

Meeting Point of Great Powers: Southeast Asia*

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David Shambaugh:

Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia

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David Shambaugh, author of the book *Where Great Powers Meet*, is a Gaston Sigur Professor of Asian Studies, Political Science & International Affairs and Director of the China Policy Program of the Elliott School of International Affairs (George Washington University, Washington DC) as well as a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. In 2015, he was chosen as the second most influential China expert in the United States, but he is an acknowledged expert in China as well. His main fields of research are: internal affairs, external relations, military as well as security and Asian international relations of China. In addition, he was an advisor to the US government as well as various private foundations and companies. His book published in 2013 entitled *China Goes Global* was chosen by *The Economist* as one of the best books of the year.

In his work, David Shambaugh seeks answers to questions such as: What toolkits do Beijing and Washington have in the region? What historical heritages do the two great powers carry in connection with the region? What is the attitude of the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to the United States and China, and how can they thrive between the two great powers? According to the basic thesis of the book, Southeast Asia is of extreme importance in itself as well, but this region is also a microcosm of the global great power rivalry between America and China. As for the structure of the book, the author first discusses the contest between the USA and China and then examines what leeway Beijing and Washington have in the region, what historical footprint they left in the

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Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in its ten member countries, and also what policy these countries are pursuing in connection with the two great powers. Finally, he tries to find out what is expected in the region in the future in relation to the rivalry of the two great powers. According to Shambaugh, the extensive competition between the United States and China is one of the main determinants of international relations and is expected to remain such for a very long time. Therefore, developments in the Southeast Asian region may have global consequences as well.

In the first chapter, the author establishes that in today's complex field of international relations there is one single factor sweeping everything aside and rising to the surface: the overall competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. He presents the outset and the current situation of the rivalry between the two great powers and then discusses the ensuing increasingly popular conclusion that there is a new cold war going on in our world. He explains that although the latest rivalry between great powers is similar to the cold war era to some extent, it is also different in many respects. In the author's opinion, the greatest difference is that China – unlike the Soviet Union – has become organically interlinked with the international institutional system. According to experts' unanimous opinion, the competition between China and the USA is becoming increasingly intensive in the Southeast Asian region, and they also agree that this contest may even be influenced by the ten ASEAN member states. Nevertheless, the author calls attention to the fact that other regional, so-called 'middle powers' – such as Japan, India, Australia and the European Union, and, to a lesser degree, Russia as well – also play a key role in the Southeast Asian strategic game of chess. The author then presents Southeast Asia itself, describing it as an extremely dynamic region. He notes that the region is comprised of eleven nation-states, ten of which are ASEAN members, and with its total population of 636 million people, Southeast Asia is one of the most populous areas in the world. He emphasises that the large population is coupled with a diversity of religions as well, and this diversity determines almost everything in Southeast Asia. In the author's opinion, this is the reason why it is so difficult for ASEAN countries to act together in order to reach common goals. Finally, the author of the book outlines when and how the powers of the world appeared in the region and what impact it had on Southeast Asia.

The next comprehensive part is constituted by the second and third chapters. They analyse the presence of the United States in Southeast Asia. The second chapter provides details of the American heritage of Southeast Asia, i.e. of the historical role of United States and of the relations with the Southeast Asian region under the individual US presidents. The third chapter takes us to the present, describing the current role of America in Southeast Asia. The author also considers this important to discuss, because in his opinion the presence of the United States in the region

is clearly undervalued or even deemed self-evident by many observers. On the whole, Shambaugh believes that the presence and impact of the USA in Southeast Asia is extensive and significant in various categories, even if it is less perceptible compared, for example, to the presence of China. He highlights three areas where the USA still plays a defining role: trade, security and *soft power*. He considers the part taken by US diplomacy to be the weakest area.

The next main part of the book discusses the presence of China in Southeast Asia, as previously in connection with the United States. The fourth chapter examines how relations changed over China's thousand-year history and during World War II, and what the attitude of Chinese leaders to the region was like. The fifth chapter already gets down to China's current role in Southeast Asia. As he did for the United States, the author of the book discusses the levels where China is present. He defines the Chinese presence in four relationship dimensions: diplomacy, relations between people, trade and security. However, he stresses that the degree of Beijing's influence is not the same in the four different dimensions, but varies across categories and countries as well. He notes that China's economic and trade impact is the largest of the four dimensions, and this is the most dynamically growing one. He places society-level relations between people to the second place, followed by diplomacy and then security.

In the sixth chapter, the author of the book examines how much leeway ASEAN has between the two great powers, as he stresses that none of the countries in the region are under the sole influence of China or the United States. He thinks that the most important common feature of the ten member states is the ambivalence they show towards both great powers, and that they do not really trust any of them. He also outlines the advantages and disadvantages for ASEAN that may originate from relations with China and the United States. First, the author examines the region as a whole, and then discusses the individual countries separately as well: he briefly presents Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, before analysing their relations with the United States and China.

In the final seventh chapter, the author searches for an answer to the question of what the outcome of the competition between China and the United States in Southeast Asia may be: polarisation or coexistence while competing? Certain comparative advantages and disadvantages can be pointed out in the case of both great powers in connection with their interactions with the individual Southeast Asian countries, as both have strengths and weaknesses. Shambaugh notes that since 2017 a very significant collective shift towards China has been observed, but he adds that although the position and influence of China in the region has increased considerably, this should not be overvalued. The author's opinion on

China's diplomatic and political influence in the region is that at present it exceeds that of the United States, and its military potential and presence are also increasing steadily in parallel with that. In addition, the 'Belt and Road' Initiative and the ensuing regional infrastructure construction provides a particular comparative advantage for China. The United States is striving to be present in various areas of the life of Southeast Asian countries these days as well, i.e. we can really speak about a multi-dimensional actor. Nevertheless, continuing the train of thoughts, the author calls attention to the fact that raw military power remains the greatest strength and most important means of the United States. The United States is still by far the most important factor in supporting the security of Southeast Asian military forces. In addition, everyday life in Southeast Asia is almost completely interwoven by the cultural attraction of the United States: it is present in the media, in films, in various sports, in higher education, technology and investments. To sum it up: it is far greater than China's cultural impact on the region.

While China is attempting to widen and deepen its presence in all Southeast Asian countries with intensive work, in the author's opinion the United States' attitude in this area is rather negligent. This is what Shambaugh derives the all-pervasive and currently prevailing narrative, which is generally known in connection with the region, from: China is an 'unavoidable' dominant power, while the importance of the United States is decreasing and declining inevitably. Nevertheless, using an empirical approach, this book concludes that this narrative is not precise and does not completely conform to the facts. According to its conclusion, the United States continues to have deep roots and has much more comprehensive power in the Southeast Asian region than China. At the same time, it also acknowledges as an unquestionable fact that the American influence is declining, and according to David Shambaugh China may eventually conquer Southeast Asia if the United States fails to pay enough attention.