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## Relations among Indochinese Countries under the Rise of China: Will China Affect Their Existing Unity?

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### Abstract

Over different periods in history, the relations of the three states of Indochina region – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia – have always tied together and lived under China's sphere of influences. However, with China involved in maritime disputes with Vietnam recently, it seems that the unity and cooperation of the Indochinese nations might be at risk with the appearance of China's rise. How would leaders in Indochinese nations respond to China's power in the region? Will the rise of Beijing weaken the identity and the common interests of Indochina as one single region and affect the regional unity? The writer provides an analysis of the China – Indochina relations since the ancient days. The primary argument is that while the governments of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia might hold different opinions towards China, however, for small states, a broken relationship with their neighbors will not provide positive outcomes. Past experiences and lessons have proved that despite different changing courses in history, the three Indochinese countries had always tried to maintain peaceful and coordinative relations.

**Keywords:** Indochina region, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, China- Indochina relations.

### 1. Introduction

China's emergence from a poor developing state to one of the most global powers has been one of the most spectacular phenomena of human history in the international affairs in the past four decades. Over this period of time, the People Republic of China (PRC) has succeeded not only in increasing China's economic power but also in improving China's strengths in other areas. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's presence can be felt from almost every corner of the world that some have begun to view China as the direct competitor against the United States in the world affairs. When China's assertiveness in its foreign policy started to be revealed, some scholars of International Relations, both Chinese and foreigners, have shown their suspicion over its behavior and argued that an aggressive China is doomed to fail (Yan, 2014). However, recent evidences have shown that China's advancement in terms of foreign relations over the course of transforming its grand strategy has attracted attention from scholars and political leaders around the world, especially with the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. With this new grand strategy aiming at driving the PRC into the role as the center of the international system, China's economic development has brought both opportunities and challenges for many states across the world. Small, developing or underdeveloped regions like Africa or Southeast Asia saw the Chinese's initiatives as an opportunity to improve their economy and regional integration. Meanwhile, the Western powers like the United States and its allies considered China's policy as "predator

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economic strategy” (Mohan, 2017) or a direct threat towards the current international system. Thus, whether holding a positive or negative view on Beijing policies, it can be seen that the rise of China along with its BRI has recently become one of the most debated topics in modern world politics.

Then, as China promised to strengthen the regional and global connectivity, the development of transportation and infrastructure that connects China and other regions will have strategic implications upon China’s aspirations to become a great power. The BRI will emphasize the Chinese influences outward of Asia and further to other different areas such as Africa or the Indian Ocean. It can be observed that Southeast Asia would be one of the most important among the targeted beneficiaries. As Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia being the heart of China’s Indochina Peninsular Corridor, this land bridge is expected to boost China’s cooperation with this region (Xinhua, 2017a). Having considered the relationship among Vietnam, Lao and Cambodia has been under the strong Chinese influences for thousands of years, from the Imperial China tributary system throughout the Communist revolutionary wars up to the modern days, this research paper will focus on the study of the relations between China and the Indochina region. Taking into considerations that China has been continuously involved in disputes with Vietnam in the recent years, the author seeks to provide an analysis of the China – Indochina relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary international affairs. The essay also concentrates on analyzing the influences of China upon Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia throughout their course of history and examines whether the rise of China would diversify the national interests of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, consequently, weakening the identity and common interests that underlying Indochina as a single region.

The research essay will be divided into three different parts. It will begin with a brief introduction about the “peaceful rising” of China since 1978 along with the Belt and Road Initiative as Beijing’s most recent grand strategy before thoroughly analyzing Chinese influences upon the Indochina region since the ancient days until the modern era. Then, I will examine the Chinese impacts on the foreign policies of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in order to address the main question, whether the rise of China will weaken the regional unity of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

## **2. Discussion**

### **The rise of China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

To begin with, since the decision to reform and open its national economy in 1978, China has been emerging from a developing country to one of the great powers in the international affairs, especially in terms of economic power. Over the past four decades, China has emerged in the international affairs as a major power of Asia, especially in terms of economic power. From an underdeveloped Asian country with the largely state-controlled economy, China has experienced the “fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history” (Morrison, 2018), and now ranked as the second largest economy in the world. From the expansion of its economic presence in Asia to the strengthened military might, China’s rise is undoubtedly one of the most debated topics in international politics as well as within China. Thus, the growth of Chinese power can be roughly divided into two main periods: Prior to 1978 and since 1978 with the focus on the Belt and Road Initiative.

#### ***Prior to 1978***

In this period, the China national economy was operated under the system of budget subsidies and directed by the state. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, Beijing developed a centrally planned economy. The policy in which most of the industrial production was controlled by the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has limited the opportunities for private firms or foreign-invested companies to prosper in China. Since the government had the full authority to set production goals, prices, and resources in most of its economy, there were little incentives for the Chinese labors to become more productive or concern about the quality of their products, thus, by 1978, its national economy accounted for only less than 1% of the world total (Zheng, 2005). According to the World Bank, from the 1950s to 1978, China, under Mao leadership, had suffered tragic economic downturns, with the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976) which led to the death of millions of people and widespread political chaos. Nevertheless, shortly after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) has decided to break away from the Soviet-style economy. After the rough period of the Cultural Revolution, that significantly damaged the faith of their people upon the CCP, the Chinese government, then under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping sought to shore up its legitimacy by adjusting its economic policy according to free-market principles and opening up to the West. Taking economic development as its highest politic goal, Beijing has hoped that economic growth would in consolidating its power in China and raising the living standards of its people.

### **Since 1978**

Beginning in 1978, China, has so far, launched several economic reforms by decentralizing its economic policy. In contrast to the previous era, economic control of various enterprises was being granted to the provincial and local governments, thus, allowing them to follow free market principles instead of under state-directed guidance. Additionally, the central government had gradually removed the state price controls in the wide range of products and trade barriers which encouraged great competitions, boosted exports and attracted huge flows of foreign investments (FDI) to China. In four decades, China economy has expanded dramatically and been able to avoid a major economic crisis. From 1979 to 2016, Beijing was able to double the size of its national economy in every eight years, with China's annual GDP averaged 9.6 %. As China's GDP surpassed Japan in 2010 to rank only behind the United States, its economic development has rapidly changed its status in international affairs to the extent that many analysts began to wonder if and when would China overtake the U.S. to become the largest economic power in the world. Statistics have shown that from 1980 to 2017, while the U.S. share of global GDP on a basis of the PPP (purchasing power parity) dropped from 24.3 % to 15.3 %, China's share rose to estimated 18.3 % from 2.3 %. Thus, China economic growth is so noteworthy that the IMF predicted that on a PPP basis, China's economy will be 46.6 % greater than the U.S. by 2022 (Morrison, 2018). Such growth has enabled China to improve the living standard of its citizen, successfully brought estimated 800 million people out of poverty. Moreover, the actual size and the rapid growth of China has been a subject for debates of among economists and scholars of IR, with the magnitude of the Chinese labor forces and its commitment to development, there is no doubt that the rise of China will be unprecedented in the future decades (Ikenberry, 2014). Moreover, various aspects of the rise of China, from its continuously expanding influences in internal politics in its growing demands in developing military strength are also major concerns of many scholars in the world, especially in the U.S. and its allies. If we look at how China ranks in both internal and external politics over the course of its reforming era, it can be argued that by the 2010s, China has succeeded in achieving its original goal that was set out in 1978. Thus, China has entered the phase when it's success in economic growth has created greater opportunities to pursue its foreign policy goal, China began to strengthen its commitment in the international relations and expand its influences in many areas. With the transition in the Chinese grand strategy from keeping a low profile (*taoguang yanghui* – KLP) to striving for achievement (*fenfa youwei* – SFA) in 2013 (Yan, 2014), the rise of China has been outward of its region. The upgrade in its national economic power has led China to increase its involvement in the construction of the global economy, resulting in the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China's grant strategy to enhance its presence on a global scale.

### **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) reflects Beijing's decision to take its rising policy to the next level of commitment. First unveiled in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the BRI represents China's grand strategy to boost economic integration and connectivity with its neighbor states and a large number of Chinese trading partners across the world, stretching from Eurasia to Africa (Morrison, 2018). According to Xi (2017), the initiative calls for joint contribution from all over the world with the aims to developing a more dynamics platform for Asia-Pacific multilateral relations (Xinhua, 2017b). Although it was launched by China with the original focuses on Asia and other continents, the initiative "belongs to the world" and is open to all Chinese partners. Therefore, by focusing on the establishment of an international economic network that sets China in the central position, the initiative is said to welcome other countries from other regions to enjoy the benefits of China's financial growth as well as strengthening their foreign relations with other partners (Cheng et al., 2018). With the goal to connect as many countries as possible by 6 international inland corridors along with a Maritime

Silk Road, the BRI is expected to account for approximately 31 % of the global GDP. Significantly, by December 2017, Beijing has officially announced that about 100 agreements of cooperation have been made under the BRI between China and other 86 countries (Xinhua, 2017c). To successfully develop this grand strategy, it is predicted that the BRI would cost China from around \$4 trillion (The Economist, 2016) to approximately \$9 trillion (Bruce-Lockhart, 2017).

Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative highlighted the Chinese commitment in developing a Sino-centric economic system, it is believed to bring progress to many countries among different regions. As China already fostered for the establishment of the \$100 billion Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB) (Morrison, 2018), focused at the infrastructure development in Asia, it is undoubtedly that Asia will probably enjoy huge advancements in the following decades fueled by the Chinese financial sources and capital. Consequently, among the targeted beneficiaries, it seems that the three countries including Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia - the former French Indochina – China’s closest neighbors would be the sub-region that received both opportunities and challenges from Beijing’s policy. As the small powers in the international communities, history of the Indochinese nations in the field of foreign relations and economic development have been largely influenced by China. While Beijing’s strategies have become more aggressive over the year, Chinese power is believed to cast great impacts upon the Indochina region, due to its geographical proximity with the PRC. Hence, the following part of the essay will be used to examine the relationship between China and the region of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia throughout their changing history. The analysis will later contribute to answering the core argument of the paper as for how the rise of China would affect the Indochinese community in the contemporary international affairs.

### **The history of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: From Chinese tributary states to ASEAN members**

The three Southeast Asian countries in terms of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have shared a long relationship together through various periods of time. In the Western academic literature, historically, these sovereign states usually categorized as the Indochina region (or the former – Indochina Union), once colonized by the French for most of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the roots of the bond between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have dated back from centuries, and the impact of China upon this region has always remained strong since the ancient days. One of the reason is the matter of geography, especially in their proximity to China. In contrast with the island states in ASEAN such as Indonesia and the Philippines where China seems to have limited influences, the Indochina- the Southeast Asian mainland countries – throughout their changing history from traditional kingdoms, colonial fiefdoms to the modern days have always under robust Chinese influences (Reilly, 2013). This part of the paper seeks to offer a historical and theoretical background of how the Indochina countries have been influenced from the Chinese sphere, as they existed from the ancient days to their “discovery” by the European explorations until the modern days. It will include several concepts about the theories of International Relations and political studies of China and the involving countries such as identity, geopolitics and the ancient-China tributary system.

#### ***Historical and theoretical background***

The historical records of Indochinese nations showed that China has taken part in shaping the life and cultural standards of the Indochinese nations, especially for Vietnam. As mentioned in these records, at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, Vietnam had spent the next following twelve centuries under Chinese domination, leading to the transformation in many aspects in this country. From a “south seas civilization”, the thousand years domination of China have fostered the receptivity of the Vietnamese on the Chinese model of language, philosophy, cultural habitats and a certain amount of Sinic norms (Gunn, 2011). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even though globalization has made Vietnamese society become an overlapping sphere of many cultures such as Japanese, French, and American via the huge amount of investment and diplomatic cooperation from major powers in the world, the legacies of China in Vietnam remains strong and not difficult to realize. Then, the region of Indochina, especially with Laos and Vietnam are directly connected to the southern border of China, has always been co-opted into China’s sphere of influences, particularly

with the practices of the Chinese tributary system – an international system that is believed to be one of the greatest achievement of traditional China (Zhang, 2001; Reilly, 2013).

The tributary system (*chaogong tizhi*) was the traditional Chinese one for managing its foreign relations. Based on established rules and symbolic forms by which the neighbor countries entered and processed their relationship with China, the origins of the tributary system can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (Zhang, 2001). Throughout their course of history, the tributary system has evolved and supported China in constructing a close relationship with its neighboring states, provided it an effective mechanism of compliance from the neighbors in terms of political, economic and diplomatic concerns (Higgins, 1992). Taking advance of the idea of a superior China, the tributary system played an important role in creating a Chinese world order, Pax Sinaca, that witnessed the participation of many non – Chinese countries from Central, South and Southeast Asia (Zhang, 2001). Making the Chinese emperor known as the Son of Heaven (*tianzi*) with the morality power to rule over the *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven). From establishing social harmony to cosmic realms, the tributary system established an international order within which Imperial China is the Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo*), the center of the world civilization and considered all that beyond the Chinese boundaries as barbaric, less civilized communities. These “barbaric communities” would offer tribute to China, usually a largely token of native products or rare commodities, along with an act of ritual obeisance (*kowtow*), then, Chinese ruler would formally grant the foreign rulers the legitimate acceptance into the Sinocentric order. Throughout centuries, this tributary system developed beyond the scope of an international trading system and became an institution that served the Chinese conception of their ethnocentric world view. Later on, with Confucian ideology, which highlighted hierarchy, ritual and ethical behavior acted as the key beliefs of the system, the tributary system portrayed an unequal relationship between China and its neighbor societies (Higgins, 1992).

Furthermore, according to Benjamin Reilly (2013), more than economic benefits, the practices of the tributary system also took part in protecting Imperial China’s security and its ruled order. The argument can be proved by analyzing the facts about how the neighboring countries engaged with China, particularly the distinction in China’s relationship between the communities to the north and southern societies. Due to its geographical proximity with Southeast Asia, in the past, the southern kingdoms have been concerned as parts of China’s “backyard” (Ba, 2008). In sharp contrast with centuries of conflicts against the Mongols and the northern barbarians at the Great Wall of China, for centuries, with the lack of another Great Wall at the southern border, those kingdoms to the South of China have been integrated into the Chinese socio-cultural order through the tributary system with the responsibility of peacekeeping along China’s southern frontier. By asking the “Near countries” to its borders like Vietnam or the Lao kingdom of Lang Xand to send tribute every three years, Imperial China has maintained a close relationship with its southern neighbors (Reilly, 2013). Besides trading purposes, the tributary system also served to safeguard China’s security. The deep historical ties of tributary relations between China and the Indochina states left significant legacies that have still existed in the modern days, even with the fall of the system. The hierarchic relations embodied in Confucianism like ranking and respectful to the Empire still reflect in some aspects of the relationship between China and Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia today.

Then, in the aftermath of the two Opium Wars (1839-42; 1856- 60), with the Western civilizations began to aggressively expand to East Asia that eventually lead to the collapse of the tributary system. The regional affairs of China and the concerned Southeast Asian states have been transformed. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Southeast Asian states like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were referred as the French Indochina (or the Indochina Union) and colonized by the French until the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. These Southeast Asian countries, being located closed to one another, in the afterlife of the tributary relations, once again shared a common identity as the colonies of the French empire. In the following part of the essay, the author will provide further explanation that not only the expansion of the West has contributed in transforming the political affairs of China and Indochina, ending the dynastic cycles in these nations, but the clashes of two international orders and the intellectual contest (European vs. Chinese) also paved the way for a new era of Chinese influences upon the concerned countries. This era marked the retreat of Imperial China and the beliefs of Confucianism as the moral and an intellectual foundation. From a universal dynastic empire, China has taken a transition to become a

“civilized state”, gradually and forcefully integrated to the European standards and the global international society (Zhang, 2001). However, while the collapse of Imperial China along with the cherished Confucianism principals were somehow a huge loss for the Chinese who lived in the nineteenth century (Zhang, 2001), in the long term, at a system level, this development did not affect the strong influences of China upon its neighboring region, particularly the Indochina Union. When the French were defeated and forced to withdraw from the region in 1954, historical literatures have shown that the proximity to China critically shaped the revolution and offered a model of governance in the following period to the countries in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Ba, 2008; Reilly, 2013). All witnessed the rise to power of the communist parties in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the help of China, to a lesser or a greater extent. From the tributary relationship, the Chinese sphere of influences shifted to the communist revolutions and Leninist political structures as a response to the domination of the West. With the fall of the Japanese Empire at the end of the Second World War and the victory of Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China has continuously demonstrated its support towards the non-democratic political authority of its neighboring countries. Such non-democratic parties are still ruling in Laos and Vietnam.

To avoid further challenges to its power, China since the Mao’s era has attempted to reestablish the model of the tributary system in the neighboring countries. The history of Southeast Asia indicated that although Communism, as both a doctrine and political ideology, tried to consolidate its power in almost every country, but it was only in Indochina that ideology could be successful. In other Southeast Asian states like Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, the Communist movements were suppressed and faced radical resistance (Reilly, 2013). The political structures of Southeast Asia have experienced a great division in terms of political authority ever since this era. Almost all maritime states in the region have transformed the model of government to democracy, while the mainland nations who proximity to China remained autocratic (Reilly, 2013). One of the reasons could be due to the limited influences of China but of the USA instead upon the further states in Southeast Asia. Historically, the relationship between China and the maritime Southeast Asian states were much less developed in comparison to the mainland nations.

### ***Contemporary Indochina***

The Indochina region nowadays can be seen as the “buffer states” of China (Reilly, 2013). Differences in geographical proximity provided proper explanation to the remaining of the Sinic influences in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia through different periods of history. Today, the three countries of Indochina also mostly depend on China for foreign investment and various supports for economic growth. Vietnam and Laos remained as the outstanding illustration of the “China model” of modern single-party autocracies, the communist political system with open market economies. Meanwhile, Cambodia even though practices a different model of government, yet, remained under an effective single-party authority (Reilly, 2013). Moreover, geographical linkages and traditional friendship among Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have resulted in an extremely close trilateral relationship in many aspects, from political commitment to economic development. According to Ccheang and Wong (2015), similarities can be found in the economic policy of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as the three governments together share some common principals, including opening up to the outside world and aim for the diversification in the sources of investment. This sub-regional cooperation or the “growth triangle” represents the special relationship of the Indochina countries in the international affairs. In fact, in comparison to other growth triangles in Southeast Asia, the Indochina’s one was quite well-developed (Ccheang, Wong, 2015). The trilateral relationship being established since the communist movement during the war against colonization and imperialism has been still relevant to the modern days. With the geographical proximity of locating next to one another, the developing process of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia has always been closely tied to together. Frequently exchanges of state visits and open dialogues have been launched by the three governments with the respect in maintaining trust and political commitment among the three. In addition to China, Vietnam is one of the key investors and economic partners of both Laos and Cambodia, with Vietnam ranked in the top three of Lao’s Foreign Direct Investor in 2012 (Ccheang, Wong, 2015). Besides, in 2017, Vietnam celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of relations with Laos and the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vietnam – Cambodia relations, marking another milestone in the development of the Indochina regional cooperation (Hanoi Times, 2017; VOV, 2017).

Furthermore, in the recent decades, China has continued to expand its presence into the maritime domain of the region, notably with its increasing investment in military capacities. By claiming its authority towards the Paracel and Spratly Islands, to which a number of Southeast Asian countries also claimed to be their territories, notably Vietnam, the Chinese influences upon Southeast Asia has evolved outward of the mainland realm (Ba, 2008). Some of the members of ASEAN, especially the non-communist countries plus Vietnam have begun to pursue a dual strategy that involved the external relations with the Western major powers like the United States, bringing the balance of power between the great powers into the regional affairs (Ba, 2008). In short, since the Southeast Asian states are considered to be small powers in comparison with the strength of China and the U.S., worries that the rise of China could affect the regional security, the Southeast Asian countries have encouraged external powers to engage in the region and maintaining the regional status. With China becoming stronger in terms of military, politics and economy, power dynamics remaining the defining character in the studies of the relations between China and Southeast Asia, notably the Indochina, to engage China has been one important aspect that motivated their foreign policy.

Even though states may have different concerns at the rise of China, none can deny the fact that Beijing has brought many opportunities into this region. Recent history has proved that China somehow can be viewed as the magnet attracting major powers to engage to Southeast Asia. It was the imperial expansion and the Chinese trade to the Western expansion that eventually lead to the colonization of the West in the region leading to the revolutionary wars (Ba, 2009). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, proximity to China also played significantly in attracting the great power conflicts of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to the region, notably in the Vietnam War. Although a country like Vietnam has always under conflicts with China and been looking to the U.S.' power to contain the rise of China, especially having the South China Sea disputes occurred, yet, the PRC remained as one of its most important diplomatic partners. At the moment, the U.S. is still considered to be the dominant power in this region, yet, the presence of China upon Southeast Asia is cannot be ignored, especially in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia due to geo-political connection. Most significantly, as Alice Ba (2009) noted, while China's dominant power in the past has been materially constrained, recent economic growth has provided Beijing with the capabilities to perform coercion strategies that were absolutely absent in the former period (Ba, 2009). As regional multilateralism being considered as the pillar for Beijing's national policy, there are high possibilities that the regionalism future of Southeast Asia, especially the Indochina will be influenced by the rise of China.

With the above-mentioned analysis, we could summarize that even when the ancient-China's tributary system collapsed, its legacies upon the regional countries still exists. To understand the relationship between the Indochina and China in the contemporary politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one important aspect is to understand how the influences of China could be maintained in this region throughout history. For centuries, Beijing had consistently attempted to assimilate the countries at its southern frontier into the Chinese sphere of influences whether it was by means of diplomatic or otherwise (Reilly, 2013). The Indochina countries seem to have shared a long history of living under the shadow of China as well as several sets of common cultural values and identities. However, as Vietnam now has strong concern about the PRC's expansion and tends to enhance the relationships with the U.S to balance against the Chinese power while the others do not, different perspectives and approaches to national interests have generated among the governments of the Indochinese nations. While Cambodia and Laos seem to get closer to China, Vietnam is looking for supports and assistance from U.S and its allies (Ccheang & Wong, 2015). It is argued that in the context of an increasingly aggressive China, the cooperation among the Indochina nations is vulnerable to cope with the change in the regional affairs and especially with the intensive competition for power between the United States and China in the region. As the unity and cooperation between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia might be at risk, the critical questions could be whether the rise of Beijing will weaken the identity and the common interests of Indochina as a region or whether Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia will maintain their close ties as they have always done in the past? In what ways that China does the rise of China to become a great power could affect the relations and cooperation among Indochinese countries. And will the historical development of the region provide an effective way to have a proper answer? The final part of the

essay will analyze how the Indochinese nations have responded to the Chinese expansion and hope to find out some arguments for those questions.

### **The unity of Indochina, as a single region in dealing with the rise of China**

Even though Southeast Asia, notably the Indochina is a region that comprised of the middle or small power in the international affairs, however, in the recent year, due to its geo-strategic position and rich in natural resources, the region has become the favorite playground for other major powers. The regional politics of the Southeast Asian countries have been largely influenced by the implications of other stronger countries, taking the U.S – China rivalry as an example when focusing on the rise of China's might.

While China economic rapid growth and the Belt and Road Initiative are being considered to build up the interconnected cooperation to achieve common prosperity in the region (Xinhua, 2017a), the U.S. today is said still the dominant power in Asia. As the result, scholars from America and region view the BRI quite differently than what has been told by Chinese officials. Beijing's movements and activities have been widely considered as the direct challenge to the U.S. power in Asia. Based on the various approaches, the regional policy makers and scholars have overwhelming arguments that as China succeeded in achieving the great power status, the U.S already existed order will be vulnerable. A certain number of previous works of literature of IR has looked at the recent Sino- U.S. relations as the reemerging of the bipolarity in the global affairs, which will put an end to the U.S. – led world order that has established since the end of the Cold War (Tunsjø 2017). During the first two decades of the post- Cold War period, while Washington was busy with its military campaigns in the Middle East, the PRC has started to show assertiveness in its policy towards its neighbors, resulting in various territorial disputes in the maritime domain. The rise of China has been the magnet that, once again, leading to increase activities of the U.S in Southeast Asia. Noting that among the states that have been involved in maritime conflicts with China, many of them are Washington's allies and partners, such as Japan, or especially Vietnam in the South China Sea disputes. That's why, the U.S interests would be affected significantly if China's power can continue to expand. Then, with the aim to limit the aggressive expansion of the PRC to maintain the current status quo, the U.S. policymakers have launched several attempts to implement that goal, beginning with President Obama's pivot to Asia (Obama, 2012).

Since the beginning of the 2010s when the U.S. administration took the protection of its supremacy in the Asia-Pacific as its highest politics (Clinton, 2011), the following years witnessed a period of rebalancing from Washington against China. From Obama's pivot to Trump's recent announced Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States has been trying to indirectly contain the rise of China by attempting to boost the power of other states in the region. By managing to strengthen the cooperation in Asia with its allies and partners through trade agreements such as the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), Washington was looking forward to creating a coalition of Asian nations as a counterweight against China's power. Then, among the U.S partners, Vietnam has been viewed as one of the most active participants. As a member of the Indochina states that shares border with the PRC, Vietnam, has been contesting over the islands at the South China Sea since the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Morrison, Vaughn, 2006). When Beijing attempted to legitimate its claim in the South China Sea based on the nine-dash line, stating that China's rights in this region are "historical and solid" (Hiebert, Nguyen, Poling, 2014), Vietnam has been leaning towards the U.S. as one of the comprehensive partners for the Southeast Asian regional stability and the balancing factor against China. While still showing its support for China's BRI, the Vietnamese government is trying to develop a mix strategy by strengthening closer ties with Washington. Following the lift of U.S. embargo on the sale of lethal weapons in May 2016, for the first time since the Vietnam War, an American aircraft carrier – the USS Carl Vinson- visited Danang in March 2018 (France-Presse, 2018). Some analysts have viewed these events as a new level of commitment between the U.S. and Vietnam to deal with an aggressive China. Up to now, Vietnam has remained as the most vocal claimant in the South China Sea after the China-friendly President of the Philippines backed off from the disputes. The Vietnamese government, while managing to stabilize its foreign relations with China, has worked hard to invite other major powers like the U.S. and its allies to the region in order to establish a strategic equilibrium regarding the Chinese factor (Ccheang, Wong, 2015).

Nevertheless, even though the rise of China is believed to raise serious concerns among the Southeast Asian states, their perspectives upon the PRC are quite diverse. Although Vietnam may



see the rise of China would lead to unwanted security challenges, thus, making Vietnam to perform hedging strategy towards China, Laos and Cambodia, who have no direct involvement in the South China Sea disputes may hold different opinions. With Laos and Cambodia plus Brunei signed the four-point consensus with China stating that the South China Sea is not an ASEAN' issue (Parameswaran, 2016), both Laos and Cambodia governments have indicated great interests in enhancing their foreign relations as well as enthusiastic supports to China's initiatives (Pang, 2017). Indeed, China has become the major economic investor in both Laos and Cambodia with China's total accumulated investment in Laos reached \$187 million in 2014 and \$12 billion at Cambodia by the end of 2016 (Pang, 2017). According to Prime Minister Hun Sen, Cambodia's economic development in the past years has owed largely to China's assistance (Pheakdey, 2012). The Cambodian leader has also praised and appreciated the "wisdom of Chinese President Xi Jinping" when talking about the BRI (Fresh News, 2018). Hence, the present-day footprint of China as the major donor upon the development of Laos and Cambodia cannot be denied, and it is likely to further enhanced by the launch of the BRI. Both Laos and Cambodia are the key points in the construction of China's "Indochina Peninsular Corridor" in Southeast Asia. Great number infrastructure buildings, including railways and roads to connect the Indochina with other continents have been constructed by China since 2013. For Cambodia, the Chinese investment represents great opportunities for developing its economy, because the Chinese financial support usually does not go with strictly requirements about human rights as the U.S. and European states often have insisted (Fifield, 2018). Cambodia has gained huge profits from Chinese infrastructures, with 30 casinos and 70 more are under constructions, Chinese tourists also contributed to the progress of Cambodian's economy.

From then on, it seems that previous studies have suggested that the rise of China might have brought sharp division among the Indochinese community. If the territorial disputes in China-Vietnam relationship leads to serious tension, it will generate pressures upon both Cambodia and Laos in its strategic responses. Although the relation between Vietnam and China could be seen as be a major concern for both Laos and Cambodia, they are obvious to be under strong China's sphere of influences which have been observed through the South China Seas issues (Ccheang, Wong, 2015). In the worst scenario, Laos and Cambodia might be forced to choose side, a situation in which would heavily affect the national interests of both states. Consequently, through the lens of neo-realism, it can be observed that the response to Chinese behavior from the Indochina is in sharp contrast. Strategically, although the Vietnamese government do not directly show its desire to balance against China, Vietnam might have been, to some extent, relied on the U.S support to counter China's rise. Meanwhile, Cambodia and Laos are having the trends of bandwagon towards China by moving closer to Beijing (Ccheang, Wong, 2015). Then, it seems China's quest in regaining its "rightful place" and establishing the modern-tributary system has brought the struggle for power of the great powers into Southeast Asia, resulting in high possibilities of a sharp division among the Indochinese policymakers.

Nevertheless, recognizing that a broken Indochina cooperation will not bring positive effects for the national interests of all three involving countries, the governments of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have been trying to strengthen regional cooperation. Despite their different views upon Beijing's behavior, for the small powers, serious conflicts will not produce benefits, especially when Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are located right next to one another. That's why, many visits and dialogues from the Vietnamese top diplomats and leaders to Laos and Cambodia have been frequently launched in order to remind the Indochina countries about their trust, comprehensive relations and traditional friendship (Ccheang, Wong, 2015). Moreover, taking its national interests and China factor into considerations, Vietnam's leaders have decided to take a proactive approach on the other two. A conference of the three Indochinese leaders along with other high-ranked officials of various international institutions such as President of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Takehiko Nakao, World Bank Managing Director Joaquim Levy and ASEAN Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi was organized in Hanoi in March 2018 following the 10<sup>th</sup> Development Triangle Area Summit (Nhandan, 2018). Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen along with Laos Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith have signed a joint declaration that promised to expand the trilateral cooperation to a national level, rather than just in border provinces (Vietnam News, 2018). The trio has agreed on a positive cooperation that will stretch from security issues such as timber smuggling plus human and drug

trafficking to the other domain of trade, education, and infrastructure development. Succeeded in strengthening this Indochina's growth triangle will further contribute to the realization of the ASEAN Community in 2025 (Nhandan, 2018). Then, regarding the trends of events that occurred in the Indochina region so far, it seems that the three countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are still trying the best efforts in deepening the regional trilateral cooperation. Although it is clearly that each government might have different opinions upon China's movements, the rise of China and especially the BRI, however, past experiences and lessons have shown that despite different changing courses in history, the Indochina triangle had always tried to maintain peaceful and coordinative relations. Even if the rise of China did generate sharp division in the perspectives of each Indochinese government, in an anarchic international affair, "security is the highest end", only when security is assured that states allowed to safely pursue other goals (Waltz, 1979). The Indochina states should focus on the course of developing its national power and avoid any potential conflicts; especially conflicts within the Indochina. As Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc recalled in the 10<sup>th</sup> Development Triangle Area Summit, saying:

"There is a Vietnamese proverb that we brothers heartily endorse: It takes not one but three trees to make a high mountain" (Vietnam News, 2018).

### 3. Conclusion

To sum up, China's rapid growth and emergence as a major power has led to the increasing concern for not just the major powers like the U.S. and Japan, but also for the small countries like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Having geographical proximity to the PRC, it is obvious that the three Indochinese nations should be cautious the most when referring to their approaches towards the PRC. Even though the China factor might have brought some glances of disagreement among the Indochinese governments, at the moment, the history of this region still provides us an effective guideline to examine the Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia trilateral relations and the links between China and the Indochina as a single region. As the sign of the Chinese influences upon these countries can be traced back to thousands of years, since China will definitely become stronger in the near future, the Indochina region will continue to live under its shadows. With the Belt and Road Initiative is in the developing phase, China's strategy is expected to deliver significant changes for these Southeast Asian countries in terms of economic and infrastructure development, hence, it is too early to give an exact prediction of what would the regional unity of Indochina might become under the shadow of China. Nevertheless, today, it can be argued that for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, national interests and security with their neighbors remained as the highest politics. While the three governments might have different visions about China's policy, Vietnam may continue to look at the U.S.' power to counter China's expansion, however, to sustain the Indochina triangle is also one of their main concerns. Despite external pressures from Beijing, the three states of Indochina are still trying to avoid serious regional disharmony.

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