

Title: Rolul ASEAN în balanța de putere regională – ASEAN's role in the regional balance of power

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The Asia-Pacific region has a diverse mix of great rival powers, unresolved territorial disputes in which they are embroiled, painful historical memories, adverse political ideologies and different perspectives on development, changing military balances and the absence of regional security institutions represent a problem for managing local tensions. Asia-Pacific is now in a period of transition, where competition between the great powers is fierce. The distribution of power among countries is changing and unstable, accentuating the feeling of unpredictability and uncertainty.

After the Second World War, the region was composed of US-led bilateral alliances, but over time various ad-hoc security dialogues or various multilateral forums were added, based mainly on ASEAN, but which have long been accused of having failed to provide results such as the management of relations between the great powers regarding common understandings on constraints, rules of conduct in various situations or conflict management, a fact argued by the current situation of maritime territorial disputes. However, the ASEAN-based regional institutional architecture is an important component of the regional balance.

The main international actors to be analyzed are ASEAN and its member states, together with China and the USA. In this sense, the paper is structured in four parts. In the first part, I made a presentation on the perspectives on theoretical and conceptual notions on neorealism, the balance of power, the security dilemma and the role of international organizations in the international system. In the second part, the paper focused on analyzing the evolution of ASEAN and highlighting its main features; the presentation of the relationship between China and the USA and ASEAN and the institutional structure led by it and the balance between the actors already mentioned.

This component is divided into two segments: ASEAN during the Cold War and ASEAN post-Cold War. The objectives of this part are to analyze the creation of ASEAN as a regional organization, its organization and analysis of intra-ASEAN cooperation and its ability to respond to perceived threats. This analysis will be based on the notion that cooperation within ASEAN is a consequence of the balancing process in which member states have engaged against external threats.

In the third part, the analysis focuses on the presentation of the China-US-ASEAN relationship, their position vis-à-vis ASEAN and its institutional structure and the balance between them. Thus, I will follow the analysis of the evolution of the post-Cold War relationship between

the two actors with ASEAN and the types of power relations created in the context of the competition between Beijing and Washington.

First, vis-à-vis China, have looked at how China's outlook for ASEAN has evolved, following the evolution of the 1990s, with China looking with suspicion at ASEAN's attempts to establish multilateral institutions such as the ARF, considering them a form of containment. But in the mid-1990s, there was a paradigm shift in Beijing's leadership, seeing an opportunity in ASEAN-led initiatives. Second, US involvement in the ASEAN-based regional institutional architecture really began in the late 2000s. In the 1990s, the US focus was on its bilateral alliances in the region. The situation has remained the same for much of the 2000s, in the context of the Bush administration's war on terror, with the United States being selectively engaged in the multilateral architecture based on ASEAN.

Ultima parte a lucrării este un studiu de caz, Studiul de caz se va axa pe analiza răspunsurilor instituțiilor de securitate regionale bazate pe ASEAN cu privire la situația din Marea Chinei de Sud. Motivul pentru care am ales efectuarea unui studiu de caz este reprezentat de capacitatea acestuia de a lucra cu date calitative și de a exemplifica relația de cauzalitate. Cercetarea se va concentra asupra evoluției situației în Marea Chinei de Sud, oferind o analiză empirică a ceea ce se întâmplă pe teren și a momentelor marcante din această perioadă ce au prezentat modul în care ASEAN și membrii săi în raport cu subiectul și cu relațiile SUA-China.

The objectives of the paper are the following:

- analyzing the evolution of ASEAN as a regional organization, its structure and the analysis of intra-ASEAN cooperation and its capacity to respond to perceived threats.
- analyzing the evolution of the post-Cold War relationship between the two actors with ASEAN and the types of power relations created in the context of the competition between Beijing and Washington.
- conducting a case study in order to clearly formulate the role of ASEAN in the regional balance of power, marked by US-China competition and a development of a more understanding of ASEAN's internal dynamics and the institutional constraints it faces due to its construction.

Chapter I. Theoretical approach. Neorealism has its origins in classical realism, but deviates from many of the ideas proposed by Hans Morgenthau. For example, for both theories, states are the main actors in international politics. The neorealist thesis is that states are unitary and rational actors in a complex world. As sovereign states, they cooperate for mutual benefit, carrying out economic, diplomatic and military actions in this process. By virtue of the capabilities of these states, they may decide not to take any action, to attack other states or to negotiate and cooperate.

The neorealist theory identifies the structure of the international system as having a crucial role in this regard. The structure represents a certain set of conditions, and this structure affects the

behavior of the component units, in the case of international relations these being the states. States must comply with these conditions in order to remain internationally competitive, with their elimination from the system being alternatives, and in this way they interact within the international system. According to neorealism, the ordering principle of the international system is anarchy, thus being a decentralized system, there is no central authority at the international level. As I said above, states are the main units that make up the international system, and due to anarchy they are equal to each other, without a hierarchical order.

There is no centralized authority over states, which means that there is no guarantee that one state will not be attacked or invaded by another. It encourages states to gain strength to become stronger and feel safer. The desire of states to protect themselves through actions in search of power leads to anarchy and causes what is called the security dilemma. According to John Herz, the inventor of the term security dilemma, in an anarchic system, ignorance of the intentions of others puts man in a dilemma, worrying about his own security, creating a vicious circle in which the accumulation of security leads to increasing the insecurity of others. This is an important definition of a concept so central to international relations, widely accepted by major schools of thought in international relations.

According to Robert Jervis, the security dilemma exists when the means by which one state seeks to increase its security diminish the security of others, representing the foundation of the spiral model, which describes how interaction between states seeking only security can fuel competition and worsen political relations. Thus, from the point of view of structural realism, uncertainty is one of the main reasons for states to compete. States can never be sure of the intentions of other states.

According to him, the international system characterized by anarchy, ie the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing the rules and punishing the aggressors, and the uncertainty thus caused about state intentions and available offensive military capabilities, cause states to constantly fear and resort to self-help mechanisms for survival, thus trying to reduce the possibility of external aggression by strengthening maximizing power: "the international system creates strong incentives for states to seek opportunities to increase power to the detriment of rivals and take advantage of those situations exceed costs. The ultimate goal of a state is to be hegemonic in the system."

Thus, following the ideas of offensive neorealism, the ultimate goal of states should be to achieve hegemony, dominance in its geographical region, because this is the best way to ensure survival in the international system. As a result, states are always looking for and taking advantage of any favorable opportunities to maximize their power. On the other hand, defensive neorealism, which is also the theoretical support for this paper, states, above all, do not seek to maximize their power, but seek to survive in the international system, all states wanting to maintain their position on the international stage.

Kenneth Waltz argues that anarchy encourages states to behave defensively and maintain rather than destroy the balance of power. He points out that when the great powers behave aggressively, potential victims tend to balance against the aggressor. Thus, too much and rapid accumulation of power by one state may cause other states to join forces against them, eventually becoming worse off than it would have been if they had refrained from seeking further increases in power. However, although states are mainly inclined to concern themselves with preserving their power and ensuring survival in an anarchic system, this does not mean that they do not have different preferences, interests, which in turn they cannot adopt a foreign policy. offensive. The distribution of capabilities also ensures that the preferences of states are changed under the auspices of the security dilemma.

Robert Jervis's article "Cooperation under the security dilemma" is a very important one in terms of providing a more nuanced understanding of the security dilemma and how it affects it. In this article, Robert Jervis discusses two very important main arguments, namely that the security dilemma, one of the central elements of the study of international relations, is the main explanatory element to determine why states (even in an anarchic international system) that have compatible goals end up in a war situation, exceeding the normal level of inter-state competition, and at the same time explains his theory on the offensive defensive balance.

Next, the balance of power is the central element of the school of realistic thinking. According to Morgenthau, the balance of power can be understood as a state of affairs, a situation in which the balance is in balance or in imbalance. The aim must be to maintain balance to ensure the stability and preservation of all units in the system, without any of them becoming dominant over the others. Under the power balance mechanism, states choose to balance or align. Alignment is the act by which states choose to ensure their security by rallying to the dominant power. Stephen Walt, a prominent representative of defensive neorealism, believes that states balance or align with power imbalances in the system, arguing that "states will ally with or against the most threatening power." He thus argues that the balance of power theory ignores other factors which, in his argument, matter in the way in which a decision-maker identifies his threats and allies.

States choose balancing at the expense of alignment, because an alliance in which you retain your integrity and freedom as a state is preferable to an alliance in which you are subordinate to a hegemon. The argument goes on to say that because intentions can change and perceptions are unreliable, it is safer to balance against potential threats than to hope that strong states will remain benevolent. Under these conditions, the balance is affected by the following criteria: aggregate power (the higher the total resources of a state, the more it poses a potential threat), geographical proximity, offensive capabilities and perceived intentions.

Given these, what is the neorealist perspective on international institutions? As a general definition, international institutions are sets of rules designed to govern international behavior, which are often designed as statements prohibiting, demanding or permitting certain actions. Regarding institutions, the basis of the realistic theory was the insistence that international

institutions are determined by the interaction between power and the national interest in the international system.

The neoliberal argument for the importance of institutions refers to the fact that institutions can mitigate competition in the field of security and promote world peace, because they have the capacity to cause states to reject behavior aimed at maximizing power in the international system and to refrain from calculating each important movement depending on how it affects their position in the balance of power. Thus, international institutions have an independent effect on the behavior of the state that at least mitigates the effects of the anarchic system. In general, the realistic school of international relations did not emphasize the importance of international institutions, considering them side effects of state power and interests.

According to Mearsheimer, international institutions cannot have an effect on the behavior of the great powers. He acknowledges that states sometimes act and benefit from these institutions, but it is the great powers that create and shape institutions so that they maintain or increase their power, with international institutions ultimately determined by power relations. However, defensive neorealism is more reconcilable with the role of international institutions in international relations, accepting the idea that they have an effect on the behavior of states. For example, Stephen Krasner considers that states think in terms of relative gains and are concerned about how these gains are distributed in forms of cooperation such as international institutions.

But this points to the potential of the latter to impose a certain method of profit-sharing and to resolve conflicts of this nature, with the strongest states being able to use their power and leverage against smaller states. Krasner notes that while this demonstrates the lack of independence of international institutions, they acquire a role as intermediary bodies that help negotiate international arrangements and promote stability in a particular matter of interest. Joseph Grieco also states the importance of international institutions in terms of profit distribution. The gist of its notion of international institutions is that they can ensure that the benefits of states' cooperation efforts are proportionately distributed. If one state earns relatively less than another through such an action, it will be disadvantaged and thus will not engage in cooperative behavior.

Grieco believes that regimes can provide information, facilitate payments and even promote reciprocal behavior that allows states to accept temporary losses, expecting them to be reimbursed later. For the same author, international institutions represent an opportunity for weaker states to be heard, as they seek to join sets of institutional arrangements. Their joining depends on the organization of the institution and how it affects the position of the state in the international system.

Also, another explanation is represented by the appearance of institutions in response to the existence of external threats, of a material nature. States respond to material threats to their security by creating institutional arrangements to enhance their individual and collective security. These arrangements usually take the form of security alliances that are designed to swing against an opposing state or group of states. However, these institutions do not have to be military

alliances, as they can also take the form of economic arrangements based on improving the material skills of member states to defend their independence and integrity from external threats. These developments, which appeared a few years after the end of the Cold War, demonstrate the attempts of the neorealist school to incorporate into its theory the role of international institutions.

Chapter II. ASEAN. ASEAN is a regional organization with a difficult history that has its origins in a tumultuous period, where the lines of spheres of influence were arbitrarily drawn by powers outside the region, such as the Soviet Union, the US or former colonial powers that have created strong and lasting animosities between the states of Southeast Asia, divided between communist, non-communist states, new regions reborn after the departure of the colonial rulers and so on. In essence, ASEAN was born out of such a conflict, with Indonesia challenging the legitimacy of creating a new state called the Federation of Malaysia, a result of all these complexities mentioned above, the two states entering into armed conflict, a conflict imbued with a nationalist explosion in Indonesia and a constant fear of communist resurgences. This context has proved unsustainable in the long run.

Over time, the evolution of ASEAN has included both new friends and former enemies, adding new levels of complexity to the institutional organization, in the same context of external pressure throughout the Cold War period, with countries such as Vietnam joining the 1990s. Laos or Cambodia. The evolution of ASEAN reflects this complexity and evolution of the foundations of the regional organization, reflecting the new group of members and international context at any given time. For example, the Declaration for the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality of 1971 emphasizes the right of every state to conduct its national existence without external interference in its internal affairs and sets as its objectives the neutrality of Southeast Asia in the great struggle between the great powers. that time. This was an early formula in which ASEAN sought to establish itself at the regional level, creating a regulatory framework that served to frame internal relations between ASEAN member states and ASEAN relations with other external powers.

In the context of the evolution of ASEAN, the 1976 Bali summit is a cornerstone in the institutional evolution of the regional grouping, taking the first step for ASEAN in the search for its political identity, focusing on establishing a common approach to security and a code of conduct. to regulate relations between Member States. Codified in the Treaty of Claim and Cooperation, ASEAN's principles of conduct were based on a set of international rules and principles that characterized the lowest common denominator among regional partners, which are among the guiding principles of the modern international system and the UN Charter.

As in the case of the Bangkok Declaration, respect for national sovereignty was proposed as the central principle of ASEAN. ASEAN was also explicitly described as a political and security arrangement, although characterized by a low level of institutionalization and lacking concrete mechanisms at the time. The Bali Summit stressed the need for a peaceful approach to cooperation and said that ASEAN would address security issues through political and economic means, rather

than through conventional military methods, as stated in the text of both documents that resulted from this.

Among the basic principles of ASEAN, based on all the institutional evolution of the organization, the ASEAN Way and the ASEAN Centrality are the most important, providing a clear vision of the role that ASEAN sees for itself at the regional level. The very idea of the ASEAN Way existed as an abstract and poorly defined concept, often lacking a clear description of it, being largely a result of the interactions between the states of Southeast Asia and the principles set out in the founding documents of the organization. Thus, the ASEAN Way consists of various characteristics that include a high level of informality, the practice of a quiet diplomatic style, a continuous process of dialogue between ASEAN members, the willingness to exercise self-control, solidarity, the practice of consensus building and the art of conflict avoidance. The above-mentioned standard rules and principles, including respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of the Member States, are also integrated into this much more familiar interaction process than the rest of the principles enshrined in the ASEAN documents.

ASEAN centrality is one of the most frequently mentioned principles in all state-level declarations, essentially representing a commitment by non-ASEAN states to accept the ASEAN-based and ASEAN-centered institutional architecture, using it to expand architecture or to problem solving and dialogue. This principle is very important because it is essentially the goal of the member states and is also a compromise measure accepted by the great powers at regional level, serving the interests of all.

ASEAN is a group of developing countries with ample economic opportunities for investors, and is geographically located in a strategically important area between the Indian and Pacific Oceans along a route. important maritime opportunities in the South China Sea and neighboring China, representing a major point of interest for the expansion of Chinese influence in recent decades through economic and military projects alike. All this offers advantages to ASEAN states to emphasize the importance of ASEAN, the current reality having its say in this sense, the regional institutional architecture being based on multilateral interaction formulas based on ASEAN. They also provide diplomatic cover and opportunities for dialogue for the great powers, such as the United States and China, which have several channels at their disposal to exercise influence and dialogue when it is not possible to do so bilaterally.

Chapter III. ASEAN-China relations. China's growth as an economic and military power in the Asia-Pacific region has significant implications for the strategic and economic future of Southeast Asia. This makes the Asia-Pacific region a very dynamic one in which the balance of power is constantly changing, causing new alignments and reconsiderations at the strategic level. One of the main phenomena that China's rising is causing at the regional level is one of an economic nature, the Southeast Asia region being ahead of China in terms of its economic development until the 1990s.

In this sense, in the economic arena, China appears both as an opportunity and as a challenge. In the field of security, the implications of China's accumulation of military power, and mainly the purpose to which it directs these resources, are a key concern in the region, especially given territorial frictions and historical disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, where they overlap with economic and security interests for all stakeholders.

Recognizing the existing role of the US in the regional balance of power, ASEAN's perceptions of China in Southeast Asia, based on arguments about economic interdependence, a common regulatory orientation and institutional ties, are also independent of the US. However, China's future role in South-East Asia is likely to be shaped more by its domestic evolution and its relationship with other major players, especially the US, than with the countries in the South-East Asia region. However, Southeast Asia, which acts multilaterally, also has an opportunity to help manage China's security role in the region.

The countries of Southeast Asia have tried to do so by avoiding a policy of confrontation with China, despite the many controversial territorial and economic issues in their relationship. Such a policy is avoided for fear of stirring up Chinese nationalism and provoking hostile responses from Beijing to its southern neighbors. Moreover, ASEAN countries do not want to give up the opportunity to benefit from China's economic growth. Unless and until China becomes obviously expansionist, Southeast Asia will host China and oppose a position of isolation, as it seems to be formulated in US foreign policy, continuing with a policy of engagement.

At the same time, the great states of Southeast Asia will resist any temptation to align themselves strategically with China, wary of its uncertain evolution as a new great power and the political costs (which are, in some cases, domestic and international) of China. such an alignment. To sustain its economic growth, China needs resources and markets in Southeast Asia, as well as a stable regional environment, which ASEAN can provide. China also needs the agreement and cooperation of Southeast Asia to achieve its leadership ambitions in Asia and the world.

Its relationship with ASEAN is a case in point to testing Beijing's credibility as a world power focused on engagement and constructive in its actions. While Beijing remains cautious about ASEAN's pressure on the South China Sea dispute and the pro-US orientation in the defense area of many ASEAN members, there are reasons for Beijing to see Southeast Asia as a relatively secure area in which to cultivate positive and mutually beneficial relationships, especially in the economic field. Beijing is also aware that an adverse relationship with Southeast Asia could move many of them to a closer alignment with China's competitors, such as Japan and the United States.

These considerations transform the Southeast Asian diplomatic space and its extended space into an extremely complex one, where a number of challenges have marked and will continue to do so in the evolution of China-ASEAN relations. The internal dynamics of these states are an important factor, especially in China, where political succession and fear of social change and the effects it could have on the CCP's dominance always dominate the attention of those in the highest

echelons of government in China, while historical, colonial and territorial disputes arising from them and a complex history of East Asia always add to the challenges of diplomatic relations.

The above also entails more serious problems when it causes exacerbated nationalist exits and severely diminishes the possibilities for cooperation and the development of long-term relations. Regional states are still in a stage of development, both economically and socially and in other respects, which means that principles such as those identified with ASEAN Way proposed by ASEAN, are guarantees for ensuring national sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of another state, these being part of the political discourse of regional states, often hampering the political and diplomatic process.

In this context, great power relations, such as that between China and the USA or China and Japan, have a significant impact on the development of ASEAN-China relations, regardless of their current intentions. All this creates a very complex situation in the area of Southeast Asia, and the issue of the South China Sea is very exemplary for those mentioned above, over time being one of the major problems that have been in the path of more intense cooperation between China and ASEAN. Recent events have shown that the area is a real powder keg that can explode at any time.

China is an actor with great influence and complexity for ASEAN, because it is a great revisionist power that wants to consecrate its role of regional hegemon and great power. The South China Sea, where China has been claiming historic rights and which it has militarized hard over the past decade, turning it into a static aircraft carrier, is one of the major topics between China and ASEAN, directly impacting some of the members of the group whose territories are affected, and affecting the regulatory role of ASEAN at the regional level, China insisting on imposing its vision on what can be described as the rights and obligations of states in China's neighboring waters.

The institutional economic relationship between ASEAN and China really developed after the end of the Cold War, with China's growing economic growth. For example, during the Asian financial crisis, China provided financial assistance to Thailand and Indonesia, two of ASEAN's founding members, by supporting an IMF loan and choosing not to devalue its currency, which turned China into an important financial partner respected by the ASEAN states. The problem is that this type of collaboration has not turned political. Despite China's promises for peaceful development and influencing the Asia-Pacific regulatory framework through dialogue and cooperation with ASEAN, China's militaristic and aggressive actions in the South China Sea has stopped this, with ASEAN becoming more of a tool used by China to achieve its own goals, seeking to undermine the ASEAN framework of cooperation in Asia.

One of the landmarks of the Silk Road Initiative, part of the Belt and Road, is the development of extensive maritime infrastructure in Southeast Asia, the South Pacific and around the Indian Ocean coast. This network of facilities has an authentic trade dimension, which comes to support China's huge fleet of traders, as Beijing seeks to build a network of economic

connections linking China with Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. But much of it could also be used to support the rise of Chinese military forces in the region.

Chapter IV. ASEAN-US relations and the sino-american competition. In Asia, although China is the great power that is physically located in the region, the USA is a power with a tradition in Asia, since the Open Door policy started in the 19th century by Washington. It cemented its position in the image we can see today after World War II, where unlike the North Atlantic alliance in Europe, the US created a system of bilateral alliances, the San Francisco system, meant to stop the spread of communism and the USSR and to maintain US influence in Asia.

Over the years, with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the period of development following the end of the Cold War, the United States established its position as the main power in Asia. Its situation was much easier to manage due to the major changes taking place in China, with the problems created by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution setting the stage for a fundamental overhaul of China's leadership and the nation's grand strategy, with Deng Xiaoping focusing on revitalizing and the modernization of China.

As a result, there was a paradigm shift in Asia during the 1990s, as Asian Pacific countries saw that the changed security environment offered new perspectives for multilateral cooperation, which led to the consolidation of a multilateral architecture, such as the one centered around ASEAN. This was largely due to the fact that the US-led alliance system prevented a security vacuum, allowing it to move from a process based on balancing the US and the Soviet Union to promoting regional stability through initiatives to strengthen security and trust and promote cooperation for a wider set of security issues, such as piracy or other non-traditional issues.

The problem, however, was that the US did not interact much with these multilateral systems, preferring to emphasize the importance of its bilateral alliance system, presenting alliances with traditional allies as the basic framework on which the regional security architecture is based. In return, this has caused considerable concern among Asia-Pacific states that US bilateral alliances and multilateral organizations, based mainly on ASEAN, were in direct competition as the basis for the regional security architecture.

This perception has been particularly noticeable throughout the Bush administration, which has had rather mixed results in the context of the US-ASEAN relationship. Firstly, the US did not seem interested in remaining employed in Asia for the long term, as it appeared to be preoccupied mainly with problems in the Middle East and Central Asia, starting the war on terror following the 2001 terrorist attacks. Secondly, in time, competition with Beijing had begun to sit at the center of the Bush administration's discourse on Asia.

This continued to weigh heavily on ASEAN-US relations, even in the context of the Obama administration, and the situation was complex at the regional level. On the one hand, the Chinese military threat to Southeast Asian states was very real, but the US presence and its target seemed

to be the opposite of that of ASEAN and the Asian states. On the other hand, this also presented the opportunity to strengthen relations with Asian states in order to balance in the face of this perceived threat, but also to collaborate with ASEAN in a new context. In other words, the rise of the Obama presidency provided a serious opportunity to put the US back in the regional balance of power in Asia by strengthening relations with its Asian allies and partners, but also by integrating it into regional architecture, both of which serve national goals of the USA, the Sino-American relationship occupying a crucial place in this respect.

The solution found by the Obama administration in this regard has come to be known as the pivot to Asia, or rebalancing to Asia, based on a series of tools and objectives that were essential for achieving US economic and security goals. First, the United States had strengthened its relations with allied states, strengthening their capabilities and role in responding to threats. Second, the US had expanded its partnerships with new partners in Asia, developing countries and possible former enemies during the Cold War, such as Vietnam, an ASEAN member state. Third, the US had committed itself to a greater role in the regional institutional architecture in Asia-Pacific, seeking to strengthen its presence through the TPP or expand cooperation with ASEAN by recognizing the centrality of ASEAN.

However, the intensification of sino-US competition has left its mark on the US presence in Asia. The geostrategic concept of the Indo-Pacific, a maritime region with a geographical center in Southeast Asia, reflects a series of international changes that have led to the recognition of economic and security relations in the area linking the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as one single strategic space. The evolution of the structure of regional institutions from ASEAN demonstrates this, expanding by including US states, Russia, China, India, Japan, Australia, etc., such as the East Asia summit.

Also, the sino-US competition marked by the increase in power at all levels of China and the US need to remain the dominant power at the regional level is another factor. In the context of the expansion of Chinese influence, pushing Japan westward and attracting India eastward to balance against China has led to the intersection of their strategic interests, leading to the formation of the Quad between Japan, the US, India and Australia, whose goal is to preserve the status quo in the face of Chinese revisionism. One of the main reasons for aligning the strategic interests of these actors, leading to the wording of the Indo-Pacific term, is China, more precisely the expansion of the latter in the Indian Ocean to defend their interests along the Silk Road and its recent expansion to the Western Pacific, at the same time as efforts to dominate the maritime space of the South China Sea and the East China Sea along the first island chain.

These developments have found their way into the restart of the Quad, the dialogue between the US, Japan, India and Australia, which is the expression of the Indo-Pacific concept to balance against China, an actor that is perceived as constantly breaking the rules and as a competitor, trying to turn these rules to its advantage. The threat posed by China is much clearer in Xi Jinping's tenure than in Hu Jintao's time, with Beijing clearly moving in a direction of a

foreign policy aimed at securing regional domination and pushing the system of rules and regulations in its favor. At the same time, each state has concrete and particular concerns about China's actions that force them to act.

The free and open Indo-Pacific strategy is based on strengthening alliances and partnerships with the states of Southeast Asia, these small and medium-sized states being in the midst of the powerful rivalry between the US and China. Strengthening cooperation with them plays a central role in combating China's revisionism, with the US National Security Strategy mentioning the importance of ASEAN as "central elements of Indo-Pacific architecture and regional platforms for promoting free order". The maritime space is one of the central elements of US cooperation with Southeast Asian states, most of which are part of the disputes in the South China Sea, where China is waging a revisionist campaign that has led to the imposition of its de facto sovereignty over the neighborhood. close. Recently, the United States has focused on providing maritime security assistance to countries such as Vietnam, which is at the forefront of the South China Sea, and strengthening military relations.

In this context, the stakes are very high, which complicates the decisions that the states of Southeast Asia and ASEAN more broadly have to make. In recent decades, Washington's leaders have watched with growing uneasiness as China's military budget has grown and funds have been disproportionately directed toward the development of sophisticated missiles and other anti-access systems, as we can now see in the South China Sea, which can easily be described as a Chinese lake. The main purpose of these programs was to impose China's de facto sovereignty in its immediate vicinity and to severely increase the cost to the United States if it sent its air and naval forces to defend Taiwan or interfere in another way with the strategic objectives of Beijing in its nearby waters.

China has imposed its territorial claims on the South China Sea, building artificial islands on half-submerged reefs, which are large enough to house military airfields and other facilities. Beijing's challenge to asserting Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Island chain has become highly visible, including by using a growing fleet of fishing vessels to play quasi-military roles and emphasize the Chinese presence. At the same time, China's warnings to Taiwan to abandon any hope of avoiding negotiations for political reunification with mainland China have become increasingly strong and aggressive.

Current U.S. government documents name two military objectives for discouraging or winning against China in a conflict: denying China's air and maritime dominance within the first island chain in a conflict, and dominating the U.S. military outside the first island chain. Challenging Chinese dominance within the first island chain is why the US military is pursuing the development of new long-range missiles and artillery and the increasingly intense US Army Corps exercises in the Pacific islands.

Tensions have not yet reached the levels of the Cold War, as Chinese officials like to present the situation, but mutual suspicions are growing. The Trump administration has taken steps

to implement a "decoupling" process to reduce America's dependence on a variety of Chinese exports that have military applications or that could expose the United States and other states to blackmail if Beijing suddenly decides to stop those exports, in a situation similar to the current relationship between China and Australia. The United States seems determined to maintain America's status as the hegemonic power of East Asia.

Chapter V. ASEAN in the South China Sea. Competition with the US adds a dimension of zero-sum competition to China's militarization of the South China Sea, which often forces ASEAN states to retreat to maintain regional stability and ensure its own survival and economic interests. The US-China competition, which is taking place regionally and globally, is being closely watched by the ASEAN states, as the Southeast Asia area has become a place of great military tensions, especially in the context of China's militarization of the area and the strategy of the US-led free and open Indo-Pacific, which has begun to gain a clear military character, swinging against China by forming a kind of Asian NATO composed of US partners and allies, such as Japan, Australia, India and even European powers that showed interest.

This leads to an overcrowding of the region, with ASEAN feeling that the principle of ASEAN Centrality is violated, in the context in which ASEAN cannot afford to turn its back on either side, seeking to remain engaged in relations with both China and the US to maintain regional stability and for the survival of the Member States. Both the US and China are important partners for ASEAN, and regardless of their perceptions of each other's intentions, the US remains a traditional power in the area, a promoter of international order based on rules and economic development, and China is the major economic partner in the 21st century and an indisputable physical presence in its vicinity.

This blocks ASEAN because it cannot make a choice, thus seeking to balance between the two great powers. However, regional tensions have been very high in recent years, even forcing ASEAN to produce a document addressing its concerns in the context of China's militarization of the South China Sea and the US strategy for a free and open Indo-Pacific. The case study on the South China Sea, the evolution of the situation there and the individual reactions of member states and ASEAN as such demonstrate the difficulties ASEAN is going through in addressing this case, which highlights the challenges between its complexity and ASEAN's natural weaknesses resulting from its construction. As mentioned earlier, ASEAN is a regional organization with a difficult history, whose main objective has been to develop a process for resolving conflicts between non-communist states in Southeast Asia in ways other than using coercive means.

This has led to an emphasis on the right of each state to conduct its national existence without external interference in its internal affairs and to the development over time of ASEAN's own way of conducting its diplomacy, based mainly on consensus, representing here a multilateral framework that does not threaten the interests of any of the members and not necessarily a decision-making process using the rule of majority or unanimity. In 2012 as well as in 2016, Cambodia blocked ASEAN's statements on offering a position on the South China Sea, supporting

China's position on dealing with disputes bilaterally. In this context, ASEAN member states failed to agree on maritime disputes in the South China Sea on Sunday, after Cambodia blocked any mention of the Hague Court ruling against Beijing in their statement.

With the rise of the Duterte administration in the Philippines, his new approach to re-engaging his country in a dialogue with China had a considerable influence on ASEAN, leading to the resumption of negotiations for a code of conduct between ASEAN and China, an otherwise endless process. practical results on the ground, serving exclusively the interests of China. China refuses to join a legally binding code of conduct that could challenge Beijing's goal of turning the South China Sea into a Chinese lake. China's objection to the ruling of the Permanent Arbitration Court on the South China Sea case was a visible example from China of the presence of a higher authority in its backyard, seeking to impose itself through the power of its own forces, using a 'might makes right' attitude.

Likewise, given the limited timeframe for the COC negotiations, China appears to benefit most from the differences and conflicting views that emerged between the ASEAN states at the negotiating table. Meanwhile, China has aggressively established what is in fact a new status quo on the ground, by militarizing the islands in the South China Sea and by normalizing its presence and control in disputed waters in the South China Sea. By doing so, China may be able to redefine the geographical boundaries of the South China Sea, as well as the scope of the disputed areas in favor of its geopolitical interest.

The centrality of ASEAN is also in jeopardy, with the project revealing the weak consensus of all ASEAN countries in negotiating with China. Despite the commonly recognized perception that consensus is essential for ASEAN to meet the challenges in the South China Sea, certain national interests of individual members have blocked attempts to strengthen regional cooperation and cohesion. This raises concerns that ASEAN's consensus rule no longer supports the new realities and that other members can support Beijing's preferences and stop ASEAN from making decisions. In fact, this is one of the drivers of the free and open Indo-Pacific and the inability of ASEAN to advance in these cases has caused the emergence of a politico-military bloc in the form of the Quad that causes competition at the regional level.

Conclusions. In conclusion, first of all, the current formula of ASEAN is a natural one, which finds its foundation in its tumultuous history during the Cold War, and the diverse character of the group and the international context of Southeast Asia over the years have forced the development of a diplomatic style that does not necessarily serve to promote ASEAN interests at the regional level, but to ensure the ability of ASEAN members to balance within ASEAN, according to their national interests. This turns ASEAN into an inflexible organization can enter blockage quite easily.

This in fact allows the avoidance of ASEAN, just as China did in the South China Sea and just as the US engaged in a process of containing China, endangering the centrality of ASEAN, and this is felt by ASEAN, forcing it to publish the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2018,

indicating that the very relevance of ASEAN is in jeopardy. In this context, ASEAN must maintain its strategic autonomy and not fall prey to the Sino-US rivalry, focusing on the development of the economy and the intensification of connectivity, thus increasing interdependence.

Secondly, on the basis of these statements, ASEAN is forced by its position to find a middle ground in the balancing process between the USA and China, not being in its interest to choose between the two great powers. As mentioned earlier, both the US and China are important partners for ASEAN, and regardless of their perceptions of each other's intentions, the US remains a great power with a tradition in the area, a promoter of international order based on rules and economic development, and China is a major economic partner in the 21st century and an undisputed physical presence in its vicinity, the military threat posed by the latter being a matter that needs to be managed with pragmatism in the long run.