



Is a China-Led Order Emerging in Southeast Asia?

Henrick Tsjeng



The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Is a China-Led Order Emerging in Southeast Asia?

Henrick Tsjeng

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The 12th Beijing Xiangshan Forum, the Victory Day Parade and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit all demonstrate China's increasing will and ability to reshape the international order.
- The large showing and support by Southeast Asian states and the ASEAN Secretariat at these events demonstrated China's increasing influence and importance in the eyes of Southeast Asia.
- However, challenges remain, and it would not be a smooth road to Chinese regional leadership in Southeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

The 12th Beijing Xiangshan Forum concluded on 19 September 2025, capping what some have termed an [alternative](#) to the Shangri-La Dialogue. This followed the Victory Day Parade held in Beijing on 3 September and the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held in Tianjin from 31 August to 1 September. On the last day of the SCO summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), the fourth of such Chinese "global initiatives".

Such events are not new. However, [commentators](#) have asserted that, coming back-to-back, these events demonstrate China's will and ability to assume leadership of and [reshape the global order](#). Southeast Asia – a key neighbouring region – also appears to be [drifting](#) towards Beijing. Despite these developments, China's leadership of the region should not be assumed to be imminent or even inevitable.



Despite China's growing influence, its leadership of the regional order is neither imminent nor inevitable. *Image source: Unsplash.*

Leader of the Global South

China's proffered leadership of a reshaped international system does hold allure for many in Southeast Asia. For one, there was a [sizeable turnout](#) by Southeast Asian leaders during the Victory Day Parade. Additionally, ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn participated in both the [SCO-Plus summit](#) and the [Xiangshan Forum](#). There are several reasons behind such Southeast Asian support.

First, China was perceived as keen to reform the international order to give the Global South a voice. During the Xiangshan Forum, Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun [said](#) his country was opposed to military alliances and "exclusive blocs aimed at hegemony". He urged the reform and improvement of the global governance system to maintain a "more just and reasonable" global order.

China was clearly making a pitch for leadership of the Global South and projecting itself as a champion of "[true multilateralism](#)". Xi in his [speech](#) during the SCO-Plus meeting said that all countries "should continue to dismantle walls, not erect them" and "seek integration, not decoupling", in a clear rebuke to the United States for its protectionist policies.

The opportunity for China presented itself with the advent of the second Trump administration. Since assuming the presidency earlier this year, President Donald Trump has been challenging the global rules-based order by imposing punitive reciprocal tariffs on adversaries and allies alike. He has also been [demanding](#) that US allies increase their defence spending.

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that China's offer of leadership would attract some Southeast Asian countries. Reeling from reciprocal tariffs, observers are [claiming](#) that some in Southeast Asia increasingly view China as a "more reliable and predictable" trade partner than the United States. There has been speculation that ASEAN was attempting to prepare for a "[post-America](#)" world, and part of this plan involved greater economic engagement with other countries, including China. For example, ASEAN recently agreed to sign the [upgraded](#) ASEAN-China Free Trade Area agreement.

Champion of Sovereign Equality

Second, Beijing was seen to champion sovereign equality. The GGI [concept paper](#) stated that all countries “shall have their sovereignty and dignity respected, their domestic affairs free from external interference, the right to independently choose their social system and development path, and the right to participate in, make decisions in and benefit from the global governance process as equals.”

Such assertions would be appealing to Southeast Asian states, especially since most of these countries have suffered from colonialism and war and strongly support the principle of non-interference in their internal affairs. Furthermore, non-interference is enshrined in the [ASEAN Charter](#), demonstrating the heavy emphasis Southeast Asian countries place on this long-standing principle.

Defender of International Law, Advocate for Peace

Third, China presented itself as a responsible leader that advocated for peace. Dong [said](#) that the People’s Liberation Army “will act as a ballast for peace and stability, upholding the vision of permanent peace enshrined in the United Nations Charter.” China also positioned itself as a defender of international law: In the GGI concept paper, a core concept was Beijing’s commitment to the international rule of law.

Naturally, ASEAN member states support any external power that upholds international law and is committed to peace and security – principles that ASEAN stands by.

No Chinese Leadership in Southeast Asia, Yet

However, China will continue to face challenges in Southeast Asia. Some ASEAN countries are wary of China’s purported support for international law, particularly as it pertains to the South China Sea. The South China Sea disputes have continued to trouble relations between China and Southeast Asian countries, especially the Philippines. Even though key claimant states Vietnam and Malaysia have recently kept their respective maritime disputes with China low-key, these could easily flare up at any moment.

China has also used the concept of sovereign equality to oppose any “interference” in territories that it claims. By using a combination of [historical](#) and [legal](#) arguments to claim that China was the rightful owner of the area in the South China Sea demarcated in Chinese maps by the so-called nine-dash line, Beijing has sought to counter allegations that it was committing [territorial aggression](#) against other countries; instead, Beijing has asserted that it was merely defending its sovereign rights.

This behaviour, of course, diminishes trust between Southeast Asian claimant states and China, as Beijing would be perceived as dismissive of the national interests and sovereign rights of Southeast Asian states.

Yet another issue is China’s ability to play peacemaker in the region. The Global Security Initiative [concept paper](#) that Beijing unveiled in 2023 stated that China sought to “promote political settlement of international and regional hotspot issues” and

“encourage the countries concerned to overcome differences and resolve hotspots through candid dialogue and communication”, hinting at possible mediation roles that China aspires to undertake.

Beijing has attempted to match words with action through mediation attempts in the Myanmar crisis and the Cambodia-Thailand conflict. However, China has little to show in the former, with the civil war Myanmar still raging; its quiet role in the latter is perceived as [minor](#) at best, compared to Trump’s well-reported [warning](#) of derailing tariff negotiations with both countries unless they agreed to third-party negotiations, which were brokered by Malaysia as the ASEAN chair.

Most of all, China has a track record of using coercive tactics, including [economic intimidation](#) and [grey zone tactics](#), against ASEAN member states that were deemed to have infringed on China’s core interests. The Philippines has [experienced](#) the bulk of such tactics in recent years due to its [more proactive approach to asserting its rights](#) in the disputed areas. Beyond that, there have been allegations that China has used [disinformation](#) campaigns to support its claims over the South China Sea.

Ultimately, most Southeast Asian states are using the opportunities offered by the SCO, the Victory Day Parade and the Xiangshan Forum to rebalance their foreign relations in China’s favour as US influence declines in the region. Yet, the majority of Southeast Asian states are also likely to seek [deeper engagement](#) with other external players like Australia, India, Japan and South Korea, rather than put all their eggs in the Chinese basket.

The Long March to Regional Leadership

For now, China does not yet have the clout to assume full leadership of the regional order, and the circumstances do not yet permit it to do so. As long as territorial disputes continue to fester, and perceptions that China is a [“self-serving”](#) partner persist, Beijing will struggle to sustain a [“friendly backyard”](#) in Southeast Asia.

If China continues to play the long game, it may well eclipse the United States in the region. This development may significantly undermine ASEAN and its member states’ ability to remain neutral and avoid choosing sides. Hence, it is crucial for ASEAN to ensure that it maintains its centrality, that its institutions remain effective, and that it continues its robust engagement with its other partners.

Henrick Tsjeng is Associate Research Fellow with the Regional Security Architecture Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

