

Securitization vs. Desecuritization: Sino-US Strategic Competition in ASEAN

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Abstract

Southeast Asia has become the new terrain of great powers' competition. The influence of the United States, a leader of the free world, is challenged by the rising communist China. On the one hand, China's assertive foreign policy in territorial disputes with its neighbors has destabilized peace and security in the region. On the other hand, intentions behind Chinese soft power deployment through Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) are suspected as Beijing aims to dominate its backyard countries in Southeast Asia. This paper, therefore, presents the strategic assessment of Sino-American competition in ASEAN. The first section explores the deployment of Washington's stra-

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tegy (securitization of China) and Beijing's strategy (desecuritization) to catch the attention of ASEAN nations. With this background, the second section discusses the challenge posed by the desecuritization strategy of China through the BRI. Although some scholars characterize the Chinese grand strategy contained deceptive agendas, the pragmatic-oriented foreign policy, debt-trap diplomacy, aid assistance led by Chinese state-owned enterprises, and the inconsistency of American foreign policy have intensified the success of Chinese grand strategy in the region. Assuming from the current situation, there are three possible scenarios to occur. The third section predicts the worst-case scenario of Chinese neo-colonialism in Southeast Asia. The 'self-reliant' ASEAN is the future best-case scenario described in the fourth section. In the fifth section, the intractable great powers conflict and the hum and haw foreign policy of ASEAN nations reflect the business as usual. To avoid the worst-case and move beyond the business as usual, two possible solutions are demonstrated in the sixth section. In this section, the analysis focuses on each ASEAN state's capacity development and collective efforts in strengthening the robust regional organization, respectively. Finally, the present paper proposes five strategic recommendations to ASEAN in order to be able to deal with external challenges and attain ultimate benefits for its member states.

Keywords: Securitization, Desecuritization, Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), China, US, ASEAN