

inverse of Edward Luttwak's "great-state autism": the small state's fine attunement to the interests and actions of larger powers. This distinctly Singaporean brand of realism has two main pillars. First, Singapore has built its armed forces into a cutting-edge military deterrent, fortified by mandatory national military service on the Israeli model, to compensate for its lack of strategic depth. Second, it has invested heavily in regional cooperation: it is active in ASEAN and other institutions like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) mechanism, hoping to bind the region in a mesh of norms and rules. The Lion City's approach has allowed it to sustain a singular distinction: as Gideon Rachman observes, Singapore is "perhaps the only country in the world to have a special relationship with both China and the United States."³⁶

Singapore's tiny size and reliance on the unimpeded flow of trade have naturally made it an advocate for the continued forward deployment of US naval power in Southeast Asia. The PAP government strongly supported the American role in the region during the Cold War, and when the US Navy closed its base at Subic Bay in 1992, agreed to the relocation of a key naval command to Singapore. Later, Singapore commissioned the construction of a pier at Changi Naval Base specifically designed to accommodate port calls by the US Navy's Nimitz-class aircraft carriers. The US is a key supplier of weaponry to the Singapore Armed Forces, while the US Navy maintains a logistical command unit in Singapore from which it coordinates warship deployment throughout the region, including in the South China Sea. Although not a formal treaty ally, Singapore has been among Washington's most steadfast and reliable partners in Asia.

While looking to the US for security, Singapore has looked to China for trade. Though it did not formally recognize the PRC until 1990, relations between the two nations dated back to May 1976, when Lee flew to Beijing and met with a debilitated Mao Zedong. But it was Deng Xiaoping's return trip to Singapore in November 1978 which was to have the more lasting impact. Deng was greatly impressed by the clean, ordered city that he encountered. Lee likewise admired Deng's stated intention to pull China from the political chaos whipped up by Mao. As Ezra Vogel recounts in his magisterial biography of Deng, the meeting between the fastidious, Oxbridge-educated Lee and China's new paramount leader, a head shorter in his austere Zhongshan suit, marked the beginning of a long and productive relationship. "Before Deng's visit to Singapore," Vogel writes, "the Chinese press had referred to Singaporeans as

the 'running dogs of American imperialism.'” A few weeks after Deng’s visit to Singapore, however, this description disappeared from the Chinese press. Now, “Singapore was described as a place worth studying for its initiatives in environmental preservation, public housing, and tourism.”³⁷

Later, as a reforming Deng groped for the stones beneath his feet, Singapore provided a rough model for what he wanted to build in China. In a speech during his Southern Tour in early 1992, Deng praised Lee’s achievements. “Singapore’s social order is rather good. Its leaders exercise strict management,” he told officials. “We should learn from their experience, and we should do a better job than they do.”³⁸ It was not simply Singapore’s success that attracted Deng, but its achievement (as he saw it) by fellow Chinese. As Lee reportedly told Deng during his 1978 visit, “If Singapore Chinese who were the descendants of poorly-educated coolies could make good, how much better mainland China could be if the right policies were adopted.”³⁹

Singapore’s role in encouraging the PRC’s economic opening extended its long history of involvement in mainland Chinese affairs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British Singapore had been the main center of Overseas Chinese activity in Southeast Asia. The reformers Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei spent time there, and Sun Yat-sen made the city a republican nerve center and fundraising base; he visited eight times in the early 1900s, staying in a double-story bungalow in Balestier owned by the Teochew rubber magnate Teo Eng Hock. Singaporean Chinese later played active roles in the conflicts roiling their homeland: they supported the Kuomintang and the CCP, established newspapers, and raised emergency relief funds during the war against the Japanese in the 1930s and 1940s. Some returned to China to serve the two regimes in various roles. Among the most prominent was Tan Kah Kee, the “Henry Ford of Malaya,” a millionaire rubber baron and philanthropist who founded Xiamen University in his home province of Fujian in 1921, and later coordinated wartime relief efforts. After 1949, Tan returned to China from Singapore and served the PRC until his death in 1961. Today, he remains a revered figure in both nations.

By the 1980s, these dormant connections between Singapore and China were stirring back to life. Singapore and its people started investing and working on the mainland. For instance, when Kentucky Fried Chicken opened its first store in China in November 1987, its manager was a Chinese Singaporean.⁴⁰ Singaporean officials, including Lee’s close associate Goh Keng

Swee, were enlisted as economic advisors to various Chinese cities and regions. At the same time, Chinese delegations began flying to Singapore to study its approach to issues as diverse as housing development, water treatment, and transport regulation. Between 1976 and 2015, Lee made 33 visits to China, and worked closely with a succession of Chinese leaders.⁴¹ By the time of his death in 2015—after a political career spanning six decades, including 31 years as premier—China had become Singapore’s leading trade partner and an increasingly important source of foreign investment, while Singapore supported key Chinese initiatives including the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Upon his passing, Chinese leaders queued to offer eulogies; Xi Jinping praised his “outstanding contributions” to peace and development in Asia.⁴²

In November 2010, China and Singapore marked the twentieth anniversary of diplomatic relations by unveiling a small bronze bust of Deng Xiaoping in central Singapore. The statue is nestled on the bank of the Singapore River, a short walk from the spot where Raffles first disembarked on the island on January 28, 1819. From his perch under the trees, Deng looks across the water toward the historic Fullerton Hotel, an imposing neoclassical building that once served as colonial Singapore’s Central Post Office, and the iron spans of the nineteenth-century Cavenagh Bridge, both now dwarfed by the glass and steel towers of Singapore’s financial district. On the back of the statue is inscribed, in English and Mandarin, a slogan of Deng’s: “Development is of overriding importance.” It is a statement that could just as easily have come from Lee.

Despite its equally constructive relations with China and the US, Singapore has drawn its lines of interest with precision, never hesitating to stand up to one power or the other when necessary. Lee and his successors have made it clear that their nation’s cooperation with the US was (and remains) a matter of shared interests rather than shared values. In 1988, the Singaporean government expelled an American diplomat, E. Mason Hendrickson, for meeting and allegedly cultivating opponents of the PAP, which Singapore claimed amounted to interference in its internal affairs. An official statement accused Hendrickson and his superiors of acting “as if they were the colonial power and Singapore their protectorate.”⁴³ During the so-called “Asian values” debate of the 1990s, Lee and other Singaporean officials were forthright in challenging the

principle that democratic freedoms and human rights were universal. “People may find us slightly prickly,” said Chan Heng Chee, a former ambassador to Washington. “We’re a bit too insistent on independence, on our own identity, on telling the Western press, you’re not going to tell us what to think.”

Singapore has taken the same approach to China, although geographic and cultural proximity makes it a much trickier challenge. In the early years of engagement, Singapore encouraged China to grow within the contours of the prevailing US-dominated regional order. In the 1990s, a full decade before then-US Under-Secretary of State Robert Zoellick announced that Washington should try to turn China into a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system, Singapore was already working to embed China into existing regional institutions and socialize it into the “ASEAN way.” For a while it seemed to work. But China’s expanding economic power and growing regional truculence now threatens to destabilize the American-backed security environment that has benefited Singapore for so long.

One fear, at least theoretically, is that large Chinese-backed infrastructure projects designed to alleviate the Chinese economy’s heavy reliance on shipments through the Malacca Straits could redirect the flows of trade on which Singapore has historically relied. As Lee admitted to a Thai official in the 1960s, the possibility of Thailand building a canal across the Isthmus of Kra kept him awake at night.⁴⁴ By undermining Singapore’s natural geographic advantage, it raised the possibility that Singapore might go the way of old Malacca: consigned to irrelevance by the shifting patterns of global trade. While this scenario is unlikely—Singapore has long ceased to rely on geography alone—China’s newfound clout gives it the ability to exert considerable economic or military pressure on the city-state: the main reason that Singapore has been so outspoken on the need for a continued American military presence in Asia.

These frictions have been most evident on the question of the South China Sea. When Beijing formally asserted its “nine-dash line” claim in 2009, Singapore took the strongest stance of any non-claimant state, prompting then-Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s frustrated remark about “big countries” and “small countries”—reportedly delivered while looking directly at his Singaporean counterpart George Yeo.⁴⁵

Open disagreement flared in July 2016, after the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled against China’s “nine-dash line” maritime claim

in the South China Sea, in a case brought by the Philippines. After the ruling, which Beijing denounced as “null and void,” Singapore issued a cautious statement urging “all parties” to the dispute, China included, “to fully respect legal and diplomatic processes,” including the Hague ruling.⁴⁶ Two months later, the *Global Times*, the CCP’s nationalistic tabloid mouthpiece, published a report claiming that, during a summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Venezuela, Singapore had tried to insert an endorsement of the ruling into the meeting’s final document. Stanley Loh, Singapore’s ambassador to Beijing, subsequently wrote to Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of *Global Times*, decrying the report as “false and unfounded.” Hu shot back: “I think Singapore should feel ashamed when you tried to trip up China, your largest trading partner.”⁴⁷

Feeding into the Chinese angst was Singapore’s strong support for the Obama administration’s “rebalance” to Asia. This included the deployment to Singapore in 2015 of the new P8 Poseidon aircraft, which was used (among other things) to track Chinese naval movements in the South China Sea. Visiting the White House in the final months of President Obama’s second term, at the height of the strains with Beijing, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared that his focus on Southeast Asia had “won America new friends and strengthened old partnerships, including with Singapore.”⁴⁸

The war of words escalated. In October 2016, Professor Jin Yinan of the PLA’s National Defense University, an influential Chinese security advisor, said that Singapore was “playing with fire” in seeking to play big countries off against one another, suggesting that Beijing should make it “pay the price for seriously damaging China’s interests.”⁴⁹ The following month, Hong Kong customs officials seized nine Singaporean Terrex armored personnel carriers en route from military exercises in Taiwan. Lee was also disinvited from the inaugural Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in May 2017. He was one of just two Southeast Asian heads of government not to hear President Xi reference Zheng He, “the famous Chinese navigator,” in his keynote address. (The other absentee was Prime Minister Prayuth of Thailand.)

As relations with Beijing frayed, Singaporeans were treated to an unusually public debate on the question of how to handle Asia’s rising superpower. In July 2017, *The Straits Times* published an article by the retired diplomat Kishore Mahbubani, then the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS), reflecting on the recent isolation of Qatar by a coalition of bigger Arab states. In the article, Mahbubani

argued that Qatar offered Singapore an important lesson: “Small states should behave like small states.” Referring to Singapore’s outspoken stance on the South China Sea, he said the PAP government should be “very restrained in commenting on matters involving great powers.” If not, Mahbubani warned, the Lion City risked a Qatar-like fate. “In the jungle, no small animal would stand in front of a charging elephant,” he wrote, “no matter who has the right of way.”⁵⁰

The article touched several prominent nerves in the Singaporean governing establishment. K. Shanmugam, the Law and Home Affairs Minister, described Mahbubani’s argument as “questionable intellectually,” adding, “We have to be clear about our interests and go about it smartly. But not on bended knees and by kowtowing to others.” Bilahari Kausikan, the retired former permanent secretary of the Foreign Ministry known for his candid views on foreign affairs, took to Facebook to rebut its “muddled, mendacious” argument. He wrote, “Of course we recognize asymmetries of size and power—we are not stupid—but that does not mean we must grovel or accept subordination as a norm of relationships.”⁵¹ Visiting Singapore shortly after the controversy broke, I went to see Mahbubani at his light-filled office at the Lee Kuan Yew School. He was in defensive mode, though refused to back down. “Singapore should recognize that when the world changes, it’s got to change and adapt,” he said, citing (as in his book) the case of Kodak. “We shouldn’t go around as a small state making great powers angry. I know I trod on sensitive toes, but it’s a fact of life.”

China’s vehemence toward Singapore was not only a question of size. It also grew from a common Chinese perception of the ethnic Chinese-majority city-state as a “Chinese” nation, and one that should therefore naturally defer to Beijing’s wishes. As relations soured, Chinese internet forums brimmed with commentary accusing Singapore of “forgetting its origins” (*wangben*) or of being “a country of Han traitors” (*hanjianguo*)—a loaded epithet once used for Chinese collaborators during the “war of resistance” against Japan.⁵² Kausikan explained to me that the perception was also widespread among PRC officials, who had difficulty in accepting Singapore’s multiracial identity, and frequently asked for its “understanding” on the basis of shared cultural and ethnic affinities. Kausikan said that to accept such a characterization would strain Singapore’s multiracial compact, and potentially, its social cohesion. “To be described as a Chinese country is not just a description,” he said, “it also prescribes a norm of behavior.”

These concerns have been brought into focus by a recent increase in Chinese outreach and influence efforts targeting Singaporean Chinese, part of Beijing's wider pitch to members of the "Chinese family" overseas. Over the past decade, the PRC has helped organize a range of people-to-people exchanges with Singapore. It has reached out to Singaporean Chinese business and clan associations, and convened conferences of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs. It has put together *xungen* ("roots-seeking") camps, similar to Israel's Birthright program, where young Singaporeans are flown to China to practice calligraphy and tai chi, even to sing "red" songs from the Maoist era.⁵³ Ja Ian Chong, an associate professor at NUS, said that while the main purpose of these outreach efforts—often arranged and funded in part by state agencies like the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office—is to highlight shared ethnic and cultural origins, political questions are never entirely absent. He said, "Where culture and history stop, and state policy and intentions begin, is a very blurred line."

Singaporean officials I spoke to were sanguine about the threat posed by Chinese ports and canals, some of which may never eventuate. But they expressed apprehensions about the blurring of Singaporean Chinese identities under the pressure of Chinese cultural outreach and more covert influence operations designed to shape public opinion in China's favor. While the Singaporean government has yet to state these concerns openly, retired officials and ambassadors-at-large have given voice to the increasing official consternation. In a public lecture in June 2018, Kausikan warned that pro-China narratives were being seeded, through word of mouth and Chinese social media apps like WeChat, in a bid to sway Singaporean Chinese sentiments in Beijing's direction. He called on the country's citizens to resist any attempt to "impose a Chinese identity on Singapore."⁵⁴ China's ambassador to Singapore, Hong Xiaoyong, later wrote an op-ed rebutting Kausikan's remarks, arguing that China had "no intention of influencing Singaporeans' sense of their national identity and will never do so."⁵⁵

Just how seriously the Singaporean authorities take this question became clear in August 2017, when the government expelled from the country Huang Jing, an American academic born in China, for what it said was his covert effort to influence Singapore's foreign policy on behalf of an unnamed foreign government, widely believed to be China. The PAP government has also tightened its laws to protect against "fake news" and false information. Sometimes Singapore has used subtler methods to telegraph its separateness from China.

During his talks with Deng Xiaoping in 1978, Lee Kuan Yew spoke in English, rather than Mandarin, and did so in all of his subsequent dealings with Chinese officials. Singapore also pointedly over-represents ethnic Malay and Indian officials in its delegations to China. When Beijing inaugurated a China Cultural Centre in Singapore in late 2015, the Singaporean government countered by building its own Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in the middle of the financial district. In a speech given at the unveiling of the 11-story, \$110 million project in 2017, Prime Minister Lee harped on Singapore's distinctiveness from China: "The Chinese Singaporean is proud of his Chinese culture," he said, "but also increasingly conscious that his 'Chineseness' is different from the Chineseness of Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese, or the Chineseness of people in China, Hong Kong or Taiwan."⁵⁶

However, the issue has been complicated by the PAP's own contradictory attitude toward the idea of "Chineseness." While taking pains to assert a distinctly Singaporean—that is, non-Chinese—identity, it has selectively leveraged its historical and cultural connections to take advantage of China's economic growth. "In the '80s and '90s, as China was opening up, we were really pushing our Chinese identity," said P.J. Thum, a Singapore-born historian at the University of Oxford, who also hosts the *History of Singapore* podcast. "The government was telling us, oh you are Chinese, so you should behave certain ways, believe certain things, and eat certain foods, and speak Mandarin."

In 1979, the PAP government launched a campaign encouraging Singaporean Chinese to adopt Mandarin Chinese in place of the dialects spoken by their ancestors. The "Speak Mandarin" campaign saw regional languages like Hokkien and Teochew largely effaced from the media. Singaporeans who watched Cantonese-language soap operas from Hong Kong had to get used to seeing them dubbed into a tongue some could barely understand. At the same time, the complex traditional Chinese characters were replaced by the PRC's simplified form of written Chinese, which now features on all official signage in Singapore. The first decade of the campaign saw the number of dialect-speaking Chinese households drop from 76 percent to 48 percent; by 2015, it had fallen to just 12 percent.⁵⁷

Initially, the campaign's goal was to create a unified "Chinese" community from the country's myriad dialect and clan allegiances. But by the 1990s, as China's economy began to take off, the Mandarin push had acquired an inexorable economic logic as well. Many Singaporean Chinese in their thirties

and forties recall the pressures they came under to learn Mandarin at school. Kirsten Han, an independent journalist and editor-in-chief of *New Naratif*, a pioneering regional long-form journalism outlet, recalled, “What they said to us is, you guys need to go and do business in China, and it will be so much easier for you if you speak the language.”

But the Speak Mandarin campaign constructed a linguistic bridge that now runs both ways, increasing the reach and penetration of Chinese broadcasting networks—particularly PRC-friendly television stations from Taiwan—which disseminate the official line of the Beijing government. As an indirect result of Singapore’s efforts to engineer a nation of Mandarin-speakers, said Ja Ian Chong of NUS, “the narrative about a ‘Greater China,’ this very racialized idea of the nation, well, Chinese-speaking Singapore audiences are getting more of that than before.”

Singapore’s Chinese community is far from homogeneous, and such efforts to exert influence are unlikely to have uniform effects. Younger Singaporeans raised in English, with only a vague notion of China, are less likely to take up Beijing’s line unthinkingly. But older Singaporean citizens, especially those educated in Chinese, are potentially more susceptible to influence. “It’s very unsettling,” one Singaporean netizen wrote in a discussion of Chinese influence operations on Reddit in 2018. “My dad went from a Singapore patriot to a Chinese one after he got a smartphone and cable TV.”⁵⁸

Another factor in the equation is the huge numbers of mainland Chinese who have arrived in Singapore over the past two decades under a government-engineered immigration drive. Since PRC citizens are considered “Chinese” in Singapore’s system of racial accounting, they have been a logical target for efforts to offset the city-state’s famously low birthrates. (Earlier attempts to attract Hong Kong and Malaysian Chinese proved less successful.) Hundreds of thousands have arrived in the past 20 years, their presence visible in the Sichuanese restaurants that line New Bridge Road in Chinatown, the students filling the cafés at NUS, and the revelers knocking back cold bottles of Tiger Beer in the bars of Geylang, Singapore’s red-light district.

This arrival of PRC nationals has had contradictory effects. On the one hand, it has widened the pool of citizens and permanent residents with a shallower sense of attachment to Singapore. In recent years, mainlanders have arrived in such numbers that they have less incentive to assimilate than the first trickle of PRC citizens who moved to Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s.

On the other hand, Chinese immigration has further heightened Singapore's distinct sense of national identity. This was illustrated in horrific fashion in May 2012, when a 31-year-old Chinese citizen named Ma Chi ran a red light in a \$1.4 million Ferrari and slammed into a taxi in central Singapore, killing himself and two others. The accident undammed a pool of bitterness against cashed-up mainlanders like Ma, who had arrived in Singapore from Sichuan province in 2008, as well as the larger number of low-skilled Chinese arrivals, including bus drivers and construction workers, who were placing an increasing strain on public services. In online forums, PRC Chinese were blamed for driving up real-estate prices and snatching the best jobs—even for stealing husbands. Bloggers described Ma as “spoiled and corrupt”; detractors created a mock Facebook page, later removed, which quickly filled with ugly epithets.⁵⁹

This anti-mainland China sentiment, part of a broader backlash against the PAP's immigration policies, showed how the visible influence of China in the everyday lives of Singaporeans had sharpened their sense of identity. “They're very foreign to us,” said P.J. Thum of the mainland Chinese. “And that, more than anything else, has really driven a sense of Singaporean-ness among the Singapore Chinese. Before that, you could cling to this idea that we come from this civilization of thousands of years, but now you're actually seeing the civilization up close, and you're like: we're nothing like that.”

For now, the PAP's ruling mandarins seem confident they can keep pace with the challenges thrown up by China's expanding military, economic, and cultural power. In September 2019, Singapore and the US renewed for a further 15 years the 1990 agreement facilitating the American use of defense-related facilities in Singapore. This took place a few months after Singapore indicated that it would move forward on a revised defense agreement with China, and less than a year after Singapore, as ASEAN chair, coordinated the first ever joint maritime exercise between China and the ASEAN countries.

Given its foreign policy pragmatism, Singapore has come closest to articulating a common Southeast Asian perspective on the growing Sino-American tensions. In his keynote speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue security conference in May 2019, Prime Minister Lee offered advice to both superpowers. While praising China's growth as “a tremendous boon, both to itself and to the world,” he said that Beijing had to reconcile its victim complex with the reality of its own burgeoning power. China “can no longer expect to be treated in the

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same way as in the past, when it was much smaller and weaker,” Lee said. He added that the Chinese leadership should seek to resolve maritime disputes “through diplomacy and compromise rather than force or the threat of force.”

At the same time, Singapore has taken an agnostic view on the Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, fearing that its aggressive turn against China could dislodge ASEAN from its position of centrality and fracture the region. In his Shangri-La speech, Lee said that US policy-makers had to accept that China would continue to grow, “and that it is neither possible nor wise for them to prevent this from happening.” Instead, he called on Washington to forge “a new understanding that will integrate China’s aspirations within the current system of rules and norms.”⁶⁰ It was unclear whether either side was ready to heed Lee’s advice—but Singapore will surely be energetic in navigating the transition from *Pax Americana* to whatever, if anything, comes next.

8
MALAYSIA
LORD OF THE RINGGITS

The showroom for Forest City, Malaysia's largest residential property development, looks less like an office than an airport hangar or a museum's atrium: a domed steel space filled with noise and light. Sprawling at the center of the hall is a scale model depicting the initial phase of the project. Here, illuminated towers rise like spacecraft from a field of roads, shopping malls, and residential high-rises, lined with the tiny streetlights and toothpick palms. Some buildings have miniature "SOLD OUT" labels attached. Groups of hopeful buyers—mostly mainland Chinese—crowd around the display as Chinese-speaking sales staff conjure a vision of the gleaming city of 700,000 that will one day rise from the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula.

Billed as "an exclusive island paradise" and a "magnet for global elites," Forest City will eventually encompass four artificial islands covering around 20 square kilometers in the Johor Strait, which divides Malaysia from Singapore. Standing behind the project is Country Garden, one of the largest private property developers in China, and a local investment entity led by Ibrahim Ismail, the Sultan of Johor, whose official portrait looms in medal-lioned splendor above the showroom entrance.

The Forest City showroom is so lavish that it has become an attraction in its own right. When I visited on a humid October morning in 2017, a band in the main atrium breezed through a set of pop standards. Children dashed through the model apartments, past marble counters and tables laden with bottles of Chilean Merlot. Outside, Indian and Malay families strolled along the man-made beach, where palm trees bent toward the distant cranes and smokestacks of Singapore's Tuas industrial zone. Two Malay women in *tudung* headscarves posed for a photo next to a 10-foot statue of the project's official mascot, Mr. Forest, a mustachioed grenadier sporting a white bearskin, green coat, and epaulettes.

Forest City sits at the heart of Iskandar Malaysia, a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) set up in Johor in 2006 in a bid to replicate the success of China's Pearl River Delta Economic Zone, which encloses the hi-tech manufacturing center of Shenzhen. Once complete—the target date is 2035—Forest City will be a self-contained island paradise of well-tended lawns, spacious shopping arcades, golf courses, and international schools, all swathed in vertical greenery.

Since its launch in 2014, Forest City has pitched itself mostly at affluent mainland Chinese, touting its “blue skies, white clouds, pure sea breeze” as a respite from polluted mega-cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Much of Country Garden's promotional material is in Chinese, and the firm has opened showrooms across China. The pitch is straightforward: Singapore's lifestyle, at Malaysia's prices. “Our price is much cheaper than Singapore, but it's just 2 kilometers away,” said Yu Ting, a 25-year-old English-speaking sales representative from Guangdong whom I met floating around the main reception desk, dressed in the official company uniform: striped shirt, red scarf, and white sailor cap. She told me that busloads of Chinese buyers were coming each day to tour the project. “It's very close to Singapore,” she said, “just like Shenzhen is very close to Hong Kong.”

Forest City's plans include its own customs and immigration checkpoint, facilitating quick access across the strait to Singapore. It offers buyers various tax breaks, full freehold titles, and a path to residency under the government's Malaysia My Second Home program. So far, two-thirds of the apartments have been purchased by mainland Chinese. “In Malaysia there's no winter—but China gets very cold in winter, which is no good for my body,” Xing Hanjiang, a 62-year-old small businessman from Shanghai, told the *Financial Times*. “The distance isn't very far between Malaysia and China, and there's no language barrier.”¹

However, Forest City's plan to turn Johor into the “next Shenzhen” made the project a political lightning rod as Malaysia approached national elections in May 2018. In particular, it drew flaming salvos from Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's two-time prime minister. From 1981 to 2003, Mahathir had ruled his country in brash, authoritarian fashion. In that time, he had done more than any other leader to modernize Malaysia, prompting comparisons with Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew (whom he reportedly detested). In 2016, Mahathir had come out of retirement, at the age of 91, to oppose Prime Minister Najib

Razak, his one-time protégé in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which had ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957. In the run-up to the election, in which he would score an astonishing victory over his former party, catapulting him to a surprise second term in office, Mahathir frequently beat up on Forest City, warning that it would eventually become a “Chinese settlement” cut off from the rest of the country. At one point he said he would prefer that it revert to actual forest, whose residents “will consist of baboons, monkeys, and so on.”²

Forest City thus became the focus of a broader debate about China's expanding economic presence in Malaysia. Under Najib, the country's already close relationship with China had reached dizzying new heights. No other country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) engaged in as much trade with China. The People's Republic of China (PRC) was also Malaysia's largest source of foreign investment in manufacturing and its third-largest source of foreign tourists, despite a downturn following the mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 in 2014. In his farewell speech in 2017, Huang Huikang, China's outgoing ambassador, said the Sino-Malaysian relationship “should move up over the next 40 years to reach mutual dependency, like lips and teeth.”³ Mao had once used the phrase to refer to China's relationship with Kim Il-sung's North Korea.

In October 2017, I caught an express train to Putrajaya, the manicured administrative zone outside the capital Kuala Lumpur, to ask Mahathir about Forest City and China's growing economic prominence in Malaysia. Mahathir's office was located in the cockpit of the Perdana Institute, an organization dedicated to preserving the legacy of former prime ministers. Oil paintings of these distinguished gentlemen lined the cream walls of the institute; each wore a *songkok*, the Muslim cap common throughout the Malay archipelago. There was also a portrait of Mahathir on horseback, complete with jodhpurs, dress boots, and equestrian helmet.

In his office, Mahathir sat propped in an ergonomic chair, a large Quran opened on a stand behind him. A few months earlier, the ageing politician had led a small delegation out to the Forest City showroom. He said he was impressed with the project, though he doubted that many locals could afford to live there. “If the city is to be populated, and it must be populated, it is necessary to bring in foreigners, and the biggest source of foreign migrants would be China itself,” he said.

For Mahathir, as for many Malay nationalists, this evoked uneasy memories of the waves of Chinese immigrants who swept into colonial Malaya in the late 1800s and early 1900s, drastically altering Malaysia's demographic balance, and helping feed a profound feeling of Malay impermanence: a sense that the country's "native" majority were becoming strangers in their own land. Mahathir compared the Forest City project to the island of Temasek—today's Singapore—which fell under British control in 1819 and quickly filled with Chinese immigrants, a fact that partly contributed to its expulsion from Malaysia in 1965. "Because the population was so different from the population of the countries originally owning Singapore, it became impossible for Singapore to return to become a part of the mainland," he said softly. "And as a result, Singapore became a foreign country."

Another of Mahathir's concerns was debt. Under Najib, Malaysia had become the largest recipient of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) financing of any nation bar Pakistan, and some of the Chinese projects came with eye-watering price tags. The largest was the \$16.1 billion East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), a project of the China Communications Construction Company. The planned rail line was slated to run from Port Klang, Malaysia's main port near Kuala Lumpur, to the border with Thailand, bisecting the peninsula's forested interior of tea plantations and former colonial hill stations. Then there was the Melaka Gateway project (\$10.4 billion), which sought to revive the old city of Malacca as a global economic hub with the construction of a deep-sea port and maritime industrial park on three reclaimed islands offshore. This was backed by PowerChina International, a major Chinese utility, and two Chinese port developers. There were plans for another Chinese-backed industrial zone and port refurbishment in Kuantan, in Najib's home state of Pahang on the east coast, which also ran into the billions. While Forest City wasn't technically a BRI project, the line between the Chinese state and private business was characteristically vague: Country Garden's showroom in Johor featured an illuminated floor-to-ceiling map highlighting Forest City's "strategic location" at the center of the Belt and Road.

China isn't the first outside power to take an interest in Malaysia. The country has long been a prize of empire, with rich natural resources and a strategic location at the hinge of the Pacific and Indian oceans. Since the commercial heyday of the Malacca Sultanate at the turn of the sixteenth century, Malaysia has attracted waves of colonists—Portuguese, Dutch, and

British—all eager to control this fulcrum of global trade. In modern times, China's main connection with Malaysia came through the southern Chinese immigrants—mostly illiterate and male—who settled there in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But for today's China, with its maritime ambitions, Malaysia has become a key piece of the jigsaw in Southeast Asia: less obstreperous than Singapore, more receptive to Chinese influence than Indonesia. And it isn't hard to connect the strategic dots of the BRI in Malaysia. By constructing deep-water ports on both sides of the Malay Peninsula and a railway running between them, Beijing was effectively planning a land bridge over the peninsula: another potential route around the Malacca Straits and Singapore.

But what was in it for Malaysia? Najib's critics pointed out that many of these BRI projects would be constructed by Chinese state-owned firms, using mostly Chinese labor and building materials, with loans from Chinese state banks. P. Gunasegaram, a veteran journalist with a regular column in the online newspaper *Malaysiakini*, questioned whether they could really be called "investments" at all. Given the financial opacity surrounding projects like the ECRL, he argued that there was no way of knowing whether they were economically viable: "The terms have not been disclosed, there's no feasibility study, there's no environmental impact study, nothing has been done, so nobody can see any of these figures as to the feasibility of the project." Gunasegaram drew a comparison to Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, which was signed over to a Chinese firm in 2017 after the government was unable to service the loan for its construction.

Many people that I spoke to in late 2017 suspected that Najib's Chinese embrace was intimately connected to his troubles on the home front—in particular, the radioactive scandal surrounding the sovereign wealth fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), which had been set up by Najib's government in 2009 to invest in green energy and tourism ventures. In July 2015, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that \$681 million originating in the 1MDB fund had flowed into the prime minister's personal bank accounts. Rumors about mismanagement and financial shenanigans had surrounded 1MDB for some time, but this was the first time the allegations had been linked to Najib himself.

The revelation hit Malaysian politics like a tidal wave. For years, public anger had been simmering about corruption and Malaysia's widening

inequities of wealth, which were the most lopsided in Asia. In 2006, a group of opposition members and anti-corruption activists had started a movement known as Bersih—the Malay word means “clean”—to call for fair elections and transparent government, holding large “yellow-shirt” rallies in 2007 and 2011. This anger contributed in part to UMNO’s poor showing in the general election of 2008, when the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, of which UMNO was the dominant part, failed to win a two-thirds majority for only the second time in its history.

Now Najib stood accused of involvement in a scheme of unprecedented scope and audacity. The 1MDB theft was “no run-of-the-mill corruption case in yet another developing country,” Tom Wright and Bradley Hope wrote in *Billion Dollar Whale*, their riveting, novelistic account of the scandal. It was one of “the greatest financial heists in history.”⁴ Investigators would later learn that around \$4.5 billion from the fund, raised from international financial markets and contributed directly by the Malaysian government, had been sluiced through a maze of offshore accounts and shell companies. Sitting at the center of this globe-spanning grift was Low Taek Jho—Jho Low to friends—a little-known Penang financier and associate of Najib who had encouraged him to set up the fund, and then allegedly stole several billion dollars for himself, his friends, and co-conspirators. These he used to build a Hollywood production company, amass luxury real estate, and throw wildly decadent parties featuring celebrity guests including Alicia Keys and Leonardo DiCaprio. Proceeds from 1MDB allegedly funded Najib’s re-election in 2013, and furnished his wife Rosmah Mansor with tens of millions of dollars’ worth of jewelry.

At first, Najib responded to the *Journal*’s report with denials. In a Facebook message posted the day after the article’s publication, he denied taking any funds for personal gain and described the allegations as “part of a concerted campaign of political sabotage.”⁵ Then he went on the attack. Najib replaced Malaysia’s attorney general just as he was getting ready to file criminal charges against him, and sacked cabinet members critical of the government’s handling of the fund. Media outlets that reported on 1MDB had their licenses suspended. Najib found it harder to keep a lid on investigations abroad. In July 2016, the US Justice Department announced that it was seeking the seizure of more than \$1 billion in assets bought in the US with money allegedly stolen from 1MDB. The assets included high-end real estate in New York and Los Angeles,

a \$35 million private jet, works of art by Van Gogh and Monet, a stake in EMI Music Publishing, and—ironically—a share of the profits from *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Martin Scorsese's 2013 film about a corrupt stockbroker. In its civil lawsuit, Justice Department officials alleged that some of the pilfered funds had flowed into the accounts of "Malaysian Official 1," a thin pseudonym for Najib. Similar investigations were also under way in eight other countries, including Switzerland, Abu Dhabi, and Singapore.

The American probe came as a heavy blow for Najib, a scion of one of Malaysia's most prominent political families, and an old boy of Britain's Malvern College and the University of Nottingham. He had come to office in 2009 promising reform and moderation, and quickly caught the attention of the Obama administration. An Anglophile who said all the right things about democracy and radical Islam, he seemed like the perfect partner for Obama's "rebalance" to Asia. In 2014, Obama visited Malaysia, the first US president to do so in half a century, and his deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes referred to Malaysia a "pivotal state" in the region.⁶ Obama and Najib later golfed together while on holiday in Hawaii. During the president's visit, Malaysia became one of four Southeast Asian countries to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the economic component of the "rebalance," before it was scuttled by President Donald Trump in early 2017.

The 1MDB scandal, and the government's heavy-handed response, sank Najib's reputation in the West. As financial probes fired up overseas, Najib turned to his country's main economic partner. In early 2016, China came to Najib's relief with a bailout plan for 1MDB. Chinese state-owned firms bought up shards of the toxic fund, including power plants and a large stake in Bandar Malaysia, a multibillion-dollar property and transportation project in Kuala Lumpur.⁷ The Chinese government also reportedly helped Malaysia repay a \$6.5 billion debt to a state-owned petroleum firm in Abu Dhabi.⁸

To many of his critics, the prime minister's desperation to plug the financial hole in 1MDB made him unable to refuse any Chinese request. "Najib is an international beggar now," said Zunar, a political cartoonist who was among the Malaysian leader's fiercest critics. Since the breaking of the 1MDB scandal, Zunar—real name Zulkiflee Anwar Haque—had frequently lampooned the prime minister, drawing him as "The Lord of the Ringgit" and the "Man of Steal," complete with Superman outfit and sack of misappropriated funds. "Foreign governments are very happy to deal with Najib, because he's very

weak,” Zunar said. Another of his cartoons showed a pair of Chinese chopsticks picking up the two halves of Malaysia like succulent dumplings.

Sure enough, in early 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* published another report revealing how the Chinese government had leveraged the 1MDB scandal to its advantage. The report, based on uncovered minutes from meetings between Najib’s government and Chinese officials across several months in mid-2016—around the time the US Justice Department announced its asset seizures—claimed that certain Chinese infrastructure projects had been purposefully planned at “above market profitability,” with the excess funds intended to relieve 1MDB’s debts. The documents showed that the ECRL, valued at \$16.1 billion, had been originally estimated by a Malaysian consultancy to cost just \$7.25 billion. The other project mentioned was a \$2.5 billion Trans-Sabah gas pipeline, which would be built partly on Malaysia’s portion of the island of Borneo. According to notes of a discussion on September 22, Chinese and Malaysian officials agreed to move ahead with the infrastructure deals even though “they may not have strong project financials.” There were further juicy revelations: Chinese officials told visiting Malaysians that China would use its influence to try to get the US and other countries to drop their 1MDB probes. Najib also opened secret talks to let Chinese navy vessels dock at two Malaysian ports.⁹

In November 2016, not long after the meetings reported by the *Journal*, Najib paid a state visit to China. While in Beijing, he wrote an editorial in the state mouthpiece *China Daily* slamming “former colonial powers” for “lecturing countries they once exploited on how to conduct their own internal affairs today.”¹⁰ He returned with commitments for \$34 billion worth of trade and investment deals, including the agreement for the ECRL. As in Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma, Chinese officials, hoisting the banner of “non-interference,” had capitalized on the souring relations between a Southeast Asian leader and the West.

But before long, it became apparent that China had taken a long position on an over-leveraged asset. As the full scope of the 1MDB scandal became public, Bersih organized new protests calling for Najib’s resignation. On August 29 and 30, 2015, the center of Kuala Lumpur became an ocean of yellow as tens of thousands denounced the administration’s corruption. It was one of the largest public demonstrations in Malaysia’s history. Mahathir attended the second day of the rally, and soon thereafter quit UMNO and founded a new

party, known as Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, which he aligned with the other parties opposing Najib's government.

The new multiethnic Pakatan Harapan (PH) opposition coalition—the name meant “Alliance of Hope”—was a nest of awkward bedfellows. Most notably, it united Mahathir with Anwar Ibrahim, a former deputy he had sacked and jailed on spurious charges in the 1990s. (After leading the opposition to its largest-ever electoral gain in 2013, Anwar had since been re-imprisoned by Najib.) Umapagan Ampikaipakan, a Malaysian radio broadcaster, noted that Mahathir now found himself “campaigning for the political party that was set up to fight injustices allegedly perpetrated while he was in power.”¹¹ Similarly, former critics of Mahathir's cronyism, judicial meddling, and suppression of the press were forced into the strange position of defending his legacy. Those I spoke to offered a simple line of reasoning: under Mahathir, graft had been the *hors d'oeuvres* of government. Under Najib, it was the entire meal.

These strange alliances were on display at a PH rally I attended in October 2017. The gathering was held on a sodden field in Petaling Jaya, a residential city now subsumed within the widening penumbra of greater Kuala Lumpur. Among the colorful tents and pulled-tea vendors, the predominant theme was state corruption in general, and 1MDB in particular. People wore T-shirts that read, “Love Malaysia, remove kleptocracy,” below an image of floating jewels, graphic shorthand for the prime minister's lavish spending. Others asked, “Where is the RM 2.6 billion?” referencing the \$681 million that had materialized in Najib's bank accounts. In a surreal scene, Mahathir sat on stage as a monochrome “Free Anwar” appeal flashed on a video screen to a plaintive orchestral swell. As the rally reached its climax, Mahathir took the stage to the opening strains of “The Final Countdown.” Picked out by the stage lighting, he appeared a shrunken figure, his red PH T-shirt tucked into loose black trousers. The crowd stilled to quiet as Mahathir's voice echoed out across the field. “Never before have we had a prime minister who is a thief. He steals so he can have a comfortable life,” Mahathir said. “Najib's fate is in our hands. We can get rid of him.”¹²

When I met him a few days later, Mahathir explained that Najib's corruption had begun to endanger Malaysia's sovereignty, particularly by pushing him into an unhealthy reliance on China. “We have benefited from being able to export goods and services to China,” he said. “But in the process, China has

become extremely rich, and with that wealth, it has shown that it can actually overcome other countries, not through war, but purely through its wealth.”

There was much in Mahathir’s background to make him wary of China’s rising power. Born in 1925 in Alor Setar, the low-slung capital of Kedah state on the west coast of peninsular Malaya, he had come to adulthood at a time when most of Southeast Asia languished under some form of Western colonial rule. “Asia was a region without pride,” he wrote in the 1990s, “and our economies were structured to serve the European demand for raw materials and natural resources.”¹³ While Mahathir could be prone to political hyperbole and conspiracy theories—he once blamed “Jewish” financiers for the 1997 Asian financial crisis—he was well-attuned to the ways that economic domination could generate imperial designs. He had experienced not only British colonial rule, but also Malaya’s vicious wartime occupation by imperial Japan between 1942 and 1945. In China’s “win-win” appeals, Mahathir heard the echoes of imperial projects past. If elected, he promised, Najib’s Chinese deals—including Forest City—would face close scrutiny.

Three decades earlier, Mahathir had done much to lay the foundations of Malaysia’s close economic relationship with China. In 1981, the year he became prime minister, ties between the two nations were permeated with mistrust. To Malaysia’s frustration, China continued to offer moral support to the outlawed Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), then waging an insurgency from its remote jungle redoubts along the border with Thailand. Its ragtag army had long ceased to pose much threat, but the specter of Chinese subversion cast a dark shadow over Malaysia, a nation born into independence at the tail end of the Malayan Emergency, an insurgency launched in 1948 by the CPM against British rule. After its founding in 1949, the PRC had offered strong encouragement and backing to the Malayan communists. There is little evidence that Beijing sent military supplies to the CPM, but it welcomed its leaders to China for ideological mentoring and medical treatment, and established a radio station in Hunan—Suara Revolusi Malaya, the “Voice of the Malayan Revolution”—which relayed propaganda into Malaya and Singapore. The CPM’s cadres were deeply impressed by Mao’s revolution and dutifully followed the political line laid down in Beijing. As the CPM’s leader Chin Peng later wrote, “Nothing could move forward without China’s consent.”¹⁴

Since the majority of the CPM’s fighters were ethnic Chinese, many of them disaffected coolies and squatters from Malaya’s tin mines and rubber

plantations, China's support for the insurgency was inseparable from Malaysia's own tense ethnic politics. Since its colonial heyday, Malaysia had been haunted by racial divisions. In the mid-nineteenth century, as the American Civil War had sent global demand for tin soaring, wealthy Straits Chinese investors—and, later, Europeans—moved to develop the rich alluvial deposits of western Malaya. To work the mines of Perak, Ipoh, and Seremban, they imported hundreds of thousands of indentured laborers from southern China, who were fleeing poverty, famine, and the instability of the Taiping Rebellion. The British also imported large numbers of workers from southern India, who joined the Chinese in backbreaking labor on Malaya's sprawling rubber estates.

While ethnic Chinese had been present in Malaya in modest numbers since the time of the Malacca Sultanate, these new streams of southern Chinese immigrants had a profound effect on the colony's subsequent development. The mostly male immigrant workers—"lean, smooth-shaven, keen, industrious, self-reliant, sober, mercenary, reliable, mysterious, opium-smoking, gambling, hugging clan ties, forming no others, and managing their own matters," as one British traveler described them in 1883¹⁵—lived a parallel, separate existence from the Malays, whom the colonial authorities encouraged to remain planted in their rural *kampongs* (villages). During the colonial "tin rush," Malaya's economic center of gravity shifted from the old Malay towns to new urban centers dominated by the Chinese. By 1880, the town of Taiping, formerly a Malay village, had become "a thriving, increasing place, of over six thousand inhabitants, solely Chinese, with the exception of a small Kling [Indian] population" and "scarcely any Malays."¹⁶ Between 1900 and 1941, the Chinese population of Malaya tripled from around 800,000 to more than 2.5 million, by which point they constituted close to half of Malaya's population.¹⁷

"The rich Malaysia of today," V.S. Naipaul wrote in 1982, "grows on colonial foundations and is a British-Chinese creation."¹⁸ It was also marked deeply by the colonial racial divisions of labor: between the prosperous and overwhelmingly urban Chinese and the rural Malays, relegated to the lower rungs of the economic ladder. When the Union Jack came down for the last time in Kuala Lumpur on August 31, 1957, marking the birth of an independent Malaya, Malay nationalists and politicians had wrestled with the question of how to redress the imbalance. The new nation's constitution gave Malays a special status as *bumiputera*, a Sanskrit-derived word meaning "sons of the soil"; it also enshrined Malay as the national language, and Islam as the official religion.

When Malaya was folded into a larger Malaysian Federation in September 1963, racial considerations weighed heavily. The idea of a federation was first broached by Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1961, and later encouraged by the British, who hoped that fusing Malaya and Singapore into a new federation would help prevent communists from gaining the upper hand in the self-governing Lion City. Since this would make the Chinese a majority, however, the new state also incorporated the British Crown Colonies of Sabah and Sarawak, thousands of kilometers across the South China Sea on the island of Borneo, to dilute Chinese representation and preserve Malay predominance.¹⁹ (London made sure to exclude the tiny, oil-glutted sultanate of Brunei, which would remain a British colony until 1984.) In this way, the Chinese helped determine the very shape of modern Malaysia.

In the years following Malaysia's creation in 1963, racial tensions occasionally flared into violence. For some Malay "ultras"—right-wing communal extremists—constitutional concessions weren't enough; they called for more radical measures to institutionalize *ketuanan Melayu*, or "Malay supremacy." In 1964, racial riots erupted in Singapore, a prelude to the city's expulsion from the Malaysian Federation the following year. Five years later, on May 13, 1969, the violence came to Kuala Lumpur. A *TIME* correspondent described the scene: "Malay mobs, wearing white headbands signifying an alliance with death, and brandishing swords and daggers, surged into Chinese areas in the capital, burning, looting, and killing. In retaliation, Chinese, sometimes aided by Indians, armed themselves with pistols and shotguns and struck at Malay *kampongs*. Huge pillars of smoke rose skyward as houses, shops, and autos burned."²⁰ The riots took place three days after a general election in which the governing Alliance Party coalition, of which UMNO was the dominant member, had lost significant support to its opponents, in particular two newly formed, and predominantly Chinese, opposition parties. An estimated 800 people were killed in the violence, which threw a long shadow over Malaysia's subsequent history.²¹

Against this backdrop of racial discord, China's support for the Malayan communist movement—and its ambiguous policy toward the nation's ethnic Chinese population—cast it as a serious security threat. In 1966, Tunku Abdul Rahman warned that Beijing's goal was to "carve up large parts of Asia, partition Southeast Asia, and draw the fragmented parts into the communist sphere of influence."²² In the early 1970s, when the two nations began negotiations on

the establishment of diplomatic relations, these two issues were among the most contentious. It was only after China promised to dial back its support to the CPM, and to refrain from tampering with ethnic Chinese loyalties, that normalization was able to proceed. In May 1974, Malaysia became the first ASEAN state to establish diplomatic relations with China. (Thailand and the Philippines would follow suit in 1975.)

When Mahathir entered office in 1981, China still insisted on continuing its “moral” support to what was left of the communist insurgency, but this would fall away as the Cold War neared its end. At a ceremony in December 1989, a month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Malayan comrades finally laid down their arms after more than four decades of struggle. Chin Peng, who had lived in exile in Beijing since 1961, ensconced in a state bungalow close to Tiananmen Square, signed a peace accord with the Malaysian government in Thailand. Refused entry to Malaysia, he retired to Bangkok, where he died in 2013. Thus a once-feared communist insurgency followed its Thai and Burmese counterparts through the trapdoor of history, removing the last obstacle to improved relations between Malaysia and China. Mahathir was quick to recognize China’s economic potential, lifting restrictions on travel to the mainland that had been in place since the Emergency. “It is high time to stop seeing China through the lenses of threat,” he said in 1995, “and view it as an economic opportunity.”²³

China became a crucial factor in Mahathir’s ambition to propel Malaysia into the ranks of the developed world—a project he dubbed “Vision 2020.” During his 22 years in power he visited the country seven times, and nine more times after his retirement. “Tun Mahathir broke the ice,” said Abdul Majid bin Ahmad Khan, a former Malaysian ambassador to Beijing, when I met him at the Royal Selangor Golf Club in Kuala Lumpur, a bastion of old colonial Malaya set amid 348 hectares of lakes, gardens, and undulating fairways culminating in the shining chrome needles of the Petronas Towers. “To us, [1989] was the real beginning of relations with China,” Abdul Majid said. “Mahathir took it a step forward and said, ‘no more ideology. Now it’s about economic opportunity.’” During Mahathir’s time in power, Malaysia–China trade climbed steeply, from \$307 million in 1982 to \$14 billion in 2002.²⁴ China’s money wasn’t the only thing that appealed to Mahathir. An acerbic critic of Western attempts to promote democratic and liberal values in developing countries—the subject of the “Asian values” debate of the 1990s—he

found a like-minded partner in China, which frequently emphasized its commitment to national sovereignty and mutual non-interference.

Mahathir's good relations with China continued under his successors. Like many Southeast Asian governments, UMNO and the BN coalition recognized the importance of China's economy in sustaining the growth that buttressed and legitimized their rule. After Najib took office in 2009, Malaysia's relationship with China became closer than ever. Both sides frequently and warmly referenced the fact that Najib's father, Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, had been the one to establish relations with the PRC in 1974—the first ASEAN leader to do so. In 2009, China became Malaysia's largest trading partner and has remained so ever since. Spurred by the China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, which came into effect in 2010, bilateral trade reached an all-time high of \$124 billion in 2019, with a large surplus in Malaysia's favor.²⁵ In October 2013, Xi Jinping visited Malaysia and the two nations elevated relations to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” When Najib came under fire for cozying up to China, he asked, “What's wrong with us fostering closer ties with China, which is expected to be the biggest economy in 2030?”²⁶

As with Singapore, improved ties led to a reawakening of Malaysia's centuries-old connections with mainland China. This was perhaps best epitomized by the opening in 2015 of the Malaysian campus of Xiamen University, the first overseas campus established by a major Chinese university. Here, on a hot plain in Selangor, 45 kilometers outside Kuala Lumpur, the entwined relations between China and the Chinese Malaysians came full circle: Xiamen University, the main institution of higher education in Fujian province, was founded by the Chinese-Malayan rubber magnate Tan Kah Kee in 1921; now a statue of Tan stood in front of a commanding suite of concrete buildings in his adopted homeland—funded and built by the Chinese government.

Robust cultural and economic ties have shaped Malaysia's approach to its conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea. Malaysia claims 12 features in the Spratly Islands group, all of which lie within China's “nine-dash line” claim. It occupies five of them, including Swallow Reef, which includes a tourist resort and popular dive spot. Some 80 kilometers from the Malaysian coast—well inside its Exclusive Economic Zone—is James Shoal, which Beijing has officially declared the southernmost point of its territory, despite it being “22 meters below the sea surface and over 1,500 kilometers from China proper.”²⁷ In 2013, China also began stationing coastguard vessels at the

Luconia Shoals, which lie around 100 kilometers off the coast of Sarawak, and comprise one of the largest reef formations in the South China Sea, believed to contain significant oil and gas deposits. Since then, China has maintained a near-constant coastguard presence around the shoals, most of which are under water at high-tide.

Despite frequent Chinese incursions, however, Malaysia has generally eschewed the vocal approach of Vietnam and the Philippines to the disputes in the South China Sea. China, for its part, has responded to Malaysian activities in the Spratlys with restraint, compared to similar actions undertaken by Vietnam.²⁸ Kuala Lumpur has “consistently played down China’s activities in our territories,” said Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, a Malaysian think-tank.²⁹

Of course, the Malaysian defense establishment has exercised justified caution about China’s maritime designs. After China held military exercises around James Shoal in 2013 and 2014, Malaysia announced the construction of a new naval base in Bintulu, about 80 kilometers away on the coast of Sarawak. In a similar vein, Malaysia has strongly supported a US military presence in Asia, if in a more muted key than neighboring Singapore. US warships undertake dozens of port visits to Malaysia each year, and five of the past six chiefs of the Malaysian navy have been graduates of the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.³⁰ As Robert Kaplan writes, the US has given Malaysia tens of millions of dollars’ worth of radar equipment for use in the South China Sea, under the pretext of the global “war on terror.” In this way, American power “helps give Malaysia the luxury of its national ambiguity.”³¹

In general, Malaysia aims to deter Chinese encroachments in the South China Sea, while avoiding a fight that would disrupt a lucrative bilateral relationship. It has been able to employ this strategy in large part because the South China Sea has not become the subject of popular mobilization to the extent that it has in Vietnam, with its strained history of relations with China, or even in the Philippines. According to the Pew Research Center, no other Southeast Asian country is more positively disposed toward China: in 2015, 78 percent of those surveyed in Malaysia reported a favorable view of China, compared to just 19 percent in Vietnam.³² As Shahrman Lockman, a Senior Analyst in the Foreign Policy and Security Studies Programme at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, put it, “It doesn’t really matter to most

of the populace right now.”

Of greater concern to many Malaysians are the ways in which Chinese power may be affecting the country’s fragile balance of ethnicities from within. On the afternoon of September 25, 2015, China’s ambassador to Malaysia made his way to Petaling Street in the heart of Kuala Lumpur’s Chinatown. Dressed in a psychedelic red batik shirt, Huang Huikang smiled for the cameras as he presented local traders with moon cakes for the approaching Mid-Autumn Festival and sampled Petaling Street’s famous *air mata kucing*, a refreshing iced drink made from medicinal herbs and monk fruit.

Afterward, from a table at the back of a Chinese restaurant, he read a prepared statement to the press. Huang started by praising the multiracial culture of Malaysia’s capital. He then went on to say that he did not want to see this harmony “destroyed by any people with ulterior motives.” The ambassador issued a warning: “The Chinese government has always pursued peaceful co-existence in international relationships and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.” But Beijing would “not sit idly by” over any “infringement on China’s national interests, violations of legal rights, and interests of Chinese citizens and businesses which may damage the friendly relationship between China and the host country.”³³

Ambassador Huang’s statement was a response to a large ultra-nationalist Malay “red shirt” rally that had taken place near Chinatown ten days before. On September 16, an estimated 30,000 people had flooded into central Kuala Lumpur in a show of support for “Malay supremacy” in general, and the administration of Prime Minister Najib in particular. Organized by Jamal Yunus, a pro-Najib UMNO leader, and a nationalistic martial arts group called Pesaka, this rally for “Malay dignity” was intended as a response to the massive yellow-shirt Bersih protests the previous month, which had called for Najib to step down over the 1MDB fiasco.

Under increasing pressure at home and abroad, Najib was doing what must have seemed like the logical thing: he was playing the race card. Swathed in red, protesters held signs reading “Don’t insult Malays and Islam” and “#najibstays.” Others chanted Islamic verses. The rally had a strong anti-Chinese undercurrent. According to witnesses, some demonstrators hurled racial abuse against ethnic Chinese and made references to the May 1969 riots.³⁴ Protesters were eventually dispersed by riot police with water cannons outside the large orna-

mental gate marking the entrance to Petaling Street. It was later reported that the “red shirts” were planning another demonstration in Chinatown on September 26—the pretext for Ambassador Huang’s visit to Petaling Street.

Huang was no amateur. He had previously held diplomatic posts in the US and Canada, and served as China’s special representative for climate change negotiations. Like other recent Chinese statements about the ethnic Chinese abroad, his comments were vague—perhaps intentionally so. In previous remarks, Huang had bundled Malaysian Chinese into the category of *haiwai qiaobao*, or “Chinese compatriots overseas.”³⁵ It was similarly unclear whether his Petaling Street statement referred to Chinese expatriates, Malaysian Chinese, or, to the extent that there was a meaningful distinction to Malay radicals, both. Some speculated that Huang’s statement was an oblique way of signaling Beijing’s dissatisfaction over Najib’s military cooperation with the US, or his support for the TPP trade agreement.

Whatever the ambassador’s motivation, he was widely seen as having broken a decades-long taboo against Chinese interference in Malaysia’s ethnic politics. Dennis Ignatius, a 36-year veteran of the Malaysian Foreign Service, described Huang’s comments as “an unprecedented breach of a solemn undertaking” made in 1974. He asked, “How do tense race relations in Malaysia impinge on friendly relations with China, unless, of course, China still considers itself the overlord of all ethnic Chinese whatever their citizenship?”³⁶ As he and many others noted, China’s insertion of itself into Malaysia’s racial politics would do little to help the local Chinese: more likely, it would simply confirm the suspicions of the Malay right wing that they enjoyed the protection of a “big brother” in Beijing—that they were fundamentally foreign, disloyal, alien.

Ambassador Huang’s Petaling Street outing demonstrated how China’s economic, political, and cultural power is beginning to alter Malaysia’s racial dynamics in subtle but significant ways. In the aftermath of the racial riots of 1969, UMNO introduced a far-reaching affirmative action scheme known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP was designed to close the economic gap between the Malays and the Chinese, which the government viewed as the root cause of the violence. It was the most explicit and aggressive attempt by any Southeast Asian nation to redress wealth imbalances between its ethnic Chinese and indigenous majority. It reserved university places for Malays, gave special financial handouts to *bumiputeras*, and favored Malay-owned companies for state contracts. At the same time, UMNO formed a new coalition—Barisan

Nasional—that included distinct parties representing the ethnic Chinese and Indians. Their “controlled, and subordinate, political participation” achieved the political stability necessary to attract foreign investment and fuel Malaysia’s sustained economic boom.³⁷

The NEP succeeded in bolstering opportunities for rural Malays and increasing *bumiputeras*’ share of the nation’s capital, which rose tenfold between 1970 and 1991, from 3 percent to nearly a third.³⁸ But its side effect was the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries. These borders have only hardened further as Malay identity has come to be more widely identified in Islamic terms, making race and religion an ever-tempting play for Malay politicians. “Despite official integrative visions of ‘One Malaysia,’” writes Michael Vatikiotis, “there is in reality virtual ethnic and religious segregation.”³⁹ Faced with the 1MDB scandal, it was only natural that Najib would resort to the hoary trope of Malay impermanence, and try to paint the accusations as a “Chinese” plot.

While China’s economic and political presence has teased out deep-rooted Malay insecurities, as evidenced by the controversy over Forest City, its impacts are most likely to be felt by Malaysia’s Chinese. In broad terms, China’s emergence has been good for the quarter or so of the Malaysian population who have Chinese ancestry. Improved bilateral relations have helped soothe racial tensions, and created business opportunities in mainland China. This was especially the case in the early years of the PRC’s reform and opening, when Malaysian-Chinese industrialists gained a lucrative foothold in the Chinese market. The most prominent was Robert Kuok. Once described by *The Economist* as “the quintessential Asian tycoon,” Kuok made his original fortune by cornering Malaysia’s markets for flour, palm oil, and sugar.⁴⁰ He then branched out with canny investments in China, including his Shangri-La hotel group, which opened its first hotel in Hangzhou in 1984, and his tentacular transport conglomerate Kerry Logistics. Today, the media-averse 96-year-old, the son of a barefoot *fin-de-siècle* immigrant from Fujian, is the richest person in Malaysia, with an estimated net worth of \$13.1 billion.⁴¹

However, not all Malaysian Chinese have benefited from increased economic relations with China. Malaysia’s racial preferences have roped off key sectors of the economy for Malay entrepreneurs and the large government-linked companies (GLCs), dominated by Malays, which have been the biggest Malaysian investors in mainland China. Meanwhile, labor-reliant small- and medium-sized enterprises, the types of Malaysian businesses most likely to be

owned by ethnic Chinese, are also the most vulnerable to competition from cheap Chinese-made imports, and the large Chinese state-owned firms that are increasingly investing in Malaysia.⁴² When it comes to headline BRI and state-backed construction projects, “Chinese businessmen here have very little share in the projects involved,” said Tony Pua, a parliamentarian for the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a member of the PH coalition. “They are essentially marginalized.”

To some extent, this reflects a growing distance between the PRC and Malaysia's Chinese community. While domestic ethnic politics played into Tun Abdul Razak's decision to open diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1974—in particular, he hoped it would help him win Chinese votes ahead of that year's general election—younger generations are more culturally and emotionally removed from the land of their ancestors. “Malaysian Chinese are very proudly Malaysian,” said Rita Sim, the fast-talking co-founder and director of the Centre for Strategic Engagement, a think-tank that studies the changing composition and attitudes of the Chinese community in Malaysia. “They don't want to be told that they are Chinese from China.” In this context, ethnic and linguistic ties to China no longer give Chinese Malaysians any significant advantage over the Malay-dominated firms and GLCs that enjoy strong state backing.

For Chinese Malaysians, China's expanding economic presence in Malaysia contrasts starkly with the disadvantages they face within the country's system of racial preferences. Steven Gan, the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini*, observed that Najib peddled anti-Chinese politics while praising China and signing mammoth BRI infrastructure deals. “Suddenly you've got mainland Chinese coming here, and they've been treated better than the minority Chinese,” he said.

Similar concerns arose in 2017, when the Chinese car manufacturer Geely purchased a 49.9 percent stake in Malaysia's national car company, Proton, and quickly appointed a mainland Chinese executive as CEO. This wasn't the first such case for a GLC—Malaysia Airlines had appointed a German chief executive in 2015—but many Malaysian Chinese were keenly aware that this was a position long barred to members of their own community. The fact that Geely's CEO was himself ethnic Chinese only deepened the sense of injustice. Before, said Tony Pua, “The Malays were first-class citizens, the Chinese were second-class citizens. But with foreign Chinese coming in, that has relegated

the local Chinese to third-class.”

Similar tensions are evident in the cultural sphere. As in Singapore, China’s economic emergence has coincided with the increased use of Mandarin, and the fading of the Chinese regional tongues—Cantonese, Hokkien, and so forth—originally spoken by immigrants from southern China. In Kuala Lumpur, Mandarin TV series from the PRC are rapidly gaining in popularity at the expense of Hong Kong-produced Cantonese dramas that, until recently, dominated Chinese-language viewing in Malaysia.⁴³ The Chinese government has encouraged this trend as part of its “soft power” push in Malaysia. This has seen it offer donations to Chinese-language schools, and ramp up scholarships for Malaysian students to attend Chinese universities. By 2015, an estimated 7,500 were studying in China.⁴⁴ In 2009, it opened a Confucius Institute at the University of Malaya, and later, the large Malaysian campus of Xiamen University outside Kuala Lumpur. An outgrowth of this is that Mandarin proficiency is spreading not just among ethnic Chinese, but among Malays and Indians, too. According to Rita Sim, non-Chinese enrollment at Chinese primary schools is now at “an all-time high”; nearly one in five students hail from other ethnic groups.⁴⁵

For Malaysia’s Chinese education movement, which has fought for years to preserve the use of Chinese languages, this is a classic case of being careful what you wish for. While Beijing’s efforts probably guarantee the survival of Mandarin Chinese in Malaysia (if not the dialects), its adoption by non-Chinese Malaysians threatens to erode the natural advantages that ethnic Chinese have long enjoyed. Historically, Sim pointed out, Malay ministers and politicians had to employ ethnic Chinese aides to liaise with the Chinese community. These positions are now filled increasingly by Chinese-speaking Malays. Similarly, the head of operations for the Chinese-language program at the government broadcaster Radio Television Malaysia—a position once reserved for ethnic Chinese—is now a Malay, as is the head of the Chinese-language program at Bernama, Malaysia’s national news agency.⁴⁶ Sim said, “While this was once supposed to be your space that nobody could enter, the other races are coming in.”

All this takes place against a backdrop of low birthrates and brain-drain emigration, the latter of which can be directly linked to Malaysia’s system of institutionalized discrimination. Chinese Malaysians have steadily shrunk as a total share of the country’s population, from 37.2 percent at independence

in 1957 to 22.8 percent in 2019. The Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, a local think-tank, predicts that if current trends hold, this figure will fall to 19.6 percent by 2030.⁴⁷ As time goes by, Malaysia's ethnic Chinese are becoming less politically salient and more economically confined, but no less convenient as a scapegoat for Malay politicians.

Shifting demographics and continued racial tensions explain the tenor of the reaction to Ambassador Huang's Petaling Street warning. As the Chinese government reaches out to ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, and adopts more vigorous rhetoric about the protection of its "compatriots" abroad, it risks becoming entangled in what Hishamuddin Rais, a Malay writer, filmmaker, and stand-up comic described to me as Malaysia's "unresolved national question." Rais said that for many Malay conservatives there was increasingly little distinction between being anti-China and being anti-Chinese. "The unresolved national question is now muddled with the arrival of the [mainland] Chinese here," he said over jet-black Malay coffee and chicken satay at a roadside market in central Kuala Lumpur. "When China interferes, the backlash will be on the local Chinese."

On May 9, 2018, Mahathir led Malaysia's opposition to a landslide election victory against Najib and the BN coalition. The following day, at the Istana Negara palace in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's sixth prime minister was succeeded by its fourth, as Mahathir was sworn back into office, two months shy of his 93rd birthday. Few people had given his rickety PH coalition much chance against the well-oiled patronage machinery of UMNO and the BN alliance. But UMNO's advantages masked the fact that support for the party had been waning for years. Increasing numbers of Malay voters had become fed up with corruption and widening income inequalities, while ethnic Chinese and Indians were tired of their perpetual second-class status. For the first time since independence, UMNO found itself in opposition. The novelist Tash Aw described it as "the end of the only government Malaysia has ever known."⁴⁸

Mahathir immediately ordered a reopening of investigations into the 1MDB fund. On July 3, exactly three years after the *Wall Street Journal* scoop that sank his political career, anti-corruption officials arrested Najib at his mansion in Kuala Lumpur. The Attorney General's office subsequently charged the ex-prime minister, his wife, and a number of senior officials with corruption and money-laundering offenses related to 1MDB and other scandals. When police raided

Kuala Lumpur apartments owned by Najib's family, they carted out \$274 million worth of items, including 12,000 pieces of jewelry, 567 handbags, and 423 watches, as well as \$28 million in cash.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Jho Low, wanted by both the US government and the new Malaysian administration, had gone to ground, apparently in China. Many believed he was under Beijing's protection.

Mahathir followed through on his promise to review the Chinese infrastructure deals signed by the Najib government. In July, his government canceled the ECRL and froze several other projects, including the Melaka Gateway development and the natural gas pipeline in Sabah. The PH victory was also bad news for Forest City: in August, Mahathir announced that foreigners would be barred from buying residential units there. Later he back-pedaled slightly, saying that those purchasing properties would not receive automatic Malaysian residency, but his comments cast the future of the project into serious doubt. At the same time, Mahathir adopted more muscular rhetoric about Chinese actions in the South China Sea and, during a visit to Beijing in August 2018, shocked his hosts by implying that the BRI could become a "a new version of colonialism."⁵⁰ China had been opportunistic in taking advantage of Najib's quandary. Now it was weathering the backlash.

Amid the souring relations between Washington and Beijing, Mahathir's turn against China prompted exuberant reactions from some American observers. "While Washington wasn't looking, democracy won a major battle over authoritarianism in Malaysia," one *Washington Post* columnist enthused. "The unexpected change has given the Trump administration a chance to reverse a policy of benign neglect toward the region, support democracy—and gain a rare win over China."⁵¹ Yet, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Malaysia's cronyism and patronage could not so simply be put down to Chinese influence. UMNO's power had always been premised on a tight nexus between politics and business and the distribution of patronage along racial lines. Moreover, while the 2018 election represented a genuine breakthrough, it was easy to overlook the background of the leader it returned to power—one who had once meddled with the judiciary, imprisoned political opponents, and presided over a nested system of cronyism concealed under the cloak of Malay uplift. During the "Asian values" debate of the 1990s, Mahathir had been among most vociferous critics of Western-style liberal democracy.

It soon became clear that on the question of China, Mahathir differed from his predecessor in degree rather than in kind. While beating up on

China had been an effective campaign strategy, once in power Mahathir began to moderate his rhetoric. In interviews he made it clear that he wanted Chinese investment, so long as Malaysia stood to benefit. Beijing seemed happy enough to meet Malaysia's new government halfway. In March 2019, Malaysia reversed its decision to terminate the ECRL project, after renegotiating the costs down by about a third, from \$16.1 billion to \$10.7 billion. Other projects were also given a reprieve. In April, the government resurrected the multibillion-dollar Bandar Malaysia project, with the involvement of the state-owned China Railway Engineering Corp. The same month Mahathir attended the second Belt and Road Forum gala in Beijing, his second visit to the Chinese capital in less than a year. There he gave a speech in which he said he was "fully in support" of Xi's headline initiative, though he offset this by underlining the importance for Malaysia of free passage through the South China Sea.⁵²

In essence, Mahathir's pushback against China was more of a course correction than a fundamental shift. His view of China remained much as it had been in the 1990s, when he recognized that Chinese trade and investment were vital for Malaysia's economic advancement. His justified concerns about China's rising power, and the abject dependence of the Najib administration, were balanced by his engrained suspicion of Western—particularly American—intentions. If some US hawks sought an ally against China in Southeast Asia, they wouldn't find an easy one in Mahathir.

That is not to say that Chinese influence was likely to become an unimportant factor in Malaysian politics. During the 2018 election campaign, the question of China had figured prominently on both sides. While Mahathir and PH focused on the Chinese threat from without—the concerns of Chinese debt and immigration—UMNO focused on the threat from within. It painted the PH as a front for the DAP, whose membership is predominantly ethnic Chinese, and argued that an opposition victory would erode Malay Muslim privileges. In the run-up to the elections, pro-UMNO Islamist organizations labored to blur the boundary between the PRC and Malaysian Chinese. In March, the group *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* hosted a forum to promote the idea that the entire Chinese diaspora would eventually fall in line with Beijing. "Humans cannot run from a sense of belonging, of tribalism, the social connection," Abdul Rahman Mat Dali, the group's deputy president, said of Chinese Malaysians.⁵³

After the election, similar racial tropes were mobilized to assail the new PH government. Politicians from UMNO and the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Malaysia's largest Islamist party, positioned themselves as defenders of ethnic Malay rights and Islam, which they claimed were threatened by the new government's reform agenda and the appointment of non-Malay politicians to prominent posts. During a by-election rally in Selangor, a senior UMNO official asserted that the new chief justice, attorney general, and finance minister—all non-Malays—had failed to complete their respective oaths of office because they had not been sworn in on a Quran.⁵⁴ In November 2018, pressure from UMNO and PAS—the country's two largest Malay parties—forced the government to abandon plans to ratify a UN convention against racial discrimination, which they feared would undermine Malay privileges and threaten Islam's status as Malaysia's official religion. The parties celebrated with a rally of more than 50,000 at Merdeka Square in central Kuala Lumpur, which was attended by a range of UMNO luminaries, including Najib and Rosmah. "People don't respect or care about our dignity. They insult our religion because we have lost power," UMNO deputy president Mohamad Hasan told the crowd. "For us to rise again, we must regain power."⁵⁵

In the event, the perennial appeal to race and religion provided UMNO with a speedy path back to power. In February 2020, Malaysian politics was shaken by the sudden collapse of the PH coalition, the resignation of Mahathir, and the elevation of Najib's former deputy Muhyiddin Yassin to the prime ministership. The events, as remarkable in their own way as the election that had toppled UMNO 21 months earlier, originated in attempts to forestall Mahathir's promised handover of power to Anwar Ibrahim and marginalize the Chinese-dominated DAP.

In late 2019, senior officials of Mahathir's Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) began reaching out to UMNO and PAS to explore the possibility of creating a new pan-Malay coalition that would exclude Anwar and the DAP. On February 24, Muhyiddin, a former deputy to Najib who served as president of PPBM, withdrew the party from the PH coalition and realigned it with UMNO, a move adamantly opposed by Mahathir, who blenched at joining hands with corrupt elements of his former party. The prime minister resigned in protest, hoping that it would open the way to the formation of a new national unity government under his own leadership. Instead, on March 1, Malaysia's king appointed Muhyiddin to form a new government bringing together UMNO,

PAS, and PPBM. The result was that the most ethnically diverse cabinet in Malaysia's history was succeeded by an unelected alignment of the nation's three largest Malay parties. The sudden reversal showed that PH's era-ending victory had barely altered the racial identities and subterranean flows of patronage that had undergirded Malaysian politics since independence, and would likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

"Self-determination's a ridiculous idea in a mixed-up place like this," Anthony Burgess has a character remark in *The Long Day Wanes*, his trilogy of novels set in the dying years of British Malaya in the 1950s. "There's no nation. There's no common culture, language, literature, religion."⁵⁶ In many ways, the last half-century of Malaysian history belies such a jaded assessment. Compared to Burma, with its morass of ethnic conflicts, a hybrid nation has done well to create unity from heterogeneity. Yet for all this progress, race and religion remain the fundamental cleavages in Malaysian society, with complex implications for the future of Malaysia's relationship with China. Dating back to the Emergency, perceptions of China have been inseparable from Malaysia's own racial dynamics. In the years to come, Beijing will need to tread carefully to avoid awakening history's ghosts.

9
INDONESIA
A LONG SPOON

Twenty years on, the scars are still faintly visible. On busy Jalan Pintu Besar Selatan, in Glodok, Jakarta's Chinatown, a row of shop-houses lies abandoned, an octagonal *feng shui* tile still attached to a bricked-up window. Across the street, locked steel shutters offer a glimpse of charred beams and walls blackened by fire. A nearby three-story building stands in ruins, entwined with resurgent foliage, its inside walls scrawled with graffiti.

In May 1998, when angry mobs vented their rage against economic crisis and three decades of cronyism under President Suharto, much of the violence was directed at the nation's ethnic Chinese minority. Despite making up just a tiny slice of the country's population, Chinese Indonesians were widely perceived to have profited handsomely under Suharto's "New Order" regime. Over three days of rioting, hundreds of Chinese homes and businesses were destroyed. Dozens of Chinese women and girls were raped. More than 1,000 people were killed, many of them rioters who found themselves trapped in flaming shopping malls. Latif Yulus, 67, recalled a city on fire. "People were yelling, 'burn, burn, destroy!'" he told me. "It was chaos. There were fires everywhere."

Today, Yulus (Chinese name Liong Tjiang Joe) is the proprietor of Kopi Es Tak Kie, the oldest café in Glodok. Established by Yulus's grandfather in 1927, shortly after stepping off the boat from Guangdong, Tak Kie stands as an emblem of the enterprise and resilience of the *Tionghoa*, as Indonesia's Chinese are known locally. The café survived the conflagrations of 1998, and remains a thriving neighborhood hub, alive with the rat-a-tat of Hokkien dialect and the clatter of white Formica dishes. Framed photos of celebrities on the wall testify to the popularity of Tak Kie's chicken noodles, *nasi campur*, and sweet iced Java coffee, among them Jakarta's former governor Joko Widodo, now Indonesia's president.

Things have improved significantly for Sino-Indonesians since 1998, but memories of the riots still resonate. In May 2017, a few months before I spoke to Yulus, a Jakarta court sentenced the city's ethnic Chinese former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, commonly known as Ahok, to two years' prison on charges of blasphemy, amid a campaign of public demonstrations with strong anti-Chinese overtones. For many of the traders and residents of Glodok, Ahok's downfall was a reminder that ethnic Chinese retained a precarious foothold in the Indonesian national community. "We are a minority," Yulus said. "We have to be aware, not be arrogant."

Nowhere else in Southeast Asia is a nation's relationship with China so closely entangled with the status of its ethnic Chinese minority. As in other parts of the Malay archipelago, Chinese traders and sojourners have been present across the Indonesian islands for more than a millennium. On the island of Borneo, archaeologists have unearthed caches of Song dynasty ceramics, carried by enterprising Chinese traders who ventured up the rivers to exchange their jars and beads for hornbill beaks, edible bird's nests, and other jungle products.¹ When the Dutch East India Company, or VOC, established its first outposts in the Malay archipelago in the seventeenth century, it encountered Chinese merchants who traded cargoes of tea, porcelain, and silk for local products like pepper, sandalwood, and *trepang* (sea cucumbers), then as now a prized delicacy. As early as the 1300s, some Chinese had settled permanently along the coasts of Java, where they assimilated, married local women, and occasionally rose to prominent positions in the precolonial sultanates. By the mid-1700s, the local rulers of at least four cities in Java were of Chinese descent.²

Chinese merchants came to occupy an important place in the VOC's commercial networks, and helped build Batavia (today's Jakarta) into a flourishing colonial entrepôt. "If there were no Chinese here," the Dutch minister and naturalist François Valentijn observed in the 1720s, "Batavia would be very dead and deprived of many necessities."³ The VOC granted the Chinese economic and social privileges, including the right to collect taxes and control the official opium monopoly. Sitting in an elevated position halfway between the Dutch and the *pribumi*, or native Indonesians, the Chinese eventually came to be resented by both. Racial antagonisms exploded in 1740, when Chinese sugar mill workers revolted, prompting a pogrom by VOC troops and indigenous collaborators that took the lives of around ten thousand ethnic Chinese.⁴

The so-called “Batavia Fury” was just the first instance in which the ethnic Chinese would be scapegoated by local rulers seeking to defuse popular anger.

These colonial-era prejudices against the Chinese would outlive the Dutch, carrying over into the Indonesian nationalist movement and the independent republic to which it gave birth. At this point, latent anti-Chinese sentiments were magnified by the threat of communism. The Republic of Indonesia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) were founded within months of each other in late 1949, and established diplomatic relations in April 1950. However, it was a decision that was strongly opposed by Indonesian conservatives, particularly members of Muslim organizations and elements in the Indonesian army. These groups viewed the new regime in Beijing as an existential threat, due to its assumed influence over both the local Chinese and the Indonesian Communist Party—the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI)—which had launched a failed uprising in eastern Java in 1948, during the war of independence against the Dutch. Early PRC actions served to reinforce these perceptions. In the early 1950s, Wang Renshu, China’s first ambassador to Indonesia, established close ties to the PKI and aggressively courted Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese, hoping to swing their loyalty away from the Kuomintang regime on Taiwan. As an Indonesian-born former PKI member who had been exiled by the colonial authorities and now returned as a fanatical emissary of Mao’s China, Wang’s biography neatly embodied Indonesian fears of conflicting Chinese loyalties.⁵

Relations with China improved somewhat after 1957, when Sukarno, Indonesia’s first president, did away with parliamentary politics and embarked upon a period of populist authoritarian rule known as “Guided Democracy.” A flamboyant nationalist orator and hero of the independence struggle against the Dutch, Sukarno hoped to position Indonesia in the vanguard of the world’s non-aligned and anti-colonial forces. Gradually, he began steering his country’s foreign policy in a more radical direction. In speeches, he castigated the West and denounced the deepening US involvement in Vietnam. In 1963, Sukarno launched a political and military campaign called *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) against the new Federation of Malaysia, which he derided as a puppet of British and American imperialism. All the while he tilted closer to China, culminating in the establishment in August 1965 of a “Jakarta–Beijing Axis,” a partnership that threatened briefly to reshape the trajectory of the Cold War in Asia.

Sukarno's leftward turn disturbed the delicate balance between Indonesia's two most powerful political forces: the military, which enjoyed strong backing from the United States, and the PKI, which had links to China. In the early 1960s, Sukarno had managed to play the two hostile camps off against each other, while keeping both reliant on his patronage. But as he swung further to the left internationally, he also tilted toward the PKI domestically, tipping the scales against the military and other anti-communist forces. The situation came to a head in the early morning hours of October 1, 1965, when dissident army officers launched an abortive coup, kidnapping and killing six senior Indonesian army generals.

The circumstances surrounding the so-called September 30th Movement (known in Indonesia as Gerakan 30 September, or G30S) have never been fully illuminated. The participants claimed it was a response to a US-backed attempt to overthrow Sukarno, though such a plot was never definitively proven. Whatever its initial purpose, the G30S conspiracy provided a political opportunity for the army's Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad), led by a little-known major general named Suharto. Pinning the plot on the PKI, Suharto and the army肘ed Sukarno out of power and, with the aid of local militias and conservative Muslim groups, set about systematically liquidating its communist arch-rival.

Over the months that followed, an estimated half-million people were butchered as the PKI—then the third-largest communist party in the world after those of China and the Soviet Union—was torn out by the roots.⁶ The party's leaders were summarily executed, and around a million people were detained without charge, some for decades. The destruction of the PKI amounted, in Geoffrey Robinson's words, to "one of the largest and swiftest, yet least examined instances of mass killing and incarceration in the twentieth century."⁷ It was also a major turning point of the Cold War, cheered by much of the American press.

From this bloodshed and upheaval, Suharto emerged in control of Indonesia. Appointed acting president in 1967, he proclaimed the *Orde Baru*, or New Order, and steered Indonesia into the anti-communist camp. Accusing Beijing of orchestrating the G30S plot, Jakarta severed relations in 1967 and wouldn't reestablish them until 1990, holding out even as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines recognized the PRC in the mid-1970s. The reason was straightforward: having seized power to head off a supposed Chinese-backed

coup attempt, the New Order had an interest in continuing to depict China as an existential threat. So central was this “red scare” to the regime, the historian Harold Crouch wrote, that it “felt that its legitimacy might be put at stake if it restored friendly relations with the power it had portrayed as the embodiment of evil.”⁸ Suharto’s position only began to soften in the mid-1980s, when the economic benefit of engaging with China came to outweigh the political benefit of demonizing it.

While ethnic Chinese were not the main victims of the anti-communist purges of 1965–6, as is sometimes claimed, the toxic anti-China politics of the New Order quickly engulfed Indonesians of Chinese descent.⁹ On high alert for any hint of Chinese subversion or infiltration, the Indonesian government banned Chinese schools and newspapers, and public displays of Chinese characters. Ethnic Chinese were forced to take more Indonesian-sounding names, as with the Glodok café-owner Latif Yulus. Unable to express their Chinese identity, the *Tionghoa* were also unable to shed it. They bore a special mark on their national ID cards, which effectively barred them from the military, the bureaucracy, and most areas of political life. In the region of Yogyakarta, they were even prevented from owning land, a stricture that remains on the books today.¹⁰

The effective outcome of these discriminatory policies was to reinforce the traditional ethnic Chinese dominance of the commercial sector: the one place where Chinese Indonesians faced few restrictions. The New Order regime thus paradoxically gave birth to the *cukong* (“bosses”) a tiny clique of ethnic Chinese compradors who relied on Suharto’s patronage and grew immensely rich when Indonesia opened its doors to foreign investment in the 1970s and 1980s. By the time of the 1998 riots, 13 of the country’s top 15 taxpayers were Chinese Indonesians. (The remaining two were sons of Suharto.) While making up just 3.5 percent of the country’s population, ethnic Chinese were estimated to control around a third of its wealth.¹¹

Among the most prominent of these palace tycoons, and perhaps the closest to Suharto himself, was Liem Sioe Liong. Liem had arrived in the Dutch East Indies as a penniless Fujian immigrant in 1938, and befriended Suharto during the independence struggle. Once in power, Suharto granted Liem lucrative concessions; in return, Liem buttressed his rule financially. “One hankered after power, the other after money,” wrote the tycoon’s biographers. They “worked very closely together, building a symbiotic relationship that resulted in huge benefits for both.”¹² Liem established partnerships with ethnic

Chinese tycoons elsewhere in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia's Robert Kuok and Thailand's Chin Sophonpanich. By 1997, his Salim Group—called after Sudono Salim, the Indonesian name that Liem adopted in 1967—was reportedly the largest Chinese-owned conglomerate in the world, with \$20 billion in assets and some five hundred subsidiaries.¹³ During the New Order, Salim and its affiliated companies dominated Indonesia. Bank Central Asia was the country's biggest private bank, and Indocement its dominant cement producer. Indofood was its leading manufacturer of instant noodles.¹⁴

Suharto's strategy of surrounding himself with ethnic Chinese cronies was politically astute. As Benedict Anderson writes, "The Chinese would have economic but not political power, while the indigenous Indonesians (among whom a rival or successor to Suharto might arise) would have political positions, but no concentrated independent sources of wealth."¹⁵ But this racial division of labor had the malign effect of associating an already suspect ethnic Chinese minority with a crooked and increasingly despised regime. When the Asian financial crash buffeted Indonesia in 1997, setting off the economic and political aftershocks that eventually brought down the New Order, many turned on the familiar scapegoat. When violent riots that erupted across the archipelago in May 1998, some of Suharto's supporters, eager to deflect public rage away from the regime, directed it toward Chinese targets in Jakarta and other cities with significant ethnic Chinese populations. Needless to say, those Sino-Indonesians who fell victim to the riots were not the reviled *cukong*—those with the means fled Indonesia, along with billions of dollars in capital—but small business owners and other civilians. On May 21, amid continuing unrest, Suharto announced his resignation and handed power to his vice president, B.J. Habibie. The New Order thus ended much as it began: in paroxysms of violence.

Paradoxically, the 1998 riots marked a turning point both for Indonesia's relationship with China, and for the treatment of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Unlike in Malaysia, where racial riots in 1969 were followed by a tightening of discriminatory measures against those of Chinese descent, the early years of Indonesian democracy saw the relaxation of ethnic restrictions.¹⁶ No longer reliant on the communist bogeyman to sustain their rule, and under pressure from Chinese community associations, Habibie and his successor Abdurrahman Wahid lifted the bans on expressions of Chinese culture. Chinese New Year returned, with its firecrackers and lion dances; so did Chinese newspapers and

dialect associations. As Sino-Indonesians reconnected with Chinese culture at home, some forged closer cultural and commercial ties to the PRC.¹⁷

These developments paralleled Indonesia's warming relationship with China. While contacts had remained cautious since the reestablishment of diplomatic ties in 1990, China's image improved greatly following the Asian financial crisis in 1997. As in Thailand, the effects in Indonesia were severe, as was the anger at the high-handed response of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which demanded a host of austere financial reforms in exchange for its bailout. To many Indonesians, a famous and widely circulated photograph of the IMF director Michel Camdessus, standing with arms crossed over a seated and clearly humbled Suharto as he signed off on the IMF's \$40 billion bailout package, recalled the humiliations of the colonial era.¹⁸ The Chinese government, in contrast, offered emergency medical aid, extended a \$200 million credit line to Indonesia, and contributed \$500 million to the IMF's bailout package.¹⁹

Another factor in the improved relations was Beijing's restrained response to the May 1998 riots. During past episodes of anti-Chinese violence, the Chinese government had railed and condemned, earning hostile rebukes from the Indonesian government. This time the Chinese handled the issue delicately, despite a public outcry at home. It left Hong Kong and Taiwan to register the loudest protests, and when forced to refer to those killed in the riots, it avoided using the term *huaqiao* (Overseas Chinese), and instead described them as *yinni huaren* (Indonesians of Chinese descent). Beijing's ambassador in Jakarta made it clear that China viewed the incident as Indonesia's "internal affair." As he put it, "The Chinese government must not act as if it could be the chef in somebody else's kitchen."²⁰

By soothing a core Indonesian sensitivity, China's response allowed the two nations to begin working on issues of overlapping interest, from a shared opposition to regional separatism—Indonesia was then struggling to contain independence movements in the outlying regions of Aceh and West Papua—to a mutual interest in boosting investment and trade. Whatever their misgivings, Indonesian leaders were now awakening to the fact of China's economic emergence, and its potential benefits for their country. By the first decade of the 2000s, the roads of Indonesia's cities were teeming with Chinese motor-bikes, which mixed with the Hondas and Yamahas that had been manufactured locally since the 1970s. Non-stop flights were established to China, and

mainland tourists, scared off by the violence of 1998, began to return, as did much of the Overseas Chinese capital stashed abroad after the riots. Chinese state firms started to invest in Indonesia's rich deposits of coal, minerals, and natural gas. By 2007, China had become Indonesia's fifth-largest trading partner; ten years later, it had leapt into first place. By then, it was also the country's third-largest source of foreign investment. "There's real meat there," one prominent Chinese-Indonesian businessman told me. "You have Chinese who have lots of capital . . . and we need that capital to invest in infrastructure. Indonesia has so much to gain."

The same is true for China. Indonesia is an increasingly important source of raw materials for the Chinese economy, everything from wood pulp to mineral ores to palm oil. It is set to become the fourth-largest economy in the world by 2050, according to the global consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, with a young population and an expanding middle class that makes it an attractive external market for Chinese consumer goods.²¹ As the largest nation of maritime Southeast Asia, Indonesia is also central to China's seafaring ambitions. Its 17,000-odd islands bestride some of the world's most strategically important shipping lanes and chokepoints, including the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits. It was no accident that Xi Jinping chose the Indonesian House of Representatives as the venue in which to unveil the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)—the maritime component of the Belt and Road Initiative—in October 2013. Xi's vision of a maritime "road" linking China to Europe is impossible to imagine without Indonesian support.

In fundamental ways, however, Indonesia is likely to remain resistant to Chinese influence. Partly, this reflects the history of mistrust dating back to the Cold War. Partly, too, it is a function of Indonesia's prominence and size. Encompassing the majority of the Austronesian realm that conjoins the Pacific and Indian oceans, Indonesia's 264 million people and \$1 trillion economy give it a strong gravity of its own, and make it the only Southeast Asian nation that could potentially counterbalance China's power. In this respect China and Indonesia can be described as mirror images: both are large, multiethnic, inward-looking nations: "middle kingdoms" that share a sense of their own centrality to their respective regions.²² In precolonial times, the Malay peoples of what is today Indonesia experienced limited intercourse with the Chinese state, despite their extensive trade with southern China. As in Malaysia, the arrival and spread of Islam through the archipelago—a process ironically

furthered by the fifteenth-century maritime voyages of the Muslim Admiral Zheng He—only heightened the sense of cultural distance. If Indonesians look abroad today, writes Martin Stuart-Fox, they look to Mecca before they look to Beijing.²³

Thriving economic interactions thus coexist with growing uneasiness about China's push into the oceans, particularly in the South China Sea, whose southern reaches lap at Indonesian shores. Shadowing this is the persistent question of China's relationship with Indonesia's small but economically prosperous ethnic Chinese community. For all the progress of the past two decades, many Indonesians take the view, as Michael Leifer phrased it in 1999, "that in supping with China, as with the devil, it is best to use a long spoon."²⁴

The Natuna archipelago lies scattered across the southernmost rim of the South China Sea between Borneo and the Malay Peninsula, a group of islands ringed with sandy beaches and wooden fishing shacks raised on stilts. On June 17, 2016, a small Indonesian navy corvette, the KRI *Imam Bonjol*, was patrolling through waters north of the Natunas when it encountered a group of Chinese fishing boats and two much larger vessels from the Chinese Coast Guard. The boats had entered far inside Indonesia's 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and the *Imam Bonjol* gave chase. After firing a few warning shots, it seized one of the Chinese fishing boats and arrested its seven crewmembers, before towing them back to its ramshackle base on Natuna Besar, the main island in the Natuna chain.

The incident was just one of a series of recent confrontations between Indonesian and Chinese vessels in waters around the Natuna Islands. While Indonesia is not a formal claimant in the South China Sea, its EEZ overlaps with the southernmost part of China's "nine-dash line" claim, creating a zone of friction that encloses some of the world's most biodiverse oceans and largest untapped reserves of natural gas. Three months earlier, an Indonesian attempt to capture another Chinese boat in the area had been foiled by the intervention of a Chinese Coast Guard vessel, operating 1,500 kilometers from the nearest Chinese coast, which forcibly severed the towline connecting the impounded vessel to an Indonesian patrol boat.

These incidents grew out of a war on illegal fishing declared by President Joko Widodo, known often by the nickname Jokowi, shortly after he took

office in 2014. Illegal fishing had long been a serious problem in Indonesia, costing the nation billions of dollars in lost revenue each year. Leading the crackdown was Susi Pudjiastuti, then Jokowi's Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. A chain-smoking divorcée and aviation magnate who was serving in political office for the first time, she oversaw a campaign in which Indonesian authorities seized dozens of foreign vessels found fishing without permission in Indonesian waters. After Susi's appointment in 2014, she promised, "We will track down and sink every single illegal fishing vessel we catch."²⁵ For the benefit of the press, some of the seized vessels were dramatically destroyed with explosives.

Few of the boats captured by the Indonesian navy were Chinese; most were from Vietnam or Malaysia. But given Beijing's notorious tendency of using its civilian fishing fleet to assert maritime sovereignty claims, Indonesia's willingness to impound even a few Chinese fishing trawlers strongly signaled its intention to defend its EEZ against Chinese incursions. In response to the June 2016 incident, the Chinese Foreign Ministry had denounced the Indonesian arrests, asserting that the region was part of China's "traditional fishing grounds."²⁶ A few days later, Jokowi flew to Natuna Besar. Dressed in a bomber jacket, he boarded the *Imam Bonjol* and inspected the warship's gun turrets as fighter jets roared overhead. Security Minister Luhut Panjaitan said Jokowi's visit was aimed at sending a "clear message" that Indonesia was "very serious in its effort to protect its sovereignty" around the islands.²⁷ In 2017, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry announced a high-profile press conference to unveil a new map that renamed the waters around the Natuna Islands the "North Natuna Sea," adding to the crowded catalog of patriotic nomenclature in the South China Sea. It also bolstered its military presence in the Natunas, and held military exercises in nearby waters.

During his campaign for president in 2014, Jokowi had promised to bolster Indonesia's status as a seafaring nation. He pledged to turn Indonesia into a "global maritime fulcrum": to build connectivity between its islands, and leverage the nation's enviable location at the hinge of the Pacific and Indian oceans. In October 2014, he delivered an inaugural speech crammed with maritime metaphor: "We have far too long turned our back on the seas, the oceans, the straits, and the bays," Jokowi declared. Describing himself as "the captain of the ship" of Indonesia, he promised that "we will raise the mast, a strong one. We will face the tides in the ocean with our own power."²⁸

Once in office, Jokowi set out to implement this vision by establishing a Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs, creating a unified coastguard, and empowering Susi's ministry to pursue illegal fishing boats.

Jokowi's maritime emphasis sought to correct a long period of Indonesian neglect. Despite being the world's largest archipelago, with around 93,000 square kilometers of inland waters, Indonesia had paid surprisingly little attention to securing and defending its ocean expanses. This was partly an outgrowth of the challenges bequeathed by Dutch colonialism. When Sukarno proclaimed Indonesia's independence in 1945, Elizabeth Pisani writes, "he was liberating a nation that didn't really exist, imposing a notional unity on a ragbag of islands that had only a veneer of shared history."²⁹ As a result, the new nation was preoccupied with creating "unity in diversity" (as Indonesia's official motto went) and suppressing the serious regional rebellions that flared up across the archipelago from the late 1950s. The Indonesian armed forces focused most of their attention inward, prioritizing internal security over the enforcement of external claims. For years, Indonesia's defense spending has been among the lowest in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) relative to GDP; even then, most of this has gone to the land forces.³⁰ This left the Indonesian navy perilously ill-equipped to assert control over its maritime domain—a weakness revealed by China's burgeoning naval presence in the South China Sea.

While Jokowi's forceful actions around the Natuna Islands were viewed internationally as pushback against China's aggressive claims in the South China Sea, the Indonesian leader's views on China were more ambiguous. Indonesia's seventh president was a unique figure in his country's history: the first to hail from neither the military nor the established political elite. Raised in a riverside slum in the Javanese heartland city of Solo, Jokowi had run a furniture exporting business there before being elected the city's mayor in 2005. In that office he became known for his simple, unaffected demeanor and hands-on style of governance, characterized by frequent *blusukan*—impromptu field visits in which he bantered with his constituents, with aides and camera crews in tow. After becoming Jakarta's governor in 2012, he exported this energetic style to the capital, earning him a nationwide profile. Two years later, Jokowi surfed into national office on an Obama-like message of "hope and change," a can-do small-city politician who promised to curb corruption, fire up the economy, and overhaul Indonesia's woeful infrastructure.

Jokowi came to the presidency in 2014 without much interest in foreign affairs. Unlike his predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who had tried to raise Indonesia's international standing to one commensurate with its status as the world's fourth-most populous nation, Jokowi had no previous diplomatic or military experience, and was reportedly bored by the annual cycle of multi-lateral summitry.³¹ Jokowi was therefore inclined to view China's rise through the lens of his domestic agenda: in particular, his promise to build up Indonesia's infrastructure, especially in the poorly developed eastern islands. On coming to office, Jokowi's administration announced plans for \$355 billion worth of industrial parks, ports, and airports stretching from Sumatra to Sulawesi to Kalimantan. Unable to fund these projects from the national budget, Jokowi looked to China, viewing the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and his own "global maritime fulcrum" as basically complementary enterprises.

Straight away, Jokowi established a good relationship with Xi Jinping, whom he reportedly saw as a fellow "results-oriented" leader.³² During his first two years in office, he met Xi five times and joined the new China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In September 2015, his government awarded the contract for a \$6 billion high-speed rail line between Jakarta and Bandung to a consortium of Chinese and Indonesian state-owned enterprises, a project that initially looked likely to go to a Japanese firm. In May 2017, Jokowi attended the first Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, where he praised the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a "realistic" approach to development: "It is not merely talk, but it is about actually building something. From ports to railways, these are industries we can see and touch. This is exactly the sort of courage and real action the world needs right now."³³ The following year, China and Indonesia signed contracts for \$23.3 billion worth of BRI infrastructure projects, including two hydropower plants in North Kalimantan on the island of Borneo, a power plant in Bali, and a steel smelting facility.³⁴

Although progress on these projects would be sluggish, Jokowi's desire for Chinese financing played into his administration's approach to the tensions around the Natuna Islands. Its dramatic campaign of boat scuttling masked the fact that Chinese vessels were generally handled far more delicately than those belonging to other countries. In a 2016 report for Sydney's Lowy Institute for International Policy, Aaron Connelly observed that plans to sink several Chinese vessels along with dozens of other foreign vessels that year were canceled at the last minute, presumably due to the likely diplomatic

ramifications. (The last Chinese fishing boat was blown up in May 2015.) Jokowi's "emphasis on delivering tangible domestic economic results and his associated skepticism of multilateral summit diplomacy" also led his administration to step back from Indonesia's previously active regional diplomacy aimed at building an ASEAN consensus on the South China Sea disputes.³⁵

In some ways, Indonesia's approach to the Natuna Islands reflected its long-standing preference for maintaining an "independent and active" foreign policy. Before Suharto's takeover, this meant forging a middle path that would safeguard Indonesia's independence: what Sukarno's vice president Mohammad Hatta characterized in 1948, in another memorable Southeast Asian metaphor of balancing, as "rowing between two reefs."³⁶ In an age of escalating competition between China and the US, this has manifested as a hedging strategy that Evan A. Laksmana, a senior researcher at Jakarta's Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), has termed "pragmatic equidistance": a policy of engaging with the various great powers on a range of fronts while maintaining a careful balance between them.³⁷ Notwithstanding Jokowi's lack of interest in multilateral diplomacy, this approach is also inseparable from Indonesia's traditional leadership role within ASEAN, and its active participation in multilateral groupings from the G20 to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Seen in this light, Jokowi's war on illegal fishing passed the Goldilocks test. Seizing a few Chinese boats helped quell criticisms from Jokowi's political opponents that he was soft on China. It also led to significant increases in fish catches, an important domestic issue for Indonesia's coastal communities. At the same time, by framing the Natuna dispute as one of law enforcement rather than maritime sovereignty, Indonesia could assert its own claims without risking a serious break with Beijing. Jakarta's official "non-claimant" status also allowed it to continue working for a peaceful resolution to the South China Sea disputes through ASEAN, even if less vigorously than previously.³⁸

Despite Jokowi's shows of strength around the Natuna Islands, however, Indonesian control over its ocean expanses remains fragmented. Evan Laksmana said that despite Jokowi's best efforts, the country's maritime and coastguard forces are a chaos of overlapping mandates, under the nominal authority of the navy and around a dozen ministries and other bodies, making it difficult to coordinate policies. At times, even interpretations of maritime

law differ from agency to agency. “Just because we come off as strong on some parts of the maritime domain,” he said, “that’s not necessarily the position of Indonesia in general.”

If events near the Natuna Islands have yet to forestall healthy economic relations between China and Indonesia, those onshore portend greater difficulties. In May 2017, just days before Jokowi flew to Beijing for the first Belt and Road Forum, a court in Jakarta found his ally Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the city’s Chinese-Indonesian former governor, guilty of blasphemy. The public campaign for his jailing evinced worrying echoes of the past. Unabashed about his Chinese heritage, Basuki—known commonly as Ahok, from his Hokkien name Tjung Ban Hok—encapsulated the great strides that Chinese Indonesians had made since 1998. Elected in 2012 as Jokowi’s deputy, and bumped up to the top job in 2014 after Jokowi was elected president, he was both ethnic Chinese and Christian—the first “double minority” to govern Indonesia’s capital for a half-century. His downfall also indicated that old prejudices against the Chinese retained a poisonous political currency, with potential implications for Indonesia’s future relations with China.

The blasphemy controversy originated in Ahok’s gubernatorial re-election campaign in late 2016, when he referenced a passage of the Quran during a campaign speech. In essence, Ahok told voters to ignore political arguments that non-Muslims should not be allowed to govern Muslims. But when a selectively edited excerpt of the speech went viral, hardline Islamist vigilante groups, including the pugnacious Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, or FPI) rallied hundreds of thousands of protesters in central Jakarta calling for Ahok to be arrested for blasphemy. Amid rising public pressure, a court laid formal charges. After losing an April 2017 runoff election to his opponent Anies Baswedan, a former minister of education and culture who did not hesitate to play the religious card he had been so fortuitously dealt, Ahok was found guilty and sentenced to two years’ prison.

The campaign against Ahok was underpinned by a current of Islamic conservatism that had gained considerable ground in the post-Suharto era. Strict, “modernist” interpretations of Islam have been part of Indonesia’s religious mix since colonial times. The New Order had suppressed hardline fundamentalist groups as a possible threat to its hold on power, but the Suharto era was also a period of economic flux and urbanization that seeded a growing religious observance. Another crucial factor was the concurrent

influx of Saudi petro-dollars into Indonesia, which went toward the construction of mosques and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) promoting Saudi Arabia's exacting brand of *salafi* Islam. The trend of Islamization accelerated after 1998. It was visible in the adoption of more austere forms of dress by increasing numbers of Indonesian Muslims, including the *niqab*, a head-to-toe covering worn by women. It was also marked by the ascent of pressure groups like the FPI, which inveighed against any group deviating from the *salafi* norm, whether Christians and "heretical" minority Muslim sects like the Ahmadiyah, or progressive student groups and the LGBT community.

In the history of Indonesian populist nationalism, anti-Chinese sentiment has often accompanied expressions of Islamic identity. The country's first mass-based political organization, Sarekat Islam, was founded in 1911 by Javanese *batik* merchants fearful of competition from Chinese interlopers. As it grew and spread across the archipelago, Sarekat Islam embodied the idea that the nascent Indonesian national community it envisaged "was inspired by Islam and excluded Chinese."³⁹ This association was cemented after 1949, when Muslim concerns about the PRC's militant atheism were displaced onto Indonesia's ethnic Chinese, few of whom were Muslim.

From the beginning, the Ahok blasphemy campaign was marked by veiled (and not-so-veiled) anti-Chinese and anti-China rhetoric. Railing against Ahok's supposed crime, street demonstrators unfurled banners that read *Ganjang Cina* ("Crush the Chinese"). One protest in November 2016 turned violent, as demonstrators looted several Chinese-owned shops in an affluent suburb of North Jakarta. Facebook rumors claimed that Ahok's administration was reclaiming land in the capital to house 10 million mainland Chinese workers; another "fake news" item described a purported Chinese plot to import to Indonesia dried chilies infested with bacteria.⁴⁰ A 2017 survey conducted by Singapore's ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute found that 47.6 percent of Indonesian respondents agreed with the statement, "Chinese Indonesians may still harbor loyalty towards China."⁴¹

To be sure, Ahok had been a brash and polarizing figure. His critics blamed him for clearing thousands of urban poor from riverbanks in Jakarta, waving away the concerns of evicted residents and housing rights groups. He also angered devout Muslims when he prohibited Jakarta's public schools from requiring female Muslim students to wear a headscarf, likening the Islamic head coverings to "the napkin in my kitchen." Stanley Widiyanto, a 26-year-old

Indonesian journalist of Chinese descent, said, "He's a flawed person. He's not really savvy politically; he ran his mouth at the crowd by saying that Quran verse. I'm not saying that he was wrong per se, but from a political standpoint that was bad. He was running for governor, for God's sake."

Ahok thus became the focus for converging streams of fundamentalist ideology, ethnic suspicion, and populist resentment linked to the widening inequalities of wealth in Indonesia's capital. Charlotte Setijadi, a fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute who studies Indonesia's ethnic Chinese minority, explained that Ahok came to epitomize many of the traditional stereotypes about the Chinese. "He was kind of like the perfect embodiment of all of that," she said, "a Chinese Christian, an impolite man in a position of power, who insulted the faith of the majority of Indonesians." In Jakarta's ethnic Chinese community, I heard varying opinions about Ahok. While some people expressed pride that one of their own could rise so high, others accused the governor of disturbing the city's precarious ethnic balance. "It's better to stay quiet," said Ie Tiat Fo, 57, a Hokkien textile merchant in Glodok. "When he chose to be quiet, everything was okay."

If Ahok's rise showed how far Indonesian democracy had advanced since 1998, his fall highlighted the worrying extent to which old attitudes and personalities held sway. Behind the anti-Ahok campaign lay a pernicious alliance between religious fundamentalists and conservative politicians, some with roots deep in the New Order. Bonnie Triyana, an historian who edits the monthly magazine *Historia*, said that the swirl of Islamic and anti-Chinese rhetoric had been whipped up by these conservative forces to discredit avowed reformists like Ahok and Jokowi. He described the affair as "a moment when historical memories came together with political vested interests."

The power of this old guard is one key reason why Indonesia has yet to pursue accountability for the New Order's founding atrocity: the anti-communist massacres of 1965–6. Scholars and human rights groups attempting to explore the episode have been branded "communists" and had their meetings broken up by police or Islamic vigilantes. In 2016, when activists convened a "people's tribunal" in The Hague that found the Indonesian government guilty of genocide over the killings, Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu denounced it as "the work of the PKI"—a party that hadn't existed for 50 years and was still officially outlawed, along with Marxist teachings

more generally.⁴² More than two decades after the fall of Suharto, Indonesian museums and schoolbooks still propagate the era's line: that the New Order delivered Indonesia from the jaws of the PKI and the Chinese communists.

This New Order hangover was embodied in the gruff, stocky figure of Prabowo Subianto, a former general who ran against Jokowi in the 2014 presidential election, and gave vocal support to the campaign against Ahok. A leading hardline general in the dying years of the New Order, and a former son-in-law of Suharto, Prabowo has been credibly implicated in a litany of human rights abuses, including atrocities committed in the conflict zones of East Timor and Aceh, and the abduction of pro-democracy activists in the regime's final months. After his March 1998 appointment as the head of Kostrad, the post that Suharto occupied on the eve of his own takeover in 1967, Prabowo was accused of joining with radical Islamic groups to fan anti-Chinese sentiment in the lead-up to the May riots. This is alleged to have been prompted by an internal power struggle between Prabowo and General Wiranto, the head of the armed forces, over who would succeed the ageing dictator.⁴³

Prabowo's 2014 presidential run was shot through with nostalgia for the Suharto years and populist promises of a return to stable strongman rule. The scholar Edward Aspinall describes Prabowo as an "oligarchic populist" who mimicked Sukarno's barnstorming mass rallies and sartorial affectations—down to his white safari suits, black *peci* cap, and vintage microphones—and combined them with a raging sense of personal entitlement.⁴⁴ Prefiguring the later attacks on Jokowi's ally Ahok, Prabowo's campaign peddled the anti-Chinese tropes that have long been the handmaiden of reactionary politics in Indonesia. Some claimed that Jokowi was ethnically Chinese; others, that he was secretly pushing a communist agenda.

To get a handle on how anti-Chinese sentiment and conservative religious currents were feeding into perceptions of China's increasing power and influence in Indonesia, I set out on a steamy July afternoon for a musty office building in South Jakarta, to meet with Habib Muchsin Alatas, a senior member of the FPI. Set up by a group of generals to fight pro-democracy protesters in 1998, the FPI had developed into a potent force in Indonesian street politics, feared for its aggressive "sweeping" operations, in which swarms of wispy-bearded zealots shut down bars and clubs, or attempted to break up "un-Islamic" public events and film screenings. It had also played a central role in the campaign to

bring down Ahok.

Alatas, the chairman of the FPI's shura council, its top decision-making body, was dressed in a white *salafi* robe and gray turban. With a wide face and booming voice, he struck an imposing figure, an impression accentuated by the perch he occupied behind a broad, glass-topped CEO desk. After the formal introductions, and the customary distribution of fried snacks and rice cakes, we got around to the topic of Ahok. For Alatas, the question was simple: Islam had been central to the nation since its founding. Ahok's "blasphemy" threatened to inspire similar sentiments elsewhere in Indonesia, precipitating a general breakdown in religious morality and, by extension, national unity. "If we are tolerant to Ahok, then other leaders will do the same. That's why Ahok was dangerous," he said.

The other key part of this equation was China. Alatas described Ahok as a "martyr for the grand designs of Chinese imperialism" in Indonesia, which included the alleged importation of millions of Chinese workers under the cover of BRI infrastructure investments. "And you know, China is communist, anti-religion, anti-God," he added, bringing the connections full circle. "It's like the opposite of Indonesia."

For the moment, this conflation of China and Indonesia's ethnic Chinese remains the view of a vocal minority. But as Indonesia moved toward presidential elections in 2019—another Jokowi vs. Prabowo battle—the China question again raised its head. This time, the concern surrounded China's economic footprint in Indonesia, which had expanded markedly during Jokowi's first term. Social media buzzed with stories about Chinese tour guides stealing jobs from locals in Bali, and mainland workers being shipped in to build roads and dams. Local media attention focused on a joint-venture industrial estate in Morowali in central Sulawesi, one of the largest Chinese investments in Indonesia. Although not officially a BRI project, the huge enterprise, which included a nickel smelter and mill capable of churning out 3 million tons of steel a year, was said to be employing thousands of mainlanders illegally on tourist visas.

In reality, few of the big BRI projects sought by Jokowi's administration had materialized. The Jakarta–Bandung high-speed railway had seen repeated delays due to funding disagreements, permit issues, and the glacial pace of land acquisition. Other projects languished at the planning stage. Meanwhile, official figures put the number of Chinese workers in Indonesia at just

32,000—orders of magnitude short of what rumor suggested. As Yose Rizal Damuri, an economist at CSIS, pointed out, “There are far more Indonesians working in Hong Kong than Chinese working in Indonesia.”⁴⁵ Yet the salience of such rumors suggested the extreme sensitivity of even the slightest possibility that China was taking jobs from local workers.

Similar themes flowed into the election campaign proper. Hoping to replicate the strategy that had brought Mahathir Mohamad back to power in Malaysia the year before, Prabowo vowed a stringent review of Indonesia’s BRI investments, including the Jakarta–Bandung railway, and (channeling Donald Trump) promised to “seek a better deal” in trade that would reduce Indonesia’s large trade deficit with China.⁴⁶ As at the election five years earlier, the campaign played out against a backdrop of social media hoaxes and misinformation alleging the usual anti-Chinese outrages: that Jokowi was trying to infiltrate Chinese workers into Indonesia, that he was an agent of China, or the PKI, or both.

In the end, Jokowi won re-election, though not without significant challenge. Initially, Prabowo refused to accept the election result and the ensuing protests evolved into violent confrontations between police and pro-Prabowo demonstrators, some waving black Islamic flags. At least eight people were killed and hundreds injured in the post-election unrest. Again, the turmoil was colored by anti-Chinese rhetoric. Messages circulated on social media claiming that rioters killed in the melee had been shot by “police from China,” who had arrived in Indonesia “disguised as foreign workers.”⁴⁷ Even though Prabowo’s macho posturing and authoritarian appeals failed once again to defeat the softer populism of Jokowi, who would later welcome Prabowo into his cabinet as Minister of Defense, it demonstrated that anti-Chinese populism remained a live current in Indonesian politics. While a repeat of May 1998 was unlikely anytime soon, Bonnie Triyana said, “The seeds of hatred are still there”—and seemingly no shortage of politicians and demagogues willing to tend them and bring them to flower.

As in the past, the “Chinese question” remains an acutely sensitive factor in Indonesia’s already uneasy relationship with China, complicating the Chinese government’s pursuit of its broader strategic goals in maritime Southeast Asia. In the words of Evan Laksmana of CSIS, “China will always be the most domestically combustible relationship we have with a foreign country.” And just as Beijing will always struggle to transcend the acute suspicion that

surrounds its relationship to the local Chinese, there is a danger that it could again worsen the situation through over-confident or ill-advised outreach to Chinese Indonesians.

Given Indonesia's long history of anti-Chinese discrimination, China's re-emergence as an economic, political, and cultural power poses greater complications for Indonesia's ethnic Chinese community than for its counterparts elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Those I spoke to registered a broad range of views about their ancestral homeland. Agus Hendry Susanto, 62, a Chinese-Indonesian businessman in Yogyakarta, whose family came from Fujian province during the Chinese Civil War in the 1930s, told me that he was "very proud" of China's newfound superpower status. He then hastened to add, "I am proud of both China and Indonesia." In Glodok, I interviewed the owner of a small restaurant selling *soto betawi*, a noodle soup made with beef and coconut milk. Giving his name only as Afung, the septuagenarian spoke about his parents' immigration from Guangdong in 1940. Afung said he was proud of his heritage—"everywhere we can see the sunrise, the Chinese are there," he said—but it was hard to feel much allegiance to a country that he had never seen with his own eyes. "I was born in Indonesia," he said, "and I will die in Indonesia." Others expressed the view that the increasing visibility of ethnic Chinese politicians and businesspeople in Indonesian life had drawn unwelcome attention to the community as a whole.

As Charlotte Setijadi argued in a 2017 paper, Sino-Indonesians' attitudes toward China divide along generational, linguistic, and economic lines. For some, China's rise and the more open climate for Chinese cultural expression have led to a process of "Sinification," in which they are "orientating themselves more to a Mainland Chinese version of Chineseness": speaking Mandarin, consuming mainland media, and so forth. Others continue to identify much more with their adopted homeland than their ancestral one. This roughly matches the old division between the *peranakan* Chinese, deeply acculturated and often no longer fluent in any Chinese language, and *totoks*, more recent Mandarin-speaking immigrants with closer affinities to the mainland.⁴⁸

In recent years, as relations between Indonesia and China have improved, both governments have come to view Chinese Indonesians as a natural economic and cultural bridge. In encouraging them to play this role, however, they run the risk of reinforcing old suspicions of bifurcated loyalties. Given prevailing attitudes among *pribumi* Indonesians, Setijadi said that positive

perceptions of mainland China rarely transfer to the local ethnic Chinese, “while negative stuff almost certainly gets connected to Chinese Indonesians.”

There are some indications that the Chinese embassy in Jakarta recognizes the sensitivity of the “Chinese question” in Indonesia, focusing most of its educational and other people-to-people exchanges on Muslim *pribumi* Indonesians. But mainland officials have made comments that hint at a worrying muddying of the lines between Chinese heritage and Chinese citizenship. In April 2012, Li Yinze, the director of Beijing’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), gave a speech at the China Chamber of Commerce in Jakarta in which he urged young Chinese Indonesians to learn Mandarin “in order to strengthen their identification with the Chinese nation.” Three years later, another senior OCAO official told an Indonesian-Chinese audience that “China will always be the strong backer of the people of Chinese descent overseas.”⁴⁹ In their very ambiguity, these statements provided fertile soil for suspicion. While local anti-Chinese prejudice is yet to align with broader fears of China to the extent that it did under Suharto, heedlessly cultivating ties to Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese, against a backdrop of maritime tensions and anti-Chinese religious demagoguery, could have dire consequences.

Further in the background looms the question of what the Chinese government might do in response to another outbreak of anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia. The riots of May 1998 prompted nationalist outrage on the Chinese mainland, where the incident is now remembered as “Black May.” At the time, demonstrators in Beijing defied an official ban to protest both the Indonesian violence and what many saw as their own government’s lukewarm response.⁵⁰ Christine Susanna Tjhin, a Chinese-Indonesian researcher who has done extensive research in mainland China, said the incident still resonates there. From taxi drivers to students to members of the business community, she said, “the image of May ’98 is firmly ingrained in the minds of mainland Chinese.” Though China’s reaction was subdued in 1998, would it be willing or able to show such restraint today, in an age of ascendant Chinese nationalism, when events are broadcast and amplified in real time on social media? It is a hard question to answer; suffice to say, Beijing is watching developments in Indonesia closely.

As competition mounts between China and the US, Southeast Asia’s largest nation once again finds itself “between the reefs,” facing cross-pressures from two adversarial superpowers. Given Indonesia’s size and prominence in

Southeast Asia, and its traditionally active role within ASEAN, how it responds to these dynamics could help set the tone for the region as a whole. Surprisingly, given its complex and troubled history of ties with Beijing, Indonesia has remained skeptical about the adverse turn in US policy toward China, particularly the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy announced by the Trump administration in late 2017. While Indonesian policymakers, like many of their Southeast Asian counterparts, view US power as an important stabilizing force, they fear that aggressive American efforts to contain Chinese ambitions could undermine “ASEAN centrality” and polarize the bloc.

To a great extent, Washington's current policies toward China are anathema to Indonesia's “independent and active” foreign policy tradition, which prizes multilateralism and views open great power alignments with suspicion. Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has been the primary vehicle through which Indonesia has pursued regional leadership, as symbolized by its hosting of the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. Despite Jokowi's personal indifference, Indonesian diplomats and policymakers continue to view ASEAN as the best way of managing the region's security challenges.

As the bloc's largest member—and perhaps the quintessential “Indo-Pacific” nation—it is no surprise that Indonesia has led ASEAN's efforts to formulate a response to the FOIP, anchored squarely in ASEAN and its multilateral processes. In 2019, Jakarta played a key role in drafting the bloc's “Indo-Pacific Outlook,” its first official response to the new American strategy. The “Outlook” steered a middle course between competing Chinese and American geopolitical visions in a bid to avoid any “zero-sum game” and to “continue being an honest broker within the strategic environment of competing interests.”⁵¹

Indonesia's present approach has its limits, though. As Connelly writes, Indonesia's preference for balancing the great powers had sometimes led it to adopt positions that seem “inconsistent with its own self-interest” on certain issues, particularly in the South China Sea.⁵² Similarly, its focus on sometimes toothless multilateralism has given rise to the perennial claim that Indonesia has failed to evolve into the regional power that its geographic and demographic size might suggest. To many outside observers—particularly in the US—it has long been conventional wisdom that Indonesia “punches below its weight” in world affairs.⁵³ Since the advent of the FOIP strategy, some outside analysts have expressed disappointment at Indonesia's apparent

unwillingness to take a stronger stand against China.

Yet Indonesia's approach to the mounting regional tensions is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future. Despite its maritime geography, the orientation of the Indonesian state remains overwhelmingly inward-looking, consumed with the challenge of unifying its fissiparous regions and delivering prosperity to its 267 million citizens. In 2018, Indonesia's military spending remained the lowest in ASEAN relative to its size.⁵⁴ With most of its economic resources focused on domestic challenges, Indonesian leaders perceive, for better or worse, that the nation's "regional and global profiles are best served and amplified through the multilateral forums that it has invested in over the years."⁵⁵

Until now, Indonesia's self-absorption may have redounded to the region's ultimate benefit. As Donald Emmerson writes, "If Indonesia had not punched *under* its 'weight' inside ASEAN—lowering its voice in foreign affairs, forsaking Sukarno's high-decibel rhetoric against Malaysia, accepting the need to cooperate with its 'underweight' neighbors—the organization would not have survived and the region might well have been less stable today."⁵⁶ How well this approach is suited to the coming century remains to be seen. In the end, it may well be decisions made in Beijing and Washington, rather than in Jakarta, that determine whether Indonesia holds to its middle path, or runs aground on the reefs.

THE PHILIPPINES

SLOUCHING TOWARD BEIJING

President Rodrigo Duterte is an unnerving presence in his hometown in the southern Philippines. He stares out from posters and bumper stickers, and lurks on life-size cardboard cutouts in restaurants and hotel lobbies. Since trolling his way into office in 2016, Duterte's squat bungalow in Davao City has become a place of pilgrimage for supporters, who pose for photos while making his trademark raised fist salute. In the surrounding streets, stalls run a hot trade in Duterte merchandise, including trucker hats, coffee mugs, and license plates. One T-shirt features Duterte in shades, in action hero pose, under the line #MyPresident. Another likens Duterte to The Punisher, a vigilante from Marvel Comics who wages a relentless one-man war on crime.

Before seizing international headlines with his vulgar comments about the Pope and his bloody battle against illegal drugs, Duterte served for more than two decades as mayor of this port city on the fractious southern island of Mindanao. During that time, he ran Davao City like a disheveled, hard-drinking Lee Kuan Yew. He banned smoking and the sale of liquor after 1 a.m. He legalized prostitution. Most importantly, local residents say, he turned Davao City into a refuge of order and stability in a region long known as the Philippines' "wild south." "People here were not safe," said Roda Ladera, 45, whom I met one evening while strolling through Davao City's Chinese Cemetery. But under Duterte, she said, "there was peace and order, bad people were minimized."

When Duterte was elected mayor in 1988, Davao was nearly lawless: assassinations by communist insurgents were common, and criminal gangs engaged in shootouts in the street. Ladera, who works as a caretaker at the cemetery, said that even the graves there were ransacked for valuables. While much of Mindanao is still plagued by communist and Islamic rebel groups, Davao City, now run by Duterte's daughter Sara, claims to be one of the safest

cities in the Philippines. Rolan Ordinacion, a 35-year-old taxi driver, declared: “Everyone in Davao believes in Duterte.”

Yet for some, admiration for the former mayor is tempered by unease at the hardline methods that would later earn him notoriety as president. Human rights groups claim that between 1998 and 2015, more than 1,400 poor Davaoeños were murdered by vigilante death squads. The victims included street kids and petty criminals, as well as addicts and dealers of crystal meth, a scourge that Filipinos call *shabu*.¹ “His strategy was to chase criminals and threaten them—with murder,” said Virgilio “Ver” Bermudez, a Davao City-based journalist who covered Duterte for nearly three decades. “There was a general strategy to instill fear.”

Most of the killings were blamed on “unknown vigilante killers,” few of whom were ever brought to justice. Although Duterte has denied any direct knowledge of these death squads, he never shied away from using force. In 2009, he said that criminals were “a legitimate target of assassination.”² The rest of the Philippines would soon become familiar with these methods. When Duterte made a run at the presidency in 2016, his pitch was simple: to expand his Davao City “model” nationwide, including his scorched-earth campaign against illegal drugs. “It’s going to be bloody,” he promised during the campaign. “People will die.” Duterte even boasted that he had killed armed criminals himself, though no conclusive evidence ever emerged.

Although he looked and acted like an outsider, Duterte hailed from a well-established political family, with ties to powerful dynasties in Mindanao and the Visayas; his father once served as governor of Davao province. Nonetheless, his slouching presentation, casual dress, and promise to use extreme violence to solve the Philippines’ endemic social problems set him apart from the rest of the national political elite. When Filipino voters went to the polls in May 2016, they handed Duterte a convincing victory. He won nearly 7 million votes more than his nearest rival.

Duterte didn’t renege on his promise. Within days of his entering the Malacañang, the turreted Spanish colonial palace on the banks of Manila’s Pasig River, the police were fanning out into the warren-like slums of Manila and Cebu. Led by Ronald “Bato” dela Rosa, who had served under Duterte as police chief of Davao City and now headed the Philippine National Police, law enforcement officers smashed in doors and shot alleged drug dealers, many of whom were simply addicts. Filipino journalists who covered the

drug war compared it to working in a conflict zone. Luis Liwanag, a photo-journalist who co-produced a short film titled *Duterte's Hell*, recalled nights on end working from 10 p.m. until 4 a.m., following squad cars from crime scene to dimly lit crime scene. "When you get home all your flesh is tingling," he said when we met at a Starbucks in Quezon City, a prosperous suburb north of Manila. "You can have hallucinations, especially late at night."

The death tolls from Duterte's war were monstrous. Officially, the police declared 5,104 "drug personalities" killed as of January 2019; Duterte's critics claimed up to four times that number, including many innocents who were wrongly suspected of drug crimes. Within a few months, the war on drugs had killed at least three times as many Filipinos as had died in nearly a decade of martial law under the dictator Ferdinand Marcos during the 1970s and 1980s.³

The war on drugs soon bled into the Philippines' foreign policy. When Western nations criticized the violence, Duterte embraced Xi Jinping's China and Vladimir Putin's Russia. When the International Criminal Court opened a preliminary inquiry into the killings, he announced the Philippines' withdrawal from the court and warned UN human rights investigators, "do not fuck with me."⁴ As the foreign affairs analyst Richard Javad Heydarian writes in his book *The Rise of Duterte*, the new president engineered a rapid and wrenching reorientation of the Philippines' domestic and international policies. In a matter of months, the island-nation "went from one of America's staunchest regional allies to one of its most vocal critics; it went from a bastion of human rights and liberal values in Southeast Asia to a new haven for 'Asian values' and strongman leadership."⁵ But despite his use of violence—or perhaps because of it—Duterte remained hugely popular. According to surveys conducted by Social Weather Stations, a local polling agency, at no time between September 2016 and June 2019 did public approval of the "drug war" drop below 75 percent.⁶

Given the timing of his election, descriptions of Duterte as "the Donald Trump of the Philippines" fast became a US media cliché. But some of the parallels were undeniable. As with Trump, Duterte was canny in his manipulation of the media, and similarly instinctive in his grasp that outrageous public behavior guaranteed endless free coverage in the press. Both men were also lucky, prevailing over a divided field of lackluster candidates. Like Trump, too, Duterte was more symptom than disease. As Heydarian writes, the elevation of the trash-talking Davaoño to the leadership of Southeast Asia's second-most

populous nation grew directly from the manifold failures of the Philippines' liberal elite political class, which had spent three decades promising prosperity and inclusive development, and repeatedly failed to deliver.⁷

In February 1986, when a campaign of mass public demonstrations brought down the “conjugal dictatorship” of Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda, Filipinos had good reason to hope for a better future. Thirty-one years of Marcos had left the nation in a dire state; its democratic institutions had atrophied, and the nation was saddled with \$27 billion in foreign debt. To millions of devout Catholic Filipinos, the elevation of Corazon Aquino, the widow of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr., a rival of Marcos assassinated on his return from exile in 1983, was literally miraculous. In the West, the EDSA revolution—named after the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a major Manila thoroughfare that was the scene of mass demonstrations—was also viewed in quasi-messianic terms, as incarnating a sort of historical inevitability. As James Fallows summarized the prevailing wisdom in 1987, “The evil Marcos was out, the saintly Cory was in, the worldwide march of democracy went on.”⁸

In reality, EDSA was less a revolution than a restoration of the old order. The fall of Marcos and his cronies was followed by the return of the country's old *mestizo* planter elite, which had risen under the Spanish, crystallized under the Americans, collaborated heartily with the Japanese during World War II, and more or less controlled the country since independence in 1946. Cory Aquino—*TIME* magazine's Woman of the Year for 1986—was very much part of this old ruling class. Her family, the Cojuangcos, were key members of the tiny Chinese-*mestizo* aristocracy, which traced its roots back to immigrants who had arrived from Fujian province in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹ She was the daughter of the wealthy sugar magnate Don José Cojuangco, and the cousin of Eduardo Cojuangco, one of the most notorious booty capitalists of the Marcos era. At one stage, it was estimated that Eduardo's business empire accounted for a quarter of the nation's GDP.¹⁰

As a result, the fall of Marcos did little to change the Philippines' skewed distributions of wealth and power. Although the 1987 constitution included a clause banning “political dynasties,” the nation remained in the grip of a network of rich families, who as of 2013 still governed in 72 of the Philippines' 80 provinces.¹¹ This elite complacency was exemplified by Duterte's predecessor. President Benigno Aquino III, the son of the saintly Cory and the martyred Ninoy, was elected in 2010 on promises of hope, change, and clean

government after the corruption scandals that had stained the previous administration of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Going by the numbers, his presidency was a success. The Philippines experienced its highest economic growth since the 1960s: from 2010 to 2017, GDP grew by an average of 6.4 percent a year, compared with 4.5 percent between 2000 and 2009.¹² As World Bank country director Motoo Konishi declared, the Philippines was “no longer the sick man of East Asia, but the rising tiger.”¹³

But while poverty rates fell in the aggregate, few tangible benefits seemed to leak through to the bottom rungs of society. In 2011, the Filipino economist Cielito Habito calculated that 76.5 percent of the wealth generated that year had accrued to the nation's 40 richest people.¹⁴ Meanwhile, millions of Filipinos remained mired in poverty and malnutrition, a reality that was closer to that of contemporary Cambodia than to South Korea—or even to Thailand. Nowhere was this more visible than in Manila's slums, a Hobbesian jumble of cinderblock and corrugated iron shacks that stretched for miles along littered streams. As Ver Bermudez told me in Davao City, the Philippines' impressive GDP figures reflected its high rate of population growth and remittances from the 10 percent of the population that worked abroad—themselves both reflections of serious governance problems. “GDP is really misleading,” he said. “This society has failed—that is the truth.”

By the time Duterte stepped onto the national political stage, a swathe of the voting population had become deeply disillusioned with the Philippines' political elite. There were a number of warning signs. One was the Reagan-like foreshadowing of Joseph Ejercito “Erap” Estrada, a former B-movie star who rode to the presidency by mimicking the gangsters he played on screen. (He served in office from 1998 to 2001.) Another was the growing nostalgia for the Marcos years, which some Filipinos now recalled as a golden age of stability and growth. During the 2016 election campaign, when Duterte proposed a plan to rebury Marcos, who had died in exile in Hawaii in 1989, with “official honors” at the Heroes' Cemetery in Manila, a survey found that 59 percent of Filipinos supported the idea.¹⁵ (His remains were transferred there in late 2016.) On election day, the dictator's son, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., came within a hair of winning the vice presidency.

All this ensured a broad customer base for Duterte's swaggering brand of law-and-order populism, and his pledge to franchise his “Davao model” nationwide. As Heydarian put it when we met for Japanese food at a mall in

central Manila, “People were saying, like, if this is the best that our democracy can create since Marcos, then we want something else.”

That something else involved a dramatic shift in the Philippines’ foreign policy, away from the US, its former colonial ruler and main security partner, and toward China, until recently its main security threat. Under Aquino, relations with China had plunged following a series of tense skirmishes in the South China Sea, where Beijing’s outlandish claims overlapped with large expanses of the Philippines’ 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In 2012, the two nations engaged in a heated naval standoff over Scarborough Shoal, 198 kilometers due west of Subic Bay. In response, the Aquino administration took the unprecedented step of filing a formal complaint in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, challenging a number of China’s maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea. The Chinese government retaliated with a range of coercive economic measures. It introduced travel restrictions that drastically cut the number of Chinese tourists visiting the Philippines; it also carried out “health inspections” of Philippine pineapples and bananas, leaving them to rot at Chinese ports.

On coming to office in June 2016, Duterte junked this confrontational policy in favor of a more pragmatic, conciliatory approach. When the arbitral tribunal ruled in the Philippines’ favor that July, determining that China’s “nine-dash line” had no international legal standing and supporting most of Manila’s legal claims, he set the victory aside and promised to talk directly with President Xi Jinping, hoping to tap Beijing for badly needed infrastructure funding. At the same time, Duterte lashed out at the US, particularly over criticisms of his drug war. When President Obama raised the issue, the Philippine leader told him to “go to hell.” He shocked his own aides by threatening to expel US Special Forces operating in the southern Philippines, and end annual exercises with the US military.

Duterte’s foreign policy pivot was crystallized during a remarkable state visit to Beijing in October 2016. “In this venue I announce my separation from the United States,” he announced in the Great Hall of the People, promising his Chinese hosts that he had “realigned myself in your ideological flow.”¹⁶ The pomp and circumstance of Duterte’s visit contrasted starkly with one Aquino had made in August 2011, when he was welcomed by overcast skies, a hostile editorial in the *Global Times*, and a scrupulously correct, yet

palpably cool, official welcome. Manolo Quezon III, a columnist and former speechwriter for Aquino who accompanied him on his visit to Beijing in 2011, described the contrast between Aquino's reception and Duterte's. As an honor guard, "we had a detachment, and he had a battalion," Quezon said. "We were in an inner function room, he was on the front steps." Duterte came away from Beijing with \$24 billion in promised business deals and infrastructure funding.

Stripped of his outrageous rhetoric, Duterte's "pivot to China" was neither as new, nor as irrational, as it seemed. Since Marcos had opened relations with China in 1975, economic and political ties had steadily improved, reaching a peak under the administration of President Arroyo (2001–10), who proclaimed a "golden age" of bilateral relations. The real outlier was Aquino, who, in response to Chinese maritime activities, had taken an unusually confrontational stance toward Xi's government, on several occasions comparing it to Nazi Germany. In the words of Jay Batongbacal, director of the University of the Philippines' Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea, "There was really no way for Philippine–China relations to go but up."

Duterte's China policy was also inseparable from the Philippines' close and deeply unequal relationship with the US. After half a century of direct colonial rule, and seven decades of entwined relations, the US and the Philippines remained closely attached. The US embassy in Manila was still one of the largest American missions in the world, its colonnaded chancery facing onto Manila Bay, where the American Asiatic Squadron under Commodore George Dewey defeated a Spanish fleet on May 1, 1898, bringing the Philippine islands under US control. After independence in 1946, American control persisted in indirect form. The Philippines was granted preferential access to the US market, enriching and entrenching the rural *mestizo* oligarchs. In 1951, Washington and Manila signed a defense treaty that laid the foundation of a tight Cold War security pact, symbolized by the Clark Air Base and the colossal naval station at Subic Bay.

Political and security ties went hand in hand with cultural transmissions. Filipinos inherited the American passion for fast-food and firearms, and were bound closely to the US by marriage, migration, and barracks-room camaraderies. The US influence in the Philippines is so striking that Stanley Karnow likened the Filipinos to "some kind of lost American tribe that has somehow become detached from the US mainland and floated across the Pacific."¹⁷

According to surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, no other nation in the world views the US more positively. In 2018, 83 percent of respondents in the Philippines said they had a favorable view of America—a higher proportion than in the US itself.¹⁸ From a certain angle, it is not hard to see the American state that the Philippines might, but for a different twist of history, have become.¹⁹

Yet there has always been a constituency suspicious of the American presence in the Philippines. To some on the political left, the US security umbrella that protected the Philippines was also a humiliating reminder of the country's continuing colonial dependency. In 1991–2, this manifested in the successful movement for the closure of the military bases at Clark and Subic Bay—the most conspicuous sign of the US presence in the Philippine islands. At Subic today, this opposition is marked by a monument known as The Hands that Freed the Nation, which bears the hand prints of the 12 senators who voted against the renewal of the basing agreement in September 1991, spelling the end for Subic and Clark. The monument is topped by a Virgin Mary-like figure representing *Inang Laya*—the “mother country”—breaking her chains after “more than four centuries of foreign military presence.”

Duterte's anti-Americanism drew deeply from this tradition. Like many Mindanaoans, he knew about the massacres and other atrocities committed by occupying US troops in the southern Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century. He also had close ties to left-wing intellectuals, the constituency traditionally most critical of American influence. For a time, Duterte was a student of José Maria Sison, who founded the Communist Party of the Philippines in 1968. Reports also suggested the salience of personal resentments. Duterte claimed that during his childhood he was abused by an American Jesuit priest; later, he was rejected for a visa to visit the US.²⁰ As mayor of Davao, Duterte made the unprecedented decision to block joint Philippine–American military exercises in 2007, and twice denied US armed forces access to the city's airport for drone operations.²¹ Ahead of the 2016 presidential election, Duterte had promised to chart a new foreign course that would “not be dependent on the United States.”²² In doing so, he was greatly aided by the structural peculiarities of the Philippine political system, which granted the president considerable latitude to shape foreign policy.

In addition to its criticisms of his drug war, Duterte's pivot away from the US was also a reaction to the Obama administration's ambiguous stance

toward its maritime disputes with China. In 2014, the Philippines and the US had signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which permitted the US to deploy conventional forces in the Philippines for the first time in decades—a key element of the Obama administration's strategic “rebalance” to Asia, which also saw American warships return to Subic Bay. Yet when things heated up in the South China Sea, the US had declined to confront China directly. Under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) Manila and Washington promised to support each other in the event of an attack on either country, but its wording was vague: it was unclear whether the treaty applied to Philippine-claimed islands and reefs in the South China Sea, which were only officially incorporated in 1978.

This uncertainty suffused the tense ten-week standoff that took place between the Philippines and China at Scarborough Shoal in 2012. The triangle-shaped ring of reefs and rocks, named after a British East India Company tea-trade ship that ran aground there in 1784, had been a source of low-level tensions since China began its maritime build-up in the 1990s. In April 2012, a Philippine navy surveillance plane detected eight Chinese fishing vessels sailing near the shoal. In response, the Philippines deployed the BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*, a refurbished US Coast Guard cutter, to arrest the fishermen. China responded by sending in its own flotilla, and the situation escalated. American officials stepped in to mediate. By June, they had brokered what they thought was a deal for a mutual withdrawal from Scarborough Shoal. On June 15, the Philippines withdrew its ships; China's remained. The American response amounted to little more than a verbal protest. As Quezon put it, “We pulled out, the Chinese stayed, and no one could do a damn thing about it.” There was a similar vacillating response in late 2013, when the Chinese started dredging sand and building artificial islands on disputed reefs and features in the Spratly Islands.

In fairness to the US government, the Scarborough Shoal imbroglio had put it in a difficult position. As Ely Ratner notes, Washington had been forced to mediate the dispute because of the poor lines of communication between Manila and Beijing, and the Chinese insistence on viewing the Philippines as a US proxy.²³ Once it became involved, the US had little interest in taking sides in a nationalistic squabble in the South China Sea. From Washington's perspective, the Philippines had often been a mercurial ally, its policies lurching with each change of administration. A senior official at Singapore's Foreign Ministry

felt their pain: “Every time there is an election,” the official said, “a new country is born in the Philippines.” The vagueness of the MDT was thus an asset: it gave Washington a cushion against Manila’s unpredictability.

All the same, to a growing number of Filipino defense officials and analysts, including many who were otherwise supportive of strong ties with the US, the perceived American inaction in the South China Sea contrasted unfavorably with the treatment given to other US allies. In April 2014, on a state visit to Tokyo, Obama confirmed that the US would come to Japan’s aid in the event of a conflict with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, describing the American commitment to Japanese security as “absolute.” A few days later, in Manila, he refused to extend a similar guarantee to the Philippines, describing its tensions with China as “disputes on a few rocks.”²⁴ After fighting alongside US troops from Korea to Vietnam to Iraq, many Filipinos felt their nation was being treated, as Heydarian put it, like “a second-class treaty ally.”

Duterte’s foreign policy team concurred. They believed that confronting China had brought the Philippines the worst of both worlds: it had done little to loosen China’s hold over Scarborough Shoal and its island-fortresses in the Spratlys, and it had soured relations with Beijing, effectively locking the Philippines out of participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced at the height of bilateral tensions in 2013. “What Duterte is doing is in some ways a correction of Aquino taking an outright confrontational stand against China,” said Aileen Baviera, of the University of the Philippines’ Asian Center. “He opted to be pragmatic: the only way to deal with China is to talk to China directly.”

For all its apparent madness, Duterte’s foreign policy represented a pragmatic adjustment to the changing security landscape in Southeast Asia. It reflected both the awkward realities of the Philippines’ position—it is the only Southeast Asian nation that is both a US treaty ally *and* a claimant in the South China Sea—and the growing concern about the Trump administration’s hostile posturing toward China. If the US had little interest in being sucked into a war over “a few rocks” in the South China Sea, the Duterte administration was equally uncomfortable about becoming the frontline of a shooting war between Washington and Beijing. In March 2019, when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Manila and offered the Philippines the security guarantee it had never received from the Obama administration—that any armed attack

on Philippine forces in the South China Sea would trigger an American response under the MDT—Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana responded, “It is not the lack of reassurance that worries me. It is being involved in a war that we do not seek and do not want.”²⁵

Duterte’s foreign policy recalibration didn’t just involve China. Lost in the media coverage of his “pivot to Beijing” was the warmth of his relationship with Tokyo. As ever the silent achiever in Southeast Asia, Japan remained by far the largest source of foreign direct investment in the Philippines, while inciting few of the anxieties that attached to its East Asian rival. More importantly, it was also the one major power to have enjoyed equally balmy relations with both the Aquino and Duterte administrations.

Japan’s relationship with the former dated back to World War II, when Aquino’s grandfather had been a leading collaborator during the Japanese occupation. The Aquinos had since retained close ties to the Japanese nationalist right wing, particularly to Shintaro Ishihara, the conservative former governor of Tokyo who co-authored the 1989 nationalist manifesto, *The Japan That Can Say No*. (Ishihara’s book would inspire the publication of a similarly titled Chinese tract in 1996.) At the same time, Japanese officials knew Duterte well from his time as mayor of Davao City. The Japanese had been present in Davao since the interwar period, when Japanese firms had controlled large plantations of *abaca* (Manila hemp), and downtown Davao was lined with Japanese businesses. As a result, Japan managed to negotiate a seamless transition from Aquino to Duterte. In January 2017, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became the first national leader to visit the Philippines after Duterte’s election. Visiting Davao City, the Filipino leader welcomed Abe at his home with a breakfast of sweet rice cakes and mung bean soup.²⁶ Duterte described Japan as a true friend of his country and a “preeminent and peerless” investor and development partner.²⁷

In seeking workable relations with the nuclear-armed giant on his nation’s doorstep, there was little Duterte’s foreign policy team could look to for a precedent. A powerful maritime China was something altogether new in Philippine history. While Chinese sailors and merchants had been visiting the Philippine islands since at least the Song dynasty (960–1279), the wide sea generally kept the continental empire far away. At various times, China claimed vassals among the scattered rulers of the Philippine archipelago. In 1405, during

Admiral Zheng He's titanic ocean voyages, the Yongle Emperor sought to extend China's supremacy over the islands by appointing a "governor" in Luzon.²⁸ Twelve years later, Paduka Pahala, the Muslim king of Sulu, in the far south of the islands, died while on a tributary mission to Yongle's court, and was interred in an opulent tomb outside Beijing—the only foreign monarch to rest on Chinese soil.

However, these early connections withered after the Ming dynasty's fateful turn inward in the mid-fifteenth century, and the arrival of the Spanish in the Philippine islands a century later. Shielded for nearly four centuries by Spanish and American power—"Three centuries in a Catholic convent and fifty years in Hollywood," as the popular saying goes—the Philippines had less contact with the Chinese state than perhaps any other nation in Southeast Asia. Even the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) support to the Philippines' communist insurgencies was less robust than to those in other parts of Southeast Asia.²⁹

All this changed with China's assertion of its "nine-dash line" claim in 2009, and its mammoth land reclamation activities in the Spratly Islands. Suddenly the wide sea shrank to a narrow strait. Justice Antonio T. Carpio of the Supreme Court of the Philippines, one of the most active and articulate defenders of the nation's maritime claims, said that unlike the Vietnamese, a people profoundly conditioned by their proximity to China, Filipinos were still trying to digest what it means to share a "border" with the rising superpower. "China is very close to us suddenly," he said one afternoon in his wood-paneled chambers in central Manila, its walls covered with framed antique maps. "So, we have this new mindset. We have not yet fully understood that."

This sudden contiguity is most apparent in the Spratly Islands, where just 18 kilometers separate Thitu Island, the largest feature occupied by the Philippines, from Chinese-occupied Subi Reef, one of its seven reclaimed island bases in the Spratlys. A coral-fringed speck known to Filipinos as Pag-asa, the Tagalog word for "hope," Thitu is the second-largest natural island in the Spratlys, and one of nine Philippine-controlled features in the contested island group. The 37-hectare islet supports a small military garrison and a population of 120 civilians, who live an isolated frontline existence in the shadow of an imposing Chinese naval presence. Subi Reef is the dragon's claw: starting in 2014, China transformed this band of turquoise waters and submerged coral banks into a fortified city, with multi-story concrete

structures, a spherical radar station, a 3,000-meter airstrip capable of handling the largest Chinese bombers, jet hangars, and shelters for mobile missile launchers. From Thitu, the Chinese base is visible on the horizon; at night, it lights up the southwestern sky.

Thitu Island and the rest of the Kalayaan Island Group, as the Philippines refers to its scattering of possessions in the Spratlys, are administered from a green three-story office building in Puerto Princesa, the capital of Palawan, the nearest major Philippine island. Here, some 527 kilometers from his constituents on Thitu, Mayor Roberto M. Del Mundo works at a wooden desk with a name plaque. The wall behind him displays the Kalayaan municipal seal, a ring of embossed gold featuring images of local marine life: a green turtle, a leopard coral trout, and a gray gull. Another wall is taken up by a large map of his oceanic domain, with miniature flags marking out the Philippine-occupied features.

A former soldier with a quiet voice and easy-going air, Del Mundo presides over the Philippines' largest municipality by area, but smallest by population. Kalayaan embraces 168,287 square kilometers, an area larger than the nation of Bangladesh, but has fewer than 300 residents, of whom only 100 or so are present on Thitu Island at any given time. Because of its isolation, few stay for more than a year at a stretch.

Since being elected as mayor of Kalayaan in 2016—he won in a landslide, with 142 votes—Del Mundo has taken up the burden of supporting this far-flung civilian presence amid the constant circling presence of the Chinese navy and coastguard. Some of the island's residents are former army-men like Del Mundo; most are poor families from rural Palawan, lured out to Thitu by the promise of state subsidies. But when we spoke, Del Mundo brimmed with admiration for their sacrifice. "More than anyone else in this country, they are the ones that are the most patriotic," he said.

The Philippines owes its presence in the Spratlys to one Tomás Cloma, an eccentric businessman, lawyer, and adventurer from the province of Bohol. After World War II, Cloma dreamt up plans of opening a seafood cannery in the uninhabited islands off the coast of Palawan, and mining their natural guano deposits. On May 11, 1956, he sailed out into the blue with his brother and 40 men, and laid claim to 33 maritime features in the Spratlys. He declared them an independent micro-nation called the "Free Territory of Freedomland" and gave his new possession a flag: red and blue, with a white albatross.

Cloma was a man of flamboyant pretensions: he styled himself “Admiral” Cloma and often went about in a spotless white naval uniform. But his Spratly ambitions were never realized. No foreign nation ever recognized Freedomland, and Cloma struggled to hold onto his claim. When oil exploration began off the coast of Palawan in 1970, the Marcos administration brought the quixotic enterprise to a swift halt. In October 1974, Cloma was arrested for “illegally wearing uniform and insignia” and forced to sign his “rights” to the islands over to the central government for a single peso. Marcos renamed Freedomland the Kalayaan Island Group—*kalayaan* means “freedom” in Tagalog—and in June 1978 issued Presidential Decree 1596, officially incorporating Kalayaan as a municipality of Palawan.³⁰ Cloma, who died in 1996, is today remembered as a patriot, his strange career commemorated by a bronze bust on Thitu Island, situated next to the municipality’s flagpole and flower beds, gazing out to sea.

Today, the Philippines bases its claims to the Kalayaan Islands on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Some features lie within its EEZ, while others (including Thitu) sit on Palawan’s extended continental shelf. Justice Carpio described China’s sweeping historical claims to these features, and the South China Sea more generally, as “totally fictitious” and legally dubious. “If historic rights still remained,” he said, “we would be fighting because of what Genghis Khan did.” In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration registered its agreement in the case brought by the Philippines, ruling that China’s looping maritime claim was invalid under UNCLOS, and that Beijing had violated the Philippines’ sovereign rights within its EEZ.

Yet asserting legal right over naval might is a constant struggle for the municipality of Kalayaan. The settlement on Thitu Island consists of little more than a basic municipal hall, police station, health center, lighthouse, and a dilapidated military airfield built in the 1970s. Del Mundo’s domain embraces great latitudes, yet his office lacks its own transport vessels, forcing him to rely on naval supply runs. Where China has built a fortress on Subi Reef, his office struggles to muster the supplies of rice, cooking oil, diesel, and other basic items necessary to sustain a civilian presence on Thitu. In 2016, the municipality’s budget was just 47 million pesos (around \$900,000), and Del Mundo described resources as his main constraint. “Even a few coins in my pocket, I give them to my constituents,” he said, adding, “My wife gets angry.”

The Philippine presence on the rest of Kalayaan’s islands, reefs, and atolls is even more threadbare. To establish a military toehold on Second Thomas

Shoal (Ayungin Shoal), the Philippine navy in 1999 deliberately grounded the *Sierra Madre*, a decrepit World War II-era transport ship. Today, the rusting hulk is manned by a small band of Filipino marines, who maintain a lonely watch over miles of vacant ocean.

This shortfall of resources reflects the broader challenges the Philippines faces in fully securing its permeable island geography. Despite consisting of more than 7,100 islands and some 35,000 kilometers of coastline, the state, like Indonesia, has mostly disregarded its ocean expanses. Protected after independence by the parasol of American power, and fighting to put down a raft of stubbornly persistent communist and Muslim separatist insurgencies, the Philippine armed forces have overwhelmingly focused on land operations over naval deployments. Corruption and mismanagement have also undermined modernization and defense reforms. Two recent rounds of defense modernization notwithstanding, the Philippine navy's fleet represents a minuscule deterrent to China's aggressive coastguard, let alone the rapidly expanding People's Liberation Army Navy.

In 2017, the Philippines committed 1.6 billion pesos (around \$32 million) to the reinforcement of its frontline settlement on Thitu Island. When I met him, Del Mundo handed me a copy of the Kalayaan Municipality's Master Development Plan, which envisioned the construction of a seaport, the concreting of the airfield, and the erection of new residential and administrative buildings, including tourism facilities. But progress so far has been slow. Even more pressing than resources, one municipal staffer said on condition of anonymity, was the lack of "moral support" from Manila. Under President Aquino, when the Philippines stood David-like against the PRC Goliath, the Kalayaan authorities were empowered to publicize the frequent maritime skirmishes with China. The previous mayor, Eugenio Bito-onon Jr., was widely quoted in the international press, and often escorted journalists out to Thitu Island and other isolated ocean outposts. Duterte's pivot to China had left the Kalayaan municipal authorities in an awkward position, the official said, begging for resources from the central government to protect Philippine territory from Chinese incursions, while that same government was begging for resources from Beijing.

Under Duterte, the Philippines' position on the South China Sea has been erratic. The president has veered from tough-talking to sweet-talking, each of his "dramatic reversals" reversed dramatically in its turn. During his campaign

for president, Duterte boasted that he would ride a jet-ski to the Spratlys and plant the Philippine flag there, but after taking office he struck a more conciliatory tone. In April 2017, he announced, and then canceled, a flag-planting trip to Thitu Island, citing “our friendship with China.”³¹ In March 2018, when China was found to have illegally surveyed parts of Benham Rise in the South China Sea, he said he would be willing to “go to war” to defend it from China; a month later, he declared, “I simply love Xi Jinping. He understands my problem and is willing to help, so I would say, ‘Thank you, China.’”³²

Duterte’s vacillations paralleled his administration’s broad retreat from multilateral diplomacy aimed at resolving the maritime disputes. Under Aquino, the Philippines had made energetic efforts to rally the ASEAN around the South China Sea issue, forcing China to intervene, via its Cambodian client, to purge critical language from an ASEAN joint communiqué in July 2012. When the bloc’s rotating chairmanship passed to the Philippines in 2017, Duterte took a spongier line. The South China Sea issue was “better left untouched,” he told a meeting of business leaders during the ASEAN Summit in November 2017, adding, “Nobody can afford to go to war.”³³ Instead, member states agreed to start negotiating an ASEAN–China Code of Conduct (COC) to manage tensions in the South China Sea. Without any timeline for completion, however, many observers viewed the COC as China’s way of buying diplomatic time. Absent in the announcement was any mention of the 2016 arbitral ruling in the Philippines’ favor.

Redempto D. Anda, a journalist based in Puerto Princesa, said that since Duterte took office, information on incidents in the West Philippine Sea, as Manila officially terms its portion of the South China Sea, had been placed under tighter control. Media visits to the Kalayaan Islands were much less frequent; the government had become “very careful in terms of messaging.” In February 2019, when the local *Palawan News* published an article, based on information from Mayor Del Mundo’s office, alleging that dozens of Chinese vessels had blocked Filipino boats from accessing fishing grounds near Thitu Island, provincial officials denied it. So, too, did Vice Admiral Rene V. Medina, the head of the Philippine armed forces’ Western Command, when I interviewed him at his headquarters in Puerto Princesa the following month. “The truth of the matter is, there’s really no shoving off of the Filipino fishermen,” he said. When I asked Del Mundo about the *Palawan News* report, he declined to comment.

A couple of weeks later, however, the Philippine government issued a press release acknowledging the presence of more than 200 Chinese boats in the area around Thitu, and lodged a diplomatic protest with the Chinese government. Once again, Duterte talked tough, warning China to “lay off” the island, saying he would send soldiers on a “suicide mission” to defend it.³⁴ A few weeks after that, he was back in Beijing for the second Belt and Road Forum, returning with a new stack of infrastructure funding commitments. Duterte’s zigzagging stemmed partly from his mercurial leadership style. But the tensions were also baked into his China policy, which sought to preserve sovereignty over the Philippines’ island possessions, while cultivating China for badly needed infrastructure funding.

Duterte’s détente with China may also have scuttled plans for the expansion of the small naval installation at Oyster Bay, on the undeveloped west coast of Palawan. Under Aquino, Philippine officials had announced plans to convert the neglected naval station, the home port for the navy’s three refurbished US cutters, into a larger base for its naval frigates, and eventually for American warships. “It will be a mini-Subic,” Commodore Joseph Rostum O. Peña, commander of the Philippines’ western navy, said in 2013.³⁵ The following year, the Philippines proposed opening Oyster Bay, a small cove within the larger Ulugan Bay, to the US Navy under EDCA. Around that time, it started building an access road through old-growth mangrove forests to the base, previously only accessible by water.

On a radiant morning in March 2019, I drove across the narrow waist of Palawan toward Ulugan Bay and the blue-green meridian of the South China Sea. At the fishing hamlet of Macarascas, a clutch of brightly painted wooden houses and schools spread out along the highway, the new access road snaked off toward Oyster Bay. The tarmac was black and freshly laid, with a double yellow line running down the center. Where it crested the shoulders of the hills, it revealed a breathtaking vista of Ulugan Bay: a flat jade expanse heaped with distant hills and a sky running a gradient from hazy blue to cloud.

Carving a naval base into this idyllic coast makes strategic (if not aesthetic or environmental) sense: it would give the Philippine navy much improved access to the Spratly Islands, which lie just 160 kilometers to the west, around half the distance from Subic Bay. But again, a lack of resources seems to have met an apparent lack of political will. In early 2016, when the Philippines approved five bases for a rotational US presence under EDCA, Oyster Bay

was not among them. The access road to the base was completed a few months later, after Duterte's administration took office, but little seems to have happened since. Vice Admiral Medina told me that plans had been delayed "due to funding constraints," but were now moving forward. He declined to go into details, except to say that there were "ongoing developments" at the base. Anda, the local journalist, was more blunt. "It's been shelved," he said.

The road to Oyster Bay terminated in a hacked clearing with a deserted bamboo guard post marking the entrance to the naval station and the great blue beyond. Signs were posted, reading "THIS IS A NAVAL RESERVATION—KEEP OUT." Crickets hissed in the grass. Like the tiny municipality of Kalayaan, the new Subic Bay slumbered in the sun, awaiting another change in the political winds.

In November 2018, President Xi Jinping made a landmark trip to Manila, the first by a Chinese leader in 13 years. He and Duterte signed 29 economic agreements, covering everything from industrial development and infrastructure projects to joint oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea. They also announced Chinese plans to build an industrial park at the former US Clark Air Base: a telling symbol of the Philippines' shifting international alignments. Xi hailed the visit as a "milestone" and likened Sino-Philippine relations to "a rainbow after the rain."³⁶ Yet behind the champagne toasts and buoyant rhetoric, increasing numbers of Filipinos were beginning to ask what benefits Duterte's détente with China had actually delivered.

Resistance was particularly strong within the Philippine defense and security establishment. Whatever its reservations about the lack of clarity in the US alliance, they still saw Washington as their nation's surest strategic insurance policy in an age of rising Chinese power—to say nothing of the deep personal and cultural bonds linking the US and the Philippines. After Duterte took office, defense officials and military commanders had successfully dissuaded him from enacting his more outlandish threats to the American alliance, and quietly expanded joint exercises with the US military. Meanwhile, from outside the administration, Duterte's opponents, including former Aquino-era officials, accused him of setting aside the legal victory of the 2016 arbitral ruling for little apparent gain. On the second anniversary of the ruling, former Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario had expressed his dismay at the Philippines becoming a "willing victim" and an "abettor" of China.³⁷

The criticisms carried extra weight given that few of the billions in promised Chinese infrastructure funding had yet eventuated. In 2017, according to the Philippines Statistics Authority, China contributed just 2.2 percent of approved foreign direct investment, compared to 30.3 percent for Japan, 10.3 percent for Taiwan, and 8.3 percent for the US.³⁸ By the time of Xi's visit, just one \$62 million loan for a dam had been approved, according to one estimate.³⁹ A year later, still not a single China-backed infrastructure project had broken ground under Duterte, even as the Japanese continued to support and finance major infrastructure developments.⁴⁰ Those few projects that had moved forward were subject to harsh criticism on the financing arrangements and the general lack of transparency that surrounded them. Justice Carpio was particularly critical of the terms that attached to Chinese loans. "We will be like Sri Lanka," he said, "having to cede our Hambantota Port."

The slow progress stemmed from problems on both sides. The Chinese weren't the first outsiders to have problems operating within the chaotic and polycentric Philippine system. To give Xi and Duterte something to announce, projects were approved without sufficient due diligence, feasibility analysis, or public consultation, and then ran headlong into the objections of local officials and affected residents. The Chinese government was also burdened by the memory of past experience. During the last "rainbow age" of relations under the Arroyo administration, a series of planned Chinese infrastructure schemes, including a large railway project in Luzon, had collapsed amid charges of graft by Filipino officials. Contrary to the charge that China was pushing the Philippines into a "debt-trap," Chinese state banks were erring on the side of caution in disbursing loans.

At the same time, China wasn't doing its cause any favors. Filipino officials claimed the Chinese funding came with onerous conditions, including the compulsory employment of Chinese workers and managers; Beijing also seemed unwilling to co-finance projects with other lenders such as Japan and the Asian Development Bank.⁴¹ Then there was China's behavior offshore. Even as Beijing wooed Duterte, the Chinese Coast Guard kept up its harassment of Filipino fishermen around Thitu Island and elsewhere in the Spratlys. In June 2019, the Philippine government filed a diplomatic protest after a Chinese fishing vessel allegedly rammed and sank a Filipino boat near Reed Bank, leaving 22 Filipino fishermen floating helplessly at sea before they were rescued by a Vietnamese boat.

Here was another textbook case of Edward Luttwak's "great-state autism." Heydarian said that Beijing had been gifted a political opening by Duterte, but had failed to allow him to accrue the political capital necessary to shape public opinion in China's favor. "They're looking for some sort of a Hun Sen," he said of the Chinese. "They're not going to get a Hun Sen in the Philippines. . . . It's not like you get the president's phone number, and then you've got the country; that's not how it operates." In truth, China and the Philippines were almost perfectly mismatched: one had a strong state and weak civil society, the other a weak state and strong civil society. Neither found it easy to understand—let alone work constructively with—the other.

Filipino public opinion mirrored elite concerns about China's expanding influence in the Philippines. In the run-up to mid-term elections in May 2019, polls showed that Duterte was still wildly popular on every issue except one. Post-election surveys conducted by Social Weather Stations found that 87 percent of respondents believed the government should assert its legal right to disputed islands in the South China Sea; 93 percent said it was important for the Philippines to regain control of Chinese-occupied features.⁴² During Xi's visit, thousands of Filipino Facebook users welcomed him by changing their profile pictures to Winnie the Pooh, a character banned in China for his supposed likeness to the Chinese leader. The hashtag #chinaout-ofph trended on Twitter.⁴³ A few months earlier, Filipino wags had unfurled banners in Manila reading, "Welcome to the Philippines, province of the People's Republic of China."

Another contributor to popular anti-China sentiment was the sudden increase in the number of mainland Chinese expatriates coming to live and work in the Philippines. Duterte's election had seen an easing of visa regulations for Chinese nationals, including an executive order facilitating the entry of foreign nationals via the port of Subic Bay, resulting in the cruise ship boom mentioned at the beginning of this book. From 2015 to 2018, the Philippines Department of Labor and Employment issued more than 85,000 alien working permits to PRC citizens. In addition, industry insiders estimated that between 100,000 and 250,000 Chinese nationals were working illegally on expired tourist visas.⁴⁴ Duterte opted not to take a hard line on these illegal migrants, worried about tit-for-tat retribution against Filipino workers in mainland China.

The new PRC arrivals quickly found themselves ensnared in the sorts of line-cutting, culture-clash controversies that have taken place in other

Southeast Asian countries. In February 2019, a viral pile-on ensued when a CCTV camera caught a Chinese student hurling a cup of *taho*, a soy-based breakfast snack, in the face of a train station guard in Manila. Mainland Chinese also drew negative attention for their involvement in Chinese online gambling operations, known locally as POGOs, or Philippine Online Gaming Operations. Like Cambodia, the Philippines provided a suitably fertile environment in which these semi-legal operations could take root. By mid-2019, POGOs had grown so extensive that they had overtaken call centers as the top users of office space in Manila.⁴⁵ Some security officials were even beginning to voice concerns that Chinese-run online gambling enterprises might be used as cover for intelligence activities, citing the unnerving proximity of some operations to key Philippine Army installations.⁴⁶

More worryingly, the public's unhappiness about Chinese maritime actions and mainland Chinese workers was starting to color perceptions of the country's small Filipino-Chinese community. Shortly after Xi's state visit, the broadcaster and writer Solita Collas-Monsod wrote an article in *The Inquirer*, one of the Philippines' largest daily newspapers, questioning the loyalty of the local ethnic Chinese. "A Chinese Filipino will never state unequivocally that he/she is a Filipino first, and a Chinese second," she wrote.⁴⁷ A kindred view was expressed by the Filipino writer F. Sionil José, who declared, "The silence of our Filipino Chinese on this crucial issue is deafening." Accusing the Chinese of building their wealth "through exploitation of the land and the people," José praised Vietnam's history of fierce anti-Chinese resistance, and called for the Philippines "to see to it that the economic power of these ethnic Chinese, whose loyalty to the Philippines is in doubt, should be emasculated."⁴⁸

These were minority views, and they quickly drew a wave of heated rebuttals from ethnic Chinese Filipinos. One of them was Carmelea Ang See, the managing director of the Kaisa Heritage Foundation, which researches the history of the ethnic Chinese communities in the Philippines. When we met for an interview in Quezon City, she said that the tensions in the South China Sea had surfaced a minority strain of sentiment against Filipinos with one-syllable surnames: usually a sign of Chinese ancestry. "The Chinese community gets caught in the middle," she said, "because at some subconscious level, many still see us as a foreign entity."

As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the ethnic Chinese community in the Philippines, which numbers around 1.2 million, or just over 1 percent of the

population, is far from homogeneous in its views of China. According to Ang See, many local Chinese see the new arrivals from the PRC as “totally foreign,” and even refer to them by the derogatory term “TDK,” short for *tai diok ka*, meaning “big country” in Hokkien. In the 1990s, to emphasize the community’s local—and fundamentally Filipino—loyalties, Kaisa coined the term Tsinoy, a portmanteau of “Tsinong Pinoy,” or Chinese Filipino, to differentiate locally born and raised Chinese from more recent immigrants.

Compared to nations like Indonesia and Malaysia, the Chinese community in the Philippines is well assimilated—perhaps more so than in any other Southeast Asian country outside Thailand and Cambodia. That is not to say that ethnic Chinese have always been welcome. Under the Spanish, the Chinese were subject to deportations and savage pogroms. Later, the US government applied the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the Philippines and refused entry to all but merchants and their sons: as a result, more than six of every ten Filipino Chinese can today trace their ancestry to a single locale: the county-level city of Jinjiang in Fujian province.⁴⁹ As in most other Southeast Asian nations, the community also faced restrictions during the Cold War, when contact with the mainland almost ceased.

However, certain unique factors smoothed the acceptance of the Chinese in the Philippines. Since the rise of Filipino nationalism in the late nineteenth century preceded, rather than followed, the appearance of nationalism in China, it did not acquire the same anti-Chinese resonance as in countries like Indonesia. Many pioneering Filipino nationalists came from Chinese-*mestizo* stock, not least the polymath national hero José Rizal, whose roots are marked today by a monument in Jinjiang county. When the Philippines formally recognized the PRC in 1975, the government granted Chinese Filipinos a legal path to Philippine citizenship. Since then, Tsinoyes have become an authentic part of the Philippines’ polyglot national community. Filipino-Chinese businesspeople consistently rank among the wealthiest in the country, as illustrated by the ornate tombs and mausoleums that line “millionaire’s row” in Manila’s fascinating Chinese Cemetery. But while ethnic Chinese have sometimes provoked envy, modern Philippine history has been blessedly free of the anti-Chinese violence that has stained other Southeast Asian countries.

Ang See said that she expected the Philippines’ innate tolerance to prevail over the more racialized visions of nationalism asserted by a small minority of Filipinos. As she put it, “Southeast Asian Chinese are citizens of their countries

first, Southeast Asians second, Chinese third.” As elsewhere, however, a rising China has created new strains and dilemmas for the ethnic Chinese community in the Philippines. As long as tensions with Beijing persist, whispered questions of loyalty will never be far behind.

In May 2019, mid-term Senate elections delivered sweeping victories for the allies of President Duterte. His former police chief Bato dela Rosa, who oversaw the initial stages of the drug war, won election to the Senate; so did Imee Marcos, the daughter of Ferdinand and Imelda, who had gained Duterte’s raised-fist endorsement. With the 2022 presidential elections now on the horizon, public opposition to Duterte’s China policy seemed unlikely to translate into serious political problems for the Filipino leader, whose approval ratings on just about every other issue remained high. Jay Batongbacal of the University of the Philippines said that when people were asked in isolation, they had strong opinions about China’s aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. When considered next to everything else, however, the issue often faded into the background. “While foreign policy may be a low point [for Duterte],” he said, “it’s not enough to affect public perceptions about the administration as a whole.”

In February 2020, Duterte dealt the US alliance a further blow when he announced the cancelation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the 1999 accord governing the status of US troops stationed in the Philippines. The decision was sparked by the revocation of a US visa for his ally, Senator Dela Rosa. This was part of a broader suite of sanctions passed by US Congress earlier in the year, which imposed travel bans and other restrictions on senior Philippine officials involved in the war on drugs.

The scuttling of the VFA, which would enter into effect 180 days after Duterte’s announcement unless otherwise agreed, was the most drastic step Duterte had taken to undermine the special relationship with the US. It threatened to complicate the rotational stationing of US troops on Philippine soil and jeopardized hundreds of annual joint military exercises. Supporters of the US alliance could take some consolation in the fact that Duterte was limited to a single presidential term. “Just like Trump,” Justice Carpio said, “you just have to bear with him until he leaves office.” But rumors swirled that Duterte was grooming his daughter Sara to succeed him as president, just as she had succeeded him as mayor of Davao City.⁵⁰ The founding of a putative

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Duterte dynasty held out the prospect of a more sustained period of friendliness toward China, and further complications in the US alliance.

Regardless of what happened, the Philippines was unlikely to drift fully into China's orbit. The very things that granted Beijing its opening—the nation's weak institutions and idiosyncratic, personalized political culture—would limit its ability to maintain influence over the long term. The same political structures that gave Duterte the power to wrench foreign policy in the direction of China would give his successors the power to reverse course. Duterte's real revolution was altogether more subtle. While the inertia of the US alliance would sooner or later exert its pull, the gun-slinging mayor from Davao had broken a long-standing taboo. "Our relationship with the US is no longer sacrosanct," said Heydarian. "For 80 years, the idea was, the Philippines is in the US camp no matter what. That idea is no longer taken for granted." Under Duterte, the Philippines had left its American safe-harbor and was edging out into open ocean. Things would never be quite the same.

AFTERWORD

In December 2019, as I was putting the finishing touches to this book, an unknown strain of coronavirus emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan and quickly began its lethal migration across the globe. Within weeks, COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, had infected nearly 100,000 people and killed several thousand in China. In January and February, it paralyzed production and brought economic activity to a near-halt as tens of millions in central China were put under an unprecedented quarantine. The damage to China's economy was severe. Although the government swiftly brought the virus under control, its economic recovery was hamstrung by the collapse of global demand as the coronavirus hit Europe and North America. In April, Chinese officials announced that the nation's economy had shrunk 6.8 percent in the first three months of 2020 compared with the previous year, ending a streak of unbridled growth that survived the Tiananmen Square crackdown and the global financial crisis of 2008.¹

By throwing its economy into turmoil, the virus threatened to derail China's strategic ambitions in Southeast Asia. From Boten in Laos to Bandung in Indonesia, work stalled on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects as Chinese laborers and engineers were barred from returning to their jobs across the region. Many major BRI projects were also premised on the continuing availability of massive amounts of cheap credit from Chinese state banks. The threat of a protracted global economic contraction, and an accompanying domestic credit crunch, therefore cast doubts on China's ability to meet billions of dollars in BRI commitments.

In this sense, the coronavirus pandemic served as a reminder of the many challenges, both internal and external, facing President Xi Jinping's rule. These ranged from environmental despoliation and an aging population to the violent unrest in Hong Kong and the growing international condemnation of China's

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mass internment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. The coronavirus shutdown arrested an economy already growing at its slowest pace in 30 years, and some speculated that the crisis might speed a diversification of global supply chains away from China, furthering a process that had already begun with the onset of trade tensions with the US in mid-2018. Added to this was the threat of a global backlash over China's failures in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, when it covered up early reports of the virus, and then delayed in locking down the epicenter of the contagion in Wuhan, allowing the disease to spread. All of these challenges were a reminder that the indefinite linear growth of Chinese wealth and power could no longer be taken for granted.

The effect of the pandemic on Southeast Asia, too, was profound. By March, as the coronavirus was scything across Europe and the US, the resulting economic downturn seemed likely to dwarf, by several orders of magnitude, the region's last major economic disturbance. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 had had far-reaching political aftereffects, catalyzing the fall of Suharto in Indonesia and prompting the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, the latter of which continued to resonate through Thai politics. Given the febrile state of politics in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Burma, it was hard to imagine such a steep economic decline leaving the political landscape of Southeast Asia entirely unchanged.

The early stages of the contagion had also exposed the extent of Southeast Asia's reliance on Chinese trade, investment, and tourism. From Bali to Angkor Wat, temples, beaches, and food markets stood deserted as Chinese tour groups stayed away. Construction sites in Phnom Penh fell silent, and truckloads of Burmese watermelons rotted at the Chinese border. In Penang and Hanoi, factories idled in the face of disrupted China-centric supply chains and cratering Chinese demand. Even before it was declared a global pandemic, the coronavirus had showcased the region's vulnerability to any sudden Chinese downturn.

But when the pandemic finally petered out, Southeast Asia's relationship with China was unlikely to have been altered in any fundamental way. China's size and proximity ensured that it would remain a central player in the region, even if slowing growth forced it into retrenchment elsewhere. There was a good likelihood that the contagion would prompt some Southeast Asian nations to reduce their reliance on China-centered supply chains. If it was prepared, the region also stood to benefit from the expected relocation of

production bases away from China. Nonetheless, past precedent suggested that China would play an important role in cushioning the region from the long-term economic and political fallout. Southeast Asian nations would find themselves in the same conflicted position as before, in which apprehension about China's power was balanced by a strong stake in its continued stability and growth.

At the same time, Beijing's many challenges in Southeast Asia were also likely to persist, if not deepen. For all its attempts at "soft power," including its campaign of global medical outreach during the COVID-19 crisis, China's communist leadership faced an uphill battle in convincing the region of its peaceful intentions and selling its vision of co-prosperity. From fears of Chinese debt and maritime bullying to the negative externalities of large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects, China's actions continued to undermine its promises. Conjoined to these worries was a simmering disquiet about new flows of Chinese immigration and the CCP's relationship with the region's Overseas Chinese, issues that pressed on an exposed nerve of sovereignty.

This points to the Chinese government's broader difficulties in transcending its solipsistic approach toward the region. Even as it regains its former power and wealth, China's behavior remains wrapped in the mythology of its victimization by imperial powers, past and present. As long as the Chinese leadership holds fast to this idea, it will mostly fail to understand why its power and behavior have prompted such abiding concerns. China's relationship with Southeast Asia is thus based on an increasingly tense contradiction, between the CCP's self-image as an aggrieved victim of Western designs and the reality of its own burgeoning imperial potential. Even as it champions the principle of national sovereignty, China is seen to threaten it.

As individual Southeast Asian nations struggle with this quandary, China's power also poses serious challenges for ASEAN as a whole. During the Cold War, ASEAN succeeded in allowing the small states of Southeast Asia to retain some measure of autonomy in the midst of great power competition. In the half-century since, it has maintained the peace between its members and given them a mechanism for preserving a minimum of cohesion and order. But the very thing that enables ASEAN to reconcile clashing sovereignties—its flexible, consensus-based form of decision-making—now threatens to paralyze it. As Amitav Acharya observes, the bloc's induction of Vietnam,

Cambodia, Laos, and Burma in the 1990s had a paradoxical effect: while making Southeast Asia look more like a single “coherent” region, it added to the bloc’s political diversity, making it trickier to reach consensus on key issues.² This diversity is something that the Chinese leadership has been able to exploit to its own advantage.

The predicament facing ASEAN and its member states has been complicated by the mounting tensions between China and the US—a trend accelerated greatly by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. While the Southeast Asian nations welcome a strong American presence as a counterbalance against China, many have misgivings about the erratic nature of US engagement under President Donald Trump, whose administration has veered between benign neglect and lashings of strident rhetoric.

In November 2019, when Southeast Asian leaders gathered in Bangkok for the 35th ASEAN Summit and its associated meetings, the US was notable for its absence. In place of President Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the US sent a low-level delegation headed by recently appointed National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien. This was unusual: between 2011 and 2016, President Obama had missed just one US–ASEAN meeting and East Asia Summit (EAS). Trump’s attention span was clearly less amenable to ASEAN-grade summitry. In 2018, he had skipped two Southeast Asia-focused meetings. The year before, he attended the US–ASEAN Summit in Manila, but then jetted off before the EAS immediately afterward.

The episode seemed to suggest that, for all of Washington’s newfound focus on China as a systemic rival, Southeast Asia remained a blind spot on its radar. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, released in 2019, declared the Indo-Pacific “the single most consequential region for America’s future.”³ Yet in practice, the quintessential “Indo-Pacific” region seemed to figure only tangentially in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. One illustration was the fact that, throughout the Trump administration, key US diplomatic positions in Southeast Asia sat vacant. As of publication, this included the ambassadorial posts to Singapore and ASEAN, which had been unoccupied since the start of Trump’s term. Meanwhile, Washington had no ambassador in Cambodia for nearly a year to September 2019. The same post in Thailand was vacant for even longer, while the administration’s nominee for the Indonesian post, vacated in mid-2019, had yet to be confirmed.

To be fair, the Trump administration wasn't entirely ignoring Southeast Asia. It sent senior defense officials on frequent tours through the region, extended its security guarantee to the Philippines to encompass its portions of the South China Sea, and ramped up Freedom of Navigation Operations designed to push back against Chinese actions in contested waters. In July 2018, Pompeo also announced new funds for technological and infrastructure initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, even though the resources pledged were a small fraction of what China was offering under the BRI.⁴ On the last day of 2018, Trump signed into law the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), which authorized \$1.5 billion in annual spending for a range of US programs in East and Southeast Asia. The aim of the ARIA was to "develop a long-term strategic vision and a comprehensive, multifaceted, and principled United States policy for the Indo-Pacific region, and for other purposes."⁵

So far, these various US initiatives have done little to dispel the perception of American disengagement. In early 2020, Singapore's ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute published its annual survey of more than 1,300 Southeast Asian academics, government officials, and opinion-makers. Around 77 percent of them agreed that American engagement with Southeast Asia had either decreased or decreased substantially under the Trump administration; nearly half expressed little or no confidence in Washington's reliability as a strategic partner and provider of regional security.⁶ The survey results betrayed a perception that the administration, focused narrowly on its contest with China, was overlooking the lands between. As always, the Middle Kingdom remained "the 'sun' around which America's interests in Asia revolved."⁷

The erratic nature of American engagement has been compounded by the increasingly zero-sum language with which some US officials were framing American competition with China. While Trump administration officials assured the region that the FOIP strategy "exclude[d] no nation" and that America did "not ask any country to choose between the United States and China," its promises were belied by its tendency to depict Sino-American rivalry in ideological, even civilizational, terms. Southeast Asia's leaders shared many American concerns about Chinese behavior, but positing a zero-sum struggle "between free and repressive visions of world order" (as the 2017 US National Security Strategy put it), or describing the CCP as "the central threat of our times" (as Pompeo did in early 2020) implied an invidious choice, something that the region has always been determined to avoid.⁸ Moreover, by

presenting a simplistic picture of China's activities and intentions in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, the new US consensus risks generating a self-fulfilling prophecy—one that could ultimately play into Beijing's hands.

While it is true that China seeks revisions to an international order in which it has always been an uneasy participant, its approach has been a good deal more selective and strategic. As Howard French argues, "China takes a quite eclectic approach to the international order. It supports—and draws support from—institutions built in another era mostly through Western leadership, while creating new institutions and mechanisms . . . when it senses a need and, especially, a vacuum."⁹ Beijing wants a greater say in international governance, but it has no rational interest in tearing down the order that has undergirded its own economic renaissance.

Nor is China trying to export its authoritarian political system to the world. For all its loose talk about offering "lessons" to developing countries, it is not working to undermine liberal democratic systems as such, nor to evangelize its highly singular form of Confucian-Leninism. Beijing certainly offers succor to non-democratic governments and undermines liberal values in a broader sense, but as Jessica Chen Weiss of Cornell University has written, these efforts represent "less a grand strategic effort to undermine democracy and spread autocracy than the Chinese leadership's desire to secure its position at home and abroad."¹⁰

For all the illiberal and destabilizing impacts of China's growing influence in Southeast Asia, its behavior is roughly consistent with that of past great powers. Specifically, the Chinese government is using its economic and military wherewithal to expand its influence and shape political outcomes in a region that it views as essential to its national interest—an approach that more closely resembles the American engagement with Southeast Asia during the Cold War than it does the revolutionary evangelism of Mao. If governments in Southeast Asia happen to be corrupt, illiberal, or non-democratic, that says less about China than about the particular conditions—political, economic, and social—of the countries in question. The region's authoritarianism might be a worrying phenomenon, but it is an overwhelmingly Southeast Asian one.

Instead, the Chinese government presents itself as a conservative defender of national sovereignty and self-determination: two ideas with deep resonance in postcolonial Southeast Asia. Unlike the US and many Western powers, China seldom lectures ASEAN governments on how to run their societies, and

asserts the right of every nation to choose its own political path. The result is that whenever Western governments pressure or sanction Southeast Asian governments over questions of political freedoms and human rights—from Duterte's "drug war" to the ethnic cleansing of Burma's Rohingya population—China reaps a reflexive strategic advantage. Under Beijing's shadow, Western values and Western interests increasingly pull in different directions.

In this sense, China's efforts represent one part of the broader reassertion of the Westphalian norm of state sovereignty that is taking place as global power shifts to the East—a phenomenon that the scholars David Fidler, Sung Won Kim, and Sumit Ganguly have described as "Eastphalia rising."¹¹ In practice, Beijing is wont to abridge this principle in accordance with its perceived national interests, and its economic bullying and influence operations very often amount to political interference by another name. But this, too, is unsurprising, hypocrisy being another frequent indulgence of great powers.

While the US government has a long list of pressing and legitimate concerns about Chinese behavior—from intellectual property theft to Beijing's mass internment of Uighur Muslims to its handling of the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic—the sharp turn in American policy toward China stems as much from American anxieties and self-perceptions as it does from Chinese actions. In *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom*, his sweeping history of US–China relations, John Pomfret describes how American views toward China have alternated between attempts to "convert" it—first to Protestantism, later to liberal democracy—and periods of hostility when China resisted American tutelage.¹² Viewing US–China competition as a new ideological showdown thus looms as a textbook example of "great-state autism" and mirror-imaging: one that projects an American missionary exceptionalism onto its Asian rival, transmuting a singular China into the inverted phantom of America's own virtuous self-image.

Dwelling in China's neighborhood, the Southeast Asian nations cannot afford to indulge in such binary thinking. As Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told the *Washington Post* in September 2019, the American tendency to frame US–China rivalry in ideological terms—as "a conflict between two systems, almost two civilizations"—was "very worrying" for the world and the region. By ratcheting up isolated disputes into an all-encompassing struggle, he warned, the US could create a situation in which ASEAN and its member states might be forced to make difficult choices.¹³

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Evan Laksmana, of Jakarta's Centre for Strategic and International Studies, concurred: "DC is just such a toxic place now when you talk about China," he said when we spoke in August 2019. "Everything becomes black and white."

This explains the generally agnostic view of Southeast Asian governments toward the Trump administration's FOIP strategy. In principle, the region is not opposed to the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept, something that has been discussed in Southeast Asian capitals for years. Rightly or wrongly, however, many in the region view FOIP as being motivated primarily by an American desire bid to curb and contain China, and worry that it could dislodge ASEAN's centrality and polarize the region.

These concerns were articulated officially with the release in July 2019 of ASEAN's "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," the bloc's first official position on the American strategy. Chock full of assertions of ASEAN centrality and the importance of its various diplomatic mechanisms, the outlook expressed worries about "the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behavior based on a zero-sum game."¹⁴ Its underlying premise was that Southeast Asia—a region connected to both the Indian and Pacific oceans—should lie at the core of any "Indo-Pacific" vision. The more buried subtext was that Southeast Asia is too economically intertwined with China to enlist in a US-led coalition aimed at curbing its rise.

For all their misgivings about China, Southeast Asian governments have continued to engage in the BRI and other Chinese-led initiatives, judging the benefits of participation to outweigh the risks. Of the 36 heads of state or government who attended the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in April 2019, nine came from ASEAN countries—a quarter of the total.¹⁵ At the same time, Southeast Asian governments are becoming more sophisticated in how they negotiate the terms of Chinese projects. After suspending or reassessing overpriced Chinese infrastructure deals agreed by their predecessors, new governments in Malaysia and Burma renegotiated key strategic projects, including the East Coast Rail Line in Malaysia and the Kyaukphyu deep-water port on the coast of Burma. This demonstrated the agency of Southeast Asian governments in their relations with China: far from being the passive subjects of Chinese engagement, some were now playing important roles in shaping it.

The Southeast Asian position was expressed starkly by its response to the Trump administration's global campaign against the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei. Claiming (probably correctly) that Huawei posed a

security risk given its opaque ties to the Chinese state, Washington pressed foreign governments to exclude it from any involvement in their 5G telecommunications networks. Almost no Southeast Asian country complied with its demands. Spurning their treaty ally, Thailand and the Philippines let local firms sign agreements to utilize or trial Huawei's advanced and relatively inexpensive 5G technology; so, too, did Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. The only nation to reject Huawei out of hand was Vietnam, which needed no American urging.

More telling were the justifications offered. In Malaysia, then-Prime Minister Mahathir said that if China posed an intelligence risk, the same was true of the US and other large powers. "I am quite sure for a long time the CIA have been reporting on everything that is done in Malaysia and China. We did not carry out a boycott of America because of that," Mahathir told an audience in Tokyo in May 2019.¹⁶ This was echoed by George Yeo, Singapore's former foreign minister, who said that the US was worried "not only because Huawei represents a possible vulnerability, but because using Huawei also makes it harder for American intelligence to gain access into other people's systems."¹⁷

The Huawei affair demonstrated that the US government would not get far by expecting Southeast Asian countries to curtail their economic relationships with China. As the Center for a New American Security noted in a report on US-China relations in December 2019, "US policy will have to reflect the reality that countries in the region all view China to differing degrees as both an economic opportunity and geographic reality. As a result, attempts to construct an explicitly anti-China alliance will fail."¹⁸ The same was true of the Trump administration's attempt to blame China for the coronavirus pandemic, by referring to the contagion as the "Chinese virus" and promising retaliation against China once the crisis was over. While Southeast Asian leaders will certainly want answers about the Chinese government's egregious failings during the early stages of the outbreak, there is little chance that they will support such a self-righteous and retributive approach.

If forced to choose between the US and China, some Southeast Asian nations—perhaps most—might find it hard to resist defaulting to proximity. In the ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute's 2020 survey, respondents were asked which side ASEAN should choose if hypothetically forced to align with either America or China. The US won out by a few percentage points on the whole,

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largely due to the overwhelming pro-American preference of respondents in Vietnam (85.5 percent) and the Philippines (82.5 percent). Aside from that, respondents in seven of the ten ASEAN member states—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Brunei, Malaysia, Burma, and Thailand—expressed an overall preference for China.¹⁹ As Chan Heng Chee, Singapore's former ambassador to Washington, warned, "Don't press countries in the region to choose. You may not like what you will hear."

There is no doubt that the US must respond more effectively to China's disruptive international behavior, and that measured actions would enjoy broad support in Southeast Asian capitals. However, an Indo-Pacific strategy based solely on organizing regional hostility toward China is unlikely to win the region's support. Instead, the US and its Quad partners will have to convince Southeast Asian leaders that the Indo-Pacific strategy is compatible with the principle of ASEAN centrality. It should also incorporate more ASEAN perspectives into FOIP in order to make the strategy "complementary and mutually beneficial."²⁰ An effective American approach will be one that broadens the choices of Southeast Asian nations rather than narrowing them: one that addresses the region's development challenges and increases its ability both to avoid an unhealthy overdependence on China, and to stand up to Beijing when necessary.

In some manner this will need to reflect the fact that China's primary challenge to the status quo in the Indo-Pacific is not military or ideological, but economic. Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017 left China free to push ahead with a number of alluring multilateral trade and investment initiatives, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which could become one of the world's largest free-trade pacts. RCEP includes China and ASEAN, in addition to Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, but does not include the US. In November 2019, leaders from the 15 Asian countries agreed to move forward with RCEP, hoping to conclude it sometime in 2020.²¹ Without developing compelling alternatives for the region to stick with the US instead of China, the FOIP strategy will fail to gain lasting purchase in Southeast Asia.

Beyond Trump, there is a need for an American policy that takes a more nuanced approach to Southeast Asia: one that achieves a more realistic balance between values and interests, and creates a stable form of competition that avoids overheated zero-sum rhetoric. When the time comes, Washington can

expect to draw on a considerable reservoir of goodwill in Southeast Asia. The region's publics remain broadly well disposed toward the US, which succeeds in many of the places where China fails: in drawing partners close through the force of cultural appeal and the attraction of the American creed. US businesses enjoy an enviable reputation across the region, and Southeast Asian governments remain more comfortable dealing with the US than China, even as they chafe at its liberal admonitions.

Here, too, geography forces itself into the equation. America's distance across the wide longitudes of the Pacific Ocean functions in an inverse way to China's proximity, blunting the fear of US power. Distance also serves as a reminder that there is nothing natural or inevitable about a strong US presence in Southeast Asia. The American commitment to the region is one that will have to be constantly renewed, through the quadrennial churn of presidential elections, and the uncertain commitment of the American public, worn down by never-ending conflicts in distant lands. As the historian Wang Gungwu put it when we spoke in Singapore, the Americans "have to justify being here." The Chinese, on the other hand, "are just here," he said. "It's their backyard."

At the dawn of the 2020s, Southeast Asia trembles on the cusp of a new era of superpower competition. The period of strategic tension is likely to be prolonged and uncertain, with no clear denouement. In the coming tug-of-war, ASEAN will come under increasing strain. It is hard to see the bloc recapturing the unity of purpose that marked its founding in 1967. The widening of ASEAN's membership since the end of the Cold War has made it trickier to find common ground, or to reconcile national with regional interests. It is a challenge that the potential induction of East Timor as ASEAN's eleventh member will further magnify.

While ASEAN will continue with its rota of summits, asserting its regional integrity and centrality, national interests will exert their centrifugal pull. On the burnished leagues of the South China Sea, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia will find some unity of purpose in confronting the power of the Chinese navy and coastguard, but most ASEAN members will balk at sacrificing their relationships with China for the sake of wider regional interests. Their attention drawn inward by the challenges of economic development and nation-building, Southeast Asian governments will prioritize pressing

domestic concerns over the goal of regional integration. China will continue to engage in ASEAN processes, including in negotiations for a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea, but the most consequential negotiations will take place bilaterally, as Beijing prefers.

For as long as it sustains itself, China's rising power foretells a gradual widening of the existing division between the mainland and maritime halves of Southeast Asia—or more precisely, between those with strong connections to the oceans and those of a more continental orientation. In time, perhaps, China's re-emergence could begin to expose the limitations of "Southeast Asia" as a concept. As a region was "made," so, too, could it begin to be unmade. Yet ASEAN will almost certainly endure: in spite of its deficiencies, it remains the region's best and only vehicle for maintaining a modicum of agency in a new era of great power competition.

ASEAN's efforts will be aided by the continued presence and engagement of other outside powers with overlapping concerns about China's sudden return to wealth and power. Sooner or later, the US will awake from its Trumpian fever-dream, reverting perhaps to the storied tradition of realism that has so often lurked beneath the cloak of liberal evangelism. Japan will remain steadfast and engaged across the region, offering Southeast Asian governments a high-quality alternative to China's BRI infrastructure pitch. In many respects, it remains the region's preferred partner of choice. As confidence in the US has ebbed under President Trump, trust in Japan has risen.²²

In addition to these nations, South Korea, Russia, Australia, and Taiwan will all remain closely engaged in the region. The European Union will continue to be an important economic player, in addition to a post-Brexit United Kingdom, determined to reinvigorate its relationships in Asia. On the western rim of Southeast Asia, India will continue to awaken to its huge demographic potential. The determination of these various nations to resist China's growing economic and military power provides a potential basis for "a regionally organized balance of power."²³

Together or alone, the strategic meridian of the Southeast Asian nations will be one of balance. Far from being passive subjects of Chinese and American attentions—countries to be "won" and "lost" by dueling super-powers—the region's governments will do what they can to maintain their freedom of maneuver in a tenser, more constrained world. "To promiscuously and simultaneously balance, hedge, and bandwagon is embedded in our

foreign policy DNA,” writes Singapore’s Bilahari Kausikan. “Not only do we not see any contradiction in doing so, this is an instinctive response honed by centuries of hard experience.”²⁴ For the most ardent recipients of Chinese largesse—particularly the small satellites Cambodia and Laos—the challenge will be to find a more nuanced approach to China: one that allows them to benefit from its economic growth without submitting to conditions that will erode their sovereignty over the long term.

In the years to come, Southeast Asia’s incoherence could work to its advantage. According to Kausikan, the region’s fragmented nature has long made it resistant to any superpower gaining sole control. Historically, Southeast Asia has “slipped through the fingers of any power that has tried to grasp it as a whole,” he said. “It’s like trying to grab hold of Jell-O.” Southeast Asia’s future will not be one of linear and inexorable Chinese advance, but rather one in which past dynamics and contradictions reproduce themselves over time at varying pitches of tension. The coming century in Southeast Asia looms as one of flux and strain: less a new Cold War than a frosty, Eastphalian peace.