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**ASEAN under the Great Power Competition:
The impact of US-China competition on member states'
support of ASEAN**



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1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the ASEAN member states have tried to overcome their diversity to form a collective front in dealing with numerous challenges and transformations due to the changing international environment from the financial crisis, to the current tensions surrounding the South China Sea, and within the broader context of US-China competition. One of ASEAN's foundational purposes was to mitigate the impact of external actors and enable member states to create their own regional order (Narine 2008).

However, the escalating US-China competition, often described as the "New Cold War" (Beeson 2022; Southgate 2021), raises concerns about the unity of ASEAN's members and whether they will continue to support the organization or develop divergent stances on regional affairs. Intensifying competition has led to more coercive attitudes from great powers, pressuring member states to align themselves. Koga (2022a) points out that the US-China competition has resulted in the US engaging in bilateral relations with member states, bypassing multilateral platforms, while China employs a mix of coercion and inducement tactics towards individual member states, thereby diminishing ASEAN's influence within the multilateral framework (Le Thu 2019).

Some literature has argued that, in contrast to the past, member states are now prioritizing interactions with external great powers over ASEAN for their foreign policy decisions (Natalegawa 2018:149). Therefore, the intensification of great power rivalry seems to diminish the unity among member states (Ciorciari 2017).

There is a notable gap in comprehensive analysis regarding how individual member states' responses to great power competition impact their support of ASEAN. Most discussions tend to focus on the lack of unity among member states be enlarged under great power competition, therefore affected ASEAN's relevance (Beeson 2022; Acharya 2018; Kraft 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the individual member states in the context of US-China competition, as their varied domestic conditions lead to different considerations in their foreign policies concerning their support of the regional organization (Kraft 2000). This paper aims to bridge the gap between the responses of individual member states to the US-China competition and how these choices affect their

support of ASEAN. The core research question is: ***How does US-China competition affect member states' support of ASEAN?***

I choose to focus on the relationship between member states and ASEAN, rather than the broader perspective on how great power competition affects ASEAN's relevance or influence. The complex backgrounds of different member states result in varying perceptions of the US-China competition, making it insufficient to discuss ASEAN as a whole. This research contributes to the existing literature by exploring how individual ASEAN member states respond to the US-China competition and how this influences their support of ASEAN.

ASEAN member states formulate foreign policy decisions to achieve national interests that help sustain their regimes (Murphy 2017). The consideration of national interests and autonomy shapes their responses to US-China competition, resulting in a choice between aligning with either the US or China, or continuing to engage with both sides while avoiding signaling alignment—an approach known as “hedging”. This study argues that if member states choose a side, it will undermine ASEAN's central role in regional decision-making because aligning with a great power allows external influence in the region, thereby reducing ASEAN's impact. Conversely, if member states continue hedging, ASEAN's role will be strengthened, as member states will require ASEAN to maintain their hedging strategy and avoid choosing sides. ASEAN's inclusive multilateral institutions and neutral stance among great powers make it a useful platform for member states to express collective opinions and avoid choosing between competing powers (Kuik 2022:372).

To substantiate this argument, I categorize two levels of support from ASEAN member states: participation and protection. Participation indicates support of ASEAN's operations through involvement in ASEAN-led multilateral institutions, whereas protection signifies a further commitment to safeguarding ASEAN's autonomy in regional affairs from external interference. When member states choose a side, both forms of support can weaken, as they may develop bilateral relations with the great powers they align with, rather than adhering to ASEAN. This consequently affects their support of protect ASEAN's autonomy, as choosing a side increases the risk of introducing the great power's foreign policy preferences into regional affairs via the ASEAN platform. On the other hand, member states that choose to hedge need to participate in ASEAN to engage with both great powers while using the regional organization to maintain distance from

them, avoid choosing sides, and maximize autonomy. Therefore, they support ASEAN at both levels. Through this contextualization, this research aims to capture the connection between individual member states' alignment choices under US-China competition and their support of ASEAN, highlighting that considerations for regime survival continue to play a major role in ASEAN member states' efforts in regional cooperation. However, since comprehensive alignment with either the US or China is unlikely, all member states maintain a certain level of support of ASEAN, although the scope may have narrowed for some, resulting in diverse opinions within the regional organization.

The structure of this paper is divided into six parts: following the introduction of the research question and its contribution in this chapter, in Chapter Two I discuss the existing research on member states supporting ASEAN amidst US-China competition, and the motivations for their support since the end of the Cold War. I highlight the diverse opinions regarding whether member states support ASEAN and the gap in discussions on how member states' responses to US-China competition affect their support of ASEAN. Additionally, I examine the rather vague connection between ASEAN and member states' reactions to great power competition, providing a space for this study to contribute. In Chapter Three, I contextualize support of ASEAN from member states on two levels: participation and protection. I then discuss member states' possible responses to the US-China competition, demonstrating that member states have been hedging among great powers, but the competition pressures them to choose a side. At the end of the chapter, I develop a framework bridging the two contexts, showing that states choosing sides could decrease their participation in ASEAN by joining platforms led by their aligned power, risking becoming proxies for great powers in decision-making processes. Meanwhile, hedging states will engage in participation in ASEAN-led platforms while advocating for collective attitudes to enable ASEAN to generate regional-based decisions when facing great power influence. Chapter Four explains the methodology, using previous research and empirical data from member states' governments and ASEAN to show their alignment choices and capture their support of ASEAN. In Chapter Five, I apply the analytical framework to three case countries: Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia, each showing different degrees of alignment tendencies: Indonesia as a hedger, Vietnam aligning with the US, and Cambodia aligning with China. I conclude the research by reflecting on the contribution of exploring how ASEAN member states' support of the organization reflects state leaders' considerations among different national interests, allowing ASEAN to persist, although gradually marginalized under great power competition.

2. Literature Review

To find the linkage between member states' responses to great power competition and their support of ASEAN, I first introduce related work that discusses ASEAN member states' support of the regional organization in the context of great power competition. While the specific responses of member states to great power rivalry will be further explored in the theory chapter, this chapter first examines existing research on whether and how member states' support of ASEAN is affected by US-China competition. I then introduce potential reasons why member states support ASEAN, which often align with their national interests.

Two key points emerge from the literature: (1) member states' support of ASEAN is frequently discussed alongside their response toward great powers termed "hedging", although the precise link between ASEAN and member states is not always clearly addressed; and (2) member states' support of ASEAN is driven by their intention to engage with great powers to fulfill their national interests.

The literature review identifies two research gaps. Firstly, there are diverse opinions on whether member states support ASEAN under the context of US-China competition, indicating a need for more in-depth analysis of individual member states. Secondly, most current studies have not adequately addressed the relationship between member states and ASEAN when facing great power competition, highlighting a need to better link member states' different alignment choices with their support of ASEAN. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to enrich the current discussion by highlighting the diversity and complexity of the interaction between member states and ASEAN in the context of great power rivalry.

2.1. Literature on Member States Supporting ASEAN under US-China Competition

Regional cooperation among ASEAN member states is sensitive to the influence of great powers, and US-China competition could limit the extent of integration (Ciorciari 2017). On one hand, the literature has shown that great power competition pushed member states to support ASEAN's institutional strength to maintain their autonomy. ASEAN serves as a platform for member states to engage with both sides of competing great powers, to obtain benefits and simultaneously mitigate risks of being too closely aligned

with one side. ASEAN institution-building helps bring more actors into regional affairs and generate collective action, allowing member states to avoid being forced into a one-sided commitment to great powers that could diminish their autonomy. On the other hand, some authors express concern over the diverse opinions that member states develop in the context of intensifying great power competition, and the emergence of alternative institutions led by competing great powers, which distracts member states from prioritizing ASEAN.

When discussing member states' support of ASEAN, the literature analyzes member states separately or collectively. One group of studies focuses on individual member states' responses to US-China competition, reflecting that member states build up ASEAN initiatives and institutions either to increase interaction with great powers at the same time avoid dominance from them.

Anwar (2018) highlighting that Indonesia and other member states prefer to maintain multiple, multilayered regional orders through the establishment of inclusive cooperative initiatives under the core structure of ASEAN. By doing so, Indonesia ensures that there is no domination by a single hegemon in regional affairs. The underlying purpose of promoting ASEAN regional integration among member states is to avoid harm from proxy wars as competition intensifies.

The reason for member states to support ASEAN under great power competition is often mentioned in combination of member states' response toward great power termed "hedging", where ASEAN is used as a platform for individual member states to maintain a balanced distance from great powers, avoiding bandwagoning when interacting with both sides to maximize benefits.

Kuik (2015) identifies two forms of hedging undertaken by ASEAN member states: dominance denial and indirect balancing. The former is to constrain China's influence through ASEAN-centered multilateral platforms, while indirect balancing is to build stronger defense ties with the US to mitigate risks posed under great power rivalry. Despite the there are varying degrees of hedging among the member states influenced by elites' perceptions of the threat posed by China and their openness to rebalancing with the US, all three case states analyzed (Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia) tend to include the US and China within ASEAN-led platforms to avoid the region to be dominated by single power.

Examining three ASEAN member states—Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, Goh (2005) argued that member states maintaining their security stability by leveraging military and political strength from extra-regional powers, with regional organization used to attract external great powers for close economic and political relationships. Empirical case is that member states support ASEAN as a platform to engage and increase opportunities for great powers in regional dialogues through institutions such as ARF and ASEAN+3 to establish an FTA both with individual countries and at the ASEAN level.

A similar perspective is shared by Vidra (2012), who specifically analyzed the hedging strategy adopted by Singapore. She noted that through ASEAN participation, Singapore can avoid bandwagoning while increasing cultural, social, and economic interactions with China.

Another group of literature discusses member states collectively, analyzing their unity on specific issues concerning ASEAN within the context of great power competition, capturing a general trend of whether great power competition has strengthened or weakened member states' support of ASEAN due to diverse opinions among them.

Yue (2021) argued that despite differing attitudes towards the competing sides among member states, there is still a consensus that intensifying US-China competition will undermine the regional and international environment, marginalizing and dividing ASEAN, thereby posing challenges to their survival (Yue 2021:142-143). Such awareness explains the low incentive for member states to bandwagoning. Instead, member states support ASEAN's institutional strength to foster constructive relationships with both sides through regional cooperation initiatives and provide a platform to collectively voice their concerns to avoid being forced to choose sides (ibid.:145, 159).

Jones and Jenne (2016) state that ASEAN member states' actions in region-building are primarily driven by concerns over state-building. The weakness of individual states drives integration, but with an overriding focus on state-building rather than regional unity. However, the failure of ASEAN foreign ministers to issue a joint communique on disputes regarding the South China Sea due to diverse attitudes toward economic interests and security concerns about China (Burma–Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia are closer to China, while the Philippines and Vietnam lean towards the United States) suggests that the weakness of member states, individually or collectively, limits their

ability to effectively respond to internal challenges, creating risks of external powers exploiting domestic vulnerabilities for their own interests.

Although some literature suggests that US-China competition could make ASEAN a platform for member states to interact with both sides through hedging, other works argue that intensified competition limits member states' ability to pursue regional solutions and avoid choosing sides. Mueller (2021) points out that ASEAN's dependence on external power resources to support its agenda complicates member states' ability to hedge within the ASEAN-led framework when greater powers develop alternative institutions or competing priorities. For example, China's BRI initiative challenges the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan by circumventing ASEAN engagement, and the US's support of QUAD and AUKUS without including ASEAN undermines its centrality and pressures ASEAN and its member states to choose sides (Koga 2022a). Zha (2023) argued that the current US-China rivalry undermines ASEAN's effectiveness as a multilateral institution. China's more coercive and economically incentivized approach towards Southeast Asian countries narrows the space for ASEAN member states to hedge, and the US Indo-Pacific strategy shifts its focus away from ASEAN, reducing the platform's utility for neutrality. Consequently, the lack of ASEAN centrality forces member states to engage with external institutions due to a lack of alternatives, risking ASEAN disintegration.

Some works look into the institutional function of ASEAN for member states in responding to US-China competition with the concepts of balancing, bandwagoning and hedging. Kuik (2022) mentioned that member states support ASEAN for institutional hedging, where institutions serve three functions enabling hedging: the binding effect to include all great powers on the same platform for more interaction opportunities; the buffering effect to avoid the dominance of a single great power in deciding regional affairs; and building an expansion of the institution and value in the region. He (2006) claims ASEAN is used for institutional balancing, where ASEAN states use inclusive and exclusive institution-building to constrain the influence of great powers. However, both works either discuss the alignment behavior of ASEAN as a group or as an independent actor, with few references to individual member state actions, and it cannot explain why there exist incoherence among member states.

This research, however, does not aim to provide a general perspective on whether member states, as a whole, strengthen or weaken their support towards ASEAN, but to offer a more detailed examination of how the different alignment choices of member

states, driven by their national interests, affect their support of ASEAN. This is an area needs further exploration.

In conclusion, current literature reflects diverse opinions on whether ASEAN member states will continue supporting regional organizations amid great power competition, indicating the reasonableness of analyzing individual member states. The analysis often lacks detailed discussions about specific member states' concrete connections with ASEAN when facing great power competition, highlighting a research gap that this study aims to address. What is worth noting is that some literature discussed the support of ASEAN from member states in combination with their response toward the great power competition through hedging. Thus, this perspective demonstrates the necessity of discussing member states' alignment behavior under great power competition in the theoretical chapter. Furthermore, since the research gap regarding how member states support ASEAN or not is not discussed in detail, this paper will also contextualize the meaning of support from member states in the theory chapter.

2.2. Reasons ASEAN Member States Support ASEAN in the Post-Cold War Era

Not limited to the US-China competition period, ASEAN has served as a platform for the collective voice of small member states and a gateway to attract interactions and resources from regional great powers in economic globalization since the post-Cold War era. This is beneficial for member states given their developing status. Research on why ASEAN member states engage in regional integration often highlights economic interests, as economic integration is a prominent field within the region. However, some analyses indicate that member states' focus on domestic rather than regional interests can be a hidden driving factor for supporting ASEAN.

Kuo (2008) traced the establishment and expansion of ASEAN and noted that the changing inner and outer conditions in Southeast Asia at the end of the Cold War, along with the shift in international order from military power competition to economic competition, pressured Southeast Asian states to accelerate regional integration and cooperation to avoid marginalization. While economic integration is a clear outcome and a driving factor for ASEAN member states, the fundamental motivation remains the awareness of survival under changing international conditions. By positioning ASEAN as a socio-economic and cultural cooperative regional organization, rather than a military

one, member states—mainly weaker states—can maintain their autonomy, pursue security implicitly, and maintain a distance from US influence.

Kim (2011) proposed a strategic-specific theory to explain ASEAN integration, argued that ASEAN integration reflects state leaders' preferences to maintain their regimes in response to concerns about domestic politics and economic interdependence within and outside ASEAN. Unlike democratic countries where institution-building is driven by economic interests, strategic-specific theory highlights preferences in developing countries with less stable democracies, where regime security is prioritized over economic interests. This links political stability and economic growth to national security concerns. States engage in regional integration to secure national sovereignty by becoming more competitive in the political and economic fields, in response to a changing environment and increasing interdependence.

Krapohl (2017) noted that economic integration became ASEAN's "new *raison d'être*" after the Cold War and the bipolar order in the region. Member states recognized the low potential for interregional trade and potential competition with other regional actors for external investments, such as China. This led to the establishment of the AFTA to attract external investments rather than to create comparative benefits within the region. Thus, ASEAN member states maintain unity to better represent their interests when negotiating with other regional powers, as seen in the formation of the APT framework. However, member states' support of ASEAN is driven by national interests focused on attracting interaction from regional powers outside ASEAN, often relying on the reactions and support of stronger powers.

Summarizing the reasons for member states supporting ASEAN, it is based on economic interests and security considerations. The motive for member states to make decisions at the regional level is to engage with external great powers. Thus, member states form and adjust their institutional strategies based on the utility of the institution, which is influenced by both the external environment and the internal political conditions of the member states (Koga 2022a:27).

To connect the discussion above with this paper, the effects of great power competition between the US and China on member states' willingness and ability to support ASEAN are crucial. The competition between the two powers has brought new changes to the post-Cold War regional order and altered the modes of interaction for member states, as

closer alignment with one side over the other can have significant consequences. This conclusion leads to a discussion on the response of member states to great power competition, and subsequently, their support of ASEAN as a consequence of such responses. Because ASEAN is used by member states to interact with great powers to fulfill their national interests (He 2006; Nesadurai 2008).

3. Theoretical Contextualization

In the previous chapter, I discussed the debate in the literature about whether member states support ASEAN under great power competition and highlighted the need to develop an analysis of the diverse opinions within. I identified two gaps in the existing literature: firstly, there are diverse opinions on whether the great power competition between China and the US will lead member states to pursue stronger support of ASEAN, or conversely, push member states to choose sides and support initiatives from either competing power, thereby marginalizing and diminishing ASEAN. Secondly, neither side of the opinion provides a detailed explanation linking member states' reactions to great power competition with their support of ASEAN.

Therefore, this paper aims to establish the connection between member states' alignment behavior towards US-China competition and their support of ASEAN based on such alignment decisions.

In the following content, I conceptualize the two levels of support from member states towards ASEAN. I then engage in the discussion about how great power competition affects small states and the possible responses they could take. Hedging has been the approach ASEAN member states have taken, which is connected to the use of multilateral platforms, though facing challenges due to the intensification of competition. Thus, member states either maintain hedging or have to align with either the US or China. This diverse alignment choice, driven by national interests consideration, has consequences for member state's support of ASEAN.

3.1. Two Levels of "Support" from Member States Towards ASEAN

It is necessary to first define what is meant by member states "supporting" ASEAN. By the term support, I do not only refer to membership in ASEAN but also actions to participating in ASEAN-led multilateral platforms and the promotion of ASEAN's autonomy in deciding

regional affairs, enabling ASEAN to be in the central position as “the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners” (Acharya 2017; ASEAN 2007).

In the following discussion, I define two levels of support of ASEAN from member states, based on two functions that regional institutions can provide small states when facing great powers. I refer to the regional institution as “ASEAN and the multilateral framework led by ASEAN” in the discussion below.

There are two functions regional institutions serve for small states when facing great powers. On one hand, regional institutions, in this context referring to multilateral institutions led by ASEAN, provide a platform for smaller states to interact with great powers while “preserving their formal equality” (Kuik 2022:360), as multilateral platforms often emphasize the norm of sovereign equality, giving small states effective opportunities to voice their concerns. By joining regional institutions, small states can avoid economic marginalization when facing great power influence and have better opportunities for economic development through engagement with great powers via regional institutions that attract resources and opportunities for cooperation (Kikuchi 2015:55). Apart from a profit-seeking orientation, regional institutions also help reduce the over-dependence of small states on a single great power, as small states can use the multilateral platform to interact with multiple actors (Kuik 2022:373). For ASEAN member states, the ASEAN-led platform enables member states to interact with great powers to promote their interests, providing more opportunities and better bargaining positions.

On the other hand, Keohane (1969) pointed out that one prominent function of international organizations is to allow small states to form “attitudes favorable to their survival” through collective action, emphasizing that “although they may be able to do little together, they can do virtually nothing separately” (Keohane 1969:296). In the ASEAN context, this attitude can refer to the promotion of ASEAN autonomy, which is also connected to the autonomy of ASEAN member states, to avoid regional affairs being interfered with by external great powers.

Based on these two functions discussed above, one is to let small states engage with great powers for their interests, and the other is to preserve their autonomy, I classify two levels of supporting actions from member states towards ASEAN.

First is the support through “Participation”, which means member states participating in ASEAN and ASEAN-led platforms to engage with great powers for their foreign policy objectives.

The second level of support is “Protection”, which involves member states promoting ASEAN-based decisions in regional affairs while avoiding support of great power initiatives that could harm ASEAN autonomy. By doing so, it aims to prevent ASEAN’s decision-making autonomy from being taken over by external powers.

Participation support of ASEAN’s relevance, the inclusive participation facilitated by member states, and the great power they engage with help steady ASEAN’s central position in regional affairs (Yoshimatsu 2012).

Protection concerns maintaining ASEAN’s autonomy. Respecting ASEAN autonomy entails that member states generate a collective attitude that avoids choosing sides between China or the US, instead facilitating an “ASEAN-based” response that ensures the decision-making process for regional affairs is not dominated by external powers (Stubbs 2008:459). All ASEAN states, albeit to varying degrees, share the consensus that maintaining ASEAN autonomy and forming a collective attitude toward external powers is crucial (Jones 2010). This is because the existence of the regional organization benefits member states, particularly when interacting with great powers: it provides a platform for small states to communicate with great powers from a better bargaining position (Wang 2021:2150012-16) to maintain relationships with external powers and facilitate cooperation (Wicaksana & Karim 2023:670). Simultaneously, the regional organization can protect member states’ autonomy and sovereignty by limiting external influence within their regional affairs decision-making process (Emmers 2018).

Conversely, the support of ASEAN from a member state can be diminished when the member state promotes a great power’s foreign policy strategy in regional affairs, as this risks bringing great power influence into the regional agenda, preventing member states from acting collectively (Beeson 2022:6) and consequently undermining the operation of ASEAN and the value of ASEAN centrality. While the second level of support of ASEAN can be seen when member states engage in hedging between China and the US, it can be diminished when member states choose sides, as a clear alignment choice makes it difficult for the state to remain neutral in ASEAN’s decision-making process.

3.2. Great Power Competition, Member States' response and Support of ASEAN

Before discussing the possible responses ASEAN member states could adopt under great power competition and the connection between such responses and their support of ASEAN, it is important to first contextualize how great power competition between the US and China has brought the support of ASEAN from member states into question.

I address this by presenting two key contexts. Firstly, the competition between two great powers creates uncertainty regarding the international environment, and the intensification of such competition narrows the scope of small states' foreign policy options, forcing them to choose sides, which in turn affects their ability to support ASEAN. Secondly, ASEAN member states have been engaging in "hedging" among great powers, which involves supporting ASEAN both in its operations and its maintenance, but the sustainability of hedging could be limited due to the intensification of competition between the US and China, leading to a potential decrease in member states' support of ASEAN.

The competition between two great powers generates uncertainty in the international environment, a crucial background condition when analyzing the behavior of small states, as there is no clear winner or dominant single hegemon in the development of international power relations in the region. Recent literature discussing Asian states and ASEAN member states' responses to US-China competition has focused on the concept of "hedging" (Kuik 2021, 2015; Murphy 2017; Jackson 2014). Although the literature on hedging by ASEAN states initially focused on small states' responses to the rise of China (Goh 2005; Kuik 2016), this paper positions ASEAN hedging specifically under the context of US-China competition because it involves contradictory policies in interacting with both great powers. As Ikenberry argued, the dual-hegemony system created by these two great powers, where the US serves as the security hegemon and China as the economic one, leads middle states to pursue a "not too hot and not too cold strategy" to maintain this dual hierarchy and gain benefits from both sides (Ikenberry 2016:11).

3.2.1. Hedging and its connection with ASEAN

After identifying hedging as the response from member states toward the US-China competition, on this session I identify hedging and demonstrate how hedging can be connected with ASEAN as a multilateral platform.

I start with defining hedging. Developed as a concept in response to the rise of a single great power beyond balancing or bandwagoning, hedging was initially captured as small states interacting with both sides of competing great powers, involving a mix of cooperative and confrontational behaviors (Ciorciari & Haacke 2019; Kuik 2016), which aim at providing ambiguous alignment signaling (Lim & Cooper 2015). By doing so, states avoid signaling a clear alignment tendency to have space and time to maintain autonomy and gain potential benefits from both sides. This action of avoiding choosing sides involves the need for a multilateral platform to involve all regional powers, maximizing negotiation opportunities and avoiding over-dependence on a single power or signaling a choice. This demonstrates how multilateral institutions have been used by regional states to achieve their interests amid uncertain international environments (Oba 2019).

Kuik (2021:302) pointed out that hedging differs from balancing and bandwagoning in three areas: (1) hedging includes avoiding choosing sides, while balancing and bandwagoning signal a clear and exclusive choice on one side; (2) hedging involves contradictory policy choices ranging from security to economic fields toward both competing powers, while balancing/bandwagoning shows one-sided engagement with a great power to either counter a threat or gain benefits; and (3) hedging involves diverse orientations of foreign policy towards both great powers, seeking backups. Thus hedging differs from balancing and bandwagoning in terms of its signal ambiguity and inclusive/exclusive involvement with great powers.

He furtherly defines hedging as “an insurance-seeking behavior under high-stakes and high-uncertainty situations where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers to prepare a fallback position should circumstances change” (Kuik 2016:504). Goh mentioned hedging by SEA countries has three elements: indirect or soft balancing, which seeks the help of the US to counterbalance China’s influence; engagement policies that include China politically and economically to socialize it into the conduct of international norms; and the general policy that includes many regional great powers to stabilize the regional order as “omni-enmeshment” (Goh 2005:viii, ix). Hedging features comprehensive interaction involving not only military but also economic and diplomatic approaches to constrain great power influence, either through bilateral interaction or via ASEAN-based institutions (Jackson 2014; Kuik 2016; Goh 2008). Looking into the operation of hedging proposed by Wang (2021:2150012-15-17), hedging states will balance their cooperation and interaction with great powers by building economic interdependence, security cooperation, and signaling diplomatic attitudes to ensure equal closeness and distance with both sides,

which is conduct via multilateral institutions such as ASEAN-led platforms, for example, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit.

From the definition of hedging discussed above, I identify two elements hedging involves: “engaging in interaction with both competing powers or more other powers” and “consistently avoiding signaling a clear tendency to align with either side”.

These elements can be linked to the functions of ASEAN as a multilateral platform that can, on the one hand, enable member states to interact with great power and, on the other hand, help preserve their autonomy. For the first element identified for hedging, member states need to interact with different sides of competing powers and other powers to gain benefits under the power competition context, while also avoiding placing themselves in an inferior negotiation position where great powers can dominate the bargaining process for exchanging benefits. This is why ASEAN is a valuable tool for small states like ASEAN members to interact with great powers, as it provides an environment without the dominance of a single power, placing small states in a better bargaining position. The multilateral platform provided by the institution involves all sides of regional actors equally, avoiding the dominance of a single hegemon. On the other hand, the rules established by institutions and the emphasis on consensus can constrain great powers from exerting one-sided influence on smaller states (Ciorciari 2008; Goh 2011:377).

To achieve the second element of hedging, in which member states avoid choosing sides between the competing great powers, ASEAN, as a regional organization, is useful in generating a collective voice. Its neutral position makes it a suitable platform to channel the hedging states’ non-alignment tendency collectively (Tan 2020), while simultaneously continuing their engagement with both competing powers. In this way, ASEAN serves as a platform to mitigate the pressure on member states to choose sides. Returning to the emphasis on hedging for maintaining autonomy, Long has emphasized that small states use institutions to promote their autonomy by initiating norms collectively, reducing the cost of pursuing such foreign policy strategies (Long 2017:198).

3.2.2. Narrowed space for Hedging under US-China competition

In this paragraph, I introduce how US-China competition provides an environment for hedging, how hedging is challenged by the intensification of competition, and what the alternative response member states could take.

The context of power competition involves two powers rather than one rising hegemon, providing more options for small states to act and adding more complex variables that determine their responses. Therefore, hedging is a prominent strategy in discussing ASEAN member states' responses to US-China competition. Tang (2018) argued that great power competition between the US and China provides space for small states to preserve their autonomy, as the competing powers aim to attract allies and thus are more likely to "employ accommodation rather than coercion in dealing with relations with ASEAN states" (Tang 2018:5). The economic and security engagements of both great powers in the region can foster cooperation among member states. Such regional cooperation development mitigates the risks and pressures from losing autonomy between the two great powers. At the same time, by developing economically and gaining security benefits from both sides, member states can reduce their reliance on a single great power (ibid.:8). Thus, the great power competition context provides a favorable environment for ASEAN states to hedge, as their bargaining position has improved. However, the author also pointed out that the advantages small states gain from great power competition are not sustainable and can be easily undermined at the bilateral level due to the weaker positions ASEAN states occupy when facing the US and China. Cooperation through multilateral mechanisms can help reduce the pressure to choose a side and maximize the benefits that small states can gain under the great power competition context (ibid.:5). On the other hand, Korolev pointed out that the duration of hedging depends on the systemic conditions. Once power competition intensifies toward a "zero-sum balancing logic" (Korolev 2019:432), uncertainty decreases, and the room for hedging will shrink. At the same time, competing great powers will put more pressure on hedging states with their influence, forcing them to choose a side (Zha 2022).

To summarize, great power competition between the US and China provides a favorable environment for ASEAN states to hedge, and hedging is a strategy that almost all member states have engaged in (Kuik 2021:308). However, challenges for member states to continue hedging arise when competition intensifies (Emmers 2018:362), narrowing the space for member states to keep their options open through hedging due to pressure from either side or a desire to gain greater rewards from forming alignments with a great power (Korolev 2019:426).

To explore how secondary states can react when hedging is challenged by the power transition between the US and China, He and Feng proposed four scenarios based on their perceived threats and benefits in the power transition: balancing, bandwagoning,

continue hedging, and buck-passing (He & Feng 2023:13). In the context of ASEAN member states, buck-passing in the competition context due to low threat and benefit perception does not apply, as member states need to manage resource dependency on external powers (Mueller 2021), and geographic proximity makes buck-passing less feasible (ibid.:37). On the other hand, a shift to pure balancing or bandwagoning is neither feasible nor possible for ASEAN states (Kuik 2021). To fulfill the analytical purpose of this paper to reflect different alignment behaviors among ASEAN member states, I need to apply a standard distinguishing hedging and the alternative alignment choice showing clear alignment tendencies, but without falling into the balancing and bandwagoning category.

Identifying the concept of hedging and distinguishing it from other forms of responses with clear operational indicators is challenging. First, there is no consensus on whether hedging could include elements of balancing and bandwagoning or should even be positioned on the bandwagoning—balancing spectrum. Secondly, some articles suggest different forms and degrees of hedging, where strong hedging features a state being more cautious about maintaining neutrality, while weak hedgers tend to tilt toward one side of a great power (Strating 2020); or light and heavy hedgers depending on their degree of resistance or compliance with China (Lai & Kuik 2021).

To address the first question, researchers have tried to distinguish hedging from balancing and bandwagoning by examining whether states are responding to a series of “risks” or a clear “threat” (Kuik 2016, Haacke 2019). However, secondary states like ASEAN members will avoid clearly indicating one great power as a threat (Haacke 2019), making empirical analysis challenging. On the other hand, efforts to distinguish hedging from balancing and bandwagoning as possible responses for ASEAN states have confined the concept to the dichotomy of US/China, balancing/bandwagoning, and economic/security categories (Chang 2022:2). This classification overlooks the complexity of individual member states in linking national interests to each great power, as the US does not only offer security interests while China provides economic ones; it varies among member states and depends on their domestic conditions as well. Moreover, this attempt to define hedging based on the balancing—bandwagoning concept does not capture the importance of “autonomy” as a purpose for hedging (ibid.:3), which is connected to the hedger’s involvement with multilateral platforms to facilitate hedging.

Since this paper focuses on the different responses from member states and how these affect their support of ASEAN rather than providing conceptualized hedging and small states' responses to great power competition in general, I choose not to use balancing—hedging—bandwagoning categories but instead distinguish member states' responses into “continue hedging” and “choose a side,” which entails either “aligning with the US” or “aligning with towards China”.

This approach suggests hedging as a “relative” concept among the alignment behaviors of ASEAN member states. Hedging can be distinguished from choosing a side by assessing the extent to which a state maintains equidistant and neutral relations with great powers, whereas those choosing a side show a more explicit tendency to align with one great power, and I should also expect such alignment tendency has different intensity, which could also affect the state's support of ASEAN in various degree.

For the operationalization of hedging and choosing a side, I focus on policy actions that relatively “maintain equal engagement with both sides” or involve “cooperative actions with one side at the expense of cooperation with the other,” following the terms used by Korolev as “relative equidistance” and “opposing actions” when states face increasing uncertainty under great power competition (Korolev 2019:428), or as Jackson pointed out that hedging in South East Asia involves double-sided and “proportionate engagement” with both the US and China (Jackson 2014:335). While literature has suggested measuring these engagements based on military and strategic-related policies (Lim & Cooper 2015), which can range from establishing military consultations, joint military exercises, troop and base exchanges, and high-level visits for strategic dialogues with either China or the US that show “symmetry and equidistance” (Korolev 2019:430), it is also possible to see equidistance through economic and political means since their boundary with security engagement is blurred under the intensification of great power competition (ibid.:428), and economic interaction affects a state's cost of security confrontation in the long run (Koga 2018). Therefore, I also consider economic cooperation as an indicator.

In sum, a hedging state will show equal interaction with both competing sides in security and economic fields, while those choosing a side will engage in cooperation in both fields, tilting toward one power at the expense of declining cooperation with the other.

This adjustment allows for comparability of different response of member states toward intensifying great power competition while avoiding a too-narrow concept between balancing and bandwagoning.

A follow-up question is what drives member states to decide between continuing hedging and choosing a side under the condition of great power competition that limits their hedging space. It is important to view hedging as a concept that bridges domestic factors in response to a changing external environment (Kuik 2008; Zha 2023), which means seeing hedging as foreign policy involving dynamic changes, helping explain the possibility and reasons for states to continue hedging or tilt toward one side. This idea is inspired by Korolev, who pointed out that the driving reason for states to choose balancing is the systematic level, meaning the structure of power shifting and power gaps, while the driving reason for hedging includes unit (state)-level reasons, which means leaders' consideration of domestic politics. Therefore, he suggests analyzing hedging as a "foreign policy" rather than an "international politics" approach (Korolev 2019:423). Taking the concept of viewing hedging as foreign policy reflecting a state's national interests, the next section will explore how different prioritization and considerations of national interests affect member states' choice in responding to US-China competition through continuing hedging or turning to choose a side.

3.2.3. Providing the Basis for Member States' Choices in Response to US-China Competition: National Interests Consideration

ASEAN member states make foreign policy choices based on their consideration of national interests, such consideration affect their alignment choice from hedging to tilting one side of great power, therefore also affect their support of ASEAN.

Foreign policy is the set of measures a country uses to achieve its goals of survival and development in the international environment (Ho & Tran 2023:26). State leaders use foreign policy to cope with pressure from external great power competition and align their national interests with domestic needs (Zha 2022). Under great power competition, ASEAN member states prioritize the survival of their regimes, making it more important to achieve crucial national interests than to balance their power asymmetry with the great powers (Kuik 2013, 2023a). The consideration and prioritization of these national interests affect their response to US-China competition and, consequently, their support of ASEAN. The expectation for an institution to fulfill national interests serves as the basis for small states to support the institution (Long 2017:198). In this paragraph, I discuss which types of national interests ASEAN member states consider in making foreign policy and how such considerations influence their responses to great power competition.

There are two main categories of ASEAN states' national interests discussed in the literature: economic interests and security interests (Chen & Yang 2013; Dobkowska 2014). The former involves economic expectations, and the latter focuses on territorial disputes member states have with great powers. Previous research has indicated that states with territorial disputes with China (Chen & Yang 2013; Zhao & Qi 2016) and a negative economic dependence on China due to competition for FDI inflow and trade deficits are more likely to balance against it. In contrast, states without direct territorial disputes with China and positive economic dependence are more inclined to bandwagoning with it. Since concern about risk to certain interests can reflect their prioritization (Kuik 2023c), I link threat perception to security interests, while benefit expectations relate to the economic interests a state can gain when interacting with great powers. High threat perception leads to a high demand for security interests, and high benefit expectations lead to high priority on economic interests.

Based on the discussion from Kuik regarding elites' perceptions of political risk, which refers to a state's autonomy in decision-making (Kuik 2015:21), I add another category of national interests as "autonomy". It differs from security interests by emphasizing political autonomy. To achieve security interests, weak states like ASEAN members might need to make trade-offs with great powers as security providers (Lim & Cooper 2015:497-498). In contrast, autonomy interests aim to prevent external powers from interfering in the state's decision-making process.

The concept that hedging involves a continuous trade-off between material benefits, either economic or security, gained from great power interactions (Kuik 2024a, 2024b:49-52) and the autonomy of political decision-making (Lim & Cooper 2015; Lim & Mukherjee 2019) helps bridge member states' considerations of national interests when facing great powers and how these reflect in their responses, either by continuing to hedge or tilting to one side.

The consideration and prioritization of the three national interest categories—economic, security, and autonomy—affect member states' alignment choices between the US and China.

If member states prioritize economic or security benefits, they are more likely to align with either side of the competing great powers. However, if there is a strong consideration of autonomy, member states will avoid choosing a side and continue hedging. This argument is shared by Chang (2022), who noted that hedging is a strategy focusing on

preserving autonomy to avoid costs associated with signaling a clear alignment with either competing side.

3.2.4. Linking Member States' Alignment Choices and Their Support of ASEAN

Another important context to bridge is the relationship between member states' choice to hedge or choose a side and their support of ASEAN.

In the following paragraph, I demonstrate how ASEAN serves as a crucial tool for member states to implement hedging. Then, I argue that when member states engage in hedging, they will support ASEAN through both participation and protection of its autonomy.

To provide an overarching view of ASEAN support and member states' alignment choices under great power competition, the work of Efremova positioning ASEAN as a "buffer area" and the buffer complex exercised by member states as "buffer states" is helpful.

To mitigate the negative influence that great power competition exerts on regional affairs, which leads to "intra-regional confrontation," small states have attempted to coordinate and form a "common position" on security issues when facing great powers. By doing so, they protect member states' sovereignty from external power interference, this shows how the autonomy of ASEAN is connected with the autonomy interests of member states. However, the strength of this buffer effect depends on whether small states are "actively cooperating with each other and are strongly committed to preserving their independence" (Efremova 2019:114-116). These elements are connected to the participation and protection of ASEAN contextualized in 3.1. Efremova argues that even when great powers directly pressure small states, they will prioritize "their mutual peaceful relations" over bilateral relations with great powers. In contrast, when small states prioritize the benefits gained from aligning with a great power, the buffer effect weakens, and the buffer area becomes divided by great powers (ibid.:115). Small states in this buffer area will engage with and coordinate with those states tilting toward a single great power to form a common position (ibid.), avoiding their collective interests being caught between great power rivalry due to a member's clear alignment signal. Buffer states can be linked to the concept of hedging states, given their priority to maintain autonomy and use ASEAN as a platform to preserve autonomy, with the tendency to push for collective attitudes against great power influence; while those choosing sides sacrifice their autonomy for the economic or security interests gained from the great power they align with, developing bilateral connections over a collective voice, and enabling great power interference in regional affairs.

When member states engage in hedging to preserve their autonomy, they will participate in ASEAN-led platforms to achieve the goal of interacting with great powers while also supporting ASEAN's autonomy in decision-making on regional affairs, as it helps signal their intention not to form alliances with a single power and to continue hedging. Member states support ASEAN as a suitable platform for hedging due to its position of not being dominated by any regional hegemon, which aligns with the purpose of hedging to avoid choosing a side (Kuik 2023b).

Against the background that power competition provides an environment for hedging, current observations indicate that US-China competition is intensifying (Shambaugh 2018; Stromseth 2019). Due to the stronger degree of rivalry among competing powers, the space for member states to hedge is shrinking, and the pressure exerted by both sides of the competing powers on ASEAN and its member states is rising, making hedging difficult (Korolev 2019; He & Feng 2023). In this context, member states have to either continue hedging or adjust their alignment choices.

When member states choose to align with a side, their support of ASEAN may decrease, potentially harming the organization's operations. This discussion is based on the two forms of support contextualized at the beginning of this chapter.

At the level of participation, member states that choose a side may turn to develop bilateral relations with China or the US rather than supporting the multilateral platform led by ASEAN, since the support of ASEAN is based on the national interests it can provide, when the great power can provide directly the national interests the member states aim at, they will reduce the support of ASEAN and turn to for bilateral relation instead (Weatherbee 2014). Apart from direct bilateral relations, substitute institutions created by competing great powers, such as the QUAD and AUKUS, are also weakening ASEAN's relevance in guiding regional affairs (He 2019). Similarly, China uses institutions and projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to promote its strategic influence in the region, putting question on whether member states joining these initiatives will support ASEAN (Ha 2022:10; Acharya 2017:278). When member states choose to support these institutions led by great powers, aligned with their own tendencies, ASEAN's influence decreases.

At the level of protection, a clear alignment with one great power indicates a member state's decision to trade its autonomy for security or economic benefits (Tang 2018:6; Lim & Mukherjee 2019; Lim & Cooper 2015:703). This choice weakens member states' motivation to maintain ASEAN's independence and avoid choosing sides. Moreover, ASEAN's decision-making process can be undermined when member states push the agenda of the great power they align with, leading to a lack of a unified voice among ASEAN members (Beeson 2022:6).

It is debatable whether member states also support ASEAN at the participation level by bringing the great power they align with into the multilateral platform to balance the influence of the other. Although including major powers in the institution helps build ASEAN's importance in institutionalizing and legitimizing relations between great powers and smaller states (Goh 2011; Jones 2010), it is essential to assess whether such inclusion genuinely facilitates an ASEAN-based decision-making process. Member states have been successful in expanding membership beyond ASEAN+3 to constrain China's growing influence in the East Asia Summit (EAS), thereby enhancing ASEAN's relevance (Ciorciari 2017). However, due to China's changing attitude towards pushing its agenda through ASEAN-led platforms, it is less likely that ASEAN will be strengthened by member states involving China more in these institutions or by making it adopt ASEAN norms (Ha 2022). Additionally, including great powers in the multilateral platform may complicate the ASEAN-based decision-making process due to the consensus-based procedure (Koga 2018).

Therefore, I will focus primarily on the support at the participation level, examining whether member states choose to engage in ASEAN-led platforms for their foreign policy agendas rather than pursuing bilateral measures.

Based on the above discussion, ASEAN member states can respond to the great power competition between the US and China in one of two ways: either by continuing to hedge or by choosing a side. This thesis presents two hypotheses addressing these options and develops a theoretical model to explore their implications for member states' support of ASEAN. These hypotheses, which link member states' alignment choices to their support of ASEAN, are as follows:

H1. If an ASEAN member state chooses to continue hedging, it will support ASEAN, thereby strengthening ASEAN's central role in regional affairs.

When member states prioritize autonomy over security or economic interests, they are likely to continue hedging. Hedging involves ongoing engagement with all competing powers, while deliberately maintaining an ambiguous stance and avoiding alignment with either side. Based on this strategy, member states will support ASEAN in terms of both participation and protection. Participation enables engagement with both competing powers without succumbing to dominance by either, while protection safeguards their autonomy by resisting pressures to align with one side. If ASEAN can embed the norm of preserving autonomy as a collective value, it increases the likelihood that great powers will respect this stance, reducing pressure on individual states to choose sides and thereby maintaining their independence (Mueller 2021:755). Member states' support of ASEAN institutions through active participation will, in turn, strengthen ASEAN. By advocating for ASEAN's autonomy in decision-making and fostering a unified stance, member states can resist manipulation by external powers.

H2. If an ASEAN member state chooses to align with either the US or China, it will undermine ASEAN's central role in regional affairs, thus weakening ASEAN's unity and relevance.

With intensifying great power competition, some member states may prioritize security or economic interests over autonomy, leading them to align with either the US or China rather than maintaining ASEAN's neutral stance. States that choose to align seek either security or economic gains based on leaders' assessments of what best serves their regime's stability (Kuik 2024b). However, such alignment diminishes support of ASEAN. At the participation level, aligning with a great power encourages member states to forge bilateral connections, reducing their commitment to ASEAN-led institutions. This shift may also sideline ASEAN if member states increasingly join institutions developed by the great power they align with. At the protection level, aligning with a great power's foreign policy goals weakens ASEAN's ability to maintain a collective voice on regional matters, enabling greater external influence in the region. Consequently, decreased support and weakened autonomy of ASEAN institutions undermine its relevance and independence, as member states prioritizing economic or security interests shift toward bilateral alignments over ASEAN unity.

3.3. Theoretical Framework

At the end of this chapter, I present a theoretical framework that connects member states' responses to the US-China competition with the effects of their alignment choices on ASEAN. Specifically, I examine how these choices influence member states' support of ASEAN at two levels: participation and protection. Table 1 illustrates the relationship between alignment choices and their impact on these two levels of support.

Building on the hypotheses outlined in section 3.2.4., the framework suggests that when member states choose a side, they reduce their support of ASEAN at both the participation and protection levels, ultimately weakening ASEAN. In contrast, when member states adopt a hedging approach, they strengthen ASEAN by supporting it at both levels.

Levels of Supporting ASEAN Response to great power competition	Participation	Protection
Choosing side: aligning with the US/ aligning with China Consideration of national interests: security/economic	(-) Develop bilateral relations or support substitute institutions from the great power they align with, downplaying the importance of ASEAN	(-) Diminish ASEAN autonomy by involving the great power's foreign policy agenda in regional affairs
Hedging Consideration of national interests: autonomy	(+) Participate in ASEAN-led institutions for cooperation with both competing powers	(+) Support ASEAN autonomy through forming a collective attitude to avoid choosing side between competing powers

(Table 1)

4. Methodology

In the theoretical model, I proposed two hypotheses on how ASEAN member states might respond to intensifying US-China competition: by either choosing a side (aligning with the US or China) or continuing to hedge. These responses are connected to member states' support of ASEAN at two levels—participation and protection. I argue that when member states choose a side to pursue security or economic interests with a major power, their support of ASEAN decreases at both levels. This decline is due to their tendency to form bilateral relations with the aligned power rather than operate through an ASEAN-led platform, thus acting as proxies and undermining ASEAN's autonomy. In contrast, when member states hedge to preserve their autonomy, they support ASEAN by participating in its platform and protecting its autonomy in regional affairs.

To translate this theoretical model into empirical analysis, I will compare three member states—Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia—which are expected to have different alignment choices and levels of support of ASEAN. These cases were selected based on differences in the expected national interest priorities: Vietnam faces significant security concerns due to its territorial disputes with China, especially in the South China Sea, which may lead it to tilt toward the US (Nguyễn Anh 2023). Cambodia, on the other hand, has strong economic dependence on China, often at the cost of its autonomy (Pheakdey 2012). Indonesia prioritizes maintaining autonomy in the face of great powers, influenced by its history of colonization (Roberts & Widyaningsih 2015:134-135). In literature, Vietnam and Cambodia are often noted as outliers in the hedging spectrum (Železný 2022:218) and are expected to trade autonomy for security or economic benefits in the US-China competition, potentially reducing their support of ASEAN in favor of direct ties with the aligned power.

Although analyzing all ten ASEAN member states might provide a more comprehensive view of overall support of ASEAN, time and resource constraints, as well as varying levels of access to information across all states, limit this approach. Since this research aims to illustrate how different alignment choices impact ASEAN support, selecting three cases with varied alignment strategies—tilting toward the US, tilting toward China, and hedging—is sufficient for this purpose. While this approach may not capture the complete picture of ASEAN support among all member states, I compensate by examining common levels of support in the three cases at the participation level. This approach should reveal that even states choosing a side maintain some level of support of ASEAN, indicating a

broader trend in ASEAN's resilience. In other words, if evidence shows that Vietnam and Cambodia still support ASEAN to some degree, we can reasonably expect that other member states with varying degrees of hedging also continue to support ASEAN.

The analysis will proceed in two steps: first, identifying the alignment behaviors of the selected member states, and second, examining their support of ASEAN. Each step requires distinct operational criteria.

I start by proposing criteria to distinguish between hedging and choosing sides. Previous research identifies hedging based on states' policy actions combined with government speeches to reflect their tendency to avoid choosing sides (Kuik 2021; Lim & Cooper 2015; Haacke 2019).

To determine whether a state is hedging or choosing a side, I integrate Kuik's operational criteria for hedging, which focus on "signal ambiguity" and "inclusive/exclusive involvement", along with Korolev's (2019) concept of "maintaining equidistance". When member states send ambiguous or contradictory signals that suggest engagement with both powers equally, this indicates a hedging approach. In contrast, if a member state shows clear support of one side and combines this with reduced cooperation with the other, it is considered to be choosing a side. I assess each member state's alignment choice by analyzing its interactions with the US and China across diplomatic, economic, and security domains.

In the political domain, I examine recent meetings between state leaders and analyze joint statements to assess whether diplomatic interactions are balanced or if there is a tendency to favor one great power. This includes comparing recent developments in diplomatic partnerships and post-meeting interactions with China and the US.

In the economic domain, I evaluate each state's trade relations with the great powers, foreign direct investment (FDI) sources, and responses to infrastructure projects initiated by each power.

In the security domain, I review the frequency and nature of joint military exercises between member states and each great power, as well as arms transactions and military aid, to gauge the level of security cooperation.

For the time frame, I focus on policy actions from 2010 to 2023. The year 2010 marks a significant escalation in US-China competition, evidenced by China's increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea and the US openly expressing concerns at the 17th

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) that year. Additionally, the US-ASEAN relationship was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in late 2022, making 2023 a key year for analyzing political alignment trends.

The sources are examined through the following guiding questions:

1. Does the member state interact equally with both great powers?
2. Does an increase in engagement with one power correspond with decreased interaction with the other?

After identifying the alignment choices of the selected member states, I then assess their support of ASEAN through their responses to two significant issues: the South China Sea dispute in post-2010, during which tensions with China intensified, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative. These issues not only heighten US-China competition but also challenge ASEAN's role in regional affairs. Analyzing member states' responses to these incidents will help reveal whether they continue to support ASEAN amidst intensified great power competition and, consequently, whether ASEAN is strengthened or weakened.

The operationalization of member state support of ASEAN is measured based on the two levels of support: Participation and Protection, identified in 3.1.

Participation means member states participate in an ASEAN-led framework to pursue their foreign policy rather than turn to bilateral cooperation with the US and China or support China or US-led initiatives and institutions. The positive indicator is (1) consistent participation in the ASEAN-led platform to pursue its foreign policy, and the negative indicator is (2) increased use of bilateral relations with the US or China and involvement in their initiatives.

Protection entails member states putting effort into maintaining ASEAN's autonomy and central positioning in regional affairs to avoid external influence. Indicators are public statements and actions (1) supporting ASEAN-based solutions for regional affairs and resisting initiatives or actions that could undermine ASEAN's autonomy and central position. Conversely, the negative indicator will be (2) verbal or action support of initiatives from great powers that can pressure ASEAN's autonomy and obstruct ASEAN from conducting regional solutions.

All the indicators mentioned above can be assessed through policy actions and statements, with data collected from existing literature, government documents, and media reports available in English. This includes news from member state sources like The Jakarta Post and Vietnam News, as well as international media outlets such as Reuters and BBC to capture specific statements from government officials. Due to language barriers, most sources rely on secondary materials previously translated by other researchers. To search for related academic articles, I mainly depend on Google Scholar with keywords of the case member states and their “relation with the US and China” and “support of ASEAN” under the “competition context”, the selection of the article is based on the relevance of the article title with the keywords. However, I recognize that these sources may not be entirely current and could be influenced by the researchers’ interpretations. To locate relevant information, I employed keywords such as the analyzed member state and “US-China competition” to identify alignment choices. For analyzing member states’ support of ASEAN, I searched for “South China Sea” and “FOIP” in conjunction with terms like “ASEAN Centrality”, “ASEAN unity”, and “ASEAN-led multilateral institution”, focusing mainly on publications from the last five years to mitigate the impact of outdated data. For the trade data, I access them from online data platforms such as The Observatory of Economic Complexity and World Integrated Trade Solution, as well as secondary resources.

In interpreting the collected data, I prioritize actual policy actions over verbal statements from member states for two primary reasons. First, it is often challenging to expect that statements will directly and consistently translate into real actions. Haacke (2019) observes that security assessments articulated by leaders can differ significantly from those made by military operators on the ground. Second, the verbal support that member states express for promoting cooperation is not always aligned with their actual behaviors (Jetschke & Rüland 2009). Moreover, hedging typically occurs without formal announcements (Kuik 2021). Since ASEAN states are hesitant to signal a clear alignment with either the US or China, they tend to express verbal neutrality, which diminishes the analytical usefulness of speeches in distinguishing between hedging and a tendency to choose sides.

There are certain limitations to this method. The first challenge is making valid comparisons of member states’ support of ASEAN. To narrow the scope of my analysis, I will focus on the responses of three cases to the South China Sea dispute and the US’s vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This will help examine their alignment behavior and support of ASEAN.

Given the long history of the South China Sea dispute, I will concentrate on member states' reactions from 2010 onward, as this marks a period of intensified conflict between claimant states and China, along with increased US involvement (Feng & He 2018). The FOIP was initially introduced by Japan and later adopted by the US as part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, which guides the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) involving Australia, India, Japan, and the US (Yoshimatsu 2023:35). Analyzing member states' reactions to this initiative is crucial due to FOIP's potentially exclusive stance toward China and its links to other institutions, such as QUAD. This exclusivity may indicate a tendency to balance China's influence (Calabrese 2020:311), while simultaneously contradicting ASEAN's objective of fostering an inclusive regional order and challenging its central role in the region (Koga 2023:39-40; Choong 2019:425).

Both incidents illustrate how the competition between China and the US affects the region, creating pressure for cohesive actions to promote their agendas (Feng & He 2018:7; Tan 2020) and influencing the national interests of member states. This context allows for the observation of alignment signals from member states toward competing powers and reflects their support of ASEAN. Since both incidents impact regional stability (Kim 2015; Tomotaka 2021), the responses of member states reveal their intentions to either support or diminish their support of ASEAN. However, I also recognize that considerations of national interest are inherently linked to domestic contexts, which lie beyond the scope of this model.

Secondly, hedging is a continuous strategic response to changing external power dynamics and internal needs (Kuik 2008; Jones & Jenne 2022). Therefore, the analysis can only reflect the situation of hedging—choosing sides and the support of ASEAN at a given period rather than provide a long-term trend (Chung 2009:659). Since hedging as a concept allows for significant interpretation, this research does not aim to give a strict and clear distinction about who is hedging but instead uses the concept to show relative differences between member states hedging and moving towards choosing sides through the comparison of three case studies, highlighting how these decisions affect their support of ASEAN. By doing so, the paper illustrates the complexity of domestic considerations and external environments influencing member states' approaches to the regional organization. More specifically, it demonstrates how member states' foreign policy decisions, shaped by their national interests and affected by the external environment,

reflect their responses to great power competition and consequently affect their support of ASEAN, either through participation in the institution or protecting its autonomy.

5. Case study

In the following content, I will look into three-member states' responses toward the US-China competition and their support of ASEAN: Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. For each case, I provide background on the national interests the member state will prioritize. I look into the member states' response to the IS and China competition in terms of their relation with the two competing states from three domains: political, economic, and security. Doing so enables me to classify their response to the competition as hedging, tilting to the US, or tilting to China. The second step of analysis is to look at the member states' support of ASEAN based on the response they made toward the great power competition, focusing on two incidents: The South China Sea dispute and the FOIP. I conclude each case study by evaluating the member states' support of ASEAN from the participation and protection level. After analyzing three cases, I conclude the empirical study with a discussion of findings, comparing the support of three member states with different responses toward the US and China competition, and then I address the reflection on the limitations of this research in the conclusion chapter.

5.1. Indonesia

5.1.1. Background: Prioritization of Autonomy

Regarding the prioritization of national interests, Indonesia is expected to emphasize its autonomy over security or economic benefits that might come from closer alignment with either of the great powers. This expectation is rooted in the country's historical background and development status, which provide both the space and the motivation for its leaders to maintain a non-aligned stance while promoting autonomy at the regional level. Indonesia seeks to foster an ASEAN-based response to the competition between the US and China.

The nation's colonial history has significantly shaped its pursuit of a "free and active" foreign policy doctrine (Anwar 2023), which emphasizes non-alignment among great powers to establish a regional order where ASEAN can make independent decisions without external manipulation. In the context of US-China competition, Indonesia aims to

maintain a “dynamic equilibrium,” being cautious not to lean toward either power. Its leading role in ASEAN allows it to advocate for autonomy within the organization, pushing for initiatives that enhance regional cooperation (Sebastian 2013).

Thus, Indonesia is expected to adopt a hedging strategy, which involves equal engagement with both competing powers while avoiding bias toward one side. At the same time, Indonesia seeks to participate in ASEAN and protect the organization’s agenda-setting and decision-making autonomy, thereby ensuring its own national interests. This approach has been characterized as a “hedging plus” strategy (Anwar2023), involving equal involvement with both the US and China at the national level while advancing Indonesia’s foreign policy agenda through ASEAN at the regional level. This dual strategy underscores the importance of ASEAN as both a tool and an objective for Indonesia’s efforts in hedging and preserving its autonomy.

5.1.2. Defining Indonesia’s Response to the US-China competition: Hedging

Political domain

Indonesia’s hedging strategy in the political arena, particularly in its relations with the US and China, is evident in its balanced engagement with both powers and the government’s careful avoidance of statements that might signal alignment with one side. Under President Joko Widodo, Indonesia has sought to maintain its sovereignty and autonomy while fostering closer ties with both nations. In October 2023, President Widodo visited China and met with President Xi Jinping, where they mutually agreed to strengthen the 2022-2026 Plan of Action for their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This agreement focuses on enhancing political, economic, people-to-people relations, and maritime projects, emphasizing respect for both countries’ sovereignty. The joint statement reaffirmed commitments to “open regionalism, maintaining an open and inclusive regional architecture,” and “advancing ASEAN’s vision to become the epicenter of growth” in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2023a). Moreover, both countries agreed to establish a 2+2 Dialogue Mechanism for their Foreign Ministers and Defense Ministers, expanding the original Indonesia-China High-level Dialogue and Cooperation Mechanism (HDCM). This initiative reflects a deepening and more focused improvement in bilateral relations between Indonesia and China. However, Indonesia has not limited its political cooperation to China alone. Just one week after the dialogue with China, Indonesia held its first-ever 2+2 Senior Officials’ Foreign Policy and Defense

Dialogue with the US, where the significance of ASEAN in maintaining regional stability was underscored.

A month later, President Widodo met with President Biden in Washington, resulting in a joint statement that elevated their bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, up from the previous strategic partnership established in 2013. During this meeting, President Widodo expressed the desire for the US to support ASEAN's central role and emphasized the importance of "regional and sub-regional mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions working with ASEAN on specific areas of common interest" (The White House 2023).

These recent developments indicate that Indonesia is strengthening its relationships with both the US and China with equal frequency and levels of cooperation, effectively avoiding the appearance of favoring one power over the other. Notably, in both meetings and joint statements, Indonesia has consistently highlighted the importance of respecting state sovereignty and the need to consider ASEAN in regional initiatives.

Economic domain

In the economic sector, an analysis of foreign direct investment (FDI), trade volume, and infrastructure projects between Indonesia and its competing powers—primarily the US and China—reveals significant trends. Since President Joko Widodo took office in 2014, China has consistently been Indonesia's largest source of imports and, since 2017, its largest export destination. The US ranks second in terms of export destinations (The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)).

Research by Iksan and Soong (2023) indicates that China's role as a source of FDI became prominent starting in 2017. Over the next two years, China's FDI inflow nearly equaled the outflow from the US, and by 2022, China's FDI into Indonesia was approximately three times that of the US (Shofa 2023). A notable example of economic cooperation is the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway project, developed in partnership with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This project highlights Indonesia's inclination towards closer economic ties with China, particularly in the face of competition from Japan, which was also vying for the project. However, to avoid signaling an exclusive tilt towards China, the Indonesian government initiated a separate infrastructure project with Japan (Yan 2023).

Conversely, despite relatively weaker economic ties, the Biden administration has sought to enhance economic integration with Indonesia through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). This initiative emphasizes maintaining global supply chains, particularly for critical minerals, which aligns with Indonesia's priorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2023b).

Overall, while Indonesia has developed close economic links with China, this does not necessarily indicate a clear tilt towards it. Indonesia aims to diversify its cooperation partners and avoid exclusive reliance on any single power. The ambiguous nature of its economic ties, coupled with its deliberate efforts to maintain balanced relations, illustrates Indonesia's strategy of hedging in its economic relations amidst the competition between the US and China.

Security domain

In the security sector, Indonesia maintains relatively closer ties with the US and its allies than with China. This preference stems from historical alliances with the US, uncertainties regarding China's rise, and concerns about its aggressive behavior in the South China Sea (Iksan and Soong 2023). Security cooperation between China and Indonesia remains limited, primarily existing at a low level and within informal mechanisms (Lestari et al. 2022). Additionally, the frequency of joint military training exercises between Indonesia and China is significantly lower than those conducted with the US. Indonesia's defense procurement and military modernization largely depend on Western countries, although purchases from China are on the rise. Recently, Indonesia acquired six CH-4B armed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from China, amounting to a relatively minor investment of \$30 billion, which represents only 0.09% of its total defense budget (Laksmana 2024).

Evidence of Indonesia's choice of hedging is its signals of non-alignment. For instance, in 2024, Indonesia conducted joint military exercises with both competing powers. On August 26, the annual US-led joint military exercise "Super Garuda Shield" took place in East Java, with military officials emphasizing its purpose to "strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations" while intentionally avoiding connections to the South China Sea (Reuters 2024). Just prior to this, on August 13, Indonesian and Chinese senior officials agreed to resume joint military exercises that had been suspended since 2015 due to a maritime dispute, during a joint foreign and defense dialogue between the two nations. This action underscores Indonesia's commitment to maintaining cooperation with both

the US and China, even as security collaborations tend to lean more towards the US. The announcement of resuming joint military exercises with China is indicative of Indonesia's hedging strategy, as it avoids overtly aligning with either side while asserting its autonomy from dependence on the US (Lee 2024; Seow 2024).

Overall, Indonesia's interactions with both the US and China in the context of great power competition demonstrate its hedging approach. In the political arena, Indonesia maintains a balanced frequency of engagements with both powers. Economically, its ties are stronger with China, while security relations favor the US. Despite these actual linkages, Indonesia consistently avoids signaling a clear tilt towards either competing power, reflecting its desire to maintain an equal distance in its overall relations with both the US and China.

5.1.3. Indonesia's Support of ASEAN

Indonesia's Response to the South China Sea Dispute

Indonesia has not positioned itself as an active claimant in the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. However, tensions persist between Indonesia and China concerning the Chinese-claimed "nine-dash line" and the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Furthermore, there have been escalating tensions over illegal fishing in the contested Natuna waters, a situation that has intensified since 2016 (Gindarsah 2017; Suryadinata & Izzuddin 2017).

Despite not officially claiming a stake in the dispute, Indonesia has become a "reluctant participant" due to China's increasingly aggressive actions in the contested waters and its tensions with other ASEAN member states, such as the Philippines and Vietnam (Kipgen 2021). Since taking office in 2014, President Joko Widodo has prioritized economic development, leading Indonesia to adopt a cautious approach regarding the tensions and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, Indonesia has demonstrated a commitment to protecting its sovereignty by renaming the disputed waters in 2017 and openly rejecting the legal basis of China's maritime claims (Kapoor & Sieg 2015).

Indonesia prefers to address the South China Sea issues through regional multilateral mechanisms rather than bilateral negotiations with either the US or China (Sari 2021). Instead of siding with either power, Indonesia emphasizes its autonomy and the need for

regional stability, positioning itself as an honest broker among China and the claimant states in the region. This objective has been supported through ASEAN platforms.

Indonesia has played a pivotal role in fostering dialogue concerning the South China Sea dispute, beginning with the initiatives led by diplomat Hasjim Djalal, which laid the groundwork for the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) between ASEAN and China in 2002 (McRae 2019; Putro et al. 2023). Another notable example of Indonesia's pursuit of a regional solution occurred in 2012 during the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), which failed to produce a joint statement due to Cambodian intervention aimed at preventing the internationalization of the dispute. In response, Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa engaged in shuttle diplomacy among five ASEAN member states, culminating in a six-point proposal on the South China Sea that was officially released by Cambodia. To advocate for a regional solution against China's assertiveness, Natalegawa also proposed a "non-paper" to draft a Regional Code of Conduct (COC) for negotiation with China (Thayer 2013; Weatherbee 2016). Through these efforts, Indonesia empowered ASEAN to negotiate with China while asserting its autonomy, especially given China's insistence on the full implementation of the DOC, which provides ambiguous space for its sovereignty claims in the contested areas. Notably, in 2013, China began to show willingness to engage in the negotiation process for the COC, marking its acceptance of the ASEAN-led multilateral approach (Hu 2023).

Indonesia's Response to the FOIP

In the broader context of the US strategy for the Indo-Pacific regional order, Indonesia has demonstrated a limited interest in the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), perceiving it as a potential threat to ASEAN's influence. In response to the FOIP, however, Indonesia seized the opportunity to develop its own vision for the Indo-Pacific, promoting it at the ASEAN regional level, which ultimately led to the establishment of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (Yoshimatsu 2022; He & Li 2020). Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa initially introduced the concept of an Indo-Pacific Perspective in 2013, advocating for a regional order grounded in friendship and cooperation to enhance stability. Although he sought to turn this concept into a treaty based on mutually beneficial relations among East Asia Summit (EAS) members, it garnered limited support from other member states (Natalegawa 2013; Suryadinata 2018; Tan 2020).

In 2018, under President Widodo's administration, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi proposed Indonesia's version of the Indo-Pacific concept, which diverged from the FOIP

by emphasizing cooperative relations that are “free, open, inclusive, and comprehensive”. Marsudi stated, “Together with ASEAN, Indonesia will continue to contribute to advancing strong positive cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, instead of cooperation based on suspicion or, worse, perceptions of threat” (Marsudi 2018). This initiative reflects Indonesia’s desire to avoid taking sides in the competition between major powers while simultaneously reaffirming ASEAN’s position in regional affairs (Suryadinata 2018). Marsudi communicated this concept during ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ meetings and introduced the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept (IPCC) paper at the 8th EAS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting.

Initially, however, other ASEAN member states were hesitant to embrace the IPCC due to skepticism about Indonesia’s potential dominance over the regional agenda and concerns regarding the strategic implications of such a proposal, particularly regarding its impact on relations with China (Yoshimatsu 2022; Tan 2020). The pressure to choose sides resulting from the US’s FOIP proposal eventually facilitated Indonesia’s promotion of an ASEAN-based Indo-Pacific concept. In 2019, with Thailand serving as chair, ASEAN leaders officially declared the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) at the 34th ASEAN Summit. This document incorporates elements of the FOIP, emphasizing freedom of navigation while adopting inclusive language that alleviates concerns about a balancing strategy against China. As a result, the AOIP was deemed acceptable by both competing powers while maintaining ASEAN’s autonomy and neutrality.

The AOIP underscores that ASEAN states will not create new institutions for the Indo-Pacific region but will instead collaborate with existing regional mechanisms to uphold ASEAN’s centrality in regional decision-making (Koga 2022b). In summary, Indonesia’s response to the FOIP and its advocacy for an inclusive, cooperative Indo-Pacific perspective, underscoring ASEAN’s critical role, culminated in the development of the AOIP. This approach effectively neutralized the dynamics of great power competition in shaping the regional order while preserving ASEAN’s decision-making autonomy (Anwar 2020).

5.1.4. Indonesia’s Support of ASEAN from Participation and Protection Levels

Following the empirical analysis of Indonesia’s response to the US-China competition and its reactions to incidents concerning ASEAN, I will now examine Indonesia’s hedging

strategy and its support of ASEAN through the dual framework of participation and protection developed in the theoretical chapter.

Indonesia's prioritization of national autonomy has driven it to hedge between the US and China, engaging with both powers at relatively equal levels across the political, economic, and security sectors. To avoid signaling a strong preference for either side and to maintain decision-making autonomy, Indonesia frequently emphasizes ASEAN's role, promoting the organization as the principal entity in regional affairs capable of independent decision-making.

In addressing the South China Sea dispute, Indonesia has advocated for an ASEAN-led code of conduct to negotiate with China. This includes efforts to unify other member states in forming a collective stance, demonstrating Indonesia's commitment to addressing the dispute at the regional level rather than through bilateral means, despite its security cooperation with the US and its own disputes with China. In response to the FOIP, Indonesia has also been instrumental in positioning ASEAN at the forefront of negotiations, particularly in light of exclusive proposals from the US within the context of great power competition.

At the participation level, which entails engaging with great powers through ASEAN to advance its foreign policy agenda, Indonesia has incorporated ASEAN in its responses to both powers. This is evident in the declarations made by foreign ministers regarding the great powers and in efforts to promote ASEAN-based consensus through multilateral platforms like the East Asia Summit (EAS) in support of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

At the protection level, which involves supporting ASEAN's autonomy by forming a collective stance and avoiding alignment with great power agendas, Indonesia's push for negotiations on an ASEAN-led code of conduct regarding the South China Sea and its promotion of the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept (IPCC) as the foundation for an ASEAN-based vision in response to the FOIP exemplify its efforts to protect ASEAN's autonomy.

This dual focus illustrates how Indonesia's fundamental aim of safeguarding its own autonomy is intertwined with the autonomy and independence of the region. Consequently, Indonesia's approach has led it to maintain an equal-distance engagement

with both the US and China while emphasizing ASEAN's central role in its interactions with great powers and advocating for regional solutions to prevent alignment. Ultimately, Indonesia's foreign policy seeks to preserve both its independence and a cooperative regional order, achievable through ASEAN (Weatherbee 2013; Emmers 2014; Anwar 2020). Thus, Indonesia's prioritization of national interests significantly influences its responses to great power competition at the national level and extends to regional support of ASEAN through participation and protection initiatives.

5.2. Vietnam

5.2.1. Background: Prioritization of Security

The Doi Moi reform initiated by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in 1986 marked a pivotal shift in the country's foreign policy, steering it towards multilateralism and engagement with great powers (Dosch 2006:240-241). As geopolitical conditions evolved, the urgency of addressing security concerns became paramount, overshadowing economic and diplomatic priorities (Le Thu 2018:215). National security has consistently featured in Vietnam's foreign policy agenda, closely intertwined with its economic strategies (Tran Truong 2015).

Vietnam's historical experiences, particularly the Vietnam War and ongoing tensions with China, have shaped its foreign policy, balancing cooperation with caution in its dealings with great powers (ibid.:89). The prioritization of state security is particularly salient given Vietnam's territorial disputes with China and a growing trade deficit that the government perceives as a threat to both territorial sovereignty and regime stability. The historical memory of subjugation to China, coupled with the perception of a power imbalance, makes closer alignment with this great power unlikely (Goh 2005:23).

Conversely, the United States has significantly enhanced security cooperation with Vietnam since 2011 (Tu & Nguyen 2019). The US is viewed as a crucial partner in addressing security concerns in the South China Sea (Ratner 2013:26) and as a vital source of economic development, which is integral to maintaining the regime and enhancing national power (Tran Truong 2015:93). Frustration with the limited effectiveness of ASEAN's multilateral mechanisms in resolving the South China Sea disputes has prompted Vietnam to reconsider its foreign policy, leading to a

strengthening of ties with the US and a more assertive posture against China (Dobkowska 2014:248).

Given the ongoing territorial disputes, Vietnam's economic vulnerabilities, and the US's potential role as a security provider and economic partner, it is anticipated that Vietnam will increasingly lean toward the US amid the competition between these two powers. However, the extent of this alignment may vary, influenced by the "push" and "pull" dynamics of China's actions (Tung 2022:886). This alignment is likely to drive Vietnam's advocacy for a US-led regional order within ASEAN-related discussions.

5.2.2. Defining Vietnam's Response to the US-China competition: Tilting to the US

Political domain

Since the 2010s, Vietnam has seen significant improvements in its relations with the United States; however, it remains cautious about signaling any intention to balance against China. In 2013, Vietnam elevated its bilateral relationship with the US to a "comprehensive partnership," which ranks third among Vietnam's diplomatic tiers. In contrast, Vietnam has maintained a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" with China since 2009 (Manyin 2018:213).

A notable milestone occurred in 2015 when Nguyen Phu Trong, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), became the first Secretary-General to visit the US, where he met President Barack Obama. During this visit, both leaders issued a joint statement emphasizing their commitment to facilitate cooperation in concluding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, as well as enhancing defense and security collaboration. Although the South China Sea was mentioned, it was not explicitly addressed in relation to specific regional actors (The White House 2015).

The recent upgrade of bilateral relations between Vietnam and the US to the highest level of "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2023 signals a shared vision for regional order amid China's rising influence (Trinh & Huyen Ho 2024:138). This development came shortly after a visit from Chinese President Xi Jinping to General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, during which Vietnam agreed to China's "Community with a Shared Future" proposal. Notably, the Vietnamese press referred to this as a "Community of Shared Future," indicating a more cautious approach to engagement with China compared to the Chinese declaration of a "Community of Common Destiny" (Nguyen 2023).

These developments illustrate that while Vietnam's political engagement with the US has intensified, it does not necessarily reflect a decrease in political interaction with China. Rather, Vietnam appears to be balancing its relationships with both great powers, maintaining close ties for economic and security cooperation while exercising caution in signaling a definitive alignment.

Economic domain

In the economic sector, Vietnam's interactions with both great powers reflect a sustained cooperation with China, coupled with a strategic effort to diversify its dependencies, while simultaneously increasing economic cooperation with the United States. Since 2014, China has been the largest source of imports for Vietnam, whereas the US has emerged as the primary destination for its exports. Although China remains Vietnam's largest trading partner, the growth rate of Vietnam's exports to the US has surged significantly. In 2022, the export trade value reached \$117 billion, accounting for 29.4% of total exports, with an impressive growth rate of 83.9% compared to the \$63.8 billion figure in 2019 (The Observatory of Economic Complexity). This increase may be attributed in part to the trade war between the US and China (Vu et al. 2023:264-265; Dhar et al. 2023; Dollar 2022).

Regarding foreign direct investment (FDI), China ranks among the top five investors in Vietnam, while the US was positioned 11th in 2022 (Nitta 2023). Scholars note that the emerging cooperation between the US and Vietnam, particularly in high-value-added industries, aligns more closely with Vietnam's developmental goals compared to Chinese investments, which tend to focus on manufacturing (Vu et al. 2023; Vietnam News 2024). The CPV's approval of the TPP agreement also signals Vietnam's intention to lean towards an economic system led by the US and to reduce its dependency on China (Thanh Hai 2021:176-177).

Infrastructure projects illustrate Vietnam's cautious approach toward China, especially following the 2014 HD 981 incident, where a Chinese state-owned oil company placed an oil rig in Vietnam's claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This incident marked a turning point in Vietnam's reluctance to engage with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), prompting the country to seek funding from alternative sources. For instance, Vietnam rejected loans and funding from China for projects such as the Hanoi Metro Line and the Van Don–Mong Cai highway, while expressing greater openness to loans from Japan (Liao & Dang 2020:686, 688).

Despite ongoing disputes in the South China Sea, Vietnam continues to maintain steady economic cooperation with China, recognizing it as an important goal (Tran & Sato 2018:90). However, Vietnam's reactions to China-led infrastructure projects reflect a cautious stance to avoid compromising its national security. Meanwhile, the economic ties with the US have strengthened, evidenced by a growth in export volumes and a consistent trade surplus, indicating a promising relationship between the two countries (Nguyen 2023:22).

While it may not be straightforward to determine whether Vietnam engages with both sides at an equal distance, it is reasonable to predict that Vietnam will strive to maintain positive economic relations with the US while remaining cautious of becoming overly reliant on China. Thus, when considering hedging as a relative concept, Vietnam's actions since 2010 suggest a slight tilt toward the US compared to a distancing from China. This indicates that the calculation of risk regarding state security plays a crucial role in Vietnam's policy decisions, especially in light of the economic benefits offered by China (Liao & Dang 2020).

Security domain

Vietnam's security development in relation to the two great powers is primarily reflected in the context of the South China Sea dispute. To avoid overlapping with Vietnam's support of ASEAN, this section will focus specifically on bilateral relations with the competing powers. The South China Sea dispute has become a significant barrier to the relationship between China and Vietnam, with mutual distrust impeding defense cooperation (Vu et al. 2023:259). Following the 2014 oil rig incident, Vietnam-US security relations reached a new milestone marked by the lifting of the US arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016 (Shoji 2018:4). In 2018, Vietnam participated in the US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) multilateral maritime exercises for the first time (Parameswaran 2018).

From 2016 to 2021, the US exported \$29.8 million worth of defense articles to Vietnam and transferred several large cutters to the Vietnam Coast Guard (Dung & Vu 2024). Despite these improvements in security relations with the US, Vietnam remains cautious about explicitly endorsing US security policies, fearing such moves might provoke China. This caution was evident in Vietnam's cancellation of several planned defense engagement activities with the US in 2019 (Ma & Kang 2023:374).

To address China's concerns about its growing military ties with the US, Vietnam has reiterated its "three nos" policy: "no foreign troops on Vietnamese soil, no external balancing, and no military alliances" (De Gurung 2018). However, the 2019 Defense White Paper introduced a fourth "no" with a caveat, stating that while Vietnam will not use or threaten to use force in international relations, it is open to "developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries" depending on "circumstances and specific conditions" (Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence 2019:23). This adjustment can be interpreted as a signal of Vietnam's intention to explain its ties with the US and its efforts to diversify security cooperation amid ongoing territorial disputes with China.

The upgrade of Vietnam-US cooperation to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2023 underscores Vietnam's willingness to strengthen security ties with the US without directly signaling opposition to China. The South China Sea dispute remains a critical factor influencing the depth of Vietnam-US relations (Hiep 2018a).

Overall, Vietnam's engagement with the US and China across political, economic, and security domains reveals a significant trend: Vietnam is increasingly seeking closer relations with the US, primarily driven by its territorial disputes with China (Van Quyet & Nguyet 2023). While Vietnam strives to maintain stable relations with China in the political and economic spheres and avoids misinterpreting its growing ties with the US as a tilt against China, its cautious approach to China—coupled with selective improvement in security cooperation with the US—suggests a notable shift. This reflects a tendency toward aligning with the US in the context of great power competition, particularly regarding the South China Sea issue. The subsequent paragraph will discuss how this alignment choice, leaning more toward siding with the US than maintaining equal distance for autonomy—as the case of Indonesia—affects Vietnam's support of ASEAN in response to the South China Sea issue and the FOIP.

5.2.3. Vietnam's Support of ASEAN

Vietnam's Response to the South China Sea Dispute

Vietnam is a claimant state with a direct territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea, particularly concerning the Spratly and Paracel Islands. While Vietnam has increased cooperation with other actors, including the US, to bolster its bargaining position, it also utilizes ASEAN as a platform to garner international support. This strategy was

particularly evident during its chairmanship in 2010 when Vietnam included the South China Sea dispute in the agendas of various ASEAN multilateral meetings, such as the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting and ASEAN-led forums, including ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit (Tran & Sato 2018:87; Shoji 2012:12-13). This effort successfully brought US voices into the discussions, notably when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized the importance of freedom of navigation during an ARF-related press conference (Shoji 2016:52).

However, Vietnam's efforts to resolve the South China Sea dispute have faced significant challenges. On one hand, China maintains a strong stance against the internationalization of the issue; on the other hand, the lack of consensus among ASEAN member states complicates Vietnam's objectives. For instance, during the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), Vietnam insisted on strong language regarding the South China Sea in the communiqué. In contrast, other member states favored less confrontational wording, leading to the unprecedented failure to issue a communiqué (Hu 2023:128).

Vietnam's active engagement with ASEAN contributed to the drafting of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 and the push for effective dispute settlement mechanisms. However, Vietnam's differing views from China have slowed negotiations between ASEAN and China (Tüter 2022:66). Despite these efforts, China continued its assertive actions in the disputed territories, particularly following the 2014 oil rig incident. Consequently, Vietnam has shifted its approach to prioritize bilateral negotiations with China, establishing a hotline for emergency communications (Vu et al. 2023:259).

While Vietnam has utilized ASEAN to promote its political interests, its firm stance on national security has hindered the organization's ability to form a collective agreement. The consensus-based decision-making process within ASEAN has often acted as a "golden cage" for member states, prompting Vietnam to focus more on "sub-regional and mini-lateral initiatives" for dispute resolution in the South China Sea (Dosch 2006:254). Additionally, while Vietnam has not overtly stated it, there has been a noticeable increase in its ties with other powers, particularly the US.

The previous strategy of hedging—balancing deterrence with reassurance measures, including the effort to internationalize the issue through ASEAN—has proven ineffective in light of escalating disputes (Vuving 2014). This has led to a policy adjustment in which

Vietnam seeks closer alignment with the US, elevating bilateral relations as crucial to fulfilling its security interests, as evidenced by its support of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative.

Vietnam's Response to the FOIP

Vietnam's response to the FOIP initiative is closely linked to its security interests, particularly in light of the threats posed by China, which have exacerbated the South China Sea dispute (Ross 2021). As a continuation of President Obama's pivot policy, which marked a significant turning point in US-Vietnam relations, the FOIP is a strategic signal of a US-led security order aimed at countering Chinese influence. Consequently, Vietnam's support for the FOIP and its openness to the US-initiated Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) would challenge an inclusive regional order championed by ASEAN. This engagement demonstrates Vietnam's attitude toward ASEAN's central role amid competing regional frameworks.

Following US President Donald Trump's introduction of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept at the APEC Summit in 2017, Vietnam quickly recognized the significance of the term. During a subsequent visit to Vietnam, a joint statement emphasized the term "Indo-Pacific" twice (Vietnam Embassy 2017). In 2018, during a visit to India, President Tran Dai Quang reaffirmed Vietnam's support of FOIP in a joint statement, underscoring the importance of the Indo-Pacific region concerning sovereignty, international law, freedom of navigation, sustainable development, and a fair and open trade and investment system (Vietnam Government News 2018).

While Vietnam has demonstrated more explicit diplomatic support of the FOIP, its defense sector has maintained a more cautious stance. This is evident in the absence of references to the FOIP during discussions on security and strategy by the Vietnamese Minister of Defense at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore the same year (Hiep 2018b:5). As Tung (2022) argues, Vietnam's engagement with the FOIP has been selective, focusing primarily on South China Sea-related issues, while consciously avoiding any clear alignment that could escalate tensions with China.

Nonetheless, Vietnam has pursued indirect strategic cooperation by strengthening ties with QUAD members without formally joining the group. In 2020, Vietnam participated in a QUAD meeting alongside New Zealand and South Korea, signaling its closer alignment with US-led regional initiatives. While the discussions primarily revolved around

pandemic responses, Vietnam's involvement as the only ASEAN member indicates its increasing proximity to this regional order, which has strategic implications concerning China (Panda & Gunasekara-Rockwell 2021:115).

Overall, Vietnam's approach to the FOIP reveals a nuanced stance. While it supports the US-led initiative, it grapples with the contrasting values it presents compared to ASEAN's inclusive regional framework. There are shared values between the FOIP and the ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), yet the former suggests a more exclusive regional order that could undermine ASEAN's leadership. Despite being one of the most supportive ASEAN member states of FOIP (Huong 2020), Vietnam also champions the facilitation of the AOIP, thus pursuing policies within an ASEAN-led context. However, Vietnam's engagement with QUAD clearly distinguishes it from other ASEAN member states, many of which remain skeptical or silent on initiatives that may threaten ASEAN's central role in the region (Laksmana 2020:112).

5.2.4. Vietnam's Support of ASEAN from Participation and Protection Levels

Vietnam's response to the South China Sea dispute and the US-led FOIP initiative indicates a gradual shift toward aligning more closely with the US's agendas, despite Vietnam's ongoing participation in ASEAN platforms to promote its foreign policy.

At the participation level, Vietnam has sought to garner international support of its stance in the South China Sea through ASEAN-related forums while simultaneously leveraging the US's influence to bolster its position against China. However, the actual policy measures Vietnam has undertaken to address its conflict with China and enhance its security capabilities have primarily occurred through bilateral engagements with great powers. This trend suggests a pivot from a multilateral approach to a bilateral one, reflecting Vietnam's desire for more effective strategies to safeguard its security interests.

Consequently, Vietnam's engagement with the FOIP signals a diminishing emphasis on ASEAN's protective role, although this shift does not directly undermine the organization. With active support of the FOIP initiative and participation in the QUAD Plus mechanism, Vietnam is enhancing its security interests through collaboration with the US, which may inadvertently diminish ASEAN's autonomy and influence over regional agendas.

The intensification of US-China competition has compelled Vietnam to adopt a more pronounced alignment choice, reducing its effective support of ASEAN in the protection level. Although Vietnam's actions may not explicitly diminish ASEAN's role, they do align with the US's proposed regional order and institutions, which risks marginalizing ASEAN's relevance.

On one hand, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has demonstrated to Vietnam the limitations of engaging both competing powers through ASEAN, revealing that this platform has proven neither efficient nor effective in resolving the dispute. On the other hand, the US has signaled its intention to strengthen partnerships with Vietnam, which aligns with Vietnam's prioritization of enhancing its security interests. This dynamic has ultimately led to a policy shift favoring closer ties with the US. The consensus-based, non-binding mechanisms traditionally employed by ASEAN to address the South China Sea disputes are perceived as inadequate by Vietnamese authorities. Consequently, Vietnam has increasingly sought to forge closer ties with the US and invite greater US influence in the region to meet its security needs (Blazevic 2012:91).

5.3. Cambodia

5.3.1. Background: Prioritization of Economy

As a member state with a lower level of economic development, maintaining its economic interests and achieving steady growth is crucial for the survival of Prime Minister Hun Sen's autocratic regime (Var 2021:194). Consequently, Cambodia's foreign policy is primarily driven by its economic development goals (Vannarith 2018). This perspective not only underpins Cambodia's engagement in economic regional integration but also explains its expected alignment choices amid US-China competition, with a notable tilt toward China.

Cambodia's reliance on foreign aid necessitates adherence to the demands of its donors. In this context, China emerges as a more attractive partner since it does not impose stringent requirements regarding human rights and democratic reforms, unlike the US and other Western nations. Instead, China focuses on economic development and infrastructure support in the recipient country (Luo 2024:75; Po 2019:48). Following the economic sanctions imposed by Western powers on Cambodia in 1997 after the violent coup that enabled Hun Sen to seize power, China stepped in as a primary foreign aid

provider and has been Cambodia's largest source of financial assistance since 1999. By the end of 2023, China accounted for 37% of Cambodia's public debt and more than half of its bilateral debt (Cambodia Public Debt Statistical Bulletin 2024:25).

Given this significant economic dependence and the increasing presence of China in the region, Cambodia is likely to continue favoring China to fulfill its economic interests, especially in light of the negative relations with the US, which pressures Cambodia on democratic issues. However, this "patron-client relationship" raises concerns about China's potential interference in both Cambodia's domestic policy and ASEAN regional affairs, given Cambodia's status as a client state (Bunthorn 2022:131; Po & Primiano 2020:457; Ciorciari 2013:39; Po & Sims 2022; Chen 2018:371).

5.3.2. Defining Cambodia's Response to the US-China competition: Tilting to China

Political domain

Cambodia's political relationship with the competing great powers—China and the United States—has been significantly influenced by its economic ties and the pressures faced by Prime Minister Hun Sen's regime due to the poor human rights and democratic records, which are often linked to the conditions for receiving foreign aid. In 2012, Cambodia and China elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, primarily driven by China's economic aid aimed at supporting Cambodia's development and infrastructure projects. This alignment also coincides with Cambodia's adoption of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chen 2018).

Conversely, Cambodia's strategic partnership with the US has traditionally been framed within the context of ASEAN relations. Despite Cambodia's importance in countering terrorism and the US's desire to prevent a complete alignment of Cambodia with China, American engagement has been challenging. During President Obama's administration, efforts were made to strengthen ties, but the US's increasing criticism of Cambodia's human rights situation has left the relationship tense, particularly in high-level meetings (Bulut 2017:262).

The bilateral relationship further deteriorated under President Trump, who shifted the US focus from a "pivot to Asia strategy to "America First". This change led to reduced economic ties, disappointing Cambodia's expectations (Doung et al. 2022:75). Additionally, Hun Sen's concerns about non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the

growing strength of the opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), prompted a crackdown on dissent, culminating in the dissolution of the CNRP on charges of “conspiring with the United States to overthrow the government” (Ponniiah 2018). The closure of the US-based National Democratic Institute further illustrated this distancing (Lum 2022:5-7).

In contrast to its accusatory stance toward the US, Cambodia has demonstrated a supportive attitude toward China. This is exemplified by its explicit endorsement of the one China policy and its role as one of the first countries to embrace the Chinese proposal for a "Community with a Shared Future" (Lim 2023:7-8). These actions reflect Cambodia's tilt toward China and its strategic distancing from the United States.

Economic domain

In terms of trade relations, Cambodia relies heavily on the United States for exports and on China for imports. The US has been the largest export destination for Cambodian goods. Despite a decline in bilateral relations during the late 2010s (Doung et al. 2022), the trade value between the two countries has steadily increased, rising from \$3.57 billion in 2017 to \$13 billion in 2022 (The Observatory of Economic Complexity 2022). Conversely, China became Cambodia's largest source of imports in the late 2000s, maintaining a share of approximately 30% in 2011, peaking at about 37% in both 2017 and 2019. While China has emerged as one of the top five export destinations for Cambodia since 2014, exports to the US have not seen significant growth (World Integrated Trade Solution 2010-2022).

Cambodia's increasing trade dependency has been further underscored by the implementation of the Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement in 2022, signaling Cambodia's intention to mitigate potential economic sanctions from the EU and the US by strengthening ties with China (Vannarith 2023:4). Additionally, foreign aid and foreign direct investment (FDI) play critical roles in Cambodia's foreign policy strategy when engaging with external actors. Chinese FDI in Cambodia rose from \$600 million in 2012 to approximately \$1 billion in 2016, increasing from 20.69% to 29.92% of total FDI in the country (Po & Primiano 2020:452). By mid-2022, China's Official Development Assistance (ODA) accounted for nearly 50% of Cambodia's foreign debt, totaling \$7.22 billion (Vathanak 2021:5). This investment is closely linked to Cambodia's infrastructure development; research indicates that 30% of the country's roads, 50% of large-scale bridges, and most airport and port construction projects have been funded by Chinese aid (Vathanak 2021:9).

In contrast to the growing ties with China, Cambodia's economic relationship with the US has deteriorated, primarily due to tensions over US support of opposition parties that achieved significant victories in 2013 (Luo 2024:78; Lum 2022:5). In 2018, in response to criticism regarding Cambodia's democratic backsliding—particularly after the opposition party CNRP was dissolved and the ruling party secured all National Assembly seats—the US imposed sanctions on Cambodian officials, including asset freezes and travel bans (Luo 2024:79). That year also saw a 10% reduction in US foreign aid, with a projected 75% decrease in annual assistance for the following year (Doung et al. 2022:77-79). The US suspended the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), from which Cambodia had benefited (Vannarith 2023:3).

The discussions above illustrate that the existing tensions between Cambodia and the US have intensified under the framework of US-China competition, resulting in Cambodia's decision to tilt towards China while distancing itself from the US. Sanctions and pressure from the US have only reinforced Cambodia's commitment to its ironclad friendship with China (Po & Primiano 2020:457; Poling et al. 2022).

Security domain

A similar pattern of Cambodia's alignment with China while distancing itself from the US is evident in the security sector. For anti-terrorism purposes, the US has engaged with Cambodia through the joint military exercise 'Angkor Sentinel', conducted between the U.S. Army Pacific and the Royal Cambodian Army since 2010. However, as bilateral relations soured, Cambodia suspended the military exercise in 2017, denying that China's influence played a role in the decision. Concurrently, the US halted military assistance and the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program to Cambodia (Lum 2022:2). In contrast, China has emerged as the primary military aid donor to Cambodia, with their bilateral relations remaining steady and even strengthening. The joint military exercise 'Golden Dragon', launched in 2016 and aimed at counter-terrorism, serves as a substitute for the canceled Angkor Sentinel (Luo 2024:78). In 2018, China provided approximately \$100 million in military aid to Cambodia, while the US withdrew its funding following the Cambodian government's crackdown on opposition parties (Po & Sims 2022:42).

Cambodia's dependence on Chinese security support is further influenced by its relationship with Vietnam, which has a history of invasions and ongoing issues with illegal

immigration. Consequently, aligning with China is seen as a more viable option for enhancing Cambodia's defense capabilities in the context of rising tensions with both Vietnam and China amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics (Po & Primiano 2020:455; Luo 2024:74). Given the deterioration of relations with the US and the increasing demand for security resources from China, Cambodia has made a clear alignment choice favoring China in the security domain, taking definitive actions to replace US influence with Chinese support. A notable example is the Cambodian government's rejection of the US's offer to repair facilities at Ream Naval Base in 2019 (Bradford 2021:15-16), while construction projects funded by China began in 2022 (Sochan & Chheng 2022).

The discussion above illustrates that economic dependency has played a significant role in Cambodia's alignment during the US-China competition. Pressure from the US on Hun Sen's regime to comply with conditions for financial aid, combined with China's role as a more accommodating aid provider, has led Cambodia to develop a closer relationship with China. Therefore, when assessing Cambodia's relationships with these competing powers through the lens of hedging versus choosing sides, it is clear that Cambodia has made an explicit choice to align with China rather than maintain an equal distance from both powers. Conversely, this closer relationship with China has come at the cost of Cambodia's ties with the US. Consequently, Cambodia's response to this power competition reflects a distinct alignment tilted towards China, a behavior that undermines its policy autonomy, particularly in the economic sphere. This alignment goes beyond mere economic clientelism, as it allows China to build local support of its influence in Southeast Asian regional affairs (Chen 2019:376).

5.3.3. Cambodia's Support of ASEAN

Cambodia's Response to the South China Sea Dispute

Before examining Cambodia's response to the South China Sea dispute, it is essential to understand the historical context behind Cambodia's preference for bilateral engagement over multilateral approaches to regional security. Cambodia's reliance on China for security stems from a perception of ASEAN's ineffectiveness, particularly highlighted by the organization's failure to resolve the Thai-Cambodia dispute over the Preah Vihear temple and Thailand's invasion in 2008 (Po & Primiano 2020:456). This perception significantly influences Cambodia's reluctance to support ASEAN-based solutions for the South China Sea conflict. While Cambodia does not have a direct territorial dispute with China in this context, its inclination to tilt toward China in exchange for economic benefits

and a degree of security assurance diminishes the priority of ASEAN in its foreign policy considerations.

Although China has engaged with ASEAN's multilateral platform regarding the South China Sea, its preference for bilateral negotiations became more pronounced after 2009. During this time, the Chinese Ambassador to ASEAN asserted that the South China Sea dispute should be treated as an issue between individual countries rather than between China and ASEAN, openly challenging ASEAN's "conference diplomacy" (Sato 2013:101). Cambodia subsequently supported this stance. A notable incident occurred during Cambodia's chairmanship of the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, where Cambodia refused to include the South China Sea dispute involving China, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the joint communiqué, arguing that it should remain a bilateral issue rather than a regional concern (Yu 2024:104-105). The lack of consensus resulted in the first-ever failure to issue a joint communiqué, thereby enhancing China's negotiating position in territorial disputes by dividing ASEAN members and undermining the organization's negotiation capabilities (Kim 2015:124).

In 2016, ahead of the 49th ASEAN Summit, Cambodia attempted to block a joint communiqué that supported the ruling of an international court on the South China Sea dispute (Var 2017:19-20; Yu 2024:105). Cambodia emphasized that the resolution should be handled "by the claimant states and China peacefully and bilaterally, not between ASEAN and China" (Var 2017:20). Although a joint communiqué was eventually issued, it failed to address China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea (Var 2021:203). While Cambodia denied being influenced by China, instead blaming ASEAN's disunity for the failure to issue a joint communiqué, there is substantial evidence of its supportive actions in furthering China's strategy to block an ASEAN-based approach to the South China Sea dispute and promote bilateral negotiations in exchange for economic gains.

Following the 2016 arbitral verdict, China announced approximately \$600 million in aid to Cambodia. Shortly after the meeting, President Xi Jinping visited Cambodia and canceled \$89 million of Cambodia's debt (Po & Primiano 2020:454). As a non-claimant state with strong economic ties to China, Cambodia's response to the South China Sea dispute does not favor a regional solution but rather seeks to leverage the influence of the great power with which it aligns to reap economic benefits. This behavior indicates that Cambodia is willing to trade its autonomy for economic gain, ultimately undermining

ASEAN's capacity to generate consensus-based regional solutions amid great power influence.

Cambodia's Response to the FOIP

Unlike its strong support of China in the South China Sea dispute, Cambodia has embraced the FOIP initiative, although it links the initiative more closely with Japan than with the US, as well as supporting the ASEAN-led ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) to further its national interests. Cambodia was among the first member states to publicly endorse the FOIP when it was introduced by Japan in 2017 (Vannarith 2022b). This support is noteworthy given Cambodia's close relationship with China, which is wary of the exclusive aspects of the FOIP. Additionally, Cambodia has expressed strong support of the ASEAN-led AOIP, particularly its principles of respecting "ASEAN centrality, openness, inclusivity, and respect for sovereignty" (Cheunboran 2021:22). During Cambodia's chairmanship in 2022, a joint declaration was adopted at the 40th ASEAN Summit, outlining priority areas to promote the AOIP, emphasizing the "ASEAN-led mechanism" five times. Leaders expressed a welcoming attitude toward cooperation with external partners for AOIP projects, grounded in principles such as "strengthening ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, and complementarity with existing cooperation frameworks", all while maintaining "ASEAN Centrality and Unity without creating new mechanisms" (ASEAN 2022). The declaration also reaffirmed respect for the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, indicating that Cambodia did not oppose addressing the South China Sea issue at the international level rather than solely through bilateral negotiations under the AOIP framework.

It is important to note that Cambodia supports the FOIP without directly linking it to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) (Vannarith 2019). From this perspective, Cambodia's endorsement of the ASEAN-led AOIP and its support of the FOIP reflect a careful balance aimed at avoiding any threats to its relationship with China.

Furthermore, Cambodia's support of the FOIP appears to be more focused on strengthening ties with Japan rather than the US. Japan plays a significant role in Cambodia's foreign policy diversification strategy, which seeks to reduce over-dependence on China (Koga 2022c:105), especially given that an alliance with the US is not a viable option. By supporting the FOIP and the development of the Japan-ASEAN partnership, Cambodia has secured assistance from Japan for projects like the sky-train

infrastructure in Phnom Penh and the upgrade of the port in Sihanoukville, which previously involved substantial Chinese investment (Luo 2024:81-82). This strategy reflects Cambodia's effort to enhance its relationship with Japan within the ASEAN framework, rather than aligning solely with China (Vannarith 2022a:360-361).

In this context, while Cambodia openly supports the FOIP, it does not seek to elevate US influence in the region. Instead, it aims to find common ground between the FOIP and ASEAN's AOIP to promote an inclusive regional order, maintain ASEAN autonomy, and avoid potential exclusivity within the FOIP (Deth 2023:28). By doing so, Cambodia manages to navigate the complexities of great power competition while pursuing its national interests for foreign aid.

5.3.4. Cambodia's Support of ASEAN from Participation and Protection Levels

Cambodia's support of ASEAN can be understood through its strategic alignment with China, as the nation leverages its participation in the organization to advance national interests and attract foreign investment. For Cambodia, ASEAN functions as a vital platform for enhancing its influence and securing economic benefits.

From a protection perspective, two incidents reveal contrasting outcomes. In the context of the South China Sea issue, Cambodia permitted China to exert significant influence over ASEAN, effectively using this relationship to negotiate regional matters (Po & Sims 2022:44). By obstructing the issuance of joint communiqués during the 2012 and 2016 ASEAN meetings, Cambodia undermined ASEAN's autonomy in making regional decisions.

In contrast, Cambodia's response to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative reflects a more supportive stance toward ASEAN. By endorsing the ASEAN-led ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and emphasizing inclusivity in Japan's interpretation of the FOIP, Cambodia seeks to promote an inclusive regional order, despite potential concerns from China. This approach enables Cambodia to distance itself from potentially exclusive frameworks like the QUAD, underscoring its commitment to preserving ASEAN's central role in regional affairs.

Ultimately, these motivations align with the interests of member states in securing foreign aid, illustrating how economic considerations profoundly influence Cambodia's foreign policy. This dynamic suggests that Cambodia's goal extends beyond merely maintaining

ASEAN's autonomy; it seeks to ensure the organization remains relevant as a conduit for attracting external support. Given its significant role in ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making processes, Cambodia enhances its importance to external powers (Luo 2024:82-83).

In summary, although Cambodia may have compromised ASEAN's autonomy on specific issues, particularly the South China Sea, it continues to advocate for ASEAN-led initiatives to ensure that the organization retains its influence and is not overshadowed by external powers.

5.4. Discussion

The analysis above identified three ASEAN member states' different alignment choices under the US-China competition and analyzed their support of ASEAN in terms of participation and protection. In this research, I develop two hypotheses: **H1. If an ASEAN member state chooses to continue hedging, it will support ASEAN, thereby strengthening ASEAN's central role in regional affairs,** and **H2. If an ASEAN member state decides to align with either the US or China, it will undermine ASEAN's central role in regional affairs, thus weakening ASEAN's unity and relevance.** The empirical analysis results have shown that Indonesia and Vietnam correspond with Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively. A closer look at the participation and protection levels in these two cases also reflects clear tendencies in either supporting or reducing support of ASEAN's involvement and protection.

Indonesia represents the case of a hedging state, driven by its prioritization of autonomy as a national interest. By maintaining equal distance and avoiding indications of alignment with either of the competing powers, Indonesia supports ASEAN in both participation and protection levels to achieve its hedging strategy. At the participation level, this support is reflected in the member state's involvement in ASEAN and its efforts to reemphasize ASEAN's central role in interactions with competing powers. At the protection level, Indonesia's role is seen in its active efforts to build consensus among member states during disputes, such as in the South China Sea, and in promoting ASEAN-based initiatives, such as responses to the FOIP. These efforts aim to prevent the regional organization from being influenced by external forces, while simultaneously

strengthening its autonomy. These actions align with Indonesia's ultimate goal of maintaining autonomy in national policy decision-making.

Vietnam, on the other hand, demonstrates how the prioritization of security as a national interest has driven it to choose sides, leading to a decrease in support of ASEAN at both participation and protection levels. Vietnam's approach to the South China Sea dispute often involves bilateral dealings and participation in the QUAD, even though such actions may marginalize ASEAN's position in managing regional affairs. Despite some minimal support, such as endorsing the AOIP as an ASEAN-based response and refraining from actively hindering ASEAN's decision-making processes, Vietnam's overall actions reveal a reduced commitment to ASEAN.

The analysis of Cambodia, however, yields more mixed results. Cambodia's alignment with China for economic benefits has often signaled a strong stance favoring China, raising expectations that it would act as an agent of Chinese influence in ASEAN's regional affairs. This is partly accurate. In the case of the South China Sea dispute, Cambodia undermined ASEAN's autonomy by blocking collective consensus in exchange for economic benefits from China, as it is not directly involved in the dispute. However, Cambodia's swift support of the FOIP and the ASEAN-based AOIP indicates that it still retains a certain degree of support of ASEAN. This suggests that even member states that align with external powers recognize the importance of ASEAN in maintaining influence and bargaining power with great powers. Therefore, Cambodia's support of ASEAN, though contrary to expectations, appears to stem more from strategic considerations of influence and bargaining rather than a genuine commitment to ASEAN-based solutions.

Examining the broader implications of member states' alignment choices on their support of ASEAN, Indonesia's behavior as a hedging state aligns with the concept of a "buffer state" and highlights its use of the ASEAN platform to mediate disputes among member states caused by great power competition. Indonesia's efforts to initiate ASEAN-based decisions and bridge member states to reach consensus, even after setbacks such as the failure of a joint statement on the South China Sea, demonstrate the role of hedging states in reinforcing ASEAN's centrality in regional decision-making. In contrast, the cases of Vietnam and Cambodia illustrate how alignment with external powers undermines ASEAN's unity and coherence. Vietnam's shift to bilateral approaches in dealing with the South China Sea dispute and its participation in competing frameworks, alongside Cambodia's obstruction of regional solutions and occasional instrumental use of ASEAN,

reveal the challenges posed by such alignment choices. Even though Cambodia's support of the AOIP demonstrates some alignment with ASEAN initiatives, it does not change the broader context in which ASEAN is more often used than genuinely promoted.

The future development of ASEAN will depend on the ability of hedging states to continue acting as buffers and the recalculation of aligning member states between autonomy and the benefits gained from great powers. This recalibration could influence these states to either strengthen their commitment to the organization or shift further toward external powers. However, all three analyzed states continue to support ASEAN to a minimal extent, aiming to leverage the organization to enhance their influence and secure their national interests when interacting with great powers. This dynamic enables ASEAN's continued existence despite its marginalizing role. As Narine pointed out, the importance of ASEAN having international influence is important and cannot be hindered by its internal weakness (Narine 2009:383), which still provide incentive for member state to act united despite their diverging interests.

Two additional findings emerge beyond the connections to the hypotheses. First, although the three analyzed member states have engaged with ASEAN to pursue their national interests, different prioritizations of these interests have led to varying patterns and degrees of support or reduction of support of the regional organization. The prioritization of autonomy as a national interest aligns with ASEAN's foundational purpose of preserving member states' sovereignty in interactions with great powers. However, member states prioritizing economic or security interests find greater benefits from closer alignment with great powers in the context of competition, rendering ASEAN less significant and more instrumental in their strategies. This raises questions about whether increased participation in ASEAN, such as through the inclusion of great powers in its multilateral framework, inherently strengthens the organization. It may instead increase external influence and make consensus-based solutions more challenging to achieve.

Second, member states have often used their ASEAN chairmanship to advance their foreign policy interests. Indonesia leveraged its chairmanship to secure support from great powers for ASEAN's central position in regional decision-making through high-level engagements. In contrast, Vietnam and Cambodia used their chairmanship opportunities to push or hinder agendas related to the South China Sea, either by introducing the issue into discussions or blocking efforts to form a stronger collective stance against China. The chairmanship provides member states with enhanced leverage, which can either stabilize

the organization or expose its vulnerabilities in forming autonomous and coherent decisions.

This analysis demonstrates how great power competition has influenced ASEAN and its member states, creating forces that either strengthen the organization or erode its unity as member states pursue their national interests. The consequences for ASEAN depend on the intensity of competition and the calculations of member states. Although the scope of this study is too limited to provide a comprehensive picture of ASEAN's development, the current trends suggest continued existence but with a marginalized role for the organization. Indonesia's critical role in supporting ASEAN's relevance and autonomy is particularly noteworthy. However, debates persist about whether Indonesia continues to prioritize ASEAN's central position in regional affairs or is increasingly shifting toward bilateral relations with external powers, bypassing the ASEAN platform (Sebastian 2013:15-20). While bilateral engagement does not necessarily undermine ASEAN's autonomy and centrality in decision-making (*ibid.*:21), it signals that supporting ASEAN as part of Indonesia's hedging strategy may no longer be its foremost priority. Ultimately, member states' engagement with ASEAN continues to be driven more by responses to great power competition than by aspirations for regional integration, reinforcing ASEAN's precarious yet enduring role in Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape (Tan 2015:299).

6. Conclusion

Under great power competition which narrows the scope for hedging, ASEAN member states tend to protect their interests and maintain the ability to interact with the great powers. These preferences of interests and choices consequently affect their relationship with ASEAN as the common body for diplomatic and regional affairs (Emmers 2023:19-20).

This research seeks to bridge the gap in the existing literature regarding hedging strategies and member states' support of regional organizations in the context of great power competition by comparing and analyzing the responses of three ASEAN member states to US-China competition and their corresponding support of ASEAN. The findings demonstrate that hedging states, such as Indonesia, prioritize autonomy and national interests. Indonesia exemplifies a state that supports ASEAN at both participation and protection levels, using the regional organization as a platform to pursue its foreign policy objectives and maintain a dynamic equilibrium. Simultaneously, Indonesia protects ASEAN's autonomy and central role in fostering collective, regionally-based solutions. Conversely, Vietnam's prioritization of security interests has led to a trade-off in autonomy as it aligns with the US, resulting in decreased support of ASEAN. This shift is reflected in Vietnam's preference for bilateral relations with great powers and its participation in alternative institutions rather than ASEAN, aimed at maximizing its national interests. Cambodia, as another state that has chosen alignment—toward China for economic gains—has undermined ASEAN's autonomy in decision-making to align with China's preferences. However, Cambodia's selective support of ASEAN-based initiatives, such as the AOIP in connection with the FOIP, indicates an effort to maintain some degree of autonomy and influence within the regional organization for future bargaining with great powers.

This analysis addresses the question of how US-China competition affects member states' support of ASEAN. The intensifying rivalry, reflected in actions related to the South China Sea and exclusive initiatives like FOIP that challenge ASEAN's inclusive regional order, pressures member states to either continue hedging or align with one side, depending on their prioritized national interests. When a member state opts to hedge and maintain autonomy, it supports ASEAN by involving the organization in its foreign policy objectives (participation level) and by protecting ASEAN's autonomy and central role in regional decision-making, ensuring it is not undermined by external power-driven institutions

(protection level). In contrast, when a member state aligns with a great power for economic or security benefits, its support of ASEAN diminishes on both levels, though selectively, depending on how its interests are affected by specific issues, as seen in Cambodia's case. This research aims to bring greater attention to the hedging literature within the ASEAN context by exploring the nuanced and dynamic calculations of national interests among member states and how these calculations drive variations in support of the organization amidst great power competition.

This study acknowledges the limitation of not being able to provide a confirmed answer to ASEAN's long-term development, as national interest prioritization and alignment behaviors among member states are continuously evolving. Consequently, their support of ASEAN across different issues also fluctuates. It remains uncertain whether ASEAN will ultimately be diminished, as its trajectory depends on the interplay of supportive and diminishing forces from its member states. However, great power competition has exposed and intensified internal incoherence among member states (Ha 2022:12), complicating the collective decision-making process. Despite this, ASEAN has managed to respond to key incidents with joint declarations, indicating that member states still recognize a need for the organization's maintenance, even if not all of them are active in preventing its marginalization in the region.

Future research could investigate the domestic factors influencing the prioritization of national interests and member states' support of ASEAN, beyond the external pressures of great power competition. Additionally, further studies could explore the specific conditions under which member states choose to support ASEAN, even when leaning toward great power alignment. In other words, it would be valuable to examine the circumstances under which the trade-off of autonomy reverses in favor of reliance on the regional organization for advancing national interests.

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