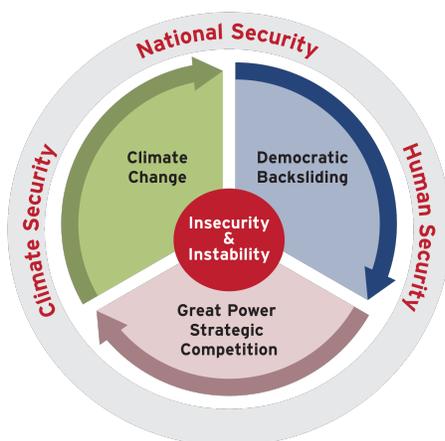


The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy identifies two strategic challenges: 1) strategic competition between major powers in shaping global geopolitical futures; and 2) shared security challenges, climate change being the most critical. Fundamental differences in geostrategic visions between democratic governance and a growing wave of authoritarian variants in governance underpin current strategic competition.

Adversarial geopolitics, or the increasingly adversarial nature of strategic competition between democratic and authoritarian norms and practices to shape the balance of power, significantly impacts the capacity to address shared security challenges like climate change. We believe that Southeast Asia serves as the prime example to examine how these pressing security challenges interact and affect each other.

Over the past 10 years, Southeast Asia has witnessed the deterioration of democracy and the rise of authoritarian forms of governance, strong geopolitical and economic pressure from China, and increased vulnerability to climate change. The mutual interactions of these compounding predicaments and asymmetric threats are at the heart of emerging security challenges in new domains across Southeast Asia. Moreover, these emerging security challenges are playing out against a backdrop of intense strategic rivalry between China and the United States, among other states.

As strategic competition continues to impact geopolitical trends in the region, near-future asymmetric threats, like climate change, will reshape this vital region's security realities, potentially escalating political instability and environmental vulnerability. Yet, to date, research on adversarial geopolitics and climate security is understudied. Our research aims to address this knowledge gap.



STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In Southeast Asia, navigating adversarial geopolitics in the security landscape involves three primary observations:

1. Southeast Asian states are experiencing varying levels of democratic backsliding—the deterioration of democracy and the dissolution of democratic principles.
2. Strategic competition has engendered a growing adversarial schism in the region as the balance of power shifts among U.S., Chinese, and Southeast Asian states' strategic interests.
3. The increasing frequency and severity of climate change-related events in the region threaten to exacerbate political instability and resource insecurity, shaping the ways adversarial geopolitics impacts environmental policy and practice (e.g., climate security).

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Southeast Asian states are at the center of a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. Adversarial geopolitics offers important lenses to examine the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China in Southeast Asia.
2. The entanglement of environmental features and geopolitical issues, like climate change and resource management, water and food insecurity, and energy generation and consumption, must be considered in geostrategic calculations.
3. As a threat multiplier, climate change will increasingly shape geopolitical calculations and strategies in Southeast Asia and needs more significant consideration.

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Southeast Asia has become increasingly entangled in the strategic rivalry between the PRC and the U.S. as both employ geostrategic paradigms to shape the balance of power and regional security, as well as norms and practices. The U.S. promotes a rules-based order and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) geopolitical strategy to counter the PRC's growing influence.ⁱ Recent policy decisions by the Biden Administration indicate a continuation of FOIP and stress the importance of international norms and laws.ⁱⁱ However, U.S. relations in the region are tense as Southeast Asian states trend towards diverse authoritarian variants in governance. On the other side, the PRC is leveraging extensive economic influence (e.g., Road and Belt Initiative [RBI]) and an assertive approach through its “neighborhood diplomacy” aiming to promote a “community of common destiny.”ⁱⁱⁱ However, many Southeast Asian states are wary of the growing Chinese influence, including its economic investments and potential long-term impacts on national autonomy, social relations, and the environment.

Meanwhile, ASEAN, driven by Indonesia, asserts its own geopolitical strategy based on its primary principles of centrality, integration, inclusiveness, and non-interference—the Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.^{iv} While the OIP is driven by the principles and norms of the “ASEAN Way” and is often described as a “hedging strategy,”^v it is clear that ASEAN favors enhancing its own resilience and unity to resist adversarial geopolitical pressures. A recent study indicated that 46 percent of ASEAN residents believe that ASEAN should not side with the PRC or the U.S., although if they had to, the U.S. sustains popular support (57 percent vs. the PRC's 43 percent).^{vi}

Other states also exert geopolitical influence in the region. Australia, Japan, and India increasingly engage with the region through trade, investment, and deepening security ties. At times, these states aligned with the U.S., known as the “Quad,” also pursue joint strategic interests. Additionally, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement between ASEAN, China, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea, was signed in November 2020, reshaping economic trends in the region.

The ways adversarial geopolitics are conceived in Southeast Asian security and foreign policy are inseparable from how they are

enacted in practice. From this perspective, adversarial geopolitics transgress seemingly distinct motives allowing for an analytical calculus of emerging trends and patterns (and future scenarios) in security practices that have widespread impacts. Of significant concern are the ways climate change-related impacts shape and are shaped by adversarial geopolitics.

ENVIRONMENTAL GEOPOLITICS

We know climate change is reshaping geostrategic, operational, and tactical environments with significant implications for national security and defense. Navigating Southeast Asian climate security challenges requires an enhanced understanding of the consequences of current regional adversarial and environmental geopolitical shifts and trends.

Environmental geopolitics is an approach that explores “how environmental themes are used to support geopolitical arguments and realities.”^{vii} In other words, environmental geopolitics considers how “the environment” and its features serve geopolitical agendas. Therefore, environmental geopolitics is particularly useful in assessing political claim-making about why certain places, practices, or actions concerning the environment are important or not important. As climate security emerges as a significant priority in Southeast Asia, understanding how the environment is understood to justify security actions or inactions becomes valuable in risk analysis.

The overall objective of employing an environmental geopolitics approach in our research is to explain how political, social, and spatial relations matter in *geopolitical discourses*--constructed understandings of the value of particular places and justified spatial actions—of climate security. Climate security in Southeast Asia manifests through powerful geopolitical discourses at different spatial scales, from AMS National Adaptation Plans (NAP) to local resilience farming. An environmental geopolitics approach focuses on the spatial dimensions of human-environment relationships that occur unevenly within and outside traditional state-centric structures intertwined with local, political, and cultural geographies.^{viii} Employing environmental geopolitics offers a way to examine how Southeast Asian climate security is brought into narratives, practices, and reality of power and places.

ⁱ Stromseth, Jonathan, 2019. *The Testing Ground: China's Rising Influence in Southeast Asia and Regional Responses*. The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC; Stromseth 2020.

ⁱⁱ Tan, See Seng. "Consigned to hedge: south-east Asia and America's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy." *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 131-148.

ⁱⁱⁱ During a speech to the Indonesian parliament in October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping referred explicitly to a shared future involving China and ASEAN: “The China-ASEAN community of shared destiny is closely linked with the ASEAN community and the East Asia community. The two sides need to bring out their respective strengths to realize diversity, harmony, inclusiveness, and common progress for the benefit of the people of the region and beyond.” See Xi Jinping,

“Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament” (speech, Beijing, October 2, 2013), http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

^{iv} Stromseth 2019

^v Beeson, M., 2022. Decentered? ASEAN's Struggle to accommodate great power competition. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2(1).

^{vi} Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2022* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).

^{vii} O'Lear, S. (2018). *Environmental Geopolitics*. Rowman & Littlefield. Landham: Maryland, pg. 2.

^{viii} Ibid.