to a semi-colonial status, forced open to trade after the first Opium War in 1839–42, its vaunting civilizational pretensions forced into the humble constraining jacket of the modern nation-state.



China's return to Southeast Asia therefore marks the closing of a brief historical parenthesis—five hundred years at the most—in which Western power was predominant in Asia. It forms one part of the broader global shift of power and wealth that Gideon Rachman of the *Financial Times* has termed “Easternization.”<sup>17</sup> China's expanding presence in Southeast Asia—from its island-fortresses in the South China Sea to the quickening diffusion of its money, people, and ideas throughout the region—represents a resumption, through varied means, of its historical expansion to the south.

Of course, Southeast Asia is a vastly different place today compared to even a century ago. While Western imperialism temporarily halted China's march toward the tropics, a more enduring obstacle came in the form of the Southeast Asian nationalisms that it helped to provoke.<sup>18</sup> Fortified by a potent new sense of national pride and identity, tempered in some instances by ferocious struggles against Western colonial rule, the independent nation-states of Southeast Asia were (and remain) fiercely defensive of their sovereignty—and much less willing to assume positions of deference. Moreover, unlike in the precolonial era, when there was no other significant force to counterbalance Chinese power, today's Southeast Asia is crowded with rivals. The 11 nations of the region boast strong economic, political, and cultural ties not only to China but also to the US, Japan, the European Union, Australia, India, and many other countries, which collectively provide a strong counterweight to China's rising power and influence.

China's economic renewal has also coincided with Southeast Asia's increasing cohesiveness as a region. The idea of “Southeast Asia” is a very recent one. It originated as a term of simple geographic convenience, referring to the space between more firmly defined regions. While the phrase and its variants (“South-Eastern Asia,” “Sudostasien,” etc.) have been employed by Western writers since the mid-nineteenth century, its modern use dates to the formation of Louis Mountbatten's South East Asia Command by the Allies during World War II.<sup>19</sup> The term then entered widespread popular use during the Cold War, when it was taken up by US military planners and the thriving academic field of “Southeast Asian Studies” that emerged around the same time.<sup>20</sup>

The term “Southeast Asia” suggests a misleading degree of unity. On nearly every metric, the region presents a picture of bewildering diversity. It is “Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic, Confucian-Taoist,” writes Benedict Anderson, “colonized by Spaniards in the sixteenth century, by the Dutch in the

seventeenth, by the French and the British in the nineteenth, and by the Americans in the twentieth.”<sup>21</sup> Today, its peoples speak a profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages. It includes gleaming Singapore and impoverished Laos, and stretches from the azure waters of the Banda Sea to the dun foothills of the Himalayas. That this collection of lands and peoples came to be grouped into a single geographic unit is an outcome of both political convenience and historical contingency. Yet as Donald Emmerson argues, assigning a name to the region, however arbitrarily, also “helped to bring about the reality to which it now refers.”<sup>22</sup>

The main vehicle for the region’s emergence was the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967 with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines as founding members. ASEAN has since outgrown its narrow anti-communist origins to embrace ten of the eleven nations generally recognized to constitute Southeast Asia. (The remaining exclusion is East Timor, which applied for ASEAN membership in 2011.) During the 1980s and 1990s, ASEAN provided the framework for what became known as the Southeast Asian “miracle,” a period of surging economic advancement that saw the region’s cities swell and towers of glass and steel rise above the stone colonial edifices of Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

As regional economic integration has proceeded, and cheap regional airlines have bound the region and its people more tightly together, this negative space—south of China and east of India, part-Indo and part-Pacific—has started to develop a positive identity and coherence of its own. ASEAN has many shortcomings (of which more later), but under its auspices a fragmented region once termed “the Balkans of Asia” has attained a degree of peace and prosperity. As the historian Leonard Andaya writes, “‘Southeast Asia’ is no longer simply a term of convenience. Southeast Asians themselves now think regionally.”<sup>23</sup>

If Southeast Asia is central to China’s regional ambitions, it also presents uniquely challenging terrain—in large part due to China’s past actions in the region. From the PRC’s founding in 1949 up to the late 1970s, Southeast Asia was Mao’s laboratory of revolution, through which he sought to reclaim for China, through his leadership of world communism, its former wealth and prominence. By the 1960s, almost every Southeast Asian country had strong, capable communist movements, influenced and in many cases actively supported by Beijing. The parachute seeds of Maoism spread widely: from

Singapore to Phnom Penh, students, intellectuals, and trade unionists brandished Mao's "Little Red Book" of ideological aphorisms. Burmese, Indonesian, Malayan, and Thai revolutionaries converged on Beijing for political training. Chinese radio stations beamed out red propaganda in a dozen languages.

The result was that, by the time of Mao's death in 1976, China had alienated most of Southeast Asia. Fears of Chinese communist subversion spurred the founding of ASEAN: its five founding members were all staunchly anti-communist, and two of them—Indonesia and Singapore—would refuse to recognize the PRC until the final years of the Cold War. Even in Vietnam, where a communist revolution triumphed in 1975 with Chinese support, ideological solidarity soon collapsed into fierce nationalist enmity with roots in the distant past.

As in China itself, the task of cleaning up Mao's mess fell to Deng Xiaoping, the diminutive Sichuanese party veteran who emerged from the political maelstrom to become China's paramount leader in 1978. Deng shared Mao's ambitions—he, too, wanted to make China rich and strong—but he differed greatly in the means he employed. In place of revolutionary shock therapy, Deng advocated economic reform and the patient accumulation of national power under a cloak of self-effacement. In a famous 24-character slogan, he instructed his colleagues: "Hide our capacities and bide our time. Be good at maintaining a low profile. Never claim leadership." Seeking stability in China's immediate neighborhood, and recognizing Southeast Asia's importance to his program of "reform and opening," Deng also moved to mend ties with the ASEAN states. He phased out China's support to the region's communist movements, focused on trade, and adopted a humble international posture.

China's changing strategy toward Southeast Asia was spurred by US President Richard Nixon's landmark visit to Beijing in February 1972, and the broader Sino-American rapprochement that resulted. In the aftermath of the Nixon visit, China established formal diplomatic relations with Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. In late 1978, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia and toppled its Chinese-supported Khmer Rouge regime, China aligned with ASEAN and the US to form a new strategic front against Soviet-backed Vietnam and its Cambodian client-state: a partnership that provided the basis for a steady improvement in relations between China and ASEAN through the 1980s. As the CCP weathered international condemnation for its brutal handling of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, it found supportive

friends in Southeast Asia, where governments shared its sensitivities about perceived outside interference in their affairs.

By the end of the Cold War, Beijing had established diplomatic ties with all ten Southeast Asian nations—even the toxically anti-Chinese Suharto regime in Indonesia—and normalized relations with Vietnam. China also began to engage for the first time with ASEAN, a body that it had previously viewed with suspicion. In 1991, it became a “consultative partner” to the organization, and began to pursue a new policy of friendly coexistence and peaceful development with the nations lying along its periphery.

Despite stirrings of apprehension about Chinese actions in the South China Sea, security concerns were soon eclipsed by economics. In mid-1997, Southeast Asia was rocked by the Asian financial crisis, which began with the floating of the Thai baht in July of that year, and subsequently brought the region’s economic “miracle” to a shuddering halt. The effects were particularly dire in Thailand and Indonesia, where the local currencies shed half their value or more, banks and companies collapsed, and millions were thrown out of work. In the aftermath of the crisis, China played a central role in easing the economic pain, offering financial aid and supportive proclamations that differed from the sluggish reaction of the US and the harsh diktats of the International Monetary Fund. Most importantly, China refrained from devaluing its own currency, a move that earned it praise from leaders across the region. As David Shambaugh writes, Beijing’s assistance to the affected countries “punctured the prevailing image of China in the region as either aloof or hegemonic and began to replace it with an image of China as a responsible power.”<sup>24</sup>

To build on the goodwill generated by its response to the 1997 crash, China mounted a concerted diplomatic “charm offensive” in Southeast Asia.<sup>25</sup> Leaders spoke of the nation’s “peaceful rise,” and Chinese President Jiang Zemin declared that his nation would “forever be a good neighbor, a good partner, and a good friend” to the region.<sup>26</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s, high-level state visits were kicked into dizzying rotation. Beijing increased its involvement with ASEAN; by 2009, it was engaging the bloc through 48 separate mechanisms.<sup>27</sup> For the first time, it also opened multilateral discussions concerning maritime disputes. In 2002, China and ASEAN signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which succeeded in dampening maritime tensions, at least for the time being. The following year saw the

signing of a China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which came into effect in 2010, boosting trade between the two regions.

Southeast Asia's importance to China was reflected in its increasing knowledge of the region and its peoples. After the isolation of the Mao years, the 1990s and early 2000s saw a marked improvement in China's academic expertise on Southeast Asia. A survey conducted in 2001 noted the appearance of 607 publications on various aspects of Southeast Asia since 1990.<sup>28</sup> Much of this academic expertise was concentrated in southern China, particularly at universities in the provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan, reflecting the region's long-standing cultural and migratory linkages with Southeast Asia. In more recent years, this has expanded beyond the south to include research institutes and government think-tanks in Beijing, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the China Institute of International Studies, and new centers of Southeast Asian studies in major inland cities like Chongqing and Xi'an.<sup>29</sup>

This growing body of expertise fed into the quality of China's diplomacy toward the region. In the 1990s, the wooden officials of the Deng Xiaoping era started being phased into retirement and replaced with a younger generation of diplomats, frequently fluent in Southeast Asian languages, and often in English as well. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs began encouraging its diplomats to undertake multiple rotations to the same country in order to develop the local contacts in business and politics that would later serve them well as ambassadors.<sup>30</sup>

A key part of China's strategy in Southeast Asia was its deployment of "soft power" throughout the region. Chinese ambassadors gave donations to Chinese-language schools in Malaysia, and speeches at the opening of new Confucius Institutes from Laos to Singapore.<sup>31</sup> China expanded its media operations in Southeast Asia, broadcasting in local languages, and poured money into scholarships designed to bring Southeast Asian students to Chinese universities. By 2016, an estimated 80,000 students from Southeast Asia were enrolled at universities in mainland China—many on scholarships offered under the BRI.<sup>32</sup>

China's "soft power" push involved a proliferation of friendship visits, training programs, and all-expenses-paid "study tours" for journalists, academics, and government officials. One Malaysian think-tank analyst recalled a trip in which members of his institution were ferried from hi-tech industrial parks to cultural

sights to bullet trains. He summarized the trip's agenda as "demonstrations of Chinese competence, one after another." In a similar way, China deepened its outreach to the economically prosperous ethnic Chinese minorities of Southeast Asia. As Beijing sought to thicken business connections and curry support for Chinese initiatives, Overseas Chinese community organizations, chambers of commerce, and clan and dialect associations became the targets of special attention.

Despite these efforts, China has never quite succeeded at "soft power" in Southeast Asia. Its wooing of the region was based not on natural attraction, nor on appeals to its rich and fascinating history. These various initiatives rather involved variations on China's predominant theme: its economic strength. True to the CCP's materialist roots, many Chinese strategists have assumed that China's economic weight would exert an inevitable and irresistible pull on the small nations along its periphery. As Hou Songling of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at Jinan University has explained, "economics are the priority and politics will follow; economics will carry forward and spur politics."<sup>33</sup> Yan Xuetong, another leading Chinese scholar, has argued that China should let small nations benefit economically from their relationships, "and in return we get good political relationships. We should 'purchase' the relationships."<sup>34</sup> This "soft" power has also had a harder edge: if a foreign country's policy ran counter to its interests, China could cut off trade or employ other forms of economic coercion. Buried in China's talk of mutual prosperity was a stark choice: flourish within a Chinese orbit, or languish outside of it.

If Southeast Asians harbored concerns about Beijing's intentions, they could at least give the Chinese credit for showing up. China's regional charm offensive coincided with a period of ambivalent US engagement with Southeast Asia, which set in following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>35</sup> Preoccupied with planning and launching the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and then coping with the political chaos and diplomatic fallout that ensued, President George W. Bush skipped major regional summits, and most US engagement with Southeast Asia was framed in terms of the global "war on terror." The Bush administration's combination of strategic neglect and aggressive unilateralism contrasted starkly with China's persistent engagement and assertions of respect for national sovereignty. By the time Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympics, an event widely seen as a coming-out party for the new China, the nation's leaders

could mount a good argument that they had fulfilled the promise of China's "peaceful rise."

In September 2008, however, just a month after the Olympic Opening Ceremony in the Chinese capital, a massive economic crisis detonated in the US financial sector, blowing a hole in the global economy. The crash of 2008–9 would become another turning point. It not only battered the US economy and triggered a worldwide recession; it also discredited the prevailing American model of financialized capitalism and burnished China's state-led approach to economic management. Far from simply weathering the crisis, China accounted at the height of the recession for an astonishing 50 percent of the world's economic growth.<sup>36</sup> In the halls of power in Beijing, the crisis was a watershed: in the journalist John Pomfret's words, it "strengthened the impression that the future belonged to China while America's greatest moment had passed."<sup>37</sup>

The year 2009 saw a sudden shift in the tone and content of Chinese declarations, which became more assertive on a range of issues, from monetary policy to the virtues (or otherwise) of Western-style democracy. China also revived a series of mostly dormant territorial disputes with its neighbors, including those in the South China Sea. In May 2009, it submitted a map to a United Nations commission that featured the so-called "nine-dash line," a looping U-shaped boundary that claimed Chinese sovereignty over the majority of the South China Sea, including swathes of ocean claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan.<sup>38</sup> China's move incited an immediate and furious response from the affected Southeast Asian states.

China's stridency, on this question and others, has only increased since Xi Jinping's accession to the leadership in 2012. In late 2013, China began dredging operations aimed at transforming contested specks of rock and coral in the middle of the South China Sea into man-made island fortresses. By 2017, it had created seven of these features in the Spratly Islands, equipping them with administrative buildings, munitions depots, runways, fighter jet hangars, radar systems, and missile shelters. At the same time, it became more willing to employ various forms of economic coercion against other states, and take assertive actions to shape other nations' public opinion and political outcomes in ways favorable to Chinese interests.

Contrary to China's oft-repeated doctrine of non-interference, many of these influence efforts blurred the line between legitimate cultural outreach



and active involvement in the affairs of target nations—a form of intervention that has been dubbed “sharp power.”<sup>39</sup> One medium of influence was the CCP’s secretive International Liaison Department (ILD). Established in 1950 to coordinate Beijing’s contacts with foreign communist parties, the ILD has since been retooled as a means of maintaining ties with members of opposition political parties, as well as non-state groups, like ethnic armed rebel groups in Burma, which are seen as important to Chinese interests.

The most controversial form of influence operation has involved attempts to strengthen relations with Southeast Asia’s ethnic Chinese. As in the US and Australia, where the CCP’s wooing of Chinese diaspora communities has been the subject of recent alarm, state efforts have extended beyond cultural outreach, seeking to convert Chinese cultural affinities into sympathy for PRC state policies and support for official schemes like the BRI. While many Southeast Asian Chinese have resisted (or simply ignored) Beijing’s attempts to harness their support, these efforts have nonetheless generated unease across the region, where citizens of Chinese descent have frequently been suspected of dual loyalties.

All the while, China has continued to assert that its new strength will be a force for international harmony rather than conflict or domination. In October 2013, Xi Jinping convened a special conference on “diplomatic work with neighboring countries,” in which he called for the transformation of China’s immediate neighborhood, including Southeast Asia, into a “community of common destiny.”<sup>40</sup> However much Beijing might woo its southern neighbors, this “win-win” sloganeering jars with the realities of China’s present approach to the region: one that is increasingly less charm and more offensive.

For the nations and peoples of Southeast Asia, proximity to Asia’s largest power has always been a mixed blessing. As Malaysia’s former prime minister Tun Abdul Razak observed in 1971, the fact that the Southeast Asian countries dwell in China’s neighborhood means that they are always “the first to live with the consequences of her policies.”<sup>41</sup> Southeast Asia was the region where the fires of Maoism burned the hottest. It is also where the effects of China’s rising economic and political power have been most marked, for better and for worse.

On the one hand, the region has benefited greatly from a surge of trade, private sector investment, and development aid from China. In 1990, China’s

trade with the region was worth just over \$7.5 billion; by 2018, it had risen to some \$642 billion—a more than 85-fold increase.<sup>42</sup> Today, China is by far the leading trading partner of eight of the ten ASEAN countries, as well as of the region as a whole. From 2013 to 2018, China's trade with the Southeast Asian bloc totaled \$2.37 trillion, compared to \$1.33 trillion for the US and \$1.32 trillion for Japan.<sup>43</sup> It is also the leading source of tourists to the region. Chinese investment flows into ASEAN have increased at a slower clip, but have jumped sharply since the announcement of the BRI in 2013; in 2018, China was the second-largest investor in ASEAN from outside the region, behind Japan.<sup>44</sup>

In theory, Chinese state-backed financing under the BRI could help the poorer Southeast Asian countries modernize their infrastructure and raise their populations to prosperity. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the developing countries of Asia alone require infrastructure investments of about \$1.7 trillion per year to maintain growth, reduce poverty, and mitigate climate change—a need that China's BRI is ideally poised to fill.<sup>45</sup> Many Southeast Asian governments also find it appealing that Chinese support is offered without overt political conditions, unlike Western nations and international financial institutions, which often tie their aid and financing to a range of good governance and human rights benchmarks.

On the other hand, many of these economic benefits have been double-edged. Booming trade figures conceal China's large and growing trade surpluses with a number of its major trading partners in Southeast Asia, fueled by an influx of low-priced Chinese agricultural produce and manufactured goods that have undercut local industries, especially since CAFTA came into force in 2010. Moreover, Chinese investment—especially state-backed infrastructure projects—has relied heavily on the use of Chinese workers and technology, a perennially sensitive issue across much of the region.

Exported south, China's state-driven development model has had a range of deleterious effects, from environmental degradation and illegal logging to the forced displacement of local populations for infrastructure projects. While Chinese financial support is free of explicit political conditionalities, it comes with strings of a different kind: harsh financing terms that have stoked fears of over-indebtedness to Chinese state banks. All of these fears help account for the joke that I have heard across the ASEAN region, from Palawan to Sihanoukville: that the arrival of Chinese capital, goods, traders, or workers was turning the nation, or some part of it, into “a province of China.” Although

an exaggeration, the joke speaks to the profound unease that many Southeast Asians feel at the giant awakening to their north.

China's size and proximity confers on its leaders a special responsibility of convincing the Southeast Asian nations of its friendly intentions. Instead, many of its recent actions have sent the opposite message. For all the talent of its diplomatic corps, Chinese officialdom has shown it has a tin-ear for public opinion, and a general insensitivity to the negative responses provoked by its rising power—even to the idea that China's policies could evoke such resentment in the first place. These traits are especially notable in the region's more open societies. As befits an authoritarian party-state with little space for independent political organization, the PRC is adroit at dealing with states and governments—no nation does state pageantry better—yet is congenitally clumsy in its dealings with populations and organizations lying outside the remit of the state.

This blinkered approach encapsulates the condition that Edward Luttwak has diagnosed as “great-state autism”—the difficulty that large powers face in breaking free of entrenched ways of thinking, acting, and behaving.<sup>46</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, the outspoken former Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Foreign Ministry, put China's behavior down to the re-emergence of a kind of imperial hauteur: a demand that its size and prominence be acknowledged by a general subservience to Chinese interests. “Everybody has accepted China as a geopolitical fact,” he told me in an interview in 2017, “but the Chinese infer from this geopolitical fact a new norm for East Asian international relations: that there is a new hierarchy with China at the apex.”

This has given rise to an apparently widespread perception that opposition to Chinese initiatives can only be due to recalcitrance, ill-intention, or the malign influence of outside powers. This imperious attitude was epitomized during the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi in July 2010, when Yang Jiechi, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, declared that maritime disputes between China and ASEAN member states in the South China Sea would not be negotiated multilaterally. “China is a big country and other countries are small countries,” he reportedly told Southeast Asian leaders, “and that's just a fact.”<sup>47</sup> Even as Beijing claims to safeguard other nations' sovereignty, its behavior carries an unmistakable echo of colonial powers past.

China's “great-state autism” is most glaring—and potentially most dangerous—on the question of its relationship to Southeast Asia's ethnic Chinese diaspora.

An estimated 32.7 million ethnic Chinese live across the ten nations of ASEAN, most of them the descendants of poor immigrants who moved south during the high noon of European colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>48</sup> These Chinese communities have played a central role in the making of modern Southeast Asia. Their commercial networks helped drive the Southeast Asian “miracle” in the 1980s and 1990s and they remain central to the region’s economic life today, enmeshed in the commanding heights of politics and business.

At the same time, these Chinese communities have long been a source of resentment among “native” Southeast Asians. Since colonial times, they have been accused of profiting at the expense of ethnic majorities, advancing the interests of the Chinese state, or both. This has made ethnic Chinese the frequent targets of discrimination and violence, most notably during the rolling street riots that seized Indonesia in May 1998. As Michael Vatikiotis writes, it is not the threat of a Chinese naval or overland invasion that most worries the peoples and governments of the region. Rather, it is the “subliminal, unspoken fear of mass migration from China, as well as China’s putative extra-territorial claim over the ethnic Chinese communities of the region.”<sup>49</sup>

People from China began settling in Southeast Asia around the thirteenth century, in line with its growing commercial presence in the region. But the major waves of immigration date from the mid-nineteenth century, when famine, overpopulation, and political upheaval pushed millions of young men to emigrate from the coastal regions of Fujian and Guangdong provinces. While some set off for California, or the island plantations of the Caribbean, most went to Southeast Asia, where work was plentiful in the mines and plantations of colonial Java, Malaya, and French Indochina, as well as in independent Siam. So strong was the connection between Chinese immigration and Western imperialism, the historian Wang Gungwu writes, that “it could almost be said that Chinese trade followed European flags.”<sup>50</sup> By 1900, there were 120,000 Chinese in southern Vietnam, 200,000 in Bangkok, and more than 60,000 in the Rangoon area.<sup>51</sup> While many of these immigrants remained poor, a significant number flourished under colonial rule, slotting into roles as tax collectors and economic middlemen between the European authorities and native populations.

Things began to change in the late nineteenth century, when nationalism arose in China and subsequently spread, via telegraph and steamship, to the

Chinese communities abroad. Prior to this, few would have considered themselves “Chinese” in the modern sense of the term. Most spoke southern regional languages like Hokkien and Teochew that were unintelligible to Mandarin-speakers, and would more likely have identified themselves by dialect, clan group, or district of origin. Suddenly, these “Nanyang Chinese” began to play active roles in the events roiling their homeland. From the early twentieth century, they offered a pool of support for those seeking the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and its replacement with a modern republic. The republican leader Sun Yat-sen would later describe the Southeast Asian Chinese as “the mother of the revolution” that toppled the Qing in 1911.<sup>52</sup>

Political divisions among the ethnic Chinese of Southeast Asia mirrored those in China proper. Some supported the Nationalist republic led by Chiang Kai-shek, others the Communist movement led by Mao. In the 1930s, when the Nationalists and Communists formed a United Front to fight the invading Japanese armies, Southeast Asia’s Overseas Chinese similarly banded together and raised funds to support the struggle.

As Chinese identity sharpened across the Nanyang, however, colonial officials came to view Chinese populations as disloyal and potentially subversive. One British cabinet assessment from the 1950s described the ethnic Chinese of Southeast Asia as “almost automatic agencies of the Peking Government.”<sup>53</sup> The same was true of indigenous elites, already resentful at the wealth and privilege of their nations’ ethnic Chinese populations. King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) of Siam, who infamously referred to his kingdom’s Chinese as “the Jews of the East,” probably spoke for many early Southeast Asian nationalists when he wrote in 1914, “No matter where they live, what nationality they assume, Chinese remain essentially Chinese.”<sup>54</sup>

The coming of independence after World War II brought further challenges for the region’s ethnic Chinese. As Benedict Anderson notes, “Colonial subjecthood could be worn lightly; modern citizenship could not.”<sup>55</sup> The PRC’s export of communism led many Southeast Asian governments to accuse the Chinese of acting as a “fifth column” for Beijing—a claim that was all the more insidious for containing a grain of truth. This resulted in a range of restrictions, including bans on the Chinese language, travel to China, and ethnic Chinese participation in key professions. Their practical effect was to ghettoize the Chinese in the private commercial sector, where they flourished, boasting close connections to “native” political leaders and access to an intricate

“bamboo network” of Overseas Chinese financial connections spanning the region. In 1995, an Australian government study estimated that the ethnic Chinese of Southeast Asia generated a collective GDP of \$450 billion, not far short of China’s then-GDP of around \$500 billion.<sup>56</sup>

China’s policy toward its Southeast Asian offspring has always been a complex and delicate issue. For much of its history, the Chinese empire disdained those who left its shores, viewing them as outcasts, even criminals. When the Dutch sent the Qianlong Emperor an apology for a vicious massacre of Chinese in Batavia (Jakarta) in 1740, he is reported to have replied that he was “little solicitous for the fate of unworthy subjects who, in the pursuit of lucre, had quitted their country and abandoned the tombs of their ancestors.”<sup>57</sup> With the rise of Chinese nationalism things moved to the other extreme. In 1909, the Qing dynasty claimed jurisdiction over all ethnic Chinese, no matter where they resided, on the basis of blood, a position inherited by the Republic of China after 1912, a further reason why ethnic Chinese loyalties aroused such concerns in Southeast Asia.

Upon taking power in 1949, the PRC faced the challenge of what policy to take toward the Overseas Chinese of Southeast Asia. In general, its approach has shifted according to its perceived national interests. In the 1950s, hoping to cultivate good relationships in Southeast Asia, the PRC’s first premier Zhou Enlai disavowed responsibility for the region’s ethnic Chinese, encouraging them to be loyal to their new nations of residence. But ambiguities lingered, especially given China’s steadfast support for the region’s communist movements, some of which (as in Malaya) consisted disproportionately of ethnic Chinese. The issue was also complicated by the fact that the CCP and Chinese Nationalists, or Kuomintang, now ensconced on Taiwan, continued to compete for the loyalties and support of the ethnic Chinese of Southeast Asia.

As China opened its economy and sought improved ties with the ASEAN countries in the late 1970s, the policy changed again. In 1980, Beijing passed a new Nationality Law that abolished dual nationality, marking for the first time a clear distinction between *huaqiao* (Chinese citizens living overseas) and *huaren* (foreign citizens of Chinese descent). Henceforth, ethnic Chinese could choose to be citizens of China or their nations of residence—but not both. This helped mend relations with the Southeast Asian states; it also opened China’s access to the financial resources of the “bamboo network.” After Deng initiated his economic reforms in late 1978, ethnic Chinese

businesspeople in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia were among the first to sink money into the mainland. By 1989, investment in China from ethnic Chinese abroad amounted to some \$30 billion. Most of this was from Hong Kong and Taiwan, but as much as 10 percent of it came from Southeast Asia.<sup>58</sup>

In recent years, as China's power has grown, its economic and cultural ties to Southeast Asia's Chinese communities have expanded, affecting them in subtle but potentially significant ways. As some Southeast Asian Chinese have re-established or strengthened commercial links to mainland China, others have oriented themselves toward mainland notions of Chineseness. A rough proxy for this change is the decline in their use of Chinese regional languages like Hokkien and Cantonese, and the adoption (especially by younger generations) of *putonghua*, the Mandarin Chinese favored on the mainland.

More significantly, the Chinese government has also oriented itself more closely toward the ethnic Chinese diaspora. Under Xi Jinping, China is beginning to abandon the caution that has marked its approach to Overseas Chinese affairs since the 1980s. It has recently adopted a more proactive policy that describes ethnic Chinese abroad as part of a "Greater China," and endeavors to convert business ties and cultural affinities into sympathy for Chinese goals and support for key state initiatives like the BRI. In a 2014 speech, Xi described ethnic Chinese living overseas as "members of one big Chinese family" and referred to national rejuvenation as a "common dream" of all Chinese, whether or not they were PRC citizens.<sup>59</sup> In 2017, at an Overseas Chinese work conference, he similarly declared, "The realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation requires the joint efforts of Chinese sons and daughters at home and abroad."<sup>60</sup>

The importance Beijing places on the ethnic Chinese overseas became clear in March 2018, when it placed its Overseas Chinese Affairs Office under the control of the United Front Work Department, the CCP's traditional arm for developing alliances with non-communist groups, including the global Chinese diaspora.<sup>61</sup> In 2015, China introduced the *huayi ka*, a special "green card" for foreign citizens of Chinese origin, according them most of the privileges of PRC citizens. Given their relative wealth and prominence, one leading Chinese scholar proclaimed, the ethnic Chinese overseas constituted Xi Jinping's "economic weapon."<sup>62</sup>

Beijing's outreach to the Overseas Chinese makes sense given their past contributions to China's development. It nonetheless carries significant risks for



Southeast Asians of Chinese extraction. While levels of assimilation differ greatly across the region, the acceptance of the ethnic Chinese into Southeast Asian societies has rested on the preservation of a firm but fragile distinction between *huaren* and *huaqiao*: between Chinese cultural affinities and political loyalty to the Chinese state. As the Chinese government starts to claim ethnic Chinese abroad as members of a putative “Greater China,” it is beginning to muddy the distinction, reawakening dormant suspicions of dual loyalties.<sup>63</sup>

The situation has been complicated by two more recent developments. The first is the mounting public pressure within China, resulting from several decades of “patriotic education” and official state nationalism, for Beijing to protect ethnic Chinese “compatriots” living in Southeast Asia, especially in the event of another outbreak of anti-Chinese violence or discrimination. The second is a new generation of Chinese emigrants and expatriates that have accompanied the flow of Chinese capital into Southeast Asia since 1978. Since the Chinese government has a legitimate interest in the welfare of its citizens abroad, this new influx of people has only underlined the importance of maintaining the crucial distinction between Chinese citizenship and Chinese ethnicity. Worryingly, Beijing has begun referring to all ethnic Chinese abroad by a new term: *haiwai qiaobao*, or “Chinese compatriots overseas.”<sup>64</sup> This raises doubts that it has the wisdom or sensitivity to distinguish between passport-carrying PRC citizens, and the ethnic Chinese who have long called the lands of Southeast Asia home.

The same doubts also attach to some Southeast Asians. While the region’s ethnic Chinese appear well assimilated, there are still small but vocal minorities in some nations that have never fully accepted them as members of the national community. This is especially the case in Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia, where nationalist and religious demagogues continue to find profit in painting all Chinese—whether PRC nationals or citizens of their own country—as an undifferentiated foreign “other.” Caught between a rising China abroad and a rising nativism at home, the ethnic Chinese of Southeast Asia face an ominous blurring of the lines.

As China has shrugged off its old caution and adopted a more assertive foreign policy, it has naturally provoked pushback from other major powers, especially the US. In 2011, the Obama administration announced a “pivot” in American foreign policy, redirecting its attention and resources from the

Middle East back toward Asia, in a bid to counter China's strategic ambitions. As President Obama said in an address to the Australian parliament in 2011, "After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the US is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>65</sup> The pivot, later rebranded the "rebalance," promised a significant augmentation of Washington's diplomatic, economic, and military presence in Southeast Asia, in a bid to reassure American partners and counterbalance China's increasing heft.

While it would fall short of its ultimate goals, in large part due to the continuing turmoil in the Middle East, the "rebalance" went a considerable way to redressing the neglect of the Bush years. Hillary Clinton became the first US Secretary of State to visit all ten ASEAN nations; Washington appointed its first ambassador to ASEAN; the US elevated relations with Vietnam, Singapore, and the Philippines; and the administration played a key role in coaxing military-ruled Burma from its cocoon of isolation. Obama also painstakingly negotiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free-trade pact involving twelve nations, including four from Southeast Asia. Always underwhelming in its execution, the "rebalance" did not long survive the election of President Trump, who withdrew from the TPP during his first days in office, deriding it as "a bad, bad deal" for American workers.

The Trump administration has since replaced the "rebalance" with a more openly belligerent stance toward China. Whereas the Obama administration saw Beijing as both competitor and partner, recent American policy documents have depicted China as an unqualified adversary and a fundamental threat to American interests. As the unclassified summary of the January 2018 US National Defense Strategy alleges, China has adopted "an all-of-nation long-term strategy" that "seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future."<sup>66</sup> A similar view suffuses the administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, first announced by Trump during an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Vietnam in November 2017. The FOIP lays out a vision for a regional order built around a "Quad" of regional democratic powers: the US, Japan, India, and Australia. The FOIP strategy is implicitly aimed at containing Beijing's ability to dominate Asia, and ensuring, in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's words, "that China retains only its proper place in the world."<sup>67</sup>

This new anti-China mood is not confined to Trump and his acolytes. From Senator Elizabeth Warren to Steve Bannon, bipartisan opinion has converged on a view of China as a predatory power that bullies its neighbors, seeks to export its authoritarian political model, and purposefully employs “debt-trap diplomacy” to ensnare developing nations.<sup>68</sup> This monochrome image is typically set against an idealized vision of American primacy and the US-led “liberal international order” that China is allegedly working to supplant.<sup>69</sup> The 2017 US National Security Strategy describes a struggle “between free and repressive visions of world order.”<sup>70</sup> Kiron Skinner, until recently the State Department’s director of policy planning (a post once held by the diplomat George Kennan), even described competition with China in civilizational and racial terms, as being “the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian.”<sup>71</sup>

The view from Southeast Asia is considerably more complicated. China’s centrality in the region makes it a reality no nation can ignore, much less defy openly. As one senior Singaporean Foreign Ministry official put it, “No country in Southeast Asia wants to set itself against Beijing.” More than that, China’s economic ties with Southeast Asia give the region a strong stake in its continued growth and stability—not least since all the alternatives would likely be worse. Southeast Asians are keenly aware that periods of Chinese instability have often coincided with destabilizing flows of people southward. The fall of the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century led to a large stream of refugees into Southeast Asia, as did the internal upheavals of the late Qing and the fall of the Chinese mainland to the communists in 1949. A similar event today would have massively disruptive implications for the region.

The prevailing US view also overlooks important areas of common interest between China and Southeast Asia. The two regions share an history of bruising encounters with Western imperial power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an experience that has inculcated a common zeal for national sovereignty and an extreme allergy to any hint of outside interference in their affairs. This has also made many Chinese and Southeast Asian leaders congenitally skeptical of the Western claim, especially ascendant since the end of the Cold War, that there is a single, universal standard of political development.

It is on this question that the US most often reveals its own liberal variant of “great-state autism”: a tendency to view the region’s political developments through the lens of its own sense of exceptionalism, the idea that America’s national interests harmonize in some essential way with the interests of

people everywhere, that the American way of life is “the ultimate destiny of humankind.”<sup>72</sup> Based on conversations I have had in Southeast Asia’s capitals, however, the idea of the US as a universal political model is generally viewed as quaint and parochial, if not an open threat. This perception has only been reinforced by the nativism and unilateralism of the Trump administration.

Moreover, the recent history of American intervention in Southeast Asia presents a grayer picture than most recent paeans to the “liberal international order” admit. While Southeast Asia, like China, has benefited greatly from the US-backed security order, the “ordering” of the region was a bloody business. It involved America’s long and destructive war in Indochina, its backing for vicious anti-communist purges in Indonesia in 1965–6, and sustained US support for a procession of anti-communist autocrats, from Thailand’s Marshal Sarit Thanarat to President Suharto of Indonesia to Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines. While most ASEAN nations fear a dominant China and strongly desire a US military presence to help counterbalance it, few yearn for liberal prescriptions. The result is that in those places where the US and other Western powers have been most heavy-handed in their criticisms of Southeast Asian governments on questions of democracy or human rights, a pragmatic China has made quick inroads.

China’s foreign policy pragmatism has led some American observers to assert that it is seeking actively to undermine democracy or export its authoritarian system to the world. Elizabeth C. Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations writes of “China’s push to shape other countries’ political systems” and its intention “to reshape the international system in its own image.”<sup>73</sup> At first glance, this claim might seem merited in the case of Southeast Asia. The Xi Jinping years have coincided with a wave of apparent democratic reverses in the region: a return to military rule in Thailand; bloody populism in the Philippines; ethnic cleansing in Burma; autocratic ascendancy in Cambodia; and embezzlement in Malaysia on a grand scale. At the same time, Chinese leaders are speaking more confidently about what their own experience can offer developing countries. In 2016, Xi declared that the Chinese people were “fully confident in offering a solution to humanity’s search for better social systems.” The following year, he declared that China was “blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization.”<sup>74</sup>

While democracy has certainly eroded across Southeast Asia, it is easy to exaggerate China’s role in this trend. The region’s patterns of authoritarianism

and political dysfunction long pre-date the era of Xi. The reasons for this are complex, and cannot easily be abstracted from the social, political, and historical context of the nations in question. In some, they have their roots in the colonial era, when European powers manipulated racial divisions to control subject populations and facilitate the extraction of natural resources, handing on serious nation-building challenges to the independent states that succeeded them. In others, they are underpinned by pre-modern traditions of authority that raised kings and princes high above the worldly realm, shaping political cultures opposed to the idea of popular sovereignty.<sup>75</sup> Others still mirror the present situation in Western democracies, including the US, where authoritarian populism has arisen in response to the failures of ruling elites to deliver broad prosperity and equitable development.

China's critics are right about one thing: it has not certainly helped the situation. Its no-questions-asked approach to human rights abuses, and its diplomatic and financial support for the governments committing them, has helped embolden authoritarian leaders in Southeast Asian countries, much as American support did during the Cold War. But for all the talk about China offering new solutions to developing countries, it has been mostly indifferent to how they govern themselves. Rather than pursuing an authoritarian equivalent to Western democracy promotion efforts, the Chinese government works with the realities that exist, exploiting them in order to advance its strategic goals, asserting all the while that "it is the right of every sovereign state to choose its own development path."<sup>76</sup> Even when this nod to sovereignty is undermined by China's own actions, it is a message that finds a receptive audience in Southeast Asia.

It is also a mistake to ascribe more coherence to China's plans than exists in practice. To speak of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia is to speak not of one thing, but of many. One leading Thai scholar describes China as "a dragon of many shades and colors" in order to reflect the "multiplicity and flexibility" of its activities in the region.<sup>77</sup> While it is never easy to determine where the Chinese state ends and private initiatives begin, China's influence spills beyond the decrees and policies of the central state to include countless individual actors, from businesspeople and students to petty traders, smugglers, and criminals, whose ends frequently run counter to official schemes like the BRI—even as they ape its rhetoric. In his book *The Souls of China*, Ian Johnson observes that content generally comes late to Chinese projects. He describes

China as “the land of soft openings. Projects are first announced to big fanfare, structures erected as declarations of intent, and only then filled with content.”<sup>78</sup> This offers a useful reminder that Chinese initiatives like the BRI, often depicted as a masterplan for global economic domination, remain very much works in progress. Beneath the radiant banners and headline announcements, China’s strategy in Southeast Asia is more improvised, contradictory, and chaotic than at first it might appear.

As Sino-American competition becomes more intense, Southeast Asian nations have sought to avoid any scenario in which they might be forced to choose sides. So, too, has ASEAN. While it was established in 1967 as a response to Chinese communist subversion, ASEAN’s fundamental purpose was to create a mechanism by which the small nations of the region could attain some measure of autonomy in the midst of great power competition. As Singapore’s first Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam then argued, ASEAN had to fill the region’s vacuum on its own, “or resign itself to the dismal prospect of the vacuum being filled from outside.”<sup>79</sup> ASEAN has since succeeded in establishing itself as a key part of the regional diplomatic architecture, and an increasingly cohesive presence at the fulcrum of the Indian and Pacific oceans.

So far, ASEAN’s preferred approach has been to bind the Chinese Gulliver with a thousand multilateral threads, to socialize it into the “ASEAN way”: the bloc’s signature mode of sometimes glacial consensus-based diplomacy. It is an approach that amounts to a sort of narcotization by summitry. At the same time, China’s rising power has brought ASEAN’s various shortcomings into relief. The very things that have allowed ASEAN to bridge the wide differences in its member states’ interests—its operating principles of non-interference and consensus—have limited how far it can go in forging unified political positions.

Currently, the ten ASEAN nations differ considerably on the question of China in general, and on the South China Sea disputes in particular, opening up gaps into which Beijing has thrust wedges of economic inducement. In recent years, China has convinced or pressured its closest Southeast Asian partners—particularly Cambodia and Laos—to veto or dilute criticisms of its aggressive maritime activities and prevent the bloc from taking a unified position on the disputes. As China’s power increases, it thus poses fundamental challenges to ASEAN’s cohesion, and perhaps, in time, to the very idea of “Southeast Asia” itself.

China and the US are not the only outside powers actively engaged in Southeast Asia. Another important player in this story is Japan: the region's quiet achiever. Tokyo has its own baggage in Southeast Asia, where its occupying armies committed savage atrocities before and during World War II. Since the 1970s, however, accommodating diplomacy and injections of capital investment have helped transform Japan's image "from a fearsome samurai state or a rapacious merchant state to a peace-fostering, alms-giving, and community-building state."<sup>80</sup> Today, Japan is the world's third-largest economy after China and the US, its fourth-largest trading nation, and a global leader in precision manufactures and other advanced technologies. Japanese investment and aid were key ingredients in the Southeast Asian "miracle," and the country remains the largest outside investor in ASEAN. Between 2013 and 2018, Japan's investment in the region came to \$102.3 billion, nearly twice as much as the \$52.8 billion it received from China.<sup>81</sup>

Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who took office for the second time in 2012, Japan has gone a considerable way to developing its own ability to counter China and reassert a leadership role in Southeast Asia. Abe's government has quietly expanded military consultations and cooperation with nearly every Southeast Asian nation. After China, it possesses the second-largest navy in Asia. Under its own multibillion-dollar connectivity initiative, Japan has funded critical infrastructure projects from Luzon to Tenasserim. Richard Javad Heydarian, one of the Philippines' leading foreign policy commentators, describes Japan as the region's "stealth superpower"<sup>82</sup>: large enough to be helpful, yet not so large as to incite fear and anxiety.

The other potential regional counterweight, India, presents a more cryptic picture. In 2014, amid widespread apprehension over China's ambitions, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the "Act East" policy: an attempt to enhance India's political and economic ties to Southeast Asia. An update on the "Look East" policy promulgated in 1991, Modi's initiative has yielded some significant results: in January 2018, he hosted all ten ASEAN leaders in New Delhi for the first time. For the most part, however, the vast, kaleidoscopic republic remains overwhelmingly inward-looking, its strategic attention consumed by its jittery nuclear rivalry with Pakistan. Despite the strong imprint that its classical civilization left on pre-modern Southeast Asia, visible today in its sinuous Indic scripts and enigmatic religious monuments, New Delhi remains a relatively weak player in the region. Even so, India remains



## PIVOT OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

Asia's sleeping giant, its very latency serving as a bulwark against the westward spread of Chinese power and influence. In addition to Japan and India, the European Union, South Korea, Russia, Taiwan, and Australia all have a strong economic and diplomatic presence in the region, giving the Southeast Asian states added room for maneuver.

In general, China has presented each of the Southeast Asian states with a similar challenge: how to benefit from its booming economy while safeguarding its sovereignty from the perils of overdependence. As the following chapters show, each nation has met this challenge in its own way. Some have harnessed Chinese power as a shield against Western pressures to enact democratic reforms, or as a means of developing their infrastructure and lifting their populations out of poverty. Others have sought to offset China's clout by building up economic and security ties to the US, Japan, India, and other powers. All have been promiscuous in tilting, balancing, and hedging their bets. In their own way, within the limits available to them, the nations and peoples of Southeast Asia are all learning to adjust themselves to life in China's shadow.

## MARCHING TOWARD THE TROPICS

On a hot, humid morning in June 1866, six Frenchmen cast off from the waterfront in Saigon and ventured into the hazy green unknown. Led by Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, a 43-year-old Crimean War veteran with an history of chronic laryngitis, the group traveled in “two minuscule steam-driven gunboats,” according to the historian John Keay, accompanied by a support crew of 20 and an “inordinate quantity of liquor, flour, guns, and trade goods.”<sup>1</sup> All this was laid aside in support of their mission: to chart the mighty Mekong River upstream from its delta in southern Vietnam into wild regions then untrodden by European explorers.

As Western imperialism reached its zenith in the mid-nineteenth century, the Mekong region became the subject of fevered competition between rival European powers. In London and Paris, colonial functionaries swooned at explorers’ embellished accounts of the trade that flourished in the mist-shrouded borderlands lying between imperial China and the kingdoms to its south. “If one believes the travelers’ tales, these valleys contain active and industrious peoples who trade with the Celestial Empire,” wrote de Lagrée’s tempestuous deputy Francis Garnier, who dreamt of gaining access to “the mines of amber, serpentine, zinc, gold, and silver that lie along the upper course of the Mekong.”<sup>2</sup>

By the time the Mekong Exploration Commission set off from Saigon, these treasures seemed ready for the taking. The Qing dynasty that had ruled China since the mid-seventeenth century was reeling from the twin blows of Western imperial assault and internal rebellion. Following its victory in the first Opium War in 1842, Great Britain had forced the empire open to trade and Western powers had carved up the Chinese coast into a patchwork of enclaves, treaty ports, and foreign concessions. The war’s 1860 sequel saw European armies burn and loot the emperor’s summer palace on the outskirts

of Beijing. These humiliating capitulations fed into an outbreak of paralyzing internal revolts, including the Taiping Rebellion of 1850–64, which brought Qing rule to the verge of collapse. As Chinese power weakened, Beijing's hold over its protective ring of Southeast Asian vassal states began to loosen, opening up fresh opportunities for imperial conquest.

A relative latecomer to the imperial game in Asia, France's push up the Mekong was driven by the lure of profit: in particular, the prospect of opening a lucrative backdoor trade route to China's vast markets. This was compounded by its obsessive rivalry with Great Britain, then prospecting north into China from its newly conquered territories in Lower Burma. If de Lagrée's mission could establish a viable commercial trade route from Cochinchina to Yunnan, it would help check the British advance and lay the foundation for France's own rich empire in the east. The French Admiral Paul Reveillère later described the navigation of the Mekong as "a task worthy of raising the passions of our century, with its love for great undertakings."<sup>3</sup>

Within a few weeks of its departure from Saigon, however, the Mekong expedition ran into trouble. Instead of a placid broad Mississippi, the Frenchmen encountered a dizzying concatenation of spumes, rapids, and cataracts. On July 16, when the explorers' progress was halted at the frothing Sambor rapids in what is today northern Cambodia, Garnier reluctantly confided to his journal that his dream of establishing a trade route between Saigon and southern China had been "gravely compromised."<sup>4</sup> More impassable rapids in Laos, including the raging Khone falls just north of the Cambodian border, ended any realistic chance of opening the Mekong River to large-scale commerce.

Nonetheless, the mission pressed on through northern Laos and into China's Yunnan province, fighting chaotic swells and portaging along muddy mountain trails. De Lagrée soon fell gravely ill. On March 12, 1868, he succumbed to a badly afflicted liver and was buried in the Yunnanese town of Dongchuan.<sup>5</sup> Led now by Garnier, the expedition came to its end at Wuhan, two years to the day after its departure from Saigon. Exhausted and worn down by tropical disease, the remaining members of the Mekong Exploration Commission returned to France at the end of 1868.

Though it had failed at its principal aim, the president of London's Royal Geographical Society would later hail the Mekong Exploration Commission as "one of the most remarkable and successful expeditions of the nineteenth century."<sup>6</sup> In two years, de Lagrée and his men had traversed more than



3. The Mekong Region

9,000 kilometers of jungles, mountains, and rebellious borderlands, charting remote reaches of the Mekong and its tributaries. In so doing, they hastened the extension of French rule over the full extent of what Paris would later call “Indochina,” an agglomeration of present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The French government would henceforth turn its imperial attentions to Tonkin (northern Vietnam), which it conquered in 1885, and, at a colossal cost in money and lives, linked to Yunnan by rail in 1910. The Mekong, however, remained untamed. Despite the French construction of a miniature rail line to circumvent the Khone falls in southern Laos, a British wartime naval handbook observed that it still took longer to travel from Saigon to Luang Prabang by river in 1937 than it did to travel by sea from Saigon to Marseille.<sup>7</sup>

A century and a half on, the French Mekong expedition is mostly forgotten, but the European colonial dream of linking China with the lands to its south has been taken up by a new generation of hard-hatted empire builders. Embarking on its own era of great undertakings, a resurgent China is spearheading the construction of a network of infrastructure links that has penetrated the isolated tracts of highland Southeast Asia once crisscrossed by European adventurers. New highways have supercharged ancient caravan routes and opium-smuggling trails, and Chinese engineers have opened the upper Mekong to large-scale commercial trade. Chinese state firms have even begun construction of a high-speed railway connecting the Chinese city of Kunming to the Lao capital Vientiane (see Chapter 4), an icon of Chinese engineering prowess that marks a step toward the fulfillment of another imperial dream: the linking of China to Singapore by rail.

These new physical connections are in many ways unprecedented. For centuries, the rugged mountains and deep forests of the Southeast Asian borderlands provided a natural barrier between the Chinese empire and the Indianized civilizations lying to its south. Indeed, until relatively recent times, this rambling upland region, which stretches from the eastern hill states of India to the reaches of northern Vietnam, lay beyond the effective control of any lowland state. While the chieftains and petty princes of the highlands often rendered tribute to lowland Southeast Asian courts or the Chinese emperor (or sometimes both simultaneously), they accepted the authority of neither. The upland peoples may have donned Shan, Burmese, or Chinese dress, or wielded titles bestowed by lowland kingdoms, but as the British anthropologist Edmund Leach observed of highland Burma in the 1950s,

they “claimed to be lords in their own right, subject to no outside authority.”<sup>8</sup> Later, James C. Scott would give this elevated region the name “Zomia,” from *zomi*, a term for highlander common to several Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the India–Bangladesh–Burma border area. Scott described Zomia as “the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite the region’s resistance to central state control, China and mainland Southeast Asia have historically been bound by a rich and complex pattern of overland interactions. In precolonial times, the region was a realm of vassalage and a greensward of Chinese expansion. Many of its peoples originated in what is now Chinese territory, pressed south over the centuries by the pressure of the expanding Han Chinese into the fertile and sparsely populated valleys of the Mekong, the Irrawaddy, the Salween, and the Chao Phraya.

The new kingdoms that they established paid tribute to the Chinese empire, and traded with it via the Southern Silk Road: a network of mountain caravan trails running from the kingdoms of Yunnan and Tibet down into the northern hills of India and what are now Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Burma. Along these precipitous paths, Yunnanese muleteers lugged in copper pots, silks, rock salt, tinsel, and the gold leaf used to decorate Buddhist wats and other religious shrines; they returned with the exotic forest products like aromatic woods, ivory, and iridescent kingfisher feathers, much in demand at the imperial court.<sup>10</sup> Yet with the exception of Vietnam, which fate placed in smothering proximity to Chinese power, the forbidding terrain limited contact with the Chinese state; the amount of overland commerce was far eclipsed by the trade that took place by sea.

This ancient geographic barrier is now beginning to collapse. After a century and a half of weakness and internal discord, China has the financial resources to invest heavily in what John Garver has termed the “technological subjugation” of terrain.<sup>11</sup> These revolutionary transport networks have far surpassed the failed dream of the old French explorers, opening the thinly populated reaches of Upper Burma and Laos to unprecedented flows of Chinese capital, labor, migration, and tourism. This has precipitated a broad economic reorientation of the Mekong region away from its southern coasts and river deltas, traditionally its main outlet of trade and contact with the outside world, toward the colossal economy to the north. Buy a bottle of water or a pair of chopsticks in Lashio or Luang Namtha or Lang Son, and it is more

likely to have come from China than anywhere else. Traveling through north-eastern Burma, where border enclaves glow with Chinese-powered prosperity, the historian Thant Myint-U marveled at the “stunning reversal” in the country’s geography. “What had been remote is now closer to the new center,” he wrote. “What were muddy mountain hamlets are now more modern than Rangoon.”<sup>12</sup>

As the Mekong River approaches the small Chinese city of Jinghong, about halfway on its meandering 4,350-kilometer journey from the icy uplands of Tibet to the warm waters of the South China Sea, it widens into a broad course. As evening falls, tourists and residents gather at the water’s edge to skim stones and pose for photos in front of the imposing suspension bridge that arches through the night sky. Pleasure boats ply the placid waters, their bright lights staining the glassy waters pink.

Spread along the Mekong in a pocket of rolling, mist-shrouded hills close to the border with Laos and Burma, Jinghong is the largest Chinese settlement on the upper Mekong, known in China as the Lancang. The city of 500,000 exudes a palpable thrum. Its boulevards, lined with colossal palm trees, are a jumble of shopping centers, fast-food outlets, and neon advertising. In a shaded quarter near the river, barbecue restaurants and beer stalls spill over into the lantern-strung streets. Nearby is a strip of small jade boutiques, many run by betel-chewing Rohingya Muslims from western Burma, and souvenir stores selling ethnic minority outfits and hard-packed discs of smoky *pu’er* tea. On each bank of the river, high-rise hotels and apartments press skyward, proclaiming the arrival of China’s economic miracle on what was once a remote frontier.

When the French Mekong expedition passed through Jinghong in 1867, it was the central settlement of the Sipsong Panna (literally, “12 rice fields”), a loose confederation of statelets ruled by Tai-speaking chieftains, who pledged allegiance not just to China, but also to the royal courts of Burma and Siam. Most of the population were ethnic Tai, upland cousins of the Thai, Lao, and Shan peoples to the south; others belonged to a smattering of mountain-dwelling minority groups such as the Akha, Yi, and Lahu. While an Anglo-French compromise had left Jinghong under theoretical Qing control, the Han Chinese presence was sparse, and an American Protestant missionary who traveled through Jinghong in 1919 noted that “there are only the officials,

the soldiers and a few merchants.”<sup>13</sup> One impediment to colonization was the virulent strain of malaria that lurked in the hills, which the few hardy Han settlers tried to stave off by smoking opium. As one Chinese traveler drily observed in the 1930s, “The non-smokers are the exceptions.”<sup>14</sup>

What was true of Jinghong was largely true of Yunnan as a whole. For most of its history, the region sat outside the Chinese imperial domain, the home of alien and often hostile peoples. Set on a high plateau fretted with great mountain ranges, Yunnan is hard to access from China’s Yellow River heartland. In the northern part of the province, three of Asia’s great rivers—the Mekong, Salween, and Yangzi—run in tremendous parallel valleys for hundreds of miles, separated by high mountain ranges, before diverging wildly and snaking out to the ocean. Sealed in by its terrain, Yunnan was populated by upland tribal peoples who discouraged exploration or settlement by outsiders. The independent states that arose on Yunnan’s fertile plateaus—the kingdoms of Nanzhao (738–937) and Dali (937–1253)—were therefore much closer, in terms of culture and geography, to Indianized Southeast Asia than to the traditional locus of Chinese civilization.

Yunnan—literally, “south of the clouds”—was not decisively conquered until the Mongols swept through China in the mid-thirteenth century, toppling the Song dynasty and uniting China under the rule of the great Kublai Khan. When this short-lived dynasty collapsed in 1368, the successor Ming dynasty invaded Yunnan and grafted it permanently onto the empire, seeding the region with military garrisons and large populations of settlers. Instead of administering the new province directly, the Ming revived an old policy of “using barbarians to rule barbarians,” ruling through local intermediaries, whom they gradually replaced with Han Chinese as the imperial administration rolled south. In some far-flung locales, this form of native rule, known as the *tusi* system, persisted well into the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

The Chinese conquest of Yunnan altered forever the relationship between China and mainland Southeast Asia. As Martin Stuart-Fox writes, the region’s absorption projected Chinese culture and power far to the south and west, bringing it into direct contact with kingdoms and peoples with whom it had previously had little or no intercourse. As trade and other contacts increased, Burmese, Tai, and Lao principalities were drawn fitfully into China’s tributary system, initiating a history of complex political relations that continues to the present day.<sup>16</sup>



## MARCHING TOWARD THE TROPICS

While mainland Southeast Asian rulers dispatched regular gift-bearing tribute missions to the Chinese imperial court, Yunnan's rugged topography continued to keep the Chinese state at arm's length. Direct military intervention was rare, and Qing banner armies sent through the mountain passes to Burma and Vietnam in the eighteenth century fared poorly in the humid, malarial climate. As one of the last territorial additions to the Chinese empire, Yunnan was among the first to slip from central control when Qing power weakened in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1856, Yunnan's Muslim population rebelled and declared an independent sultanate, a revolt that was only put down with savage violence in 1873, sending waves of Yunnanese Muslims fleeing south into what are now Laos, Burma, and Thailand. Even after order was restored, Yunnan passed into the control of a succession of military governors and opium-smoking warlords, who ruled the region more or less autonomously until the communist victory of 1949.

In the context of the brewing Cold War, the new communist government moved to lock down what was now a strategic and sensitive frontier. At the end of the Chinese civil war, the last remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's defeated Nationalist Eighth Army had fled over the border into northern Burma. Here they regrouped and, with American and Taiwanese support, launched several failed incursions into Yunnan in 1951 and 1952. In response, Beijing reinforced its military presence, built up local industry, and opened the spigot of immigration. Between 1950 and 1958, nearly half a million Han Chinese moved or were transferred to Yunnan, many to work on state rubber plantations.<sup>17</sup> For the next few decades, the southwest frontier would become the conduit for a new Chinese export—revolution—in the form of aid, arms, and propaganda broadcasts that fortified communist insurgencies in Burma, Thailand, and Indochina.

By the 1980s, after Mao had died and China dropped its support of foreign revolutionaries in favor of trade and economic development, Yunnan assumed a new economic and strategic importance. As China's economy began to grow, planners grew concerned about the development gap that was opening up between the booming eastern seaboard and the provinces further west, which remained mired in poverty. What China lacked was a western ocean, which would give these landlocked regions much-needed access to the world's markets. Such an outward corridor would also help relieve China's heavy dependence on the Straits of Malacca. By utilizing Yunnan as a bridge

to mainland Southeast Asia, they could achieve both of these aims: pump-priming China's underdeveloped western provinces, and creating an alternative overland route to the Indian Ocean.

As China's economy approached take-off in the 1990s, officials in Yunnan began lobbying Beijing for the revival and development of the province's historic connections with the lands to the south. They emphasized the region's non-Han ethnic identity, all the better to depict Yunnan as a natural partner of Southeast Asia. As one provincial official put it in 1993, quoting a Chinese saying, "Close neighbors are better than distant relatives."<sup>18</sup> Central support wasn't far behind. To open its poor southwest provinces, the government began upgrading the highways and rail networks connecting Yunnan to the rest of China, and onward to Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. On a visit to Yunnan in 2009, Hu Jintao declared that the province should work to become a "bridgehead for China's opening towards the southwest."<sup>19</sup>

Yunnan's newfound status was a throwback to the brief but important role it had played during World War II, when the Allies had used the famous Burma Road to supply Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese republican armies, then besieged in China's interior by the legions of imperial Japan. Slicing its way through more than a thousand kilometers of dense jungles and precipitous mountains, the Burma Road connected Lashio, a railhead in eastern Burma, to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan. Although the road was cut after the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942, the strategic importance of this "back-door to China" prompted Owen Lattimore, the renowned American sinologist, to describe Yunnan as the future "pivot of Southeast Asia."<sup>20</sup> As the first modern transport link that China pushed beyond its national boundaries, the serpentine, single-lane motorway anticipated Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by seven decades.

To realize its ambitions, China has piggy-backed on regional integration schemes, particularly the Asian Development Bank's (ADB's) Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program. Launched in 1992, with the five Mekong countries and Yunnan as initial members (Guangxi region joined a few years later), the GMS scheme aimed to construct a networks of roads, ports, railways, industrial zones, and power transmission grids that would help turn the region "from a battlefield into a marketplace" after decades of Cold War turmoil.<sup>21</sup> Spurred on by the introduction of market reforms in communist Vietnam and Laos, the Japanese-dominated ADB has since spent billions of

dollars on the construction of two “economic corridors”—one running north–south, the other east–west—designed to lubricate the flow of trade, investment, and technology throughout the region.

Initially a backseat participant in the GMS, China was soon taking the financial lead on ADB projects, especially on infrastructure connections that deepened the integration of its southern provinces with mainland Southeast Asia. The Chinese government built bridges and river ports, and helped finance highways through Laos and Burma; it also funded the refurbishment of the old Burma Road. Beijing “used the ADB as a sort of neutral agency,” said a logistics consultant who has worked extensively with the bank, “but it was really Chinese money.” The combined effect of these various schemes has been dramatic: in 1991, it took six weeks for Yunnan’s exports to reach Thailand by sea via the Chinese coast; with the completion of the Kunming–Bangkok Expressway in 2013, direct road travel time between the two cities had been cut to less than 24 hours. Primed by these new infrastructure links, Yunnan’s trade with ASEAN rose from a few hundred million dollars per year in the 1990s to \$13.2 billion in 2018.<sup>22</sup>

With a population of 47 million people and a \$22 billion economy, Yunnan today functions as the forward operating base of China’s renewed push to the south. In Kunming, a thriving metropolis of 6.6 million, old neighborhoods have been flattened as the city seeks to reinvent itself as the new economic mainspring of mainland Southeast Asia: a hub of belts, roads, railways, and oil pipelines fanning out to the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea. In 2016, city authorities unveiled the giant Kunming South railway station, where it could soon be possible to board a bullet train to Bangkok—and beyond.

Regional integration efforts have brought a jolt of energy to Jinghong, the capital of what is officially known as the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. Photos of the city from a 1981 publication show sleepy, palm-shaded streets lined with widely spaced buildings.<sup>23</sup> Since then, the population of Xishuangbanna—a Chinese gloss on its Tai name, Sipsong Panna—has swelled with an influx of Han migrants from other parts of China, including middle-class “smog refugees” from polluted metropolises like Beijing and Tianjin. Han Chinese make up more than a third of the population in Xishuangbanna today, with the remainder split roughly between the Tai and the smaller upland minority groups. Once an isolated frontier station, Jinghong now occupies a

strategic position at the junction of two new highways running south to Thailand, via Laos and Burma. At the long-distance bus station in central Jinghong, buses leave every few hours for Vientiane and Bangkok, packed with tourists, migrant workers, and businesspeople.

As infrastructure has improved, and regions like Xishuangbanna have grown, China's economic miracle has started to spill southward, in the form of surplus Chinese capital and labor. Since the launch in 2001 of China's Going Out policy, which encouraged Chinese firms to invest in extending their operations abroad, private businesses and state-run enterprises—many from Yunnan and other southern provinces—have ventured out into the Mekong region, building roads, hotels, mines, agricultural plantations, and hydropower dams.

Like earlier flows of trade, the movement of Chinese capital has also been accompanied by a new mobile generation of laborers, entrepreneurs, traders, and illegal migrants who have headed south in the hope of making their fortunes on the new silk roads of Southeast Asia. These *xin yimin*, or “new migrants,” are a global phenomenon: an overspill from China's great internal rural-to-urban migrations. But they are notably present in Southeast Asia, especially in the regions directly bordering China. The exact numbers of *xin yimin* are hard to determine. Zhuang Guotu of Xiamen University estimates that between 2.3 million and 2.7 million Chinese nationals emigrated to Southeast Asia in the two decades after 1990, many overland, but given the region's porous borders and the time that has elapsed since, the real figure is likely much higher.<sup>24</sup>

Today the furrowed highlands of Burma and Laos are dotted with new Chinese communities that look and feel like displaced extensions of urban China, down to the simplified Mandarin signage, concrete shop-houses, and dangling red plastic lanterns. Chinese expatriates and businesspeople are also an increasingly visible presence in the larger cities of the region, from Mandalay to Chiang Mai to Phnom Penh (though they are notably less visible in Vietnam).

While the *xin yimin* are just the latest generation of Chinese to make new homes in Southeast Asia, they differ from their predecessors in crucial ways. Previous generations of Chinese settlers were usually cast-offs from the southern fringes of the empire, and for long stretches of history were viewed by Chinese officialdom as renegade subjects, if not criminals. In contrast, today's

migrants hail from every province in China, and have ventured abroad in an era of Chinese ascent, backed by a strong state's blessing. They view themselves not just as *huaren*—which is to say, ethnically or culturally Chinese—but as *zhongguo ren*, citizens of a united and newly powerful Chinese nation. The difference is symbolized by language. Where the old migrants spoke a rich stew of southern regional languages, including Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, and Hokkien, the new migrants are united in their use of *putonghua*—the Mandarin Chinese of the new PRC imperium. Supported by their government, and aided by the improved communication links with their homeland, they have become key players in the economies—legal and otherwise—of the Mekong region.

The Chinese presence in upland Southeast Asia was predicted long ago by Chen Bisheng, a Chinese scholar who traveled through the southern border regions in the 1930s, and published his account in 1941 in a short book entitled *Miscellaneous Recollections of the Yunnan Frontier*. Looking forward to the day when southern Yunnan was again under firm central control, he predicted that the energetic and industrious Han Chinese would naturally seek greener pastures in the sparsely populated hills of Burma and Indochina. The overland movement of the Chinese into Southeast Asia, a continuation of China's historic push to the south, was “inevitable,” Chen wrote, “no more possible to stem than the waters of a river.”<sup>25</sup>

For the Mekong nations, this new phase of Chinese emigration has far-reaching implications. In his landmark 1972 study *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People*, the British historian C.P. Fitzgerald pointed out that the Chinese empire's annexation of new southern territories was typically only the final step in a gradual movement of settlers, merchants, refugees, and exiles, “a pattern of seepage, of slow overspill from the great reservoir which was China.”<sup>26</sup> Today, the presence of international borders rules out the formal conquests of the past, but it nonetheless remains hard to disentangle the outward flow of the Chinese people from the long-term strategic goals of the Chinese state. In the twenty-first century, a quickening movement of money and migration is helping to extend China's economic and political presence down the Mekong and out toward the sea.

Just before midday on October 5, 2011, a group of Thai soldiers boarded two Chinese barges that were seen floating listlessly in the Mekong River, a few miles upstream of the drowsy river town of Chiang Saen. The vessels were

loaded with Chinese goods bound for the Thai market: the *Hua Ping* carried fuel oil; the *Yu Xing* 8, crates of apples and garlic. The soldiers found the former vessel deserted. The bridge of the latter was covered in blood, where, slumped over an AK-47 assault rifle, was a dead man later identified as Yang Deyi, the boat's Chinese captain. Stashed aboard the two vessels were clear plastic bags containing 920,000 methamphetamine pills, a haul with an estimated Thai street value of \$6 million. In the following days, the corpses of the remaining 12 crewmembers were scooped from the milky-brown waters of the Mekong. The victims had been gagged with duct tape and blindfolded, with their hands bound or handcuffed behind their backs. Some had been stabbed. Others had gaping head wounds, suggesting that they had been shot at close range.<sup>27</sup>

The grisly murders had occurred just a few miles downstream from the center of the Golden Triangle, the rugged and impoverished region where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Burma converge. For most of its history, this had been a zone of pristine lawlessness, a cauldron of bandits, drug smugglers, tribal chieftains, ethnic militias, and corrupt government functionaries where the writ of lowland states ran thin. Opium poppies were first cultivated in the region's hills on a large scale in the nineteenth century; by the 1960s, the region had become synonymous with narcotics production. Until the early 2000s, the Golden Triangle was the world's leading source of heroin. It still produces most of the methamphetamine consumed today in China and Southeast Asia.

The circumstances surrounding the murder of the Chinese sailors were foggy. Some witnesses claimed the murders had happened on the open water; others said the boats had docked before the shots were fired. The Thai authorities immediately arrested the nine soldiers who had boarded the boats, members of an elite anti-narcotics detachment known as the Pha Muang Taskforce. But it remained unclear if the Chinese sailors had been shipping the drugs themselves, or if the drugs had been planted afterward to deflect attention from the real culprits, whoever they were.

Back in China, the Mekong murders magnetized the public's attention. In the wake of "10/5," as the killings came to be known, gruesome photos of the sailors' corpses circulated online. Nationalistic internet users accused their government of failing to protect Chinese citizens abroad. In response, the authorities immediately suspended all Chinese traffic on the Mekong and

summoned senior officials from the Golden Triangle nations to Beijing. There Chinese officials pressed them to participate in a new series of Chinese-led river patrols to ensure security along the middle Mekong. The governments of Thailand, Burma, and Laos also took the unprecedented step of allowing Chinese law enforcement to operate in their territory for as long as it took to bring the killers to justice.

As the investigation began, Thai authorities offered up a suspect: a notorious outlaw named Naw Kham, whom the media quickly dubbed the “fresh-water pirate” of the Mekong. A stocky ethnic Shan born in 1969, Naw Kham had begun his criminal career working for a narco-militia run by Khun Sa, a flamboyant Shan-Chinese drug lord who established a powerful heroin empire in the Golden Triangle. As Alfred McCoy writes in his landmark book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, at the apex of his power in the late 1980s, Khun Sa controlled an army of 20,000 soldiers and half the globe’s heroin supply: “a market share never equaled before or since.”<sup>28</sup> In 1996, Khun Sa brokered a deal with Burma’s military government: he agreed to surrender in exchange for amnesty and a quiet villa retirement in the capital Rangoon. At this point the young Naw Kham struck out on his own. Setting up his operation in Tachilek, a dusty smuggling hub on the Thai–Burma border, he started running heroin; later, he branched out into the production of methamphetamine, a cheap and highly addictive drug that the Thais called *yaba*, or “crazy medicine.”

After a raid in 2006, Naw Kham shifted his base to Sam Puu Island, a lozenge of land in the loosely policed stretch of the Mekong that forms the border between Burma and Laos. There he turned to piracy, imposing a “tax” on drug traffickers of about \$160 for every kilogram of heroin and 10 cents for every methamphetamine pill.<sup>29</sup> His men prowled the riverbanks in sleek speedboats, swooping around the river’s bends to snare unsuspecting vessels. Khuensai Jaiyen, a journalist who runs the Shan Herald Agency for News, a leading source of news from Burma’s isolated Shan State, told me that Naw Kham got a cut of everything that moved through his territory: “He was making money out of the drug smugglers, he was giving protection.”

To lead its manhunt, Beijing appointed Liu Yuejin, the director of the Narcotics Control Bureau, a subsidiary of China’s powerful Ministry of Public Security. A hard-bitten anti-drug veteran, Liu followed his quarry with beady resolve. But the manhunt was far from straightforward. Naw Kham was



known to enjoy protection from security forces throughout the Golden Triangle, and twice evaded capture after being tipped off by sympathetic locals. At one point Chinese officials even considered assassinating him with a drone.<sup>30</sup> Then, on April 25, 2012, Liu received a tip that Naw Kham planned to cross the Mekong into Laos. He passed word to his Lao counterparts, and when Naw Kham slipped ashore that night, the police were waiting.

The Thai village of Sop Ruak sits a few kilometers upstream from where the bodies of the Chinese sailors were pulled from the river, at the exact point where the borders of the three Golden Triangle nations converge. Here, the area's reputation for danger and opulence has been compressed into a harmless tourist display, a ribbon of 7-Elevens, opium museums, and souvenir encampments that unspools in a colorful line along the Mekong waterfront. Tourists, these days many of them from China, pose for photos in front of the tri-border confluence where the Mekong intersects with its tributary, the Ruak, looping down out of the Shan hills from the west. On a hill sits a quiet Buddhist pagoda and a couple of graves of Japanese soldiers, killed during World War II. Nearby, a large golden Buddha directs its serene gaze over to the Lao side of the river, where an enormous jewel-encrusted crown shimmers against a backdrop of hazy green hills.

The crown belongs to the Kings Romans Casino, the centerpiece of a Chinese-owned tourism and gambling enclave known as the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ). Over the past decade, Kings Romans Group—its Chinese name *jinnumian* means “golden kapok,” after the trees that blanket the area with flame-red flowers—has spent hundreds of millions of dollars transforming this far-flung corner of Laos into a palm-fringed pleasure zone on the Mekong. The casino attracts hundreds of visitors each week from mainland China, where gambling is banned outside Macao. Most come down the new highways from Yunnan, or fly to northern Thailand and cross the Mekong on speedboats operated by Kings Romans.

The GTSEZ looks and feels like China: clocks display Beijing time, an hour ahead of Laos, and shops expect payment in Chinese yuan—even the street signage affects the municipal house-style of mainland China. The casino itself is a riot of rococo excess. A seated statue of Neptune presides in the entrance hall, raising his trident over gilded surfaces and marble floors. Inside, gamblers sit at green baize tables, cigarettes poised on moistened ashtrays, impatiently



squaring stacks of Chinese and Thai bills. An ornate gate behind the casino announces a special “Chinatown” district of boutiques and restaurants, built in a kitschy transplanted style that can only be described as Forbidden City Lite. Nearby there is a depressing zoo filled with caged tigers and peacocks, and a golf driving range massed with black four-wheel drives.

The Kings Romans Casino and the enclave in which it sits are ruled by a fifty-something Chinese entrepreneur named Zhao Wei, originally from Heilongjiang in China’s frigid northeast. Tall and gaunt, with drooping eyes and slicked-back hair—one local journalist who met the businessman told me to imagine “a Chinese Christopher Walken”—Zhao has spent most of his career haunting the murkier crannies of the Asian casino business. He first operated casinos in Macao, where he holds permanent residency, and then in Mong La, a notorious gambling enclave just over the Chinese border in the Burmese section of the Golden Triangle (see Chapter 6). In 2007, Zhao convinced the Lao government to let him export the casino model to their country, and it granted him a 99-year lease on 10,000 hectares of prime agricultural land along the Mekong. “The Lao government gives us the sky,” he told an interviewer in a 2011 CCTV special titled *Zhao Wei: Kapok in My Heart*. “In return we will build a beautiful city as a gratitude to the Lao people.” A few hundred Lao villagers were evicted, and Zhao’s dreamland began to rise from the paddy fields.

While the GTSEZ remains under nominal Lao sovereignty—the government holds a 20 percent stake and former government officials sit on the zone’s management committee—the area is reportedly free of direct government control.<sup>31</sup> Stuart Ling, a Lao-speaking Australian agricultural consultant based in the town of Huay Xai, about 50 kilometers downstream on the Lao side of the Mekong, described it as a “special zone” outside the jurisdiction of the local authorities. “Nobody collects statistics on it,” he told me. “Even on paper it’s not really part of Laos.” Like Mong La to the north, which is controlled by a small rebel militia, the GTSEZ maintains its own security force, and Zhao wields such power over this outpost of Greater Yunnan that its Chinese residents refer to him as *tu huangdi*—“the local emperor.”<sup>32</sup> “For me, he’s a big guy,” Shi Feng, a Chinese businessman who owns a restaurant near the casino, said over tea one afternoon in the Lao capital Vientiane. “In 2007 there was nothing there but mountains and forest. But now it’s like a modern city.”

Today, the Kings Romans Casino is the most garish signpost of China's rising presence on the Mekong. As part of its southward push from Yunnan, Beijing has spent the past two decades dredging sections of the river to deepen navigation channels, streamlining import and export procedures, and refurbishing port facilities. As a result, the river has grown into a burgeoning trade route, dominated by 200-ton Chinese barges like the *Hua Ping* and the *Yu Xing 8*, which ply the 265 kilometers between Guanlei, the main Mekong port in southern Yunnan, and Chiang Saen, where an expanded commercial port opened in 2011. Between 2004 and 2010, Mekong cargo volumes between Yunnan and Thailand tripled to more than 300,000 tons per year.<sup>33</sup> But the Chinese cargo boats passed through long stretches of the Mekong that were basically unpoliced, making them easy prey for freshwater pirates like Naw Kham. In 2008, unknown assailants attacked a Chinese patrol boat, injuring three Chinese police officers; the following year, a firefight on the Mekong between ethnic rebels and the Burmese army resulted in the death of a Chinese sailor.

Moreover, the illicit trades of the Golden Triangle were also rebounding back onto China itself. The same changes that had boosted legitimate trade since the late 1980s—the opening of borders and the improvement of overland transport links—also gave drug trafficking syndicates easy access to cheap Chinese-made precursor chemicals, and a gigantic new market for their product. By the mid-1990s, Golden Triangle narcotics had turned Kunming into the heroin capital of China, resulting in spiraling rates of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS. In 1996, more than 70 percent of China's reported HIV cases were from Yunnan.<sup>34</sup>

Narcotics were just the beginning. By the time of Naw Kham's arrest in Laos in April 2012, the new silk roads of the Golden Triangle were awash with weapons, stolen vehicles, exotic hardwoods, Burmese jade, and endangered animal products for use as aphrodisiacs and medicines—black markets primed by the rising demand of China's nouveaux riches. Sadly, this illicit traffic also included people: manual laborers, sex workers, and village women from Burma, Vietnam, and Laos, who were trafficked over the border by special brokers for marriage to men in rural China. As Ruth Banomyong, a logistics expert at Thammasat University in Bangkok, put it, "If you are a smuggler or you're doing something illicit, better roads are something fantastic." To Beijing's consternation, an increasing amount of this contraband was flowing directly into China.

With Naw Kham in custody, the Chinese authorities had the opportunity to make a strong statement. In November 2012, the Kunming Intermediate People's Court found the "freshwater pirate" and three accomplices guilty of the Mekong murders and sentenced them to death by lethal injection. Throughout the trial, the case was given front-page prominence in the state-run media. On the day of the executions, Naw Kham's final moments were captured in a two-hour television broadcast in which the cameras followed the four defendants on their forced march to the execution chamber, their faces blank with shock. The chilling live feed ran right up until the moment before doctors administered the fatal injections.

Interviewed during the coverage, Liu, the anti-drug czar, cast the executions as a pivotal moment for China and for ethnic Chinese around the world. "In the past, Overseas Chinese dared not say they were of Chinese origin," Liu told a presenter. "Now they can hold their heads high and be themselves."<sup>35</sup> This narrative was dramatized in a 2016 Hong Kong action movie, *Operation Mekong*, a feast of carnage and car-chases that ends with the villain—Naw Kham, played with sinister relish by the Thai actor Pawarith Monkolpisit—safely in the hands of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security. (Liu served as a special consultant on the production.) Beijing had used the case to send a message to its southern neighbors: it would go to great lengths to protect its economic interests on the Mekong.

However, the court's verdict failed to bring much clarity to the case. Chinese prosecutors never established a solid motive to explain why Naw Kham would have committed the murders. Moreover, speakers of Shan, a close cousin of the Thai language, reported that his "confession," aired on Chinese television, resulted from a mistranslation. Kheunsai Jaiyen said, "It was a kangaroo court. He was saying one thing, and they were translating another." Questions were also raised in Thailand, where an extensive police investigation had followed the arrest of the nine Thai soldiers. It concluded that the shots fired at the Chinese crewmembers came not from outlaws or drug gangs, but from weapons used by the Thai military. A Thai parliamentary committee later concurred, concluding that "circumstantial evidence suggests that Thai officials were involved in the sailors' deaths."<sup>36</sup> It was easy to see how Naw Kham's capture and execution was convenient for the Thai military: by pointing the finger at Naw Kham, it had successfully deflected attention away from the possible involvement of its own personnel.

In a detailed investigation into the Mekong killings published in 2013, the American journalist Jeff Howe identified another potential culprit: Zhao Wei, the chairman of Kings Romans Group. Unlike the harmless theme-park displays over the river in Sop Ruak, the casino was widely suspected of involvement in the region's illicit commerce. Campaigners working for the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency claimed that boutiques behind the casino sold illegal wildlife products, including ivory and tiger meat, allegedly smuggled in from Mong La on Chinese cargo boats.<sup>37</sup> During my visit to the zone in 2016, I picked up a casino brochure that featured the ghastly spectacle of *hugujiu*—a tiger skeleton floating in a tank of rice wine—and a shooting range where visitors could fire M16 assault rifles and Uzi submachine guns. Later, the US government imposed sanctions on Zhao Wei and three associates, accusing Kings Romans of involvement in “drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, bribery, and wildlife trafficking.”<sup>38</sup>

Howe concluded that Zhao's entry into the region's vice trade had entangled him in a turf war with Naw Kham, a struggle that continued right up until the killings in October 2011. It remained unclear whether Zhao was directly responsible for the sailors' murders, but the timing of events raised enough questions for Howe to conclude that Naw Kham's importance had been greatly exaggerated. He had become “a convenient legend,” Howe wrote, “and, in the end, a scapegoat who allowed the real business of the Mekong to continue running smoothly.”<sup>39</sup>

Whatever the truth of the matter, Naw Kham's capture and trial was a powerful expression of China's intensifying clout in mainland Southeast Asia. The expansion of its Mekong patrols, ostensibly conducted in concert with the governments of Burma, Thailand, and Laos, marked a major expansion of its role in regional security. Paul Chambers, a Thailand-based expert on the Golden Triangle economy, compared the hunt for Naw Kham to US General John J. Pershing's expedition to capture Pancho Villa, the gun-slinging Mexican revolutionary leader accused of killing 18 Americans in New Mexico in 1916. For the US government, then on the cusp of global power, the hunt for Pancho Villa represented more than the pursuit of a wanted criminal: it also symbolized a fledgling superpower's ability to assert control over its immediate neighborhood.<sup>40</sup> For Khuensai Jaiyen, Naw Kham's capture demonstrated how China has altered the power dynamics in the Golden Triangle. “He was paying the Burmese army, paying the Lao army, paying the Thais.

That's how he survived, and that's how he believed he would survive," he said of Naw Kham. "But in the end, no one could resist the Chinese."

Even as China's economic and political influence flows down the Mekong River into Southeast Asia, the most consequential long-term developments may be those taking place upstream. In the first half of 2016, the lower Mekong countries were hit by one of the worst droughts in living memory. In central Thailand, reservoirs dropped to unprecedented levels, forcing authorities to pump 49 million cubic meters of water out of the Mekong to relieve farmers living along its tributaries.<sup>41</sup> Downstream in Cambodia, farmers lost entire rice and cassava crops due to delayed monsoon rains. Further on, in the marshy flatlands of southern Vietnam, where the river splits into nine deltaic arms before merging with the South China Sea, the river sat at its lowest level since 1926.<sup>42</sup> Environmentalists put the drought down to a severe El Niño weather pattern, and the creeping effects of global climate change. But a crucial compounding factor was the years of man-made alterations to the river—particularly upstream in China.

As China's ambitions have grown in the Mekong region, it has shaped the Mekong to serve the needs of the Chinese economy. It has dynamited sections of the waterway to open it up to trade, and built a slew of large hydropower dams on the upper reaches of the Mekong, to power the industrialization of southwest China. Eleven mega-dams have been completed so far, with several more slated for construction by 2030. Because of conflict and the mountainous terrain along its upper reaches, development came late to the Mekong; it wasn't until 1994 that the first bridge spanned the Southeast Asian stretch of the river. But China's current ambitions for the Mekong, in tandem with a host of planned dams in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, amount to one of the largest artificial alterations to a river's course in human history—one that environmentalists fear could profoundly alter the river's ecology.

For centuries, the people of the lower Mekong have had a symbiotic relationship with the river and its resources. What begins as a freshet of snowmelt on the Tibetan plateau cascades into a mighty waterway that nourishes the world's largest inland fishery. Between the border of Yunnan and the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam, some 66 million people depend on the river for their day-to-day subsistence. According to the Mekong River Commission,

the river yields around 2.6 million tons of wild fish each year. In Cambodia, this provides around four-fifths of the population with their main source of protein. The Mekong basin is also Asia's rice bowl: in 2014, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam collectively produced more than 100 million tons of rice, around 15 percent of the world's total.<sup>43</sup>

Environmentalists worry that if current development plans go ahead, this life-giving channel will effectively be divided into a series of lakes and canals optimized for power generation and shipping, but otherwise ruinous for the fishermen and farmers that rely on the Mekong for their livelihoods. According to the non-governmental organization International Rivers, Beijing's dam-building spree, conducted without consultations with downstream nations, "threatens the natural flow cycle of the Lancang–Mekong ecosystem and downstream communities that depend on the vital sources of this mighty river."<sup>44</sup>

The potential danger has long been evident in the fertile flatlands of southern Vietnam, where the Mekong meets the sea. Here the great river is known as *cuu long*—the "nine dragons"—a reference to the snaking channels that enclose one of Southeast Asia's most fertile rice-producing regions. Centuries of human cultivation have threaded the delta region with a meshwork of canals and marshes, studded here and there with the eaves of Khmer Theravada temples and the rainbow hallucinations of the Cao Dai, a syncretic religious sect native to southern Vietnam that reveres Victor Hugo and Sun Yat-sen as saints. This rural cornucopia, roughly the size of Denmark, provides most of Vietnam's fish and fruit, as well as half its rice—all from just 12 percent of its land area.<sup>45</sup>

The 2016 drought had devastating effects in the Mekong Delta. In Soc Trang province, one observer wrote, the usually green landscape was reduced to "a desert of dry fields. Some were tilled in preparation for a season that had yet to come and others laid unprepared covered with dried, leftover stalks of previous harvests. Far off on the horizon, a fence row of hardy palm trees formed the only living vegetation in sight."<sup>46</sup> The drought forced thousands of Vietnamese farmers off the land, and into fast-growing centers like Cantho and Ho Chi Minh City.

The delta's problems have many interacting causes. These include over-cultivation, excess groundwater extraction, and encroaching salinity due to climate change. But according to Nguyen Minh Quang, a lecturer at Can Tho University, China's upstream dams are acting as a potent multiplier,

compounding and magnifying these various environmental problems. Quang said the Chinese dams played an ominous, and avoidable, role in reducing the “beautiful floods” that replenish the delta’s nutrient-rich sediment, which enriches farmers’ crops while helping to stave off coastal erosion. “If the dam-building continues,” he said, “the Mekong Delta will disappear in the near future.” This is no exaggeration: at current rates, one recent study predicted, the entire delta will be under water by the year 2100.<sup>47</sup>

The environmental challenges facing the Mekong Delta demonstrate how China’s control of the river’s headwaters has magnified its power over the countries downstream. The geography of the Mekong River reflects the region’s geopolitical hierarchy: a powerful China at the top and smaller, less developed nations below. The Chinese stretch of the river is narrow, deep, and thinly populated, unsuitable for fishing and farming but, unlike the wide stretches further south, ideally suited to dam-building. This has allowed China to reap the benefits of hydropower generation, while exporting most of the environmental costs downstream. Brian Eyler, an expert on transboundary issues at the Stimson Center in Washington, DC, and author of *The Last Days of the Mighty Mekong*, explained to me that the flow of water beneath China’s Lancang dam cascade resembled “an erratic stock chart with random peaks and nadirs,” indicating unpredictable rises and falls in the dry season water level. This has had serious impacts on agriculture, fish catches, and the river-side habitats of migratory birds.

All this gives Beijing considerable control over the southward flow of the Mekong. While China does not quite have the ability to “turn off the tap” to downstream countries, as some of its critics have suggested, Eyler pointed out that during the dry season about 40 percent of all the water in the Mekong basin comes from north of the Chinese border. “This means China has control over a large amount of dry season flow and could use it for its own purposes first before considering the usage needs of downstream countries,” he said. Eyler predicted that the most likely future purpose would be the diversion of water resources to relieve China’s chronic water shortages, especially if climate change begins to undermine the Himalayan glaciers that feed most of Asia’s major rivers.

In March 2016, at the height of the drought, the Chinese government announced a “gift” for its parched downstream neighbors: a release of emergency water reserves from the Jinghong dam, the southernmost of the upper



Mekong cascade. At first glance this gift looked much like Chinese state media depicted it, as a gesture of friendship to its downstream neighbors. But it was a gift that came wrapped in a subtle reminder to the governments of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia: that they now relied on the Chinese government for access to a life-giving resource.

This new reality was sketched with alarming clarity in research published by two American climate scientists in April 2020. Alan Basist and Claude Williams conducted their research during another record spell of drought in the lower Mekong region: one so severe that stretches of the river along the border with Laos and Thailand dried up entirely, leaving riverbeds cracked and exposed to the sun.<sup>48</sup> In previous years, the scientists observed, there was a rough correlation between water flows on the upper Mekong and water levels downstream, despite occasional dips and rises when dam reservoirs in China were being filled or released. In 2019, however, things changed dramatically. Between May and September of that year, Basist and Williams noticed that China's section of the Mekong welcomed an above-average volume of rainfall and snowmelt, but that its Lancang dam cascade prevented nearly all of this surplus water from flowing southward.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Chinese dam engineers were directly responsible for exacerbating the drought conditions downstream.

China's valve-like control of the upper Mekong has made downstream nations reluctant to criticize Chinese dam-building plans, all the more since some—notably Laos and Cambodia—have hydropower ambitions of their own, for which they rely on Chinese funding and support.<sup>50</sup> As the region's most robust opponent of China, as well as the nation with the most to lose and least to gain from Mekong hydropower, Vietnam has been the most outspoken about China's dam construction. Nguyen Truong Giang, a former Vietnamese ambassador to Brunei who now works for the Center for Strategic Studies and International Development in Hanoi, was blunt when I asked him about the issue: "China is using the Mekong as a weapon to control the countries in the lower Mekong River basin."

At the same time, China is seeking a more active role in regional institutions governing the use of the river's resources. In 2014, it inaugurated the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism, which counts China, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as members. Coming after years of mounting criticism for its Mekong dam projects, the formation of the



LMC was a sign that China intends to become more proactive in promoting regional cooperation in the lower Mekong. As the first Chinese-built Southeast Asian institution, the LMC is also broadly consistent with Beijing's aim of creating new global and regional institutions in which it exercises clout commensurate with its increasing wealth and power.

It is hard not to view the LMC as a competitor to the existing US-supported regional institutional architecture: the mostly toothless Mekong River Commission (MRC), founded in 1995; and the Lower Mekong Initiative, established by the Obama administration in 2009 as part of its "rebalance" to Asia. Given the importance of the region, this Chinese undertaking is no surprise. The first Mekong Committee, set up in 1954 as a weapon in the struggle against communism, deliberately excluded China; nor did China become a member of the MRC, its successor organization, in large part because it had no wish to accept scrutiny of its own dam-building activities.

Moreover, the Chinese-led LMC mechanism is about much more than just water management. It is shaping up as a full-blown sub-pillar of the BRI, characterized by funding for infrastructure developments and economic zones that will further enmesh the two regions. In January 2018, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang likened the LMC initiative to the engine of a bullet train, pushing the integration and cooperation between China and the five Mekong countries into "the age of high-speed rail." China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi has used the metaphor of a "bulldozer."<sup>51</sup>

At first glance, things look impressive. At the inaugural LMC summit in 2016, China promised \$1.6 billion in preferential loans and \$10 billion in credit to the five Mekong countries. The next summit came with more eye-popping announcements. In total, China claims to have made financial commitments for 132 separate infrastructure projects. How many will see the light of day is unclear, given China's penchant for "sign-first-talk-later" diplomacy.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Beijing's commitment to the LMC signifies the importance it places on consolidating the Mekong region as a Chinese sphere of influence: stable, prosperous, and tightly aligned with China's wider strategic interests.

To counter China's influence in the Mekong region, the US, India, and South Korea have all established or enhanced competing Mekong initiatives. The most active has been Japan. Anxious about China's growing clout in mainland Southeast Asia, a region that has seen vast injections of Japanese capital since the 1970s, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has

poured billions of yen into the region. Japan first reached out to the Mekong countries in 2007 through the Japan–Mekong Regional Partnership Program; two years later, it convened the first Mekong–Japan Summit. Where Western nations have balked at engagement in the face of the region's sorry human rights situation, Abe's government has pragmatically bankrolled highways, bridges, and other large-scale infrastructure developments under the slogan "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure"—a sly dig at the poor reputation of Chinese-backed projects in the region.

The lower Mekong countries have much to gain from what one observer has described as the "infrastructure arms race" between Beijing and Tokyo.<sup>53</sup> Having spent much of the twentieth century consumed by conflict, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Burma lag far behind the most developed states in ASEAN. In 2017, their combined GDP made up just 11.7 percent of the bloc's total, and they desperately need investment and infrastructure financing to stoke up their economies. As one Cambodian government advisor put it to me, "It's good for us to have these two giants competing for subregional attention. Our region has become a beautiful lady again."

Nowhere is this competition more apparent than in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, where a new Chinese bridge has been built over the Tonlé Sap River. The New Chroy Changvar Bridge, completed in 2015 with a concessional loan from China, runs directly alongside the "old" Chroy Changvar Bridge—also known as the Cambodia–Japan Friendship Bridge—which was built with Japanese assistance in 1966, blown up during the Cambodian Civil War in the early 1970s, and then rebuilt with Japanese donations in 1994. Of the five bridges crossing the Mekong River in Cambodia, three were funded by China (including one currently under construction), and two by Japan. A similar pattern can be seen next door in Vietnam, where a Chinese-funded metro project in the capital Hanoi competes with a Japanese-funded metro in Ho Chi Minh City.

A strategic tug-of-war of sorts is even taking place within the ADB itself. Ruth Banomyong of Thammasat University said that since the 1990s, the Japanese have "totally cooled off" on the GMS's North–South Economic Corridor (NSEC), which links China with the Mekong region. Instead, they have focused their efforts on the East–West Economic Corridor linking Vietnam to Burma. "They see [the NSEC] as a way of China coming down, and that they need to build their own Wall of China," he said. As far back as 2007, Bronson Percival noted the irony in the fact that "Japan and the ADB, in

which Japan has great influence, are paying the bulk of the costs for a massive development scheme that primarily benefits China.”<sup>54</sup>

As economic integration and infrastructure development supercharge old smuggling routes and caravan trails, mainland Southeast Asia is being drawn closer to China than at any point in history. For the region and its peoples, this is a development that cuts both ways. Chinese trade and capital have done much to buoy the Mekong economies, turning once-quiet border regions into restless conduits of trade. China’s economic vibrancy has given many Mekong citizens new educational opportunities and avenues for advancement. At the same time, the flow of Chinese state financing and investment has tended to amplify the governance problems that already plague much of the region. Chinese BRI infrastructure projects, legally bound to respect local laws that are either inadequate or weakly enforced, often proceed without proper social and environmental safeguards, nor much in the way of competitive open bidding processes.

To these effects must be added the unintended consequences of economic integration, leveraged up by the massive scale of China’s economy. Given its size, even a proportionally small Chinese demand for products like rosewood, jade, or endangered animal products can translate into devastating impacts in the smaller countries to its south, an asymmetry vividly captured by an oft-quoted Burmese aphorism: “When China spits, Burma swims.”<sup>55</sup> Despite the common image of China as a ruthlessly centralizing power, the Chinese state still has considerable difficulty in securing its winding, mountainous borders with Burma, Laos, and Vietnam, or controlling the people and goods that flow across them. This Zomian echo is a reminder of the sheer multitude of Chinese influences now flowing over its land borders with Southeast Asia, and the fact that much of the Chinese engagement with the region takes place outside the effective control of the Chinese state.

While all Southeast Asian nations face the challenge of living in China’s shadow, it is in the mainland countries that the dilemma is most acute. More exposed to cultural and political influence from China than the comparatively distant maritime nations of the Malay archipelago, and more closely enmeshed with China’s booming economy, it is here that China’s rise has elicited the deepest fears and the most strident reactions. Conversely, it is also where Asia’s new superpower has found its fastest friends and allies.

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### DIFFERENT SHADES OF RED

Shortly before dawn on February 17, 1979, as the morning mist clung to the hills and jagged karst formations of the Sino-Vietnamese border, more than 200,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army swept into northern Vietnam. Asleep in her home in the countryside outside the city of Cao Bang, Nong Thi Linh first thought the distant artillery was drumming rain. "Then at 6 a.m., I heard people shouting, 'the Chinese are coming!'" she said. Linh joined a chaotic flood of soldiers and citizens evacuating southward. When she returned six weeks later, she beheld a devastated scene. "In Cao Bang, the town was heavily affected," she recalled, "and the Chinese threw people's corpses into wells."

Intended to teach Vietnam a "lesson" for its January 1979 overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, a close ally of Beijing, China's invasion of northern Vietnam immediately gave way to a bitter month-long struggle. Chinese soldiers were instructed to be merciless and worked themselves into a frenzy of "extreme emotions," according to military historian Edward O'Dowd. They were told to look upon the enemy "with the 'three looks': contempt, disdain, and hostility."<sup>1</sup> The invasion was met with ferocious resistance from the Vietnamese army, occupying mountain redoubts that had been utilized for centuries against invaders from the north. Their "lesson" duly administered, the Chinese troops withdrew on March 16, leaving large parts of the border in ruins. This forgotten sequel to the Vietnam War claimed the lives of tens of thousands of troops on both sides, along with unknown numbers of civilians.<sup>2</sup>

In Vietnam, most of the fallen soldiers came to rest in military cemeteries dotted throughout the northern mountains. In late 2018, a few months before the 40th anniversary of the conflict, I visited one such graveyard 20 kilometers south of the town of Lang Son, perched on a hillside at the top of a granite

stairway. The graves were laid around a white monument topped with a five-sided star that pointed to a bright blue meridian. Each bore the inscription *liet si* (“martyr”) above the name of the fallen, and a vase of fluorescent plastic lotus flowers. Many dated from February and March 1979. “The Vietnamese people honor those who have sacrificed for the country,” said Chu Son, a gravel-voiced 51-year-old who manages the cemetery from a small office at the foot of the hill.

Memories of the border war remain especially vivid around Lang Son, where some of the heaviest fighting took place. Before the Chinese withdrew, they brought in military engineers to level the city, in what one Chinese official later described as a “goodbye kiss.”<sup>3</sup> Tran Van Su, a retired railway engineer in his eighties who was evacuated during the war and returned to Lang Son a month after the Chinese withdrawal, recalled a city of empty streets, where buildings had been blown up or flattened by artillery. Dead bodies lay here and there. “Overall it looked like a ghost town,” he said.

Lang Son has since been rebuilt into a pleasant town of tree-lined avenues and convivial roadside eateries. Shops and markets overflow with Chinese goods shipped through the incongruously named Friendship Pass border gate 12 kilometers to the north. Decorations are strung across the major roads: illuminated peonies, swooping doves, symbols of peace. One morning in September 2018, I went to visit Nong Van Phiao, a decorated veteran of the 1979 war, at his narrow two-story home in a leafy quarter of Lang Son. Phiao is an unusual name in Vietnam, a mark of the 60-year-old’s origins as an ethnic Nung, a Tai-speaking people scattered across northern Vietnam and southern China. After exchanging our initial pleasantries, Phiao told me that his friends jokingly call him Michael Phelps, after the American swimmer. “His name sounds similar in Vietnamese,” Phiao joked. He offered me a seat in front of a polished wood table. Next to us, a flat-screen TV and stereo system were set in a wooden case with mother-of-pearl inlay. Military portraits hung high on the wall.

Phiao retired from the military in 2016, after four decades of service. A stocky figure with a neat bowl-cut and pronounced limp—the result of a recent stroke—he signed up at the age of 18, shortly after the fall of Saigon to the communists in April 1975. After six months’ basic training, he was posted to the border town of Dong Dang, just as Vietnam’s relationship with its communist ally China was beginning to deteriorate. When the invasion came,

his unit was holed up in a crumbling French fort, built on a hillside in Dong Dang to guard against Chinese incursions in the late nineteenth century. Phiao recalled fighting so fierce that the barrel of his AK-47 glowed red. "It was very brutal. The noise was unbearable, and there was smoke all around us," he said. His unit managed to hold off the invaders for a full week before, their supplies dwindling, the surviving men dug their way through a collapsed tunnel and escaped back to the Vietnamese lines.

After spending an hour or so recounting this tale, Phiao went upstairs and returned with a plastic bag filled with medals, which he emptied on the glass table-top. From the pile he picked out a simple gold star stamped with a Vietnamese flag, its red faded to gold: the Hero of the People's Armed Forces, one of Vietnam's highest military honors. In total, Phiao estimates that he killed thirty Chinese soldiers.

When China invaded, the Vietnamese state media declared that February 17, 1979 would "go down in history as a severe verdict of the 'Great Han' expansionists' crimes in trying to subdue and annex Vietnam."<sup>4</sup> Four decades on, however, Vietnam's government rarely talks publicly about the war. After Hanoi and Beijing normalized relations in 1991, ties between the two communist parties improved, the border was flung open to trade, and mentions of the 1979 conflict became politically taboo. In contrast to the copious memorials to Vietnam's wars against the French and the Americans—two victorious conflicts in which China was a vital partner—the question of how to remember Vietnam's most recent war is an awkward one for the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). As it works to maintain good relations with China, many ordinary Vietnamese hear echoes of 1979 in Beijing's current actions, including its assertive push into the South China Sea. "China used to be an enemy, and now they are considered a friend," Phiao said, echoing many ordinary Vietnamese I spoke to, "but this is not the kind of friend we can trust. We always have to be careful and wary of their intentions. China is a two-faced friend. Anytime Vietnam is not alert, China will strangle Vietnam."

It is impossible to detach Vietnam's long history from that of its northern neighbor. As one popular joke puts it, the country's S-shaped bend resembles an old woman straining under China's weight. Because of this "tyranny of geography," as Carlyle Thayer has termed it,<sup>5</sup> no other nation in Southeast Asia has been so exposed to China's expansionary tendencies, nor bears so strongly the stamp of Chinese civilization. For nearly a millennium until 938,

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China ruled northern Vietnam as an imperial appendage, subjecting its people to a slow process of social, political, and cultural assimilation. Ever since, Vietnamese kings have fought off repeated invasions from the various states occupying the present territory of China.

This national memory is inscribed in the towns and cities of Vietnam, whose streets bear the names of the semi-mythical national heroes who battled against the Chinese. They include Hai Ba Trung, the two Trung sisters, who resisted Chinese rule in the first century and are often depicted riding into battle atop elephants; Le Loi, who fought off a short occupation by the Ming dynasty in the 1400s; and Nguyen Hue, who trounced an invading Qing army in 1789. At the Vietnam Military History Museum in Hanoi, a repository of the official narrative, a display lists 13 “Vietnamese Resistance Wars Against Invaders.” Until the twentieth-century wars against the French and Americans, all came from the north. “Throughout thousands of years of history,” a caption explains, “Vietnamese people have fought bravely, resiliently and continuously to conquer the harsh nature and against the invasion of foreign forces for survival and development.”

However, the official story downplays the many ways in which China’s proximity has benefited Vietnam. As the historian Keith Taylor has written, China’s contributions to Vietnam cover “all aspects of culture, society, and government, from chopsticks wielded by peasants to writing brushes wielded by scholars and officials.”<sup>6</sup> Over the centuries, the Vietnamese language absorbed huge quantities of Chinese vocabulary. Vietnam’s monarchs took on the trappings of the Chinese emperors to whom they paid tribute, and Confucian morality shaped Vietnamese society. The ruling elite modeled itself as a meritocracy in the Chinese mold, its members selected via a rigorous drilling in the Confucian classics. At the Temple of Literature in Hanoi, built by King Ly Thanh Tong in 1070 to honor Confucius, visitors can still see weighty stone steles inscribed, in Chinese characters, with the names of those who scored most highly in the examinations. Indeed, Vietnam retained the Mandarin examinations even after they were abolished in China itself.

At the same time, Vietnam was no mere copy; Chinese tools were almost always turned to distinctly Vietnamese ends. Pham Xuan Nguyen, the chairman of the Vietnam Institute of Literature in Hanoi, explained that the adoption of Chinese cultural artefacts proceeded in parallel with a process that the Vietnamese call *thoat Trung*—“exiting” or “departing” from China’s orbit.

"There have been two movements," he said one afternoon over tea in a book-lined room at the institute. "One is that we have copied from them; the other is that we have tried to depart from them."

This pinpoints the cardinal irony of Vietnamese history: namely, that political structures borrowed from China gave Vietnamese kingdoms the strength and cohesion to avoid reabsorption by the Chinese empire. Chinese bureaucratic practice, military technology, social and familial norms, imperial ideologies: all were taken and bent toward the goal of securing Vietnam's continued existence as an independent state.

These inheritances also gave the Vietnamese the means to launch their own southward expansion from the seventeenth century. Despite civil war and internal division, Vietnamese culture and political power moved steadily south, defeating the Indianized kingdom of Champa and displacing the Khmers from the Mekong Delta. By the time that the Nguyen dynasty unified Vietnam in 1802, its power extended all the way to the Gulf of Siam. Vietnam's southern march, or *nam tien*, not only recreated in miniature China's imperial march toward the tropics; it also reproduced the hierarchies of the Chinese tributary system, in which the Vietnamese imperial court was seen to represent the apex of a civilizational gradient that receded as it ran out toward the barbarian margins. Just as the Chinese viewed the Vietnamese as uppity "barbarians" in need of a firm civilizing hand, Christopher Goscha writes, the Vietnamese applied the same assumptions to neighboring people like the Khmer and Lao, "forgetting conveniently that they themselves had sprung from this barbarian world."<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Vietnam's absorption of the south owed much to the efforts of Chinese immigrants added a further layer of irony. After the collapse of the Ming dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century, a wave of Ming loyalists and refugees washed up in southern Vietnam. These *minh huong*—"keepers of the Ming incense"—settled in the region and helped the Vietnamese state extend its control over the unruly Mekong Delta frontier. By 1700, a Cantonese adventurer named Mac Cuu had founded an autonomous Ming-style port-state at Ha Tien, close to the present-day Cambodian border, which he and his descendants ruled for more than a century, loosening further the Cambodian hold over the area. The graves of these local "kings" sit today in a leafy compound in the placid coastal town, their tombs elaborately decorated with lions, dragons, and phoenixes—testaments to their former wealth and prominence.<sup>8</sup>



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By moving south, the Vietnamese could emerge—at least temporarily—from life in China's shadow. Facing north, they “needed fixed concentration, steady nerves, and unfathomable resolve,” Taylor writes. “However, when they turned south, it was possible to relax somewhat and indulge the senses.”<sup>9</sup> Today, southern Vietnam presents the more capitalistic and outward-facing side of the Vietnamese national character. The south is the dynamo of the Vietnamese economy. In some intangible sense, it also looks and feels distinctly more “Southeast Asian,” from styles of food and dress to the spoken language, which preserves more pre-Sinitic usages than the northern dialect.

The unification of Vietnam by the Nguyens in 1802 had momentous historical effects, effectively halting China's expansion down the coast of the South China Sea into today's Southeast Asia. Yet the country's fate remained yoked to that of its northern neighbor. Despite repelling repeated Chinese invasions, the threat from the north remained. The only choice was to find some way of coexisting with China. Accordingly, each Vietnamese victory of arms was followed by a pilgrimage to the imperial court to pay tribute and ritually reaffirm Vietnam's re-entry into the Chinese world order. By making these symbolic gestures, Vietnamese rulers managed to buy themselves long periods of peace and security.<sup>10</sup>

The legacies of geographic proximity and massive asymmetries of power continue to condition Sino-Vietnamese relations in the current age of renaissance Chinese power. For China, Vietnam remains “the southern boundary stone of its grand notions of itself,” in historian Brantly Womack's evocative phrase, a civilizational offspring that is expected to make regular gestures of gratitude toward its benevolent parent.<sup>11</sup> For Vietnam, China remains a subject of perennial concern, its size and power making Vietnamese leaders eager for peace, yet ever alert to any hint of impingement on their sovereignty and independence.

On May 2, 2014, China deployed a deep-water oil rig in contested waters 222 kilometers off the coast of central Vietnam. The installment of the colossal *Haiyang Shiyou 981*, owned by the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation, made little economic sense, given the small size of the known oil reserves in the area. Its placement was rather an act of brinkmanship, designed to assert China's claims to the majority of the South China Sea. Predictably, Vietnam's government protested the placement of the rig, which

fell within its 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone, and dispatched both a coastguard force and a Maritime Surveillance Force to disrupt its operations. In the ensuing fracas, a Chinese flotilla rammed at least one Vietnamese ship and fired high-powered water cannons at several others, in a bid to cripple their communications capabilities. The belligerent Chinese state mouthpiece *Global Times* suggested that if Vietnam continued to challenge Chinese claims, China should give it a “lesson it deserves.”<sup>12</sup> To many Vietnamese, the echo of Deng Xiaoping’s “lesson”—the invasion of 1979—was unmistakable.

The oil rig’s placement set off a rare surge of public unrest in Vietnam. Protesters converged in urban centers across the country, waving Vietnam’s national flag, a yellow star emblazoned on red. Some wore T-shirts reading “No-U,” in reference to China’s U-shaped claims in the South China Sea; others bore the slogan “Say No to the Ox-Tongue Line.” The demonstrations quickly spiraled into violent attacks on Chinese-owned businesses and factories in Vietnam. On the industrial outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, workers on motorbikes smashed windows and lobbed gasoline-soaked rags into factory buildings. Ironically, most of the damage was borne by Taiwanese firms, which the rioters mistook for mainland Chinese. By mid-May, according to one estimate, the riots had killed 21 people. Hundreds were arrested.<sup>13</sup> On July 15, China announced that the *Haiyang Shiyou 981* had completed its work and withdrew it—a month earlier than it had previously stated.

As in the past, Vietnam finds itself on the front line of China’s expanding power in Southeast Asia—this time at sea. The *Haiyang Shiyou 981* was installed 17 nautical miles south of Triton Island, the southwestern-most land feature of the Paracel Islands. The islands are claimed by Vietnam but have been under de facto Chinese control since January 1974, when China seized three islands following a battle with the teetering South Vietnamese republic. The two countries also assert competing claims to the Spratly Islands, which lie to the south of the Paracels. In 1988, Chinese forces displaced Vietnamese forces from Johnson South Reef and established Beijing’s first foothold in the archipelago. During the operation, Chinese sailors methodically gunned down as many as 64 lightly armed Vietnamese military engineers who found themselves stranded on a reef during high tide.<sup>14</sup> In the Spratlys, China has since built uninhabitable maritime features into artificial islands complete with harbors, radar emplacements, and military-grade runways. On the features it occupies, Vietnam maintains a series of smaller fortified emplacements.

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Vietnam claims sovereignty over both groups of islands based on historical contacts dating back to at least the seventeenth century, dismissing Beijing's own claims as "stories about fishermen," as one Vietnamese official put it to me. There is more to the dispute than simple nationalist posturing. A third of Vietnam's population lives along the coast of the South China Sea, and the latter's deposits of oil and natural gas could be potentially beneficial for the country's future development. Given its sinewy resilience, Vietnam stands as the Southeast Asian nation perhaps most able to stand up to Beijing's maritime claims, a consideration that has underpinned the recent warming of relations with its one-time enemy, the United States.

As the 2014 oil rig protests showed, the South China Sea disputes have also revealed the deep strain of anti-Chinese sentiment that courses beneath the surface of Vietnamese society, from the cyclo drivers of Ho Chi Minh City to the highest echelons of politics and business. In my conversations with ordinary Vietnamese, talk of China was sprinkled liberally with the word *tham*, meaning "greedy" or "avaricious." Nguyen Thi Li, an 82-year-old Lang Son resident, said China would always want to expand. "Because they're a big country, they'll always want to be bigger," she said. Similar sentiments are commonplace on Facebook, where nationalistic netizens frequently denounce China's actions in the East Sea, as the Vietnamese term it, and myriad other Chinese plots to swallow Vietnamese territory or impinge on its sovereignty.

Nguyen Tan Dung, the economically liberal southerner who served as prime minister from 2006 until 2016, deployed anti-Chinese rhetoric to telegraph his nationalist credentials, and to subtly criticize conservative opponents in the VCP who favored stronger ties to China and a greater state role in the economy. In modern times, the journalist Bill Hayton writes, the China question has become a "live issue in all the major debates about the future of Vietnam—a cypher through which other battles are fought."<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, as anti-China protests have become a regular occurrence in Vietnam's major cities, they have created headaches for the party. Despite the offshore tensions, Hanoi maintains good relations with Beijing, while economic ties with China play an important role in sustaining the prosperity that undergirds the legitimacy of communist rule. Dung Truong Quoc, an historian and member of Vietnam's National Assembly who edits the magazine *Past & Present*, said that the party is now struggling to balance popular

suspensions of China against the need for productive relations. "If we're hostile to each other, it's not good, but if we're too close or too friendly, it's not easy either," he said. "The Vietnamese leaders are pressed between these two lines: pressed by the Vietnamese people, and pressed by the Chinese."

The VCP's position is complicated by its historical ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). During the 1950s and 1960s, the two communist parties were as close as "lips and teeth," as the old socialist bloc phrase went. The Vietnamese revolution would probably not have succeeded without the Chinese aid and supplies—everything from arms and ammunition to ping-pong balls and soy sauce—that flowed south to support its struggles against the French and Americans. Chinese support was so important that Vietnam's communist leader Ho Chi Minh once described his country's relationship with China as being like "one hundred favors, a thousand loyal affections, and ten thousand loves."<sup>16</sup>

Ho encapsulated his country's ambivalent view of China. Like most educated Vietnamese of his generation, he read and spoke Chinese, and expressed frequent admiration for the CCP. He even translated Mao's study *On Protracted War* from Chinese into French.<sup>17</sup> But beneath his paeans to socialist brotherhood, traditional suspicions smoldered. When Chinese forces arrived in northern Vietnam in 1945 to supervise the post-World War II armistice, he told anxious colleagues that it was better to put up with French rule for a few more years than to endure another Chinese occupation. As Ho reputedly said, "I prefer to sniff French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for the rest of my life."<sup>18</sup>

In reality, the brotherly relations between the two communist parties were based on a temporary convergence of interests. For the Vietnamese, Chinese support and sanctuary was vital in their fight against the French and American imperialists. For Mao and the Chinese leadership, communist Vietnam served as a proxy with which to attack the US and advance broader revolutionary aims. When these interests started to diverge in the 1960s, a by-product of the wider falling-out between China and the Soviet Union, old enmities resurfaced. By the time North Vietnam's Soviet-built T-54 tanks smashed through the gates of Saigon's Presidential Palace on April 30, 1975, bringing the Vietnam War to an end, the relationship verged on open enmity. The Chinese saw their southern allies as ungrateful Confucian-Leninist vassals who had rebuffed the CCP's benevolence. The Vietnamese, freshly

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victorious in a three-decade struggle against foreign occupation, heard echoes of an old imperial mindset.

Relations finally broke down over events in Cambodia, where the communist Khmer Rouge had marched to power in April 1975, two weeks ahead of Saigon's fall. Led by Pol Pot, the regime's faceless "Brother Number One," who enjoyed strong backing from Beijing, the new regime set the dials toward pure agrarian utopia. It immediately sealed off Cambodia from the world, evacuated the cities, and put much of the Cambodian population to work on vast labor communes. In time, Pol Pot also turned against Vietnam, his one-time ally, launching a series of increasingly deadly cross-border incursions designed to regain long-lost Khmer territories in southern Vietnam. Hanoi eventually lost patience. In December 1978, it invaded Cambodia, removed the Khmer Rouge administration from power, and installed a faction of more pliant Cambodian communists in its place. When China responded to the toppling of its client by launching its pedagogical invasion of northern Vietnam, the two former allies found themselves at war.

Sino-Vietnamese acrimony took a particularly bitter toll on Vietnam's ethnic Chinese, who were targeted by "anti-capitalist" campaigns and forced from the country en masse. Thousands of Sino-Vietnamese were expelled across the northern border, while others boarded leaky and overladen boats and drifted out into the South China Sea, where unknown numbers of them perished. To outside observers, the disintegration of Ho's "ten thousand loves" into nationalist hostility was so striking as to prompt the scholar Benedict Anderson to write *Imagined Communities*, his influential study into the origins of nationalism. As Anderson noted, neither side made any more than the most perfunctory attempts to justify the bloodshed in terms of Marxist-Leninist ideology.<sup>19</sup>

The 1979 border invasion plunged relations to a nadir that lasted through the 1980s. Referring to Vietnam as "the Cuba of the East," Deng Xiaoping assembled a regional coalition to isolate Hanoi, which included the US, the anti-communist nations of ASEAN, and an assortment of anti-government Cambodian and Lao rebels. Frequent skirmishes took place along the Sino-Vietnamese border, which was closed to trade. In Vietnam, hostility toward China was so pervasive that it was elevated into a constitutional principle. "No sooner had they emerged from thirty years of fighting a war of liberation," the preamble to Vietnam's 1980 constitution stated, "than our people, who were longing for

peace to rebuild their homeland, were confronted with the Chinese hegemonist aggressors and their henchmen in Kampuchea.”<sup>20</sup> On a trip to northern Vietnam in 2003, I came across an old mural outside the town of Sapa that showed Vietnamese soldiers beating back Chinese troops with bayonets.

With the end of the Cold War, however, the interests of Vietnam and China started to realign. As communist states in a post-communist world, they shared the goal of modernizing their economies and avoiding being swept, like their Soviet counterpart, into the dustbin of history. In 1990, Vietnamese leaders traveled to the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu for bilateral talks, a summit that paved the way for the resumption of normal diplomatic relations the following year. For the Vietnamese leadership, it was a humbling end to a decade of defiance. Throughout the 1980s, Soviet support had helped sustain the illusion that Vietnam could live in the shadow of a hostile China. But in the end, Vietnam followed the old pattern: it “won” the war, and then, to secure the peace, made a pilgrimage to China to symbolically reaffirm Chinese superiority. The war drove home an age-old lesson: as a Vietnamese general later put it, “we must learn how to live with our big neighbor.”<sup>21</sup>

Learning to live with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) meant learning to forget. In the name of the “16 golden words” adopted by the two governments in 1999—“long-term stability and future orientation, friendly neighborhood, comprehensive cooperation,” in their English translation—the 1979 war and other recent clashes have been blotted from official memory. On the Chinese side, too, silence prevails: the war, fought entirely on Vietnamese territory, contradicts Beijing’s repeated claims that it has never threatened or attacked its neighbors. Ostensibly, this willed amnesia is motivated by the need to maintain amity with China. But to the VCP’s critics, it looks a lot like capitulation. “We should not incite hatred concerning the war, but to completely forget it?” said Nguyen Quang A, an outspoken dissident. “It’s totally wrong. History is history: you cannot redo history.”

I met Nguyen Quang A on a rainy September afternoon in 2018, at an outdoor café in central Hanoi, not far from Ho Chi Minh’s granite mausoleum, the high temple of communist historiography. The mausoleum was closed for Uncle Ho’s periodic re-embalming. At the nearby Vietnam Military History Museum, tourists filed past displays of faded black-and-white photos and other revolutionary relics, and wandered around a sculpture made from the wreckage of downed American aircraft. In a park across the road stood a

statue of Lenin, a vestige of a vanished age, casting a metallic gaze through the blur of traffic.

Nguyen Quang A, 71, has an unusual profile for a dissident. A former party member, he ran a successful IT company for years before making a late-career change to outspoken critic of communist rule. His politics were informed by his time studying telecommunications in Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s, when he came into contact with the intellectual currents of East European reform communism. As Vietnam opened its economy in the 1980s, Quang A began translating books by intellectuals including Adam Michnik and the Hungarian economist János Kornai. He also translated Leszek Kolakowski's 1971 essay "Theses on hope and despair," in which the Polish philosopher argued that the wide gap between communist dogma and reality opened up terrain for self-organized groups to carve out an independent sphere of political action—what we would today term "civil society." In 2013, Quang A and a group of like-minded scholars and writers founded the Civil Society Forum, a group dedicated to promoting gradual political reform; it even made a puckish bid to run independent candidates for Vietnam's National Assembly in 2016. Quang A told me that if the party doesn't reform itself, it will ultimately collapse. As he put it, "evolution is unstoppable. The question you have to face is, do you want a violent evolution?"

Like many Vietnamese pro-democracy activists, Quang A is highly suspicious of the government's swing from official hostility toward China to official silence, a move he put down to "pressure from the Chinese side." A significant slice of the Vietnamese public seems to agree. Each year on February 17, Vietnamese patriots take to social media to commemorate the "martyrs" and civilians who died in the 1979 war, and to attack their government for its reticence. At military cemeteries across the north, veterans and members of the public hold low-profile ceremonies. Quang A frequently joins unauthorized memorial events in Hanoi, where participants don headbands with nationalistic slogans and march solemnly along the shores of Hoan Kiem Lake. Similar tributes are held to mark the naval clashes with China in 1974 and 1988.

The problem for the government is that whenever people gather to vent their anger about China, criticisms of communist rule are usually not far behind. In fact, as Bill Hayton writes, in a country where open criticism of the authorities can lead to a lengthy prison term, anti-Chinese protests give people a patriotic outlet through which they can indirectly question communist



rule.<sup>22</sup> It is here that the “China question” intersects with wider concerns about corruption and the influence of *nhom loi ich*: the “interest groups” that have used their connections to senior party officials to enrich themselves at the public’s expense. For the past decade, high-profile corruption scandals involving the friends and “red offspring” of powerful party members have been commonplace. To many government detractors, Chinese support is crucial in keeping a corrupt and unpopular party in power. “Without the backup of the Chinese communists, the Vietnamese communists could not rule Vietnam any longer, so they kowtow to them,” said Nguyen Tuong Thuy, the vice president of the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam, and a vocal opponent of both China and communist rule.

The party has often used heavy-handed tactics to quash such challenges to its political monopoly. Critics and dissident bloggers are frequently sentenced to protracted prison terms on charges of “conducting propaganda against the state” or “abusing democratic freedoms.” Others are detained or held under house arrest to prevent them from attending public events. Some report being beaten up while in custody. Quang A told me that he has been detained 19 times, usually to prevent him attending rallies or human rights seminars abroad, or, as on one occasion in May 2016, to stop him taking up a US embassy invitation to meet visiting President Barack Obama. A few hours after our meeting, Quang A texted me that he had been picked up by state security, for the twentieth time, just moments after we parted, on the busy street under Lenin’s eye. As far as he could determine, the authorities feared he was planning to fly to Brussels to testify against a planned European free-trade pact with Vietnam.

With a miasma of official silence clouding most things related to China, netizens are all too ready to advance their own theories. Dissident Facebook discussions are rife with talk about secret pacts and political debts incurred during the Cold War. One common claim is that the authorities are quietly removing anti-Chinese monuments built in the 1980s. Party critics I spoke to made much of the fact that some war cemeteries list fallen soldiers as having been martyred in the “struggle against France” or “the struggle against America,” whereas those killed in the war with China are simply listed as having died “defending the border” (*bao ve bien gioi*). The reason for this is hard to determine. Since many northern war cemeteries were built in the 1980s, when official anti-Chinese hostility was at its height, the different



terminologies could be coincidental. But as Hayton argues, this is exactly the problem facing the party: “when it comes to China, few people believe them anymore.”<sup>23</sup>

One challenge for the Vietnamese government, said Dien Luong, a Columbia-educated journalist based in Ho Chi Minh City, is its wooden approach to communication in the digital era. By the end of 2018, 60 million Vietnamese were on Facebook, giving it the seventh-largest pool of users in the world. Since Vietnam is unwilling, and probably unable, to adopt China’s “Great Firewall” of internet controls, the authorities continue to use antiquated methods to shape public opinion. The editors of the state-run press are told when they can take a hard line on China, and when to back off—a contradiction noted by a savvy public. “They are not up to speed in the way that they convey their message to the masses,” said Dien, the former managing editor of *VnExpress*, an online newspaper that publishes in Vietnamese and English. “There were times when the government’s message was quite legitimate and correct, but it was conveyed so clumsily, it looked ridiculous.”

In mid-2018, the Vietnamese National Assembly approved a new draft law setting up three new Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in north, central, and south Vietnam. Immediately, Vietnamese Facebook lit up with claims that the SEZs would help China to infiltrate Vietnam and colonize its territory under the cover of foreign investment. Protesters took to the streets in Hanoi and other Vietnamese cities, waving national flags and holding placards reading, “Down with those who sell our country.” In central Vietnam, riot police clashed with demonstrators, who responded with a barrage of rocks. The unexpected backlash forced the government to delay the adoption of the SEZ legislation. In the aftermath, government officials pointed out that the word “China” appeared nowhere in the text of the draft law. They were right—but many ordinary Vietnamese were no longer listening.

These nationalistic spot-fires are an unwelcome complication for a party and government occupied with maintaining the galloping economic growth that undergirds the legitimacy of communist rule. By the end of the Cold War, the Vietnamese economy was shattered. Its people were impoverished and weary of war, and Hanoi had little choice but to hitch itself to the rising dragon’s tail. Since the introduction in 1986 of the economic reforms known as *doi moi*, or “renovation,” trade with China has boomed. Surging economic growth has

created breakneck urbanization, a burgeoning consumer class, and a young generation with little memory of the war and its deprivations.

The freewheeling face of modern Vietnam is most on display in the southern metropolis of Ho Chi Minh City, which generates a third of the country's GDP from just a ninth of its population. Here the contradictions of Vietnam's socialist market economy are dialed up to a high pitch. Advertisements for designer fashion brands like Lancôme and Burberry sit jarringly alongside the party's socialist propaganda: images of swooping doves and charging tanks, and the ubiquitous Uncle Ho, beaming out from billboards like a Marxist-Leninist Colonel Sanders. Far from a monument to its austere namesake, the city of Ho Chi Minh has become a place of wild economic energy: the hub and pulsating heart of a great Vietnamese Capitalist Party.

The economic transformation is also apparent at the opposite end of the country, where former invasion routes now function as busy arteries of trade. At Friendship Pass north of Lang Son, the road is well-sealed, with a median of neatly tended gardens. From a billboard above the road, a hammer-and-sickle beams out, urging the populace to greater heights of socialist construction. Approaching the border, semi-trailers rumble past on their way to the Chinese customs building, two swooping eaves of red steel enclosing the official crest of the People's Republic. At a new bus terminal, Chinese traders smoke and stamp their feet.

Friendship Pass has changed considerably in forty years. In mid-1978, as relations between China and Vietnam collapsed, the border saw scenes of chaos as Hanoi forcefully expelled tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese, claiming that they were acting as a fifth column for Beijing. (China also encouraged the exodus, warning of anti-Chinese pogroms to come.) Throughout the 1980s, the border was heavily militarized and closed to trade. In those years, one local restaurant owner recalled, many locals survived by smuggling: "We had to trade illegally to obtain normal amenities that we didn't have, like blankets, flashlights, things like that. After a while, even soldiers would do illegal crossings." On these perilous border runs, many local people lost lives or limbs to landmines.

These days, the cross-border trade is thriving. In the border town of Dong Dang, the central market overflows with Chinese goods: everything from kettles and fans and rice-cookers to clothes and pesticides to blizzards of plastic ephemera. Trade has transformed the northern border region from an isolated

upland—the end of the road in northern Vietnam—to the main conduit of a trade relationship now worth upward of \$100 billion per year. For many people in Dong Dang, the usual suspicions of China are moderated by the frequent economic interactions. “It’s relatively easy to work with Chinese companies,” said Tran Thi Tuyet, 30, the local representative of a Haiphong-based transport company who works from a small office a few hundred meters from the border gate. “In fact,” she added, “I sometimes trust them even more than Vietnamese companies, because they keep their word.”

Still, there are few outward signs of the Chinese presence along the border—surprisingly so, given the volume of trade. While parts of northern Burma and Laos have taken on the unmistakable contours of urban China, even Chinese-language signage is rare in northern Vietnam, aside from the odd restaurant menu. Mainland traders seem to keep a low profile—a sign of the extreme sensitivity that still surrounds the issue of Chinese investment, and probably always will. As one market vendor in Dong Dang told me, “We trade with each other, but not to the extent of friendship.”

Over the past two decades, alongside the reawakening of dormant sovereignty disputes, Vietnam’s economy has become intertwined with China’s. While the US is its largest export market, Vietnam now imports more from China than from any other country: everything from machine tools, fabrics, and electronic gizmos to iron and steel, chemicals, and consumer goods. Vietnam is particularly dependent on China for components needed for the manufacture of its key exports: the textiles it sews into shirts and sneakers, and the electronic parts it assembles into Samsung smartphones and flat-screen TVs. China has also become increasingly important to Vietnam’s tourist trade: in 2017, nearly a third of the 12.9 million foreigners who visited Vietnam hailed from north of the border.<sup>24</sup>

In recent years, this dependence has manifested in a ballooning trade deficit with China, which amounted to a whopping \$34 billion in 2019.<sup>25</sup> One reason for the deficit is that while China exports many high-value goods to Vietnam, most of Vietnam’s exports to China are low-value primary goods like rubber, crude oil, coal, rice, and tropical fruits. Another reason is the large number of Chinese state contractors that have won tenders to build projects such as factories and power plants in Vietnam. Funded by preferential loans from Chinese state banks, these projects use Chinese technology, equipment, labor, and other services, the import of which adds to the deficit.

This economic mismatch poses a strategic conundrum for Hanoi, ensuring that any disruption in the trade relationship would impact Vietnam to an exponentially greater degree than China. One Vietnamese official has estimated that if China cut off trade to Vietnam, the latter's GDP would contract by as much as 10 percent.<sup>26</sup> This is not an unreasonable fear, given that China has shown its willingness to use trade as a coercive diplomatic tool, as when it halted banana imports from the Philippines in 2012 in connection with the disputes in the South China Sea. Beijing's control of the headwaters of the Mekong River, via its cascade of upstream dams, also makes Chinese cooperation important for the future of Vietnam's most productive agricultural region: the Mekong Delta.

As the 2018 SEZ protests showed, Vietnam's economic linkage with China is now an issue of both popular and elite concern. One particular gripe has been the influx of large numbers of Chinese laborers to work on Chinese engineering projects and infrastructure investments.<sup>27</sup> In 2009, populist fury erupted over a planned Chinese bauxite mining enterprise in the Central Highlands, with some activists claiming that the natural result would be a "quiet Chinese invasion" of the region. The protests received support from the revered war hero General Vo Nguyen Giap, then 97 years of age, and General Nguyen Trong Vinh, a former ambassador to China, who asserted that the presence of "up to 10,000 Chinese workers" posed an "unacceptable" national security threat.<sup>28</sup>

This accounts for the decidedly cool position that Hanoi has taken on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite officially endorsing Xi Jinping's headline policy, and agreeing to improve connectivity between southern China and northern Vietnam, Vietnam remains cautious about the strategic implications of the BRI. It is wary of increasing its dependence on China by taking on additional debt—especially when similar funding is easily available from partners like Japan, who offer higher quality infrastructure and lower concessional interest rates, minus the historical baggage.

Offsetting its security fears and economic dependence on China has evolved into Vietnam's highest foreign policy priority. It has pursued this strategy by engaging China on a broad front, effectively quarantining the two nations' economic relationship from the South China Sea disputes, while building trade and security ties with as many other powers as possible. In the 1990s, Vietnam emerged from the Cold War embracing a new "multidirectional foreign policy"

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that prioritized multilateral diplomacy and the diversification of its relations with the major powers. This strategy took a major step forward in 1995, the year in which Vietnam joined ASEAN and normalized its diplomatic relations with the US. The country has since established “strategic partnerships” with 16 nations, including Australia, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, and “comprehensive partnerships” with 12 more. Hanoi has also embraced ASEAN, both to cushion its engagements with China and other major powers, and to underline its identity as a Southeast Asian—as opposed to “Chinese”—nation.

Vietnam’s greatest hedge against China, however, remains its former wartime enemy. For a long time after normalization in 1995, Vietnam–US relations were marred by a deep mutual mistrust. On the Vietnamese side, there was the legacy of the calamitous American involvement in Vietnam, including the birth defects caused by the dropping of defoliants like Agent Orange across swathes of southern Vietnam. On the American side, there was unease about Vietnam’s harsh persecution of political dissidents and religious minorities. But China’s recent assertiveness in the South China Sea has prompted a rapid expansion of trade, investment, and defense ties between the two nations. The US is now the most important market for Vietnamese exports, and Vietnamese leaders have visited the White House under three US administrations. When President Truong Tan Sang visited Washington in 2013, the two countries raised their relationship to a “comprehensive partnership.”

It is not hard to understand Vietnam’s importance to policymakers in Washington. Were Vietnam to capitulate in the South China Sea, it would become much more difficult for other Southeast Asian claimants to hold the line. “If China can break off Vietnam,” a US official told the writer Robert Kaplan, “they’ve won the South China Sea.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, the US has tried to enlist Hanoi in its efforts to help preserve the current security order in the Indo-Pacific. In 2010, during a meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared for the first time that the US had a direct national interest in the South China Sea, and that it opposed “the use or threat of force by any claimant”—an obvious reference to China.

The 2014 oil rig crisis and China’s colossal land reclamations in the Spratly Islands have prodded Vietnam ever further in the direction of Washington. In 2015, Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the VCP, visited the US and, remarkably, was received in the Oval Office by President Obama with

the pomp usually reserved for a head of government. The following May, Obama announced the lifting of the American arms embargo on Vietnam, justifying it as an attempt to “ensure that Vietnam has access to the equipment it needs to defend itself.” Most importantly for the hardliners in Hanoi, when President Sang visited Washington in 2013 to broker the “comprehensive partnership,” the two sides made a commitment to “respect each other’s political system”—what amounted to an official US commitment that it would not try to overthrow Vietnam’s communist regime.<sup>30</sup>

Relations deepened further under the Trump administration, as the US pivoted toward a more confrontational China policy. Vietnam features as a potential strategic partner in all of the administration’s key policy documents, from the National Security Strategy (2017) to the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019). Before the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal was scuttled by President Trump, Hanoi was an enthusiastic participant in the agreement, which would have helped diversify its economy away from its heavy reliance on China. The American withdrawal from the TPP was met with “frustration” and “disappointment” in Hanoi, said Do Thanh Hai, a senior fellow at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam and the author of a book on the disputes in the South China Sea. As he put it when we met in late 2017, the TPP “represented our zealous desire to become a part of the international community.” Vietnam has since been energetic in pushing the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the successor version of the TPP agreement.

While Hanoi cherishes good relations with Washington, geography militates against Vietnam ever becoming a fully fledged American treaty ally. As Brantly Womack has observed, Vietnam has historically seemed most threatening to China when perceived as a proxy for wider global forces, fears that an open US–Vietnam alliance would almost certainly provoke.<sup>31</sup> In its 1998 defense white paper, to reassure Beijing that it had no hostile intent, Vietnam formulated the so-called “Three Nos” policy: namely, no foreign military bases; no foreign military alliances; and no using a third country to oppose another.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, too, Vietnamese strategists have been lukewarm about recent American initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which the Chinese government understandably perceives as an attempt at containment. A looming China has thus both motivated Vietnam’s tilt toward the US and constrained it; each step toward Washington has been accompanied by anxious glances in the direction of Beijing.

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Furthermore, China and Vietnam are bound by a vestigial mistrust of American intentions. Conservative figures in both nations continue to harbor fears that the US, through the use of Facebook and American consumer culture, is plotting to undermine communist rule; the two governments even give this supposed plot the same name: “peaceful evolution.” This is a timely reminder that whatever their past and present differences, much unites the two communist parties. They share the same goal of containing the contradictions of their socialist market economies; they also face similar challenges from a mounting popular nationalism, which both have stoked for their own gains, but which always threatens to escape their control. In 2017, a senior Chinese official declared that the two parties were united by “a shared destiny”: a mutual interest in preserving communist rule.<sup>33</sup>

In 2020, a delicate status quo pertains, as Vietnam pursues a balance between the two superpowers that one of its diplomats once referred to as a “Goldilocks solution: not too hot, not too cold.”<sup>34</sup> Despite another round of tense naval confrontation in 2019 at Vanguard Bank, southwest of the Spratly Islands, the Vietnamese government has managed effectively to sequester the South China Sea disputes and prevent them from contaminating other productive parts of the relationship. Trade continues to flow, despite the periodic fracas offshore, and the sensitive question of Vietnam’s ethnic Chinese population remains dormant, in likely recognition of how combustible the issue could become. Hanoi continues to employ a time-tested pattern of working to assuage Chinese fears, while steeling itself to respond forcefully to any impingement on its sovereignty.

There are some senses in which a degree of superpower tension works to Vietnam’s advantage. The greatest fear of Vietnamese strategists is that the US and China might one day cut a deal that leaves them stranded at the heart of a Chinese sphere of influence. In 2009, Vietnam bought six Kilo-class submarines from Russia, as an added deterrent to Chinese maritime adventurism. Nguyen Truong Giang, a former ambassador to Brunei, told me: “If you’re afraid of the tiger, of course the tiger will swallow you.” But as popular sentiment becomes inflamed, and the US moves more forcefully to contain Chinese ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, the stakes of Vietnam’s balancing act are rising.

Walking through the military graveyards around Lang Son, I was conscious of China’s looming presence just over the hazy rim of hills to the north, and the crushing burden that this represented for Vietnam and its people. For

centuries, Vietnamese political and cultural life had been governed by a fraught dialectic of eager emulation of and fierce resistance to China. The national spirit of the Vietnamese had been hardened on the horns of this contradiction, each sentiment feeding algorithmically into the other, every iteration reinforcing their particular fate: to be bound to a hated enemy without whom they would be nothing.

Today's Vietnam stands at the confluence of the various strategic challenges pressing in on Southeast Asia. It faces China's expanding power both on land and on water, and is impacted by its stranglehold on the upper Mekong River and its actions in the South China Sea. In many senses, its fate reflects, in highly concentrated form, that of Southeast Asia as a whole: a region destined to sit in disconcerting propinquity to the world's most populous nation. "It's God's creation, unfortunately," the government critic Nguyen Quang A said. "We have a very big and powerful neighbor and we have to live peacefully with them. The one solution is that we find some island and move all our population there," he added, "but that's nonsense."



## CAMBODIA AND LAOS

### PHOBOS AND DEIMOS

A short drive outside the river town of Kampong Chhnang in central Cambodia lies a large military airfield. Its vast concrete runway sprawls out in breezy silence, untroubled by any sign of aircraft. Here and there half-finished roads lose themselves in fields of sugar palms. In a green grid of rice paddies, an empty control tower stands sentinel.

Abandoned in 1979, shortly before its completion, the airfield was built by the communist Khmer Rouge, whose mad dash toward agrarian utopia led to the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians—about a quarter of the country’s population at the time. According to prosecutors working at a United Nations-backed war crimes tribunal in the capital Phnom Penh, set up to try a handful of the regime’s surviving leaders, the manpower was supplied by prisoners—most of them purged members of the Khmer Rouge military. They used basic tools to uproot trees, scrape the land clean, and pour thick slabs of cement. Many were worked to death or accused of sabotage and executed as traitors. Thousands perished.

The airport’s 2.4-kilometer runway—still in fine condition despite four decades of neglect—is also evidence of the strong support the Khmer Rouge received from China. As Andrew Mertha writes in his book *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, Beijing dispatched hundreds of engineers to oversee the construction of the airport, and the excavation of an underground command complex—a dank catacomb of reinforced concrete bunkers stretching hundreds of meters into the nearby hills.<sup>1</sup> Shattered out-buildings and support facilities still lie scattered across the surrounding area. Exploring in the woods nearby, I came across four empty water tanks, great industrial caverns that pinged with otherworldly echoes. Phat Bora, a 53-year-old woman who worked on a Khmer Rouge road-building brigade as a teenager, remembered the Chinese experts well; they were easily recognizable by their

blue trousers and collared shirts. (The prisoners all wore black.) “Their skin was very white and beautiful,” she said.

Between April 1975, when it seized power, and January 1979, when it was driven from Phnom Penh by a Vietnamese invasion, the Khmer Rouge regime cut Cambodia off from the world and embarked on a “super great leap forward” to communism. While China had no direct hand in the purges and killings, it was the only country to give Democratic Kampuchea (as the regime called itself) significant support. According to Youk Chhang, the director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which researches the regime’s crimes, “Chinese support went from the village level all the way up to the highest level of the Khmer Rouge leadership.” Within days of the Khmer Rouge seizing power, China extended aid and technical assistance to the new government. In June 1975, the regime’s leader, “Brother Number One” Pol Pot, made a secret trip to Beijing to meet with Chairman Mao, who offered him \$1 billion in aid—China’s largest aid pledge up to that point. China sent everything from military materiel and radio transmitters to agricultural implements and food aid. A weekly flight from Beijing was one of Democratic Kampuchea’s few links to the outside world.

The documentary evidence of Chinese support to the Khmer Rouge is preserved in the National Archives of Cambodia, which are housed in a mustard-colored French colonial building close to Wat Phnom, the fourteenth-century hillside pagoda that gives the Cambodian capital its name. During a visit to the archive in 2018, I spent two days sitting beneath the ceiling fans, poring through stacks of warped files held together with string. They included reams of Chinese blueprints and schematics, printed on waxy paper in astringent purple ink. These outlined plans for a variety of Chinese projects: radar stations, a thermal energy plant, and an oil refinery in Kampong Som, today known as Sihanoukville, which was halfway to completion when the regime fell. There were also bills of lading for Chinese shipments to the Khmer Rouge, many of them for military supplies, and a few hand-written Chinese notes, inscribed in a spidery hand.

Despite the common zeal and excess of Khmer Rouge rule and Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Chinese support to Democratic Kampuchea was driven less by ideological affinity than by strategic imperatives: in particular, China’s desire to counter the Soviet Union and its regional client, Vietnam. For similar reasons, China continued its support of the Khmer Rouge after they were

driven from power in 1979. Along with diplomatic backing from the US and the anti-communist Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and logistical support from the Thai army, Chinese aid allowed Pol Pot's army to regroup in jungle camps along the Thai border and launch a civil war against the new Vietnam-installed government in Phnom Penh. Right up until their terminal collapse in the late 1990s, the Khmer Rouge wore olive-green Chinese military uniforms and communicated on Chinese-made radio transmitters. The role of China in keeping the Khmer Rouge alive was so pivotal that Hun Sen, appointed prime minister of Cambodia in 1985, described it during this period as "the root of everything that was evil" in his country.<sup>2</sup>

Three decades on, however, Cambodia is once again ensconced in Beijing's widening orbit. China is now the country's most important international backer, its main trade partner, and its primary source of tourism and foreign investment. Hun Sen, still in power, no longer denounces China's support for the people who ravaged his country. Instead, he praises its "no-strings" injections of capital. No country in Southeast Asia is closer to China than Cambodia, and none better demonstrates the extent to which China's economic and political re-emergence has altered the dynamics of aid and development in the region. History looked set to come full circle in 2015, when Cambodian state media reported that a Chinese firm was in negotiation to refurbish the old Khmer Rouge airfield in Kampong Chhnang—and finally press into service a runway laid with the bones of the dead.

The story of how Beijing so quickly swung from prime enemy to "iron-clad friend," as Xi Jinping declared in 2016, has its roots in Cambodia's unique political trajectory since the end of the Cold War. On October 23, 1991, less than three months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, four Cambodian armed factions, including the Khmer Rouge and Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP), came together to sign the Paris Peace Agreements, an international peace treaty intended to end the civil war that had ravaged the country since 1979. To implement its terms, Paris created the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), then the most expensive and ambitious peacekeeping mission ever mounted. (It would eventually cost more than \$2 billion.) Staffed by a multinational force of 26,000, including 18,000 blue-helmeted soldiers, it was tasked with disarming and demobilizing the four Cambodian factions, and repatriating some 300,000 refugees from camps along the Thai border. More ambitiously, it was also responsible

for organizing free and fair elections, with the aim of turning a war-scarred nation with a creaking communist government into a liberal democratic state—a Denmark of the Far East.

This project was infused with the liberal ideological triumphalism that followed the conclusion of the Cold War. To many outside observers, Cambodia presented an appealing moral symmetry. For several decades, the country had been shattered by the conflict between the US, China, and the Soviet Union: pummeled by American B-52 Stratofortresses in the closing phases of the Vietnam War, razed by the mad designs of the Khmer Rouge, and then consumed by a further round of civil war in the 1980s. Now, with the Cold War at an end, Cambodia would be granted a dividend of peace. The same “international community” that had fueled Cambodia’s civil wars would close ranks to shepherd a long-suffering people toward the promised land of democracy, free market prosperity, and human rights.

UNTAC’s avowed aims were never that realistic. When the first UN peacekeepers arrived in Cambodia in 1992, the country was impoverished, reeling from a generation of conflict, with virtually no history of democratic politics. Perhaps more importantly, it was ruled by an entrenched quasi-communist party—the CPP—which viewed the West’s liberal proclamations with skepticism. For the previous decade, the CPP (known until 1991 as the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party) had been on the wrong end of a cynical Cold War accommodation in which China, the US, and their ASEAN allies had backed a coalition of three armed rebel factions, including what was left of the Khmer Rouge, in an attempt to bleed Soviet-backed Vietnam and its client regime in Phnom Penh. This experience led senior CPP leaders, including Hun Sen, to see the coming of democracy not as a new dawn but simply as a more sophisticated means of removing their party from power. Far from ending, the civil war evolved into a new phase.

The UNTAC-organized election took place over a week in May 1993, in an atmosphere of keen anticipation. Huge numbers of Cambodians turned out for the first real democratic election in their nation’s history, some traveling many hours to complete their ballot. The CPP lost to a royalist faction known as FUNCINPEC, led by the Francophile son of the charismatic Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had ruled Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s. But senior CPP officials refused to accept the result. Threatening a secession of the country’s eastern provinces, they bluffed their way into an equal share

of power in an unstable new coalition government. The UN dithered. Eager to declare Cambodia a success, it signed off on the result and left, as the two coalition partners began vying for power within the government. In July 1997, armed forces loyal to Hun Sen launched a lightning strike on FUNCINPEC's military wing and effectively seized power. In response, Western governments suspended aid, and Cambodia's UN seat was vacated. Under outside pressure, Hun Sen acceded to a new election in 1998, which the CPP won easily in a climate of fear and intimidation. The Western powers signed off on the results and resumed their aid. Hun Sen again became sole prime minister—a position he has held ever since.

While Hun Sen's Cambodia remained a multi-party democracy in name, real power resided in the loyalties and obligations that bound together a trelis-like network of tycoons, CPP officials, military commanders, and local big-men (and women) distributed throughout the provinces. These traditional patron-client ties, known in Khmer as *ksae*, or "strings," ran from the villages right up to the top levels of the Cambodian cabinet, bypassing or infiltrating the country's formal political institutions. Cambodian democracy thus came to have a curiously superficial quality: nominally pluralistic, but never really changing, as the CPP used intimidation, patronage, and occasional lethal violence to prevent the emergence of any serious threat to its power.

Despite piling up domestic victories, international legitimacy eluded Hun Sen. In the Western narrative of redemption that came to dominate views of Cambodia in the early 1990s, the one-eyed, belligerent former Khmer Rouge commander was the perfect villain—an authoritarian bogeyman who had thwarted history's grand democratic design. This view was particularly strong in the US, where a lobby of conservative Republican congressmen, some representing large Cambodian-American constituencies, denounced the Cambodian leader as a "new Pol Pot" and threw their support behind Sam Rainsy, a polished former financier who had spent most of his life in France. Where Hun Sen struggled to shed Cambodia's status as a special international "project," Rainsy labored to reinforce it, circulating through the capitals of the West, portraying himself as the one figure who could bring democracy to Cambodia. To domestic audiences, meanwhile, he usually focused on historic animosities toward Vietnam.

If Western governments balked at legitimizing Hun Sen's rule, however, there was a resurgent Asian power that had no such qualms. Throughout the

1980s, China had been enemy number one in Cambodia, but its support for the Khmer Rouge after 1979 was pragmatic. After cutting off funding to Pol Pot in 1990, it had no problem supporting whichever Cambodian leader could bring stability and support Chinese aims in the region. Initially, Chinese leaders invested their hopes in Prince Ranariddh. Since the 1950s, China had been close to the Cambodian royal family, a relationship anchored in the personal friendship between Zhou Enlai and Ranariddh's father Sihanouk, who had first met each other at the Bandung Conference of non-aligned nations in Indonesia in 1955. When Sihanouk was removed from power in a coup in 1970 and sought refuge in China, Zhou arranged financial support and a comfortable residence for him in Beijing, which he retained until his death in 2012.

Once in power, however, Ranariddh proved feckless and vain; worse, from Beijing's perspective, were his close ties to Taiwanese business interests. After his coup de force in July 1997, Hun Sen vaguely intimated that Ranariddh had received covert support from Taiwan, and shut Taipei's trade office in Phnom Penh. Chinese leaders were pleased. A few months later, China gave Cambodia a \$10 million loan to replace the Western aid suspended following the violence; it also sent a \$2.8 million shipment of military trucks and jeeps, which were used to equip security forces loyal to Hun Sen. These included his well-armed personal bodyguard unit, a private army that existed outside the normal military chain of command. The Cambodian leader praised the fact that, unlike Western countries, China "does not poke its nose into Cambodia's internal affairs."<sup>3</sup>

In this new convergence of interests, old enmities were laid aside. When Jiang Zemin paid a state visit to Cambodia in November 2000—the first by a Chinese leader since 1963—neither he nor Hun Sen made any public mention of China's past support for the Khmer Rouge. The only reminder was the small cluster of protesters who hoisted banners reading "China is a bad friend" and "Cambodia is not a Chinese province," before being bundled out of sight by police.<sup>4</sup> Hun Sen told Jiang that Cambodia's relations with China were "a precious gift."<sup>5</sup>

Chinese capital and investors started trickling into the country. In the 1990s, mainland wags had jokingly referred to Cambodia as "*qian buzai*": a pun on *jianpuzhai*, the Chinese name for the country, meaning that there was "no money" to be made there.<sup>6</sup> But as the bilateral relationship bloomed, the country saw the largest influx of Chinese citizens since the Khmer Rouge

years. Between 2011 and 2015, Beijing funneled nearly \$5 billion in loans and investment into Cambodia, for the construction of roads, bridges, and hydro-power dams.<sup>7</sup> The fruits of this relationship could be seen in the gleaming new bridges spanning Cambodia's milky-brown rivers; the imported Chinese products that filled the stalls at Phnom Penh's modernist Central Market; and the high-rises that were altering the capital's skyline, ziggurats of blue-green gauze and scaffolding. China also offered military support, including uniforms, trucks, loans to buy helicopters, and a training facility in southern Cambodia.

In return, the Cambodian government supported key Chinese interests. It barred the Dalai Lama from traveling to Cambodia, and forcibly sent Falun Gong activists back to China. In December 2009, the government deported 20 ethnic Uighur Muslims, who had arrived in Cambodia seeking asylum after a long and perilous journey from China's Xinjiang region, where ethnic riots had broken out earlier that year. When the US government responded to the deportation by canceling a planned shipment of military trucks, China offered a larger shipment of Dongfeng trucks in its place.

Most controversially, Cambodia sided with China in the competing maritime claims over the South China Sea, a dispute in which it had no direct interests. In July 2012, during its chairmanship of ASEAN, Cambodian officials worked behind the scenes to veto mild criticisms of China's recent seizure of the Scarborough Shoal, following its protracted standoff with the Philippines. Unable to agree on language for the South China Sea disputes, the bloc failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in its 45-year history.<sup>8</sup> A few weeks earlier, Chinese President Hu Jintao had visited Phnom Penh, promising millions of dollars in investment and assistance. Cambodia would play a similar blocking role at an ASEAN meeting in Laos in July 2016.<sup>9</sup>

When Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Cambodia in October 2016, the two sides issued a joint statement endorsing Beijing's long-standing position: that the South China Sea disputes were not an issue between China and ASEAN, and that they should be resolved via bilateral talks: negotiations in which China would naturally enjoy the upper hand. Xi offered Cambodia a fresh tranche of Chinese funding and described the two countries as "good neighbors, real friends who are loyal to each other."<sup>10</sup>

Over time, Chinese "no-strings" support gave Hun Sen's government an escape hatch from the conditions that were often attached to Western aid money. Since the early 1990s, the CPP government had seethed at Cambodia's



status as an international “project” and resented the fact that the country was held to higher standards than most of its neighbors. This was bitter medicine for Hun Sen, who fancied himself as a great peacemaker who had presided over a period of unprecedented economic growth and political stability. Left out of the Obama administration’s “rebalance” to Asia, Hun Sen was forced to watch on as rights-abusing leaders like President Thein Sein of Burma and Nguyen Phu Trong, the head of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), were ushered into the White House. The Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte and Thailand’s junta leader Prayuth Chan-ocha would be invited to Washington in due course under President Trump.

These resentments came together in the run-up to the national elections of July 2018. The previous election five years before had veered unexpectedly off-script, when millions of discontented Cambodians threw their support behind the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), a new unified opposition party led by Sam Rainsy, Hun Sen’s long-time rival. Across the country, huge crowds turned out to see Rainsy and his deputy Kem Sokha, who promised a new dawn for Cambodia after years of cronyism and corruption. While the CPP scraped through the election with its parliamentary majority intact (claims of electoral fraud notwithstanding), Hun Sen was shaken by the loss of support. Embracing Facebook, he unfurled a populist platform that included wage-hikes for civil servants, teachers, and soldiers. He also made clear that reform would happen on his own terms.

As the 2018 election approached, the Cambodian authorities launched a wide-ranging crackdown. Political figures and human rights defenders were arrested and beaten up in the street. Rainsy was forced into exile overseas on a raft of bogus criminal charges. In September 2017, Kem Sokha, who had replaced Rainsy as CNRP president, was arrested and charged with treason, on the grounds that he had conspired with foreign governments to topple the CPP. Two months later, the Supreme Court banned the CNRP altogether. The *Cambodia Daily*, a fearless English-language newspaper that had symbolized the promise of UNTAC, was also forced to close after being presented with a \$6.3 million bill for unpaid tax. The paper’s last front page, on September 4, carried a picture of Sokha being taken into custody under the headline, “Descent Into Outright Dictatorship.”

Cambodia had never been a fully functioning democracy; in a sense, Hun Sen was simply bringing appearance into closer alignment with reality. But



the fact that he no longer felt the need to offer democratic gestures to the West was a startling sign of how Chinese support had altered the status quo. In Beijing, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson responded to Sokha's arrest by saying that China supported "the Cambodian government's effort to uphold national security and stability."<sup>11</sup> This support allowed the CPP to sideline political enemies and extend its hold on power. It also enabled Hun Sen's final reckoning, a quarter-century on, with an unwanted intervention in his country's affairs. Cambodia's days as an international "project" appeared over.

When Washington complained about the crackdown, Hun Sen gave his resentments a full airing. He criticized Washington for its bombings of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, for supporting the Khmer Rouge through the 1980s, and for refusing to waive more than \$500 million in "bloody" debt from the civil war of the early 1970s. Cambodia also suspended its participation in Angkor Sentinel, a military exercise it had held with the US Army since 2010, a month after holding—for the first time—a similar exercise with China. After Western nations withheld their support for the 2018 election, China donated laptops, computers, and voting booths to the Cambodian election authority; when the election campaign began in May 2018, Chinese Ambassador Xiong Bo was a guest at a big CPP rally in Phnom Penh.<sup>12</sup>

Election day came and went. The CPP sailed through unopposed, except for a handful of miniature Potemkin parties, and claimed all 125 seats in the National Assembly. The resulting pressure from the US and other Western governments, still measuring Cambodia by a 1991 baseline, simply pushed Hun Sen's government closer to China. Officials now described the two countries' bonds as "unbreakable," "all-weather," and "iron-clad." The Sino-Cambodian friendship was "like wine," Ambassador Xiong declared in 2018. "The longer it is, the better taste it has."<sup>13</sup>

Hun Sen's Chinese embrace, like that of Pol Pot, had deeper historical precedents. For most of Cambodia's history, the greatest threat to its survival had come not from a distant China, but from the two kingdoms to its east and west. Following the decline of the Angkorian Empire in the fifteenth century, a shrinking Cambodian realm found itself sandwiched between Siam and Vietnam (Annam), two rising powers that meddled in its politics and slowly encroached on its territories. To survive and prosper, Cambodian leaders frequently sought outside protection. In 1863, King Norodom welcomed the establishment of a French protectorate that probably saved his kingdom from

being partitioned by its traditional foes. After independence from the French, his great-grandson Prince Sihanouk looked to communist China. "If we move away from China," he warned in 1965, "we will be devoured by the vultures."<sup>14</sup>

Like its predecessors, Cambodia's current government is keenly aware of the two larger countries pressing in from each side. Pou Sothirak, a former minister and ambassador to Japan who heads the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said that the government sees China as a better guarantor of Cambodia's independence and sovereignty than any other outside power, including ASEAN.

When Cambodia joined ASEAN in 1999, policymakers hoped that it would offer an enduring solution to the country's external security threats. But they grew disillusioned at ASEAN's perceived ineffectiveness in resolving the nationalistic spat that broke out in 2008 between Cambodia and Thailand over Preah Vihear, an eleventh-century Angkorian temple perched on a cliff along their shared border. ASEAN told Cambodia and Thailand to negotiate the border dispute bilaterally, and did not table it as a formal agenda item, until Hun Sen broke with protocol and raised it during a summit meeting in Jakarta in 2011. A subsequent agreement to dispatch Indonesian civilian observers along the border was never implemented.<sup>15</sup> The episode left many Cambodian policymakers with the view that, as Sothirak told me, "ASEAN is good, but maybe China is a little bit better."

Tilting toward China has also allowed Hun Sen to distance himself somewhat from his former patron Vietnam, the primary wellspring of Khmer nationalist angst. Cambodians have never forgotten Vietnam's slow absorption of the former Khmer territories in the Mekong Delta, and many believe it is still plotting to swallow what remains of their country. Like anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam, hostility toward the Vietnamese permeates the Khmer national consciousness, bridging every social and political divide. Given the CPP's historical association with Vietnam, which placed it in power in 1979, this has also been a fruitful line of attack for Cambodian opposition figures, who have long sought to portray Hun Sen and his cronies as "puppets" of Hanoi. In a 2014 speech, Sam Rainsy even declared that the CNRP supported China's claims in the South China Sea, on the logic that anyone opposing Vietnam must be Cambodia's friend. "The islands belong to China," he told a crowd of CNRP supporters.<sup>16</sup>

The CPP government maintains tight political ties to the VCP, especially in the realms of defense and border security, but Chinese largesse has allowed it to maintain a healthier balance of patrons. Hanoi is not overly happy with Hun Sen's Chinese love affair, but its leaders are pragmatic. "We recognize Cambodia and Laos's concerns and their need for development," one Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official told me, "so we don't want [them] to have to choose sides."

On the economic development front, too, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers Cambodia a fast way to improve the electricity grids and transportation networks necessary to support its nascent manufacturing industry. Over pizza at an Italian bistro in Phnom Penh, Sok Siphana, a lawyer and government advisor who helped negotiate Cambodia's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2004, explained that the present government welcomed support from any source, but that China moved quickly compared to the traditional donors. "The World Bank, the ADB [Asian Development Bank] will take one year to send one or two guys to do a feasibility study. The Japanese will take God knows how long," he said, "and the need is there."

The most striking evidence of China's presence in Cambodia can be seen in the city bearing the name of Beijing's old friend. Until recently, Sihanoukville was a sleepy beach resort set on a promontory jutting into the Gulf of Thailand, popular with Cambodian holidaymakers and Western backpackers. In just a few years, Chinese investment has turned the small city, home to Cambodia's only deep-water port, into a roaring gambling and tourism center—a budget Macao by the sea. When I visited Sihanoukville in late 2018, I was astonished at how it had changed from my last visit eight years earlier. High-rise hotels and apartment buildings pressed up into the evening sky. City streets crumbled under the weight of cranes and cement trucks, and rainwater pooled in the ruts. Driving down from Phnom Penh on National Road 4, traffic slowed to a crawl behind lines of trucks hauling gravel, bricks, and other construction materials down to the coast.

Sihanoukville's development centered on its multitude of Chinese-run casinos, whose illuminated facades now dominated the city center. More than twenty had opened in the two years prior to my visit, with a dozen more reportedly on the way. Peeking inside the New MGM Casino, I saw Chinese gamblers in black T-shirts nervously fingering stacks of C-notes at baccarat tables, riding each flip of the cards in tense silence. Cambodian waitresses slid silently by with

carts filled with teacups and plates of sliced mango. Outside, the dusty main roads were lined with Chinese restaurants and nightclubs. Construction hoardings bore Chinese-language advertisements for tattoo parlors and personal loans. On nearby O'Chheuteal Beach, as the sun sank below a bank of salmon-pink clouds, Chinese tourists haggled for skewers of barbecued squid and roared through the surf on jet-skis. The Western backpackers who once packed O'Chheuteal's bars had largely been replaced.

In 2017, China surpassed Vietnam to become the leading source of tourists to Cambodia; the same year, Chinese arrivals to Sihanoukville rose by nearly 200 percent. Sihanoukville International Airport is now directly linked to 27 cities in mainland China. The Chinese boom in *xigang*, or "Westport," as the town is known in Chinese, appears to have started shortly after Xi Jinping's visit to Cambodia in October 2016. "The relationship is very good," a restaurant owner from Hangzhou said. "As a result, many Chinese people have come." In addition to the casinos, many Chinese entrepreneurs have come to set up online gambling operations—part of a billion-dollar industry that allows Chinese citizens to place bets over the internet without traveling to Macao or Las Vegas. In 2018, it was reported that companies from China made up 104 of the 121 firms operating out of the nearby Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SEZ).<sup>17</sup> In mid-2019, the provincial authorities revealed that as many as 90 percent of Sihanoukville's businesses were owned by mainland Chinese.<sup>18</sup>

The coastal swell has drawn unemployed Cambodian youth from across the surrounding countryside. Some get jobs cleaning hotel rooms or dealing cards, others working on the construction sites that dot the center of town. On the beach, I met So Pheaktra, a 23-year-old from nearby Kampot, who was training as a casino dealer. She said the job paid \$350 per month, more than she could earn in most other jobs. "Everything, including accommodation, is included. It's convenient work," she said.

But the freewheeling casino economy, absent much government oversight, has also been accompanied by a steep rise in drug use, violence, prostitution, and other social problems. Local newspapers are filled with reports of money laundering, online telecoms scams, illegal gambling, and drunk driving. "There is a lot of money coming in, but the Chinese also give our authorities headaches," said Seng Nim, the chief of Commune No. 4, which includes most of Sihanoukville's casinos. When I asked him about specific issues, he reeled off a list: "Beating, hitting, hacking, arguing, shooting, using drugs . . ."

Around town, I noticed Chinese adverts for a brothel calling itself the “Fairy International Leisure Club.” Reports have emerged of visitors being detained in hotel rooms and tortured into repaying gambling debts. The Cambodian government’s unpreparedness for the speed and extent of the development in Sihanoukville became tragically evident in June 2019, when a half-completed condo building collapsed, killing 28 Cambodian construction workers who were asleep inside. The Chinese owner had undertaken the construction without the required permit, and defied orders to cease work. Five Chinese nationals were later arrested over the collapse.

While much international media coverage has depicted Sihanoukville as a beachside paradise trampled by uncouth Chinese gamblers, the town has long had a sleazy edge. When Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani visited during the UN mission in 1993, he found “bars open until all hours, and a big discotheque where scores of girls flocked from the nearby villages, dressed like dolls and made up like kabuki masks.”<sup>19</sup> Later, it became a playground of Russian oligarchs, including the fugitive billionaire Sergei Polonsky, a louche figure who maintained a Bond villain’s mansion on Koh Dek Koul, a tiny private island off Sihanoukville’s coast. As the Chinese presence began to grow, expats joked that “Sihanoukgrad” was turning into “Xi-anoukville.”

As with many things concerning China, the devil was in the scale. People I interviewed said that the Chinese revolution had happened so quickly it set off sharp increases in the cost of everything from housing and petrol to cooking oil, mangoes, and chili peppers. “Before the Chinese came, my rent was \$30 per month; now it’s \$100,” said Phat, 52, a woman selling barbecued octopus on O’Chheuteal Beach.

At the same time, many see business drying up, as Chinese visitors predominantly patronize Chinese-owned businesses. Paying for packets of Hongtashan cigarettes and bowls of noodles via WeChat or Alipay, the money effectively never leaves China. Sam Rim, a 63-year-old woman running a fruit stand across the street from the Golden Sands Hotel and Casino, hacked away at a jackfruit and vented: “When the *barang* [Westerners] came we earned a lot. When the Chinese came, they sold a lot of the same things as us, so how can we earn a living? They only buy their own products.” Displaced from the center of town by rising rents, locals have begun clearing forest on the outskirts of town—far from schools and most moneymaking opportunities. Since forests have traditionally been seen as the domain of ghosts and other

spirits, this has given rise to a bitter local saying: “The Chinese kick out the Cambodians, the Cambodians kick out the ghosts.”

Sihanoukville’s ugly realities demonstrate the ad hoc nature of Chinese initiatives like the BRI, and the way in which “official” BRI projects, like the SEZ located next to the city’s port, can be overwhelmed by private interests—in this case, low-rent gambling concessionaires and organized crime syndicates—that ultimately cut against the strategic goals of the Chinese state. By the time of my visit in 2018, the Chinese presence in Sihanoukville, coupled with land evictions associated with Chinese hydropower dams and real-estate projects elsewhere in the country, had given rise to something rare in Cambodian history: anti-Chinese sentiment.

With nationalists’ fears laser-focused on Vietnam, Cambodia has generally been a friendly place for the Chinese, a fact that has been noted by outside observers since the early twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, interactions between the two countries date back to China’s earliest contacts with Southeast Asia. When Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan made his celebrated journey to the kingdom of Angkor in 1296–7, he was surprised to find settlers from his own country. “Chinese sailors do well by the fact that in this country you can go without clothes. Food is easy to come by, women are easy to get, housing is easy to deal with, it is easy to make do with a few utensils, and it is easy to do trade,” Zhou observed, echoing the present. “They often run away here.”<sup>21</sup>

Since then, ethnic Chinese have been a continuous feature of Cambodian life. A wave of immigrants arrived following the collapse of the Ming dynasty in the mid-1600s (via what is now southern Vietnam) and another came under the French. Their presence has peppered the Khmer language and diet with Chinese borrowings. Phnom Penh’s Duanhua School, founded in 1937, remains the largest Chinese school in Southeast Asia, with more than ten thousand students. High levels of intermarriage and assimilation mean that a huge proportion of Phnom Penh’s residents can claim some degree of Chinese descent, as indicated by the ancestral shrines that sit on the floors of many homes and businesses, piled with offerings of fruit, cans of soft drink, and packets of instant noodles. Some Cambodian friends have told me that these traditions are even being adopted by people with no Chinese ancestry whatsoever. “The Khmer are prone to accept Chinese culture,” said Ou Virak, the director of Future Forum, a policy institute in Phnom Penh, “because there’s an association with success.”

Despite a period of harsh persecution in the 1970s and 1980s, Sino-Cambodians remain prominent in business, and now form the key economic props of CPP rule. In a 2007 diplomatic cable from the US embassy profiling Cambodia's "top ten tycoons," five were described as having Chinese ancestry.<sup>22</sup> One notable example is Choeung Sopheap, known commonly as "Grandma Phu," a Mandarin- and Teochew-speaking businesswoman who has used Chinese connections to build her firm Pheapimex into one of the largest conglomerates in Cambodia. (It helps that she is married to a prominent CPP senator.) Each Chinese New Year, hundreds of private security guards and other staff crowd in the street outside Grandma Phu's mansion in Phnom Penh to receive red *angpao* (*hongbao* in Mandarin): Chinese New Year envelopes stuffed with Cambodian riels and US dollars.

However, the recent inflow of Chinese tourists, migrants, and investors—very different in language, manners, and appearance from Cambodia's old Chinese—has begun to strain this traditional amity. As the casinos lit up in Sihanoukville, Cambodian social media was swamped with videos of Chinese drivers roaring through red lights or committing other acts of public nuisance. Before long, the public anger at the Chinese presence threatened to boomerang on Hun Sen's administration. In January 2018, Yun Min, the governor of Preah Sihanouk province, of which Sihanoukville is the capital, wrote a report to the Ministry of the Interior warning of the economic and social effects of the city's Chinese investment boom. The new Chinese arrivals "get drunk, yell, have arguments, and are fighting each other at restaurants and in public places," Yun Min wrote. The presence of so many foreigners "gives opportunity to the Chinese mafia to commit crimes and kidnap Chinese investors due to increased insecurity in the province." Worse still, he cautioned, "some mischievous people" might use Sihanoukville's makeover "to attack and influence the Cambodia–China relationship."<sup>23</sup>

Whether anti-Chinese sentiment will ever rival the reflexive hostility many Cambodians feel toward Vietnam is hard to say. Cambodia has experienced sudden influxes of outsiders before. Ou Virak of the Future Forum drew a comparison with the massive military and civilian contingent that accompanied the UNTAC mission, which brought its own share of troubles, including spiraling inflation and the scourge of HIV/AIDS. "In some strange way, Cambodians were taught to tolerate external people that they're not comfortable with," Virak said. "I'm pretty sure that the Cambodians will learn to live with the Chinese."



In any case, the gathering public backlash soon pushed the Cambodian government to rein in the unbounded Chinese developments in Sihanoukville. In August 2019, Hun Sen announced a ban on online gambling operations, effective January 1, 2020. The ban was introduced at the urging of the Chinese government, which had grown frustrated with how far Phnom Penh had let the situation on the coast deteriorate. As soon as the ban came into force, the city's development was thrown into reverse. Thousands of Chinese nationals left the city, and property prices started to deflate. Whether or not the ban is sustained—and Sihanoukville's long history of evading regulations gives ample grounds for skepticism—it highlights the fact that Phnom Penh and Beijing have a shared interest in curbing the spread of anti-Chinese sentiment among the Cambodian population.

More dangerous, perhaps, is the prospect of Cambodia getting tangled up in the mounting tensions between China and the US. By the time of the 2018 election, Hun Sen's embrace of all things Chinese had begun to attract attention in Washington. Particular concern focused on a Chinese tourism development in Koh Kong province, across the bay from Sihanoukville. Here the Tianjin-based Union Development Group (UDG) had been granted a colossal 36,000-hectare concession that included a fifth of Cambodia's coastline. The firm had grand plans: its five-star Dara Sakor Resort would include power stations, a golf course, water treatment plants, an industrial park, and medical facilities. To provide access, a highway was struck through virgin rainforest.

Most controversially, UDG's plans included a deep-water seaport able to berth bulk carriers and cruise ships, and potentially, Chinese naval vessels. According to a 2017 report published by the Washington-based C4ADS research group, the port would be large enough to house Chinese frigates and destroyers and their crews, or to provide logistical support to nearby warships.<sup>24</sup> Similar questions were asked about a nearby international airport that, some analysts observed, featured runways the same length as the military airfields China had built on three of its artificial islands in the South China Sea, complete with the tight turning bays favored by fighter jet pilots.<sup>25</sup>

The Cambodian government flatly denied that it intended to permit a Chinese military presence on its soil, but the story refused to go away. In July 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the two countries had signed a secret agreement granting China exclusive access rights to the Ream Naval