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Dragon's Shadow: China's Influence and Erosion of Democracy in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This article explores China's growing presence in Southeast Asia and aims to look beyond the standard geopolitical mischief to appreciate its nuance. It spotlights "Complex Dependency," under which Southeast Asian states ride the coattails of China's rise even as it threatens to corrode democratic norms. A qualitative research approach is followed in the study, and literature review and case studies are dealt with critically and interpretively. Among the key findings, there is evidence that China's economic cooperation, political strategies, and cultural diplomacy influence democratization. Chinese investment, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative, can drive economic development without democratic or human rights oversight, which may lead to supporting autocratic regimes. The paper submits that this deepening dependence on China, with its characteristic assertiveness, undermines the pattern of delicate regional democracies, subtly hollowing out democracy norms and practices. Maintaining a proper balance between economic benefits and democratic values should be based on a well-informed interpretation of "Complex Dependency".

Keywords: Authoritarianism; Belt and Road Initiative; China's influence; Complex Dependency; Democracy; Soft Power; Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical landscape of Asia necessitates a nuanced understanding beyond conventional systemic thinking. This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of China's burgeoning influence in Southeast Asia, moving past simplistic East-West or 'Russia vs. China' antagonisms. As the rise of leading powers shapes geopolitical eras, the 21st century witnesses China's ascendancy, presenting opportunities and challenges for the region.[1] This study scrutinizes how China's growing economic, political, and cultural footprint in Southeast Asia impacts the trajectory of democratic governance, often leading to a subtle erosion of democratic norms and practices. It highlights the complexities of "Complex Dependency," where states grapple with benefiting from China's rise while preserving their sovereign interests and democratic values.

Significance of the Paper

This paper is significant because it critically examines the multifaceted ways in which China's influence reshapes the political landscape of Southeast Asia. Analyzing the interplay of economic initiatives, political strategies, and cultural diplomacy sheds light on the often-overlooked implications for democratic consolidation in the region. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers and scholars to navigate the complex geopolitical environment and formulate effective strategies to safeguard democratic principles.

Research Questions

1. How does China's economic engagement, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road, influence the democratic development of Southeast Asian nations?
2. What political strategies does China employ in Southeast Asia, and how do these affect the region's governance and adherence to democratic norms?
3. To what extent does China's cultural diplomacy and soft power reshape public perceptions and influence democratic discourse in Southeast Asian countries?

METHODS

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology, primarily relying on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, reports, and case studies. It utilizes a critical interpretive approach to examine the patterns of China's influence across economic, political, and cultural spheres within various Southeast Asian contexts. The methodology

aims to assess the implications of this influence for democratic erosion in the region. The theoretical concept guiding this paper is "Complex Dependency," which suggests that while Southeast Asian nations gain economic benefits from China's rise, this increasing interdependence can subtly undermine democratic governance. This framework allows for analyzing how economic ties can translate into political leverage, potentially influencing domestic policies and institutions in ways that challenge democratic principles.

Theoretical Concept

The theoretical concept guiding this paper is "Complex Dependency," which posits that while Southeast Asian nations gain economic benefits from China's rise, this increasing interdependence also creates vulnerabilities that can subtly undermine democratic governance. This framework allows for analyzing how economic ties can translate into political leverage, potentially influencing domestic policies and institutions in ways that challenge democratic principles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Context of Southeast Asian Democracies

In Southeast Asia, countries such as Cambodia, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Laos, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand have some elements of democracy but lack the power to mitigate authoritarianism. Here, electoral systems are typically designed to limit political competition, thereby pacifying oppositional forces and establishing a process for selecting ruling elites. Elected autocrats bend the rules to protect incumbents, which has led to an unbroken series of authoritarian scenarios (Szabó, 2018, pp. 153–172).

The National University of Singapore workshop examined regime evolution in semi-democracies or electoral authoritarian states, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, and Thailand. Meanwhile, democratic regimes in Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Vietnam have collapsed.

These practices are both novel and archaic. Delimiting competitors while empowering nominal governing bodies will extinguish citizens' hopes of protecting their polity from renewed tyranny. Like the sacred sword Murasama, these actions convert unchecked will into a unified brute force, demonstrating a covenant-like dominance. Based on ethnicity,

rival culling may serve as a prudent defense or collective retaliation, allowing the leviathan to progressively diminish the majority of the polity.

China's Rise as a Global Power

In the late 1990s, China faced a strategic challenge due to internal conflicts and strained U.S. relations. The rivalry between the Jiang and Zemin factions created a leadership vacuum, while external tensions with the United States hindered China's ambitions. Attempts to escape this situation relied heavily on diminishing U.S. influence, but domestic turmoil hampered China's global standing and timing. By 2008, recognizing pivotal "Sino-American relations," China shifted its focus from asserting power to embracing institutional power, engaging with the global governance framework. Strategies evolved from countering the U.S. to seeking reconciliation and forming flexible partnerships, fostering a deeper understanding of international rules and dynamics (Setzekorn, 2008, pp. 1-4).

Having realized its ambition as a great power, a rising China introduced the concept of a "peaceful rise" and "harmonious world" in 2007, arguing that a strong state would benefit global peace and development. Following its Xinjiang strategy 2012, it initiated the "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank" and the "Silk Road Economic Belt," leading to the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. In 2015, it proposed the "New Silk Road" and the "21st century maritime Silk Road," and in 2021, the "Global Development Initiative." These initiatives aimed to convert challenges into cooperative opportunities, crystallizing in the Belt and Road Initiative as an inclusive program.

Economic Influence of China in Southeast Asia

Over recent decades, China has enhanced its economic influence through significant investments in Southeast Asia, balancing market accessibility with joint infrastructure projects and distributing investments relatively equally among member nations. In response, ASEAN countries have welcomed these investments while maintaining good relations with major powers to counter China's influence. This economic framework has shifted the region's security dynamics, allowing development without excessive political scrutiny regarding democracy or human rights. Consequently, economic associations for mutual growth have facilitated participation from all nations and boosted bilateral trade, benefiting even the least politically-representative countries (Rifawan & Amelia, 2018, pp. 247-272).

ASEAN, founded in 1967, shows potential for success through expanding funds from major powers and fostering an economic community in the region. The China-ASEAN Free Trade Area aims to enhance trade in goods and services and promote investment by 2010, while active global trade is ongoing. China supports this initiative without seeking leadership by adhering to the principles of peaceful coexistence established by Premier Zhou Enlai and focusing on non-interference. China also provides substantial financial support to members of the free trade area to improve infrastructure, such as railways, roads, port facilities, and power plants.

Belt and Road Initiative

On 7 September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a 6,000-word speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, outlining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This program aims to reshape economic ties along the historic Silk Road from China to Europe and modern sea routes connecting South Asia and China. Since its introduction, the BRI has become clearer in some aspects, yet more ambiguous in others, and is firmly grounded in Xi's global vision for China's role. The initiative symbolizes China's readiness to assert itself and reinforces the idea of its revitalization (Williams, 2016).

The ancient Silk Road, which ran from China's Xinjiang Province through central Asia to Europe, flourished from 200 BC to 1400 AD, triggering economic growth. The sea route was less known but also vital. Marco Polo nearly reached Hangzhou, the wealthiest pre-modern city, via the eastern Silk Road. This route facilitated trade and cultural exchanges between China and the West. China's current push for a New Silk Road suggests a desire to revive an era of cultural and technological dominance, economic progress, and influence.

One Belt, One Road is a key policy of China's assertive leader, Xi Jinping, since early 2013, who has significantly increased China's global influence. His foreign policy in the South China Sea has become bolder, accompanied by a domestic anticorruption campaign consolidating political power. Xi aims to liberalize China's economy further and enhance its integration into the global market. While China has traditionally promoted "peaceful development," recent rhetoric indicates a shift toward a more aggressive stance, emphasizing multipolarity and amplifying the voices of developing nations.

Trade Relations and Dependencies

The economic aspects of this relational shift must be expanded to explore the effect of trade relationships on electoral activities and democratic processes in Southeast Asian

countries. Through large-scale trade engagements, China has subsumed the equilibrium of the world's trade. It controls both the supply chain and the demand chain. Furthermore, China can either reward or punish through its trading networks. The tacit economic embargoes on South Korea and Taiwan vividly exhibit this.

China has heavily invested in Southeast Asia's infrastructure, including ports and railways. This investment increases reliance on Chinese technology, as seen with Thailand's light rail. Countries dependent on Chinese FDI often align more closely with China's interests. In Indonesia, Chinese investments have boosted net imports of Chinese goods. Additionally, China's integration involves outward and inward FDI through various trade methods. Without a strategy to limit this investment, Southeast Asian economies will continue to grow dependent on Chinese equipment and products.

Southeast Asia, bordered by major oceans except for China, faces limited air attacks that can be contained. This region serves as a sandbox for China's hydraulic visualization. Control over waterways and sea routes allows "One Belt One Road" to disrupt economies and destabilize Southeast Asian peace (Gao, 2016).

Political Strategies of China in the Region

China, Southeast Asia's dominant power, has significantly impacted the region's economy and politics. Its strong currency attracts questionable investments, creating challenges for fragile democracies like Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia. While tourism boosts the economy, it also leads to social issues, including corruption, money laundering, prostitution, drug abuse, and human trafficking (Rifawan & Amelia, 2018, pp. 247-272).

Economic growth leads to social disparity and political oppression. Relations with democracies are seen as instabilities, while appropriatism undermines freedom. Drought and agro-industrial shifts have caused ecosystem collapse and governmental regression, yielding social repression. Amidst geo-strategic rivalries among China, the USA, and other powers, ASEAN countries embrace a "more exclusive, less alliance" approach. Political optimism wanes, and self-help morality prevails, resulting in chaotic self-defense that escalates conflicts.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains, prompting a shift toward regionalization. Countries in Southeast Asia began to decouple their manufacturing from China. This paper outlines key aspects of this decoupling strategy, focusing on the implications of Beijing's assertiveness and supply chain restructuring on

U.S. efforts to maintain its influence in East Asia. It addresses the challenges decoupling poses for U.S. dominance, considering China's blend of national power and welfare. Additionally, the paper explores how ASEAN states can navigate negotiations to address these challenges, emphasizing ASEAN's effectiveness as a multilateral institution in Northeast Asia.

Diplomatic Engagements

Despite significant efforts, a sustainable naval hub de-escalation mechanism or peacekeeping patrol in the South China Sea remains absent. Four constraints persist. First, ASEAN's naval de-escalation initiatives are often short-sighted and politicized. After the 2013 standoff between HYSY 981 and Vietnamese vessels, neither Chinese nor Vietnamese naval officials participated in the 2015 U.S.-ASEAN port call in Da Nang. In the August 2016 naval drill amidst rising tensions over China's claims, Vietnam was excluded due to diplomatic costs. Additionally, conflicting views exist regarding the need for joint maritime assertions and the adequacy of operational procedures in ASEAN. Pro-ASEAN and non-ASEAN members also differ in their perception of the threat from China's claims and expansion.

Strategic concerns about hegemonic encroachment and tacit coordination hindered the united application of Navy rules and procedures, preventing a cohesive approach toward breaching ASGC centers. During his 2010 ASEAN visit, Liu Guozhong, then Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission, reassured ASEAN member states of China's non-expansionist intentions and commitment to their core interests. Nonetheless, ASEAN and Anglo-Saxon strategies pressured China, leading to warnings about potential threats in the region. Despite various exercises and strategies, there was no agreement on settling past strategic debts between maritime and terrestrial forces, and no sustainable mechanism was implemented to prevent unilateral expansions or provocations (York, 2015, pp. 286–310).

Support for Authoritarian Regimes

China's foreign influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific is marked by support for authoritarian regimes, endorsing oppressive methods. Countries reference China's rapid economic growth and military rise as proof of successful authoritarianism, overlooking the contradiction between economic growth and democracy. Political scientists from Aristotle to Eisenstadt have argued that economic growth usually transforms social structures, fostering norms that promote democracy.

Asian elites were troubled by China's appeal due to skepticism around Western decision-making, influenced by international blunders since the millennium. This sentiment favored China's development governance and led to resentment against US unilateralism. Additionally, centuries of cultural ties in East Asia and the South Pacific enhanced China's influence (Yeoh, 2017, pp. 889–987).

The first crucial approximation between China and Southeast Asian governmental structures is the modelled footing. Liberal democracy centers on a partisan organization of state power, wherein ruling institutions negotiate electoral power to legitimize government. In contrast, Chinese-style socialism emphasizes transactional politics, viewing authority as collective and tied to biology rather than morality. This distinction reflects a broader trend where political entities, justified on moral or theological grounds, also demand a spiritual caste, claiming divine inspiration in choosing religious leaders and deciding between competing prophets or messiahs.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

China's economic revival fosters greater cultural influence in Southeast Asia and beyond. Chinese films and soap operas are widely traded, yet literature lags in cultural diplomacy. Best-selling author Mo Yan writes solely in Mandarin, and Chinese cartoons have a minor global audience compared to Japanese anime. Cultural production primarily caters to China's elite, with karaoke, its most popular product, borrowed initially from Japan.

China has methodically developed its “soft power” in promoting socialist ideology and international strategies. President Xi Jinping states, “The world has come to a crossroads and China’s discourse needs to impress.” While initiatives exist, the Chinese populace has not engaged sufficiently to organize the discourse organically. Neighboring cultures could use “bilateral soft power” to enhance cultural products. Unlike hard power, soft power is diffuse and subtle, making it more challenging to implement, particularly in opinion empowerment and narrative construction.

China’s rapid economic and social transformations have sparked discussions among academia, media, and the state. Domestically, debates center on how China’s improvements may influence the survival of authoritarian regimes globally post- “Arab Spring.” Following infrastructure development, China became a topic of academic and media scrutiny. State programs were launched to enhance understanding of Chinese soft power, but discussions

lack citizen involvement. The popularization of globally traded Chinese cartoons has not thrived despite initial enthusiasm.

Media Influence

The influence of Chinese media can be analyzed by comparing the characteristics of Chinese films to Hollywood blockbusters, focusing on Chinese Television (CT), which includes traditional and streaming platforms. This illustrates China's expansion in broadcasting and clarifies media influence, as well as notable shifts in meaning and visuals in CT's coverage that contrast with Hollywood's dominant sound and imagery. An image analysis of CT indicates a return to pro-Kremlin narratives, highlighting the framing of loss and peace discussions before the inauguration of Ukraine's new president.

Nationality frames became more prominent than objectivity frames, indicating a shift in CT that views events as likely outside Europe and sees civilian casualties as imminent. Production analysis shows a synergy between state propaganda and CT-4 strategies, with China using aggressive public relations and pre-emptive countermeasures. Social media's role in this systematic online campaign is influenced by non-traditional broadcasters, with distribution controlled by domestic media and advanced news agencies (Keane & Fung, 2018, pp. 47-50).

Educational Exchanges

China and ASEAN established an educational cooperation week and a conference to enhance exchanges. They organized the ASEAN-China Education Cooperation Week and the inaugural 'ASEAN-China Educational Exchange Year.' Both sides committed to bolstering education cooperation, creating an educational cooperation mechanism, and developing an 'ASEAN-China Education Cooperation Action Plan.' They will implement regular seminars and workshops and continue hosting large-scale activities (Maulana, 2018, pp. 13–24).

China has also established a safe, efficient, and convenient educational exchange mechanism with the ASEAN Countries. The ASEAN-China Education Cooperation week, jointly organized by China and ASEAN countries, has been successfully held for ten consecutive years in ASEAN countries and China, which has become an important platform for dialogue and exchange between China's education sector and ASEAN countries and even the Asia Pacific region.

Educational exchanges between China and ASEAN countries have deepened significantly in recent years, yielding fruitful results. Both parties have established pedagogical forums and mechanisms, signed a framework agreement for educational cooperation, and initiated a three-year vocational training project. They have jointly organized the ASEAN-China Education Cooperation Week eight times. Over the past five years, China has offered more than 2000 government scholarships and over 3000 scholarships to experts and training in ASEAN nations. By the end of 2015, the number of Chinese students in ASEAN countries reached 62,431, totaling 124,178 over the years. By April 2016, China had established 77 Confucius Institutes and 51 Confucius Classrooms globally, including 31 in ASEAN countries, educating over 250,000 Chinese language learners.

Case Studies of Democratic Erosion

Tread carefully and act decisively: The floodgates of democracy in Southeast Asia may not be entirely lessened than the chinks in its armor. Ironically, rising demands for strengthened democracy in Southeast Asia come as views on civil liberties are mixed. These uncertain circumstances provide a window to regain the initiative and more tightly close the gates of democracy. Furthermore, greater tenacity and ambition will be needed to fight against anti-democratic forces locally and from without (Szabó, 2018, pp. 153–172).

China's relationship with ASEAN has evolved since the dialogue partnership began in 1991. Initial optimism led to a more substantial interest in practical cooperation by the millennium. In the past decade, a renewed desire has been to enhance cooperation within the "China-ASEAN" framework. However, since 2009, tensions have emerged, with ASEAN becoming a tool in China's Belt and Road Initiative and a conflict arena with the U.S., undermining the rules-based regional order amid China's rising maritime influence.

Cautious engagement with China remains the official approach in most Southeast Asian countries. Due to a heavy reliance on investment needs, bespoke economic cooperation has gained prominence. Nonetheless, the speed of convergence is reportedly slow and uneven. Bilateral political relations remain tentatively frozen or even contentious.

Myanmar

The research provides an overview of trends in political behavioral targeting, including legislative responses across countries and monetized ad markets in online media. To

document these trends, the study includes: (1) a description of ad market shares influenced by regulations; (2) measures to predict effects on affected countries; and (3) background on media platforms involved. Care was taken to minimize bias, reviewing 336 sources. Preference was given to respected academic literature and independent organizations for more controversial interpretations. Records are aggregated by countries and markets in the supplement.

Interviews were conducted with analysts possessing non-public information to understand platform mechanisms and adaptation efforts. The analysts included a president analysis, a statistic analyst from major online media in CIS and Southeast Asia, and a chief data analyst from significant ad trust companies affected by EU regulation. "Semi-structured interviews" were used, with initial open-ended questions and follow-ups to explore new insights during discussions. Conducted over video calls, the sessions were audio recorded when allowed, and transcripts were created. Key passages were extracted and organized into themes. A total of 8 hours of interviews were recorded and analyzed over a month, resulting in clear themes despite the dense content.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, the legitimacy of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) hinges on elections as a democratic necessity. However, this democracy has become unrecognizable. The opposition, mainly the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), challenged CPP dominance, securing many seats in the contentious 2013 elections. In retaliation, the CPP further consolidated its power, dismantling the CNRP through legal maneuvers and ruling by decree.

The decline of democracy in Cambodia, intensified by the PRC since the early 2000s, follows nearly US$30 billion in Chinese development assistance, fostering a highly dependent relationship focused on flashy infrastructure projects. Prime Minister Hun Sen has utilized this aid, alongside military support and "win-win" rhetoric, to suppress dissent, attacking media and civil society while targeting opposition figures. Although civil war has been averted, the political reforms of the 1990s have collapsed, reducing laws to mere symbols. This somber reality for Cambodians highlights China's significant influence in reshaping Cambodia's political landscape and media discourse, making it crucial to analyze its role in the erosion of democracy.

Thailand

The notion of "Asia's thriving democratic movement" feels outdated due to recent external shocks in Thailand and the Philippines. Thailand, with its historical democratic legacy and indigenous liberal models, faces scrutiny as recent events cast a shadow on its political culture. Unfortunately, the image of Thailand as the leader of Asian democracy is tarnished, warranting an examination of its political evolution.

A little over a decade ago, Thailand was seen as a democratic success story. The transition from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy in 1932, led by an enlightened elite, aimed at economic growth and modernization. The constitutional monarchy established the political culture of the traditionalist-bureaucratic-military elite, governing through a power triangle involving the monarchy and military. While a viable middle class emerged, it lacked political education and loyalty to the establishment.

Following the May 1992 uprising, the People's Constitution of 1997 marked a significant attempt to escape traditionalism. Until then, popular politics challenged the Ronnakij monster's grip. The failure to recognize this threat resulted in the knight being overthrown in May 2006 through a cunning trap by the Ronnakij forces. Taking refuge with the crown's protection, drastic actions targeted "pretender princes," allowing for a resurgence. The integration of military and Ronnakij power appeared to solidify control. However, lessons from history remained rooted in the political culture, indicating that no deep-seated political norms can be eradicated.

Public Perception of China in Southeast Asia

Many assume that positive views of China stem from successful Chinese state propaganda. However, data indicates that people often view China positively, even in countries with fewer political freedoms and civil rights than the PRC. Furthermore, some European and East Asian nations with rights comparable to advanced democracies also hold favorable views of China despite lacking official Chinese communication. This raises an essential question about the origins of public perceptions of China and the impact of the Chinese government's efforts. This study seeks to uncover how various forms of exposure to China affect these perceptions (Li, 2021, pp. 68–86).

Despite considerable variation in public perceptions of China across countries, many states hold positive views. This contradicts the idea that such views are solely the result of targeted state efforts, which would limit them to a few audiences. Favorable views are particularly noted in less wealthy, politically non-Western developing states. This raises crucial questions about the origins and spread of these perceptions. Amid worsening global relations and rising populism, addressing misunderstandings about multilateralism and deglobalization becomes increasingly important, emphasizing the need for better global understanding of China beyond state actors.

Moreover, there has been an increasing concern that bilateral ties may be damaged should the opposition party challenge the ruling party and win the elections. However, this is a typical state representation narrative about China's engagement. Public perceptions of climate change are likely to vary and diverge from this narrative, regardless of the party in power. That is to say, understanding the public view of China will bring to light the grass-roots opinion and perceptions to policymakers and ultimately help them improve such engagements to better manage public concerns and opinions regarding China.

Nationalism and Anti-China Sentiment

Amidst pro-China sentiments among regional elites, public discontent against China is growing due to the economic downturn and aggressive territorial moves by Beijing. Anti-China sentiment has sparked protests, highlighting issues like China's democratic violations, COVID-19 scapegoating of Asians, intrusive digital devices, negative impacts on public finances, and infiltration by Chinese agents in education and politics.

By fracturing the coherence of South-East Asian micro-states, a broader East Asian identity has evolved. Blessed with rich natural resources and the collective prosperity of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, the region has often remained overshadowed by China, a nation that has historically invaded, colonized, and urbanized coastal tribes. This has led to grievances and calls for solidarity, resulting in vigorous anti-China protests and social media movements that express growing resentment towards China. Issues such as China's territorial expansion, migration waves, nuclear ambitions, rights abuses, and knowledge expropriation have surged, highlighting concerns over its rise to global dominance. Recurring calls for countermeasures and war against China resonate across Asia, America, and Europe, blending historical neighborly tensions, ancestral grievances, and contemporary fears.

Pan-ethnic emotive claims highlight hegemonic subjugation by the imagined dragon-man community across the Archipelago. Indonesian protesters echo narratives that unify people in greater Indonesia. A broader array of negative terms like pigs, villains, and mongrels reflects a vernacular that fuels public unrest. There were thousands of patrols with national justifications aimed at addressing these tensions.

Perceptions of Economic Benefits

In recent decades, diplomacy between China and Southeast Asia has improved due to economic interdependence fueled by China's rapid growth and surplus capital. This growth has driven China's need to invest in the region for its prosperity, while Southeast Asian countries seek investment amid political and economic vulnerabilities, making China a preferred partner (Kui, 2006, pp. 1–27).

There was a notable rise in energetic cooperation among nations in trade, foreign direct investment, infrastructure, and tourism. The aim was to enhance a country's image and shift perceptions among critical media and civil organizations by showcasing its significant regional contributions as part of Europe. China entered the scene as a latecomer with limited investment capability and initial financial influence, struggling to win bids. Development aid, abandoned projects, and unexpected Chinese investments contributed to a worsening trade deficit (Nagao, 2016).

China significantly increased its investments in various regions, focusing on infrastructure projects despite local leaders' prohibitions against foreign cooperation. With substantial funding and incentives, China quickly gained an edge over other global players, yet this drew excessive scrutiny and led to misinterpretations regarding its intentions. Diplomatic media have evolved from mere reporting to shaping perceptions about Beijing's advantages over the West. Localized knowledge has been oversold by the media and NGOs long before contracts are signed. Democratic values hinder accurate analysis of China's motives and future actions. While major projects face strict scrutiny for economic efficiency and environmental impacts, smaller initiatives often evade attention, presenting potential risks. Various infrastructures, from large-scale hydropower dams to minor social housing projects, are now under Chinese influence, including border control and census data management.

The Role of the United States and Western Powers

Southeast Asia is the focal point of fierce competition between the United States and China. The U.S. aims to counter China's economic and military growth. At the same time, China views the region as crucial for becoming a global power on par with the U.S. Unlike the U.S., which depends on defense alliances, China is focusing on economic integration through trade and investment and enhancing political cooperation via initiatives like the Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative. This approach has led to significant disparities in their influence over Southeast Asia (Beeson, 2003).

China has capitalized on Southeast Asia's growing reliance on its economy to strengthen regional influence. It is ASEAN's largest trading partner, with total trade reaching USD 636.3 billion in 2018, encompassing 15.4 percent of ASEAN's overall trade. China's regional investment hit USD 227.8 billion, a significant portion of the total foreign direct investment of USD 474.2 billion. China has become ASEAN's largest lender, surpassing Japan in infrastructure lending. Additionally, pending ratification, China is pursuing regional agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership to counterbalance the US-dominated trade system. It solidified ties through East Asian summits and meetings with Latin American countries (Rifawan & Amelia, 2018, pp. 247-272).

Countering China's Influence

As speculation grows about Chinese authoritarianism challenging liberal democracy, addressing its influence becomes crucial. This concern has prompted a serious response from various sectors. The struggle between democracy and autocracy has gained traction beyond opinion pieces; research centers in Europe and North America, along with numerous foundations and government-funded institutes worldwide, now focus on studying and countering Chinese influence across civil society, media, politics, and other areas of power (Yeoh, 2017, pp. 889–987).

Respondents should be judicious given the range of scholarly opinions about Chinese soft power. There is no universal response to Chinese media influence. Instead of focusing solely on countering Chinese media, efforts might be more effective when addressing issues like the degradation of public discourse or reforming broadcast regulations. This approach could resonate more with society and reduce backlash from citizens concerned about the negative impacts of existing media dominance. The effectiveness of American

and Western soft power in countering Chinese influence relies heavily on the collaboration of non-governmental institutions with donor institutions. Establishing goodwill and trust between donors and grantees is crucial to prevent the waste of resources. Managing undesirable outcomes raises doubts about the potential for substantial improvements.

Support for Democratic Movements

The US is actively promoting democracy, human rights, and environmental protection while depicting China as a global threat to undermine its economy and influence. The Biden administration is strengthening alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The G7's early COVID-19 vaccine initiative has shifted to a global infrastructure effort to rival China's Belt and Road Initiative (Gruffydd-Jones, 2017, pp. 652–672).

The systematic denial of China a fair hearing is concerning. Washington's "China threat narrative " presents national security in a way that questions its elements. The chosen strategy is demonizing rivals, backed by a vast national security apparatus. In Asia, efforts to counter China extend beyond traditional alliance systems (Szabó, 2018, pp. 153–172).

Finally, establishing and legitimizing a China threat narrative could profoundly affect China beyond the immediate policy environment. Widespread belief in this narrative could lock China into an adversarial position in the prism of power and identity.

Regional Responses to Chinese Expansion

China's rise has sparked interest in the "China Model" of governance and its implications for democratization. The country's shift to a market economy without democratization presents significant puzzles. The state effectively encourages capital investment and labor migration, but the ruling elite's actions have led to capital flight and a brain drain. With early industrialization, urbanization, and modernization, the transmission of political and economic liberties could precede the costs associated with democratization. Moreover, the recent financial crisis has led Asian critics of Western systems to reconsider Confucianism as a viable alternative (Yeoh, 2017, pp. 889–987).

It remains to be seen whether the model will impact regions outside China, akin to the West's adopt-in-trade-and-industrialize model in a converging global economy. This book offers insightful perspectives on China's rise, emphasizing the significance of regime types

in development debates, especially regarding transitions between authoritarianism and democracy. It explores the security proliferation of the China model in Southeast Asia, identifying vital research areas. Based on interviews and diverse sources, the in-depth case studies of Myanmar's "loosening grip" and Vietnam's "strong grip" highlight varied socio-political effects of authoritarian soft power. The book suggests that studying ecosystems of authoritarianism could provide valuable future research directions on the dynamics between authoritarian and democratic states (Wang, 2014, pp. 135–154).

ASEAN's Role

To grasp the erosion of democratic policies in Southeast Asia, one must first understand ASEAN and its ties to China. Founded on August 8, 1967, by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, ASEAN expanded to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Initially formed to counter Communism, the bloc shifted focus in the early 1990s by establishing a Free Trade Agreement, moving towards economic collaboration.

In the 21st century, ASEAN faces significant challenges with China's rise as a superpower, causing collective paralysis due to a leadership crisis. Consequently, China manipulates the sovereign intents of member states, notably with Cambodia acting as a viceroy for Beijing. This dynamic led to ASEAN's first failure to issue a joint declaration during the 2012 foreign ministers' summit in Phnom Penh, highlighting the need to analyze Cambodia's new leadership and its policies compared to previous administrations and neighboring nations.

In examining Cambodian foreign policy shifts, one must examine the rise of Chinese-educated Prime Minister Hun Sen.. The Cambodia-China relationship grew stronger after Hun Sen's 1998 victory and the ousting of French-educated opposition leader Prince Norodom Ranariddh. Initially reliant on Western support for its fledgling democracy, Hun Sen consolidated power, exiling Ranariddh in the mid-2000s. The death of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji in 2006 marked a policy shift as Hun Sen aligned more closely with Beijing. From 2008 onward, Cambodia rejected American-led democratization in favor of "enhanced cooperation," leading to significant Chinese infrastructure investments. Thus, Cambodia transitioned from an ASEAN leader to a vassal of Beijing, similar to situations in Karnataka, Malaysia, and Myanmar (Sandy, 2015, pp. 34–50).

Continued increased Chinese investments in Cambodia further isolated Phnom Penh politically. The controversial land acquisition agreement in 2010 also resulted in controversy surrounding criminal Thai political prisoner Thaksin Shinawatra's appointment as "economic advisor." With Prime Minister Hun Sen, the government shifted emotions towards more ornate melodramatic spectacles worthy of previous Chinese vassal states in contemporary history (Jie Li, 2017).

Bilateral Agreements

In Southeast Asia, numerous countries signed vague bilateral agreements with China, which generally outline broad commitments to enhance relations and often aim to formalize China's influence, such as mentoring a leader. While some agreements are rejected for undermining democracy, many remain unreleased. Since Xi Jinping's rise, access to China's political records has tightened due to national security laws, making discussions on political relations risky for many nations (Rifawan & Amelia, 2018).

The execution of bilateral agreements with China is hindered by the limited travel of senior officials due to fears of domestic criticism for being too accommodating to Beijing. Many democratic leaders have had their trips to China canceled or delayed, leading to increased Sino-American tensions. In the past, domestic politics had minimal impact on bilateral relations, with agreements executed in a "black box" away from public scrutiny. However, this is changing as fears of Beijing's influence have grown. Countries are now scrutinizing agreements; for example, in Indonesia, a plan for Jakarta's MRT faced controversy over cost and access for Chinese companies, prompting calls for transparency. Similar issues arose in Malaysia and the Philippines, indicating a shift toward openness in bilateral diplomacy (York, 2015, pp. 286–310).

Implications for Future Governance in Southeast Asia

Democracy movements in Myanmar and the Arab Spring raised hopes for new governance, but progress has been slow. Familiar issues reemerged, with anti-democratic forces gaining ground. Donor nations worry about democracy's decline as countries like Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Philippines retreat from electoral democracy, repressing democratic movements. Economic downturns have further impacted governance, resulting in dwindling hopes for democracy.

China's hard power, economic tools, and close ties to leaders like Rodrigo Duterte aim to boost its influence over regional resources and governance. Funders and states must acknowledge the economic grievances stemming from China's rapid growth to counter its transgressions. The ascent of Indonesia and Vietnam is challenging Thailand and Malaysia's economic dominance, paralleling China's rise in a long-claimed century of humiliation by the West.

Substantial areas of Southeast Asia and the Pacific were conquered, leading to grievances over land, language, and cultural encroachments. Nations challenged colonial powers, resulting in struggles for independence as older leaders died. New global economic connections imposed mandates for adopting analytical and administrative standards, causing fragmented constituencies and feelings of exclusion. Even prosperous states have not fully addressed grievances, as evidenced in southern Thailand, Myanmar, the Southern Philippines, Malaysia, and Cambodia since the 1980s. Economic resource access and cultural recognition grievances intensified after the Cold War, fostering political mobilization and empowering resistance movements to engage society and confront these issues.

Long-term Effects on Democracy

China’s influence on Southeast Asia raises questions about democracy and the mechanisms vital for it in the region. Southeast Asian states, shaped by geography, shared colonial histories, trade, immigration, and geopolitical concerns, form a unique regional entity with diverse views on representation and expression. Despite their complexities, the reliance on “Normative Models” and “Institutional Facts” suggests a growing homogenization in socialization across the area. Consequently, definitions, understandings, and evaluations of democracy in Southeast Asia must be contextually tailored to models and metrics specific to each situation.

Once understood, it is possible to read against both Goodman’s and McCoy’s studies to consider how democratic measures, including basic goodness of fit metrics and more modern, comprehensive approaches, result in greater ecological distributions than documented, while downplaying China’s relative success. Conversely, applying Goodman’s and McCoy’s methodologies to non-SEA regions, such as the Global South or illiberal states like Hungary and Poland, or backward Balkan states, shows that democratic measures fare better in SEA compared to these other 'problem' regions (Diamond, 1997).

Michelle's research highlights the significance of democracy and its evolving measures. The adoption of democratic norms by illiberal states underscores both an understanding of their benefits and the risks associated with superficial interpretations. Discussions about different forms of democracy accommodating geopolitical relations are becoming more prevalent and are expected to grow in sophistication and importance.

Potential for Democratic Resurgence

As these historical forces for democratization unfold, some countries will democratize while others will not. The process may be bumpy for some, but others may experience a stable transition. Despite potential political or natural crises, the trajectory towards full democracy can be anticipated. Mapping future political scenarios is crucial for nations to navigate their paths effectively, understanding that predictions in this context cannot be as precise as in natural sciences.

This text illustrates patterns with a variety of policy occurrences in specific scenarios. While theoretical models oversimplify and cannot capture all empirical references or forecast the future, the influence of historical forces makes future polity somewhat predictable. However, the timing and modalities of large-scale democratization remain uncertain. While neo-authoritarian regimes may lead to conflicts and tragedies, predicting whether the resulting polity will be democratic or non-democratic is likely.

The thesis focuses on national political regimes and the limited notions of democracy involved. Historical forces for and against democracy shape a geopolitical space where nations engage in the twenty-first century. This space is not representative but is based on nation-states, with the political regime as the central unit, reflecting the national political order and the legitimacy and functions of political power, thus outlining the range of democratic notions. By mapping out this national political regime space, we emphasize geography, allowing for a clearer understanding of predictions and making the process more explicit and accurate.

CONCLUSION

The paper highlights how China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia, driven by its economic prowess and strategic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, significantly impacts the region's democratic landscape. While China's investments foster economic

growth, they often go unchecked regarding democratic norms or human rights, inadvertently supporting existing authoritarian tendencies in some nations.

China's political strategies, including diplomatic engagements and support for authoritarian regimes, further complicate democratic consolidation. The study also reveals how China's cultural diplomacy and media influence aim to promote its model, yet widespread public engagement remains challenging. Ultimately, the increasing dependence on China, coupled with its assertive stance, poses a complex challenge to the fragile democracies in Southeast Asia, often leading to a subtle erosion of democratic principles and practices. Addressing this requires a nuanced understanding of China's "Complex Dependency" to benefit from its growth while safeguarding democratic values.

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