**Will ASEAN Survive the China-US Confrontation?**

China has been actively pushing the US out of its place as “world hegemon” for a number of years now. Through soft power - lucrative trade agreements, economic aid, generous loans and investments - the PRC gains partners and allies across the world. The scale of China’s “offensive” is such that the PRC is cooperating not only with each state bilaterally, but even with entire blocs of states. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, in which almost all African states participate, has been operating for many years. In 2014, the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum was established with the participation of all independent states in the Americas except the USA and Canada. In 2020, the PRC has surpassed the USA as the main trading partner of the entire European Union.

Interaction with the closest regional bloc, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), is of particular importance to China. The ASEAN countries directly border the PRC, and therefore a successful relationship with them is important not only for China’s economic development, but also for the Celestial Empire’s security.

It is interesting that the states that created ASEAN in the 1960s - Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia - already had a clear pro-Western orientation at the time. In countries such as Thailand and Malaysia, American and British troops were even based there (Thailand not only gave the Americans their land for military installations, but also fought alongside the US in Vietnam). And one of the reasons these states established ASEAN was the fear of the spread of communist ideology in the region. The main “spreaders of communism” located in East and South-East Asia (SEA) at the time were China, North Vietnam, the Burmese rebels and North Korea. Accordingly, friendship with these countries was not originally on the ASEAN agenda. However, as time went on, the ASEAN countries evolved, realized their own and regional interests and worked out their own course. In the meantime, China was emerging as a leading regional power, with which it was not profitable not to cooperate. In 1991, the PRC and ASEAN formally established a relationship that has evolved steadily since then. In 2003, China became a strategic partner of ASEAN by entering the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. In the next decade, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Zone was established, and in 2020, ASEAN became China’s main trading partner, reaching more than $731bln in trade.

In September 2021, 179 agreements worth more than $46bln were signed during the next China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit.

In November the same year, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced the establishment of the China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

In 2021, ASEAN was once again China’s main trading partner, increasing trade with it by almost 20% compared to 2020.

While the successes of China’s economic cooperation with ASEAN are impressive, the PRC’s bilateral relations with each individual ASEAN member state are more complicated. As Chinese-American competition has intensified, SEA has also become a superpower battleground, and within ASEAN the distinction between pro-Chinese and pro-Western states has become more pronounced. Thus, it is quite natural that China’s main trading partner in ASEAN is Vietnam, which is close to the PRC in socialist ideology and still remembers the terrible war with the US in 1964-1975.

China’s other important partner in ASEAN is Myanmar, formerly Burma. This country has a long history of civil wars
and coups d’état, and has long been under Western sanctions that made China its main partner. After a long process of democratization, the West has begun easing sanctions on Myanmar. In 2015, the National League for Democracy, whose leader Aung San Suu Kyi enjoyed great success in the West, came to power in the country. It would seem that Myanmar has found a balance between China and the West. However, already in 2016, members of the Myanmar Rohingya ethnic minority committed a series of terrorist attacks, the reaction of the authorities to which affected many Rohingyas and was seen by the West as genocide. As a result, sanctions have begun to be imposed against Myanmar again. In 2021, the country experienced a new coup and the military came to power again, resulting in continued sanctions. Despite disagreements with the new Myanmar regime, Beijing has blocked UN resolutions condemning its actions. Myanmar appears to be headed for further rapprochement with the PRC.

Another ASEAN state that is developing close relations with China is Laos. In 2015, the PRC financed the construction of a railway connecting this isolated landlocked country to the Chinese railway system. The US has tried to convince the Lao leadership that by allowing the PRC to build the road, it will drive its country into a Beijing “debt trap”. However, Vientiane chose to listen to Beijing, and in December 2021 the new Chinese-Laotian road was officially commissioned. Of course, China will have to repay the debt, but Laos and the PRC hope that the road will pay for itself and help develop mutually beneficial economic cooperation between them, which will offset the costs for both sides.

However, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines - i.e. 3 of the 10 ASEAN countries - have US military bases and, of course, the American positions in these countries are very strong, hence the American influence is quite strong throughout SEA.

The US supports its ASEAN partners in territorial disputes with the PRC (the Philippines and Vietnam, for example) in an effort to prevent them from moving closer to the Celestial Empire, and offers cooperation, including military cooperation, to all regional states that are dissatisfied with China’s growing influence.

In December 2021, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken conducted a tour of SEA. Speaking to an audience in ASEAN’s largest country, Indonesia, Blinken said the US was investing billions of dollars in Indo-Pacific states (which includes SEA) to reduce China’s regional influence. As a result of the US Secretary of State’s visit, Indonesia and the US have concluded a number of agreements, including one on maritime cooperation. It should be noted that Indonesia has a fairly strong navy by ASEAN standards, which periodically participates in joint exercises with the US Navy and which, of course, Washington would like to use in its fight against growing Chinese influence.

It can be concluded that both China and the US have fairly strong positions in ASEAN. It is argued that by showing unity, ASEAN could stand firm under the pressure of PRC and US pulling its members in different directions and benefit from cooperation with both sides. However, this unity seems to have cracked: in February 2022, another ASEAN foreign ministers’ summit was held in Cambodia. This time there was no Myanmar representative at the event. As mentioned above, there was a military coup in that country and the diplomat appointed by the new leadership refused to be received at the ASEAN ministerial meeting. The new Myanmar government then withdrew from the event. If the new Myanmar leadership retains power and ASEAN leaders continue their line (probably approved by Washington), Myanmar will break away from ASEAN and drift towards China.

It should be noted that it is not only Myanmar that has serious internal problems in SEA. Many ASEAN states may, under certain conditions, break away from the Association, and then there will be no joint resistance to superpower pressure: each country that breaks away from ASEAN will be forced to choose its own patron. As mentioned above, the positions of the PRC and the US are still equally strong. However, the PRC is geographically close, and it is costly for the US to maintain a military presence so far from its shores. Meanwhile, the PRC’s economy continues to grow rapidly, while the US has faced domestic problems in recent years that could call into question its economic dominance after a while. So it can be assumed that eventually Southeast Asia, if not truly united, will fall firmly into the PRC’s sphere of influence.

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