

The Evolution of Southeast Asian Countries' Perceptions of China and the UK's Roles in Global Governance under "the Belt and Road" Framework: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract. This paper constructs a trajectory of “governance practices-perception feedback-strategic adjustment” rooted in official documents, mainstream media archives, and people’s opinion surveys across six countries from 2013-2024 in the Southeast Asian location where “the Belt and Road” Initiative engages the Global Britain strategy. This trajectory serves as a framework for a structured comparison of the changing perceptions of China and the shifting perceptions of The United Kingdom (UK) among Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and such like. Research reveals that perceptions regarding China in Southeast Asia have changed from “one single economic opportunity” into a dual regime of “economic necessity – strategic risk”, whilst the perception of the UK has changed from a “colonial legacy” into a value-added proposition of “rules-based complementation – security balancing.” The shifts in perception create differing hedging strategies, for example: Indonesia - institutional autonomy; Malaysia - project-based diversification; while Vietnam takes a security-based soft counterbalancing approach. Collectively these findings demonstrate a “menu-style” preference for governance, that is, predominating economic engagement with China while allowing for and retaining security rule openness toward the UK. The findings give evidence of the capacity for small to medium-sized countries to mobilize great power competition into “risk hedging” assets through nuanced role recognition. These findings have empirical significance for the high-quality development of “the Belt and Road” Initiative and sustainable engagement with the UK’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Keywords: "the Belt and Road"; Southeast Asian Countries; China and the UK; Global Governance.

1. Introduction

In Southeast Asia, a core geographic pivot of "the Belt and Road" Initiative and an important economic corridor for global growth, its strategic importance and economic potential are increasingly assertive. Southeast Asia, situated at the pivot of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, is an important node for the transportation of energy globally and for the transmission of digital information across borders, a region where geopolitics is coming to the fore. Consequently, for both China and the United Kingdom, important global players in the area of global governance, Southeast Asia is an important theatre for expanding their international influence and influencing the global order.

By virtue of “the Belt and Road” Initiative, the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter PRC) puts forward the proposition for developing interregional economic integration based on the attainment of connectivity of infrastructure within the core of the plan [1]. While Great Britain (hereinafter GB) strengthened the “Global Britain” strategy since “Brexit” attempting to retain the traditional influence in the region of Asia-Pacific in enhancing the rule-making of trade, the cooperation and governance of climate, and the basis of its financial importance [2]. The contrived perceptions as to PRC and GB towards the development of the role of the countries of Southeast Asia for global governance degradation reflects in detailed manner these dynamism adjustments style developing towards global governance. PRC was gradually transformed from the partner of the economic character to the innovator of rules being included into the so-called “hard connectivity” and “soft connectivity” giving among others the proposition of “Chinese solutions” i.e., cross-border payment, digital standards [3]. On the other hand, Great Britain relies on the imperial legacy and dominance from the side of rule of financial regulations, at the same time she has to revile with the dispersal of resources and inadequacy

of potential for grounded principle. Those diversifying perceptions influence not only on the choice of models of cooperation interregional, but also it touches the way of positioning of countries of Southeast Asia in the framework of global governance inter-government, i.e., those who adjust to a global network of development inclusive on the part of PRC or which prefer the governance system from the Western character dominated by GB.

By integrating international relations psychology, international political economy and strategic culture theory, this study builds an analytical framework for the analysis of “governing practices-cognitive feedback-strategic adaptation”. This reveals the cognitive logic and behavioral strategies used by developing countries in a multipolar environment. The approach not only deepens the understanding of asymmetry in the global governance system, but also provides empirical evidence for the construction of the governance system of “consultation, joint contribution and sharing of benefits”. The study solves the practical problem of how ASEAN countries can strike a balance between economic cooperation and strategic autonomy. As Sino-American competition intensifies and global governance is in the process of fragmentation, the possibility of how Southeast Asian countries can avoid the dilemma of “choosing sides” becomes a key factor in regional stability and the promotion of a multipolar situation. By analyzing the evolution of the perception of the role played by China and the UK, it provides decision-making references for countries in the region concerning the differentiated formulation of diplomatic strategies, for China to promote high-quality BRI cooperation and for the UK to reshape its influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

2. Research method

2.1. Data sources

This research project gathers defense white papers, foreign policy statements and speeches given by the heads of government of important South-East Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines) at major multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Summits and the General Assembly of the United Nations. The collection of information starts with the proposal of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in 2013 and continues up to date (2024). Attention should be directed to the discussion of such issues as are relevant to the words “China”, “Great Britain”, “the governance of the world”, “the Belt and Road”, “the Indo-Pacific Strategy” and “ASEAN centrality”. China's white paper on the “Belt and Road” Initiative and its statements of government policy on South-East Asia should be collected. Great Britain's Integrated Review of Security, Defense and Development Policy, annual issues of the Security, Defense and Development Issue Review and papers on the ‘Indo-Pacific Pivot’ strategy should be collected. These will then form a basis for analysis of the governance policies of both nations in South-East Asia.

The system collects transcripts of seminars sponsored by leading think tanks in Southeast Asia and opinion pieces written by elites in major media. It selects representative and influential English language media and local language media in Southeast Asia through the use of databases such as Factiva and LexisNexis. Using the terms “China Belt and Road” and “UK Global Britain” as keywords, large-scale text data collection is conducted covering the period from 2013 to 2024.

In this way, a longitudinal trend study is carried out through the integration of historical data on the Chinese and UK perceptions of trust and influence as detailed in the ASEAN ‘Sentiment Survey Report’ publication by the globally well-respected polling agencies, Pew Research Center and the ASEAN Studies Centre, referenced herein. The study also provides a systematic review of the existing academic literature on Southeast Asia international relations, China-UK interaction with Southeast Asian and world governance theory both domestically and internationally, providing the theoretical underpinning and analytical reference sources for this research.

2.2. Analytical framework and operational process

This study constructs a dynamic analytical framework of “governance practices-cognitive feedback-strategic adjustment,” operationalizing it into the following three progressive analytical steps:

Content analysis and text coding

The gathered qualitative data (official documentation, media commentary, elite discourse) is subjected to an amalgam of qualitative and quantitative content analysis of a textual kind. Qualitative content analysis employs frame analysis in order to reveal how the roles of China and the UK are “framed” in the various textual discourses. China is framed as an “economic development partner”, “provider of debt risk” or “strategic challenger”; the UK, meanwhile, is framed as “traditional balancer”, “defender of rules” or “nation of declining influence”. Quantitative content analysis employs the text analysis package NVivo and the computer language Python to deal with word frequencies and co-occurrence network analysis. This objective accounting reveals the words which appear with a high degree of co-occurrence in conjunction with the likes of “China” and “UK” in the Southeast Asian texts, and visually illustrates the cognitive focal points and emotional biases.

Case study of process tracking and comparison

We divide the timeline since 2013 into 2 to 3 distinct phases and then take key events in these phases as the units of analysis from which we determine how “China-UK governance practices” at these critical junctures engendered major changes in perspectives of Southeast Asian countries upon these governance practices. Select 2 to 3 important Southeast Asian nations to be analyzed as case studies. Study the similarities and differences in their perceptions of China and the UK’s roles precipitated by engagements with them and which arise from their differing historical backgrounds, forms of government, economic structures and levels of trade dependence upon China.

Integration analysis and theoretical dialogue

Incorporating insights from the first two stages, we analyze how perceptions of China and the United Kingdom have changed in Southeast Asia. The question is: what accounts for this change in perceptions? Is it the prospects for economic gain? The possible security threat from outside? Preferences for institutions/rules? How are these preferences transcribed into actual diplomatic actions? Testing and developing the underlying theories of international political economy and strategic culture against the empirical findings, the study finally returns to its fundamental purpose: to uncover the underlying logic behind developing countries’ perceptions of global governance in a multipolar context, and the consequences of these for the BRI and the global system.

3. The cognitive evolution of Southeast Asian countries on the role of global governance between China and the UK

3.1. The overall evolution of cognition: From "economic opportunity-historical heritage" to "strategic balance-pragmatic participation"

A diachronic analysis of media coverage and public opinion survey data shows how the way Southeast Asian countries viewed China and the UK changed greatly in the 2010s. The changes in average trust levels in six Southeast Asian countries to both China and the UK, displayed in Figure 1, show that trust in China began moderately around 2015, rose to a peak between 2017–2018 and has since shown a gradual decline. Trust in the UK began from a relatively high base, fluctuated slightly but remained generally stable since 2016, with a slight increase since 2021 due to events such as AUKUS.

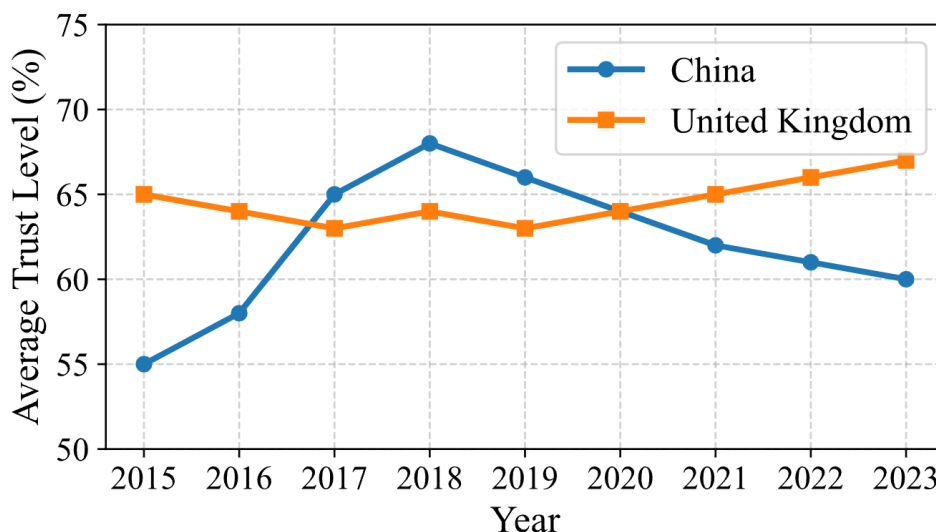


Figure 1. The average change of trust in China and the UK in six Southeast Asian countries (2015-2023).

In the early years of "the Belt and Road" Initiative (2013-2017), Southeast Asian countries' conceptual framework was swayed by the concept of the "opportunities for economic growth" with China often mentioned as "the indispensable engine of growth." Since then, and especially from 2018, the configuration of perceptions has become more complex. This is because of ideas such as the question of debt, of workers' rights, of environmental issues raised during the implementation of the large-scale projects (the review of the East Coast Rail Link projects of Malaysia) and the changing situation in the South China Sea. Here then, the "economic partner" configuration has come to co-exist and compete with the "strategic concern" configuration. In the post-pandemic time, while the confidence in the economic power of China is perceived as greater, the sensitivity to China's determined diplomacy is also seen to be increased. This illustrates the increasing duality of perception.

Perceptions of the UK have not changed significantly, although the associations have. Earlier, it was construed as an "important historical partner" and "supplier of good quality investments", in which reference to "colonial history" was early in the elite discourse so the effect it made was limited. After the Brexit referendum of 2016 there is a heightened awareness of the UK in Southeast Asia, but doubts persisted as to the certainty of its global role. A major landmark occurred with the foreign policy of the AUKUS pact in 2021. Since then, there has been a considerable enhancement of the image of the UK as a "security balancer" in regional perception. In particular elite perceptions of it in US-favored nations like the Philippines and Singapore, as well as those nations in contention with China over maritime boundaries such as Vietnam, there is an opinion that the UK is a "desired extra strategic alternative" which can be brought into the framework of global opinion as a continuing possibility for equilibrium of power in regional disputes.

3.2. Transnational comparison—Differentiated cognition based on national strategic culture

Studies of Southeast Asian countries show significant differences in their perceptions of the United Kingdom and China and the reactions they offer, in relation to their geographical position, political system and degree of economic dependence upon China.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of China, the United States, and the United Kingdom's Perceptions and Strategic Responses Regarding Global Governance Roles (2021–2023).

Country	Core perceptions of China	Core perceptions of the UK	Strategic feedback model
Indonesia	<p>“A necessary economic giant” and “a neighbor requiring vigilance.” High priority is placed on infrastructure cooperation, yet heightened alertness is maintained regarding potential conflicts in the Natuna Sea.</p>	<p>“A non-frontier power open to cooperation.” Indonesia welcomes the UK's collaboration in the digital economy and green investment sectors, while maintaining an open yet cautious stance toward AUKUS, viewing it as one of the diverse partners contributing to the strengthening of ASEAN's centrality.</p>	<p>“Proactive and Autonomous” Hedging Approach. Actively advance the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to strengthen economic ties, while promoting an inclusive regional architecture through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific to balance the influence of any single external major power.</p>
Malaysia	<p>Complex stakeholders. Deep economic dependence, with domestic political elites holding divergent views on China. Significant public skepticism regarding project fairness and transparency.</p>	<p>“Low-risk partner.” Prioritizes cooperation with the UK in education and defense. Views the UK as a moderate force offering alternative technical standards to balance excessive reliance on China.</p>	<p>Pragmatic tool-based hedging. While restarting and continuing Chinese investment projects, actively introduce investments from Western countries such as the UK and seek to diversify defense equipment sources to mitigate risks.</p>
Vietnam	<p>“The largest trading partner and the primary security concern.” The cognitive dissonance is most acute. Party media frequently shifts between reporting China's economic achievements and criticizing its actions in the South China Sea.</p>	<p>“An increasingly relevant security partner.” Vietnam has expressed strong interest in the UK aircraft carrier strike group's visit and potential defense cooperation under the AUKUS framework, viewing these as crucial leverage to bolster its position and counter Chinese pressure.</p>	<p>Soft counterbalancing. Politically, maintaining a hardline stance toward China while actively participating in maritime security cooperation led by the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom; economically, cautiously sustaining normal trade relations with China.</p>

Table 1 clearly demonstrates how perceptions directly translate into strategic behavior. Indonesia's perceptions drive its pursuit of institutional regional leadership; Malaysia's perceptions orient it

toward risk diversification at the project level; while Vietnam's perceptions compel it to seek explicit security cooperation for “soft counterbalancing.” These three cases collectively validate the logical chain of “cognitive feedback-strategic adjustment”: Southeast Asian nations do not passively accept Chinese and British governance practices, but rather actively and differentially leverage the distinct options offered by China and Britain based on their own dynamic assessments of national interests, thereby serving their core objective of “strategic autonomy.”

3.3. Integration analysis: The “ASEAN approach” to global governance and the redefinition of China and the UK's roles

Based on the above analysis, the core finding of this study is that a “menu-style” preference for global governance centered on ASEAN is emerging in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian nations place China and the United Kingdom on distinct cognitive axes. China is viewed as a “supplier based on scale,” with its capabilities in infrastructure, market access, and supply chain integration regarded as irreplaceable “necessities.” However, the associated strategic uncertainties are also seen as “risks” that require management. The UK is seen as a “rule-based complement,” with its traditional strengths in security, high-standard investment, and international rules viewed by many Southeast Asian nations as “value-added goods” or “insurance” to hedge against dependence on China and increase strategic maneuvering space.

As a result, the evolution of Southeast Asian countries’ views of China and the UK’s roles amounts to validation of their ripe move away from risk-averse strategies in this multipolar era. They will not choose “China-led” or “US-UK-led” governance models, but pursue a contextual approach to cooperation. This means prioritization of aligning with China on economic development issues, while keeping openness to Western partners (UK) on security-related and rules-based matters. This is both a further indication of the wisdom of survival of smaller nations when grappling with great power competition, but also a new set of demands for both China and the UK: that China has to do more about transparency of its rules and its social responsibility in high quality development of “the Belt and Road” initiative to bridge the deficit in trust, while the UK must show its pivot strategy to the Indo-Pacific will sustain gains in economic and public goods beyond security considerations, thus leading them toward a role shift from a “balancing power” to a “constructive partner.”

4. Conclusion

The research exposes the progress of the Southeast Asian countries’ images of China’s roles in world government and the UK’s roles in world government under the framework of “the Belt and Road” Initiative: a shift from the earlier focus of China’s provision of economic opportunity to a joint vision of “economic cooperation” and “strategic concerns.” China is perceived as a “scale provider” providing infrastructure, markets, but strategic uncertainty. The UK serves as a “rule-based complement” which assists Asean to hedge against risk providing security and high standard rules. Countries pursue “proactive autonomy,” “pragmatic instruments,” “soft balancing” vis-à-vis their geography, systems and relative degree of dependence to China. Thus, revealing the acumen of smaller nations’ pursuit of the objective of strategic autonomy. There is a clear preference for TAC (menu-style) governance. This relates to China (economic ties), Western-type (norms), and maintaining Asean centrality. The result of this focus is that China must improve “the Belt and Road” initiative’s transparency and accountability, but the UK must also deliver sustainable economic public goods so as to change its status from ‘balancer’ to “constructive partner.”

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