

## Why there are no grand alliances in Asia

Nor should Washington assume that regional states will coalesce to prevent Chinese dominance and create a European-style balance of power. In Asia, hierarchy, rather than power balance, has historically been the structure of regional order.

### Angering China is too costly

At the moment few south-east Asian leaders view China as the primary threat – militarily or otherwise. There is no regional concurrence over a “China challenge”, nor that any one power is [ideologically or morally superior](#).

A European-style power arrangement would only be likely to arise after the region is effectively polarised and China is excluded from all regional policy arenas. The cost of getting there would be high.

For a true balancing coalition to emerge in the region China would have to become significantly more threatening to every south-east Asian state. Why would China become so threatening? Probably only if it saw “core interests” such as Taiwan being threatened or if it felt excluded from the region. Either way, the cost of “getting China angry” so that a balancing coalition emerges would be too costly for everyone involved.

Regional states are, of course, more likely to buy in to a regional order they deem legitimate. But there is no evidence that all Indo-Pacific states have ever perceived a single unifying source of regional legitimacy. There is no single actor with a preponderant legitimacy, let alone a full-blown [Pax Americana or Pax Sinica](#). The absence of a universally accepted “operating system” is a feature, not a bug, of regional order.

Regional states are accustomed to living without a grand legitimate order and to working through different organising principles for different policy ends. Their strategic histories attest to the selective enforcement and uneven implementation of international rules.

Regional order begins and ends with domestic legitimacy. Asking regional countries to “[decouple](#)” from China is a tall order, for both practical and political reasons. They are increasingly and painfully aware of their supply chain vulnerabilities, but simply cutting off ties with China without a viable alternative would be strategic malpractice.

Regional countries will continue circumnavigating regional hierarchies rather than allow themselves to be pushed into some European-style balancing coalition. They won’t accept Chinese hegemony willy-nilly, although some seem to be [behaving like vassal states](#). Rather, they will continue engaging both sides and hedging their bets. They will choose the options that enhance their domestic legitimacy and strategic autonomy.

This leaves the more difficult question of, if not the United States or China, then who? Middle powers such as Japan, India and Australia are already taking sides in the US-China strategic competition. Indonesia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are unlikely to offer a concrete alternative that workably accommodates all powers.

So we may be left with managing different functional orders with different actors offering different structures and rules. ASEAN might, for example, form a normative multilateral diplomatic order, while the United States sustains the region’s military-security order and China buttresses the economic order. Mini-lateral groupings such as the [Quad and AUKUS](#) will probably further fracture this picture.

Regional order depends firstly on how regional elites define and defend their domestic legitimacy. The domestic legitimacy of many regional elites in south-east Asia now significantly depends on the private benefits and public goods China provides. A regional order that excludes one great power over the other may make sense geostrategically, but be unpalatable politically.

It’s time to spend more time figuring out the local drivers of regional order. Rather than reinventing the wheel on new policy initiatives, the United States could work with and support regional powers such as Japan and multilateral institutions under ASEAN. Genuinely co-operating with these actors might take the wind out of China’s narrative that the West is still stuck in a colonial mindset.

*Evan A. Laksmana is senior research fellow with the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.*