

Southeast Asia Rejects Mike Pompeo, Not the United States

by Mike Billington

Oct. 23—Although President Donald Trump has adopted a critical attitude towards China over the past few months, it should be clear to anyone who is thinking critically that his switch away from referring to Xi Jinping as a “great leader of a great nation,” to holding China responsible for the disastrous impact of the coronavirus on the health and the economy of the United States, does not in any way include the wholesale denunciation of China voiced by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper.

Even while referring to the “China virus,” the President has repeatedly praised China’s actions to carry through the agreements of the U.S.-China trade deal, to resolve the massive trade deficit created by the “globalists” of previous administrations. He also fulsomely praised the recently retired U.S. Ambassador to China, Iowa’s former Governor Terry Branstad, and repeated Branstad’s admiration for President Xi.

Pompeo, the messianic believer in the rapture, is spending every waking hour trying to provoke a war with China, as well as with Russia. Pompeo has acted not as a diplomat, as his office calls for, but as if he had assumed presidential powers—in fact, beyond the presidency, to the role of a warlord. If this insane campaign is not stopped, the President’s efforts to restore America to its historic mission as the “city upon a hill,” as John Winthrop famously said in 1630, will be sabotaged, and worse, the world will continue to descend into chaos and possible war.



DoS/Ronny Przysucha

U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo.

Mike Pompeo’s ASEAN Campaign

Secretary Pompeo spent the first week of August calling nearly every Foreign Minister of the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). His message was clear: if you want to be friends with the United States, you must immediately stop your extensive and increasing cooperation with China, keep Huawei and ZTE out of your 5G plans, stop all cooperation with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and stop all projects with Chinese companies, especially those which have been sanctioned by the United

States. The terms “malign actions” and “authoritarian dictatorship” filled the discussions.

Then, on September 10, Pompeo spoke (virtually) to a meeting of the ASEAN foreign ministers. In a speech, which was a classic case of geopolitical projection, Pompeo described China as a “bully,” claiming that China does not respect “sovereignty” or the “territorial integrity enshrined in the ASEAN Charter.” He bragged that the U.S. had sanctioned two dozen major Chinese companies for their “aggression” in building new islands on shoals in the South China Sea. He then instructed the foreign ministers to “Reconsider business dealings with the very state-owned companies that bully ASEAN coastal states in the South China Sea. Don’t let the Chinese Communist Party walk all over us and our people.”

Pompeo proceeded to report back to the American people on the ASEAN meeting, not only exaggerating,

but totally falsifying the response of the ASEAN members to his effort to build an anti-China alliance. His press statement, posted on the State Department website on September 11, reads:

We also underscore our commitment to speak out in the face of the Chinese Communist Party’s escalating aggression and threats to sovereign nations’ ability to make free choices. We stand with our ASEAN partners as we insist on the rule of law and respect for sovereignty in the South China Sea, where Beijing has pursued aggressive campaigns of coercion and environmental devastation. We stand for transparency and respect in the Mekong region, where the CCP has abetted arms and narcotics trafficking and unilaterally manipulated upstream dams, exacerbating an historic drought. And we stand for open and rules-based economic growth, in contrast to the opaque and predatory business practices of Beijing’s state-owned actors, such as China Communications Construction Company.

South East Asia Rejects Pompeo, Not the U.S.

Let us review the actual response to Pompeo from the ASEAN nations and look at the historic transformation of the ASEAN economies as a result of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and related investments in infrastructure and industrial development across the region.

Dino Patti Djalal, the former Ambassador to the U.S. from Indonesia, and widely considered by the U.S. foreign policy community to be one of America’s closest friends from Southeast Asia, published a [commentary](#) on October 15 in *The Diplomat* titled “Why Trump’s Anti-China Policy Falls on Deaf Ears in Southeast Asia.” Dino is clear that Pompeo is the “hitman” for the anti-China campaign, even if he does not take note that Trump does not hold the same extreme view.

Dino quotes Pompeo saying that “securing our free-



DoS

Dino Patti Djalal, former Indonesian Ambassador to the U.S.: “No Southeast Asian government has responded to—let alone applauded—the call to oppose or isolate China.”

dom from the CCP is the mission of our time, and America is in a perfect position to lead.” He also notes that Secretary of Defense Mark Esper (Pompeo’s closest collaborator since their time together at West Point) called China “the biggest threat to world order.”

But, Dino continues:

In Southeast Asia, the Trump administration’s anti-China advocacy is not likely to find a receptive audience. Indeed, a number of government officials that I have spoken to in Southeast Asia have indicated that the Trump administration is out of touch with the diplomatic reality on the ground.

Southeast Asians, true to their culture, are of course too polite to say this to the Americans and tend to respond with a smirk on their face. But it should be noticed that no Southeast Asian government has responded to—let alone applauded—the Trump administration’s call to oppose or isolate China.

Dino cites several core reasons for this: The U.S.-China conflict “does not connect with their real-time interest”; China is a “solution provider to their COVID-19 crisis”; they see China as “an important remedy for their economic predicament,” noting that ASEAN trade with China, about \$650 billion annually, is nearly double that with the U.S.; while the Pompeo policy is full of ideological preaching about democracy and “our values,” China has—

de-ideologized its foreign policy since the 1980s. No one seriously believes that China’s political intention is to turn Southeast Asian nations to communism . . . , but rather about strategic acceptance, economic engagement and political influence.

Nor do ASEAN countries have the “intention, will, interest or resources” to meddle with China’s sovereign

political system; and finally, Dino asserts, were any ASEAN country or the group as a whole to join any kind of anti-China bloc, ASEAN would “immediately lose its prized ‘centrality’ ... , the notion that ASEAN can embrace and be accepted by all the major powers and other players in the region, and thus play a central role in bringing everyone to the table.”



Presidential Communications Operations Office/TOTO LOZANO/PPD

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte insists on sovereignty: “We must stand on our own feet. If we can’t, we have no business being a Republic.” Here, President Duterte (center left) is with his Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, (center right).

The Philippines

But ASEAN nations are not interested in joining an anti-U.S. bloc either—rather, they are in general agreement with President Trump’s emphasis on sovereignty, that each nation must act first on behalf of the fundamental interests of its own citizens. The Philippines is the central country in this regard, having been essentially a U.S. colony for nearly 50 years before Franklin Roosevelt negotiated its independence. Before the 2016 election of President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines was essentially run from Wall Street and Washington, through the family and friends of the U.S. puppet Cory Aquino, who were placed in power by the 1986 coup against the nationalist leader Ferdinand Marcos by the neocon Secretary of State George Shultz and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz.

Duterte was elected in total opposition to that gang, much as Trump was elected in opposition to the established leaders of both political parties—both Bush and Obama oligarchs. Duterte’s first steps were to denounce Barack Obama and his “pivot” to Asia, open relations with China and Russia, and threaten to ban the U.S. military altogether from the country. But with Trump’s election later that year, he welcomed Trump’s approach to establishing friendly relations with Russia and China, breaking up the British imperial division of the world into warring blocs.

But the imperial bombast of Pompeo and Esper has spoiled that. Duterte has again moved to remove all U.S. military forces, ordering the end of the Visiting Forces Agreement with the U.S. early in 2020, although that order has been put on hold due to the severe impact of the pandemic in the Philippines. Duterte has banned any Philippine participation in the

provocative “Freedom of Navigation” voyages through contested territories by the U.S. Navy, and refused feelers to allow the U.S. to re-establish Subic Bay as a U.S. military base (the site used for much of the air and sea operations during the Viet Nam War). Duterte said that allowing such a base, “will ensure, if war breaks out—because there would be an atomic arsenal brought in—this will ensure the extinction of the Filipino race.”

Duterte made clear his country’s rejection of taking sides, saying in February that the nation must “stand on its own feet. If we can’t, we have no business being a Republic. You might as well choose. We can be a territory of the Americans or we can be a province of China.”

In October, Duterte lifted a moratorium on the exploration for oil and gas in the South China Sea, a moratorium imposed in 2014 by the former Aquino government, in collaboration with Obama, who had organized a fake “international tribunal,” with no participation of China. That Obama-Aquino tribunal ruled in 2016 against China’s historical claims in the South China Sea. The lifting of the moratorium enables Duterte and China to reopen three joint development projects in the contested regions, and more projects are under discussion.

Duterte has also rejected Pompeo’s demand to keep Huawei and ZTE out of the nation’s development of a 5G network. And on September 8, the Philippines’ Defense Secretary, Delfin Lorenzana, announced that he had signed a deal with Dito Telecommunity, jointly

owned by Philippine companies and China Telecom, to build cellphone towers inside Philippine military bases, dismissing complaints from Pompeo's anti-China assets.

In August, Pompeo launched another of his unilateral sanctions attacks, targeting especially China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), one of China's largest construction firms, deeply involved in Belt and Road Initiative construction around the world. Pompeo's spokesman accused CCCC of the horrible crime of building islands in the South China Sea, imposed sanctions, and added that the U.S. would—

encourage all sorts of parties and institutions and governments around the world to assess risk and reconsider business deals with the sort of predatory Chinese state-owned enterprises that we've identified here, to include CCCC and its subsidiaries that have been so central to the militarization and coercion in the South China Sea.

The State Department has in fact threatened countries around the world that they will lose U.S. support and could even be sanctioned if they do not cut off projects involving CCCC.

Duterte responded immediately, announcing approval on September 1 for CCCC, with local partners, to build a new international airport for Manila, the Sangley Point International Airport, 20 minutes from downtown Manila, to be built on reclaimed land in Manila Bay—a \$10.2 billion project. Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque told the press: “The President was clear: he will not follow the directives of the Americans, because we are a free and independent nation, and we need investors from China.”

Debunking the ‘Debt Trap’ Meme

Malaysia was one of the prime examples used by the anti-China campaigners to claim that the Belt and Road Initiative was a “debt trap,” loading countries up with debt for “white elephant” infrastructure projects, of the sort that the IMF and western financial institutions declared were “inappropriate” for the stage of de-



Government promo

In response to Pompeo's announcement of sanctions against the China Communications Construction Company, President Duterte approved it for the construction, with local partners, of a new international airport for Manila. Shown, an artist's rendition of the proposed Sangley Point International Airport, across Manila Bay from Manila.

velopment of poor nations. Under the extremely corrupt government of Najib Razak (2009-2018), large contracts were signed with Chinese companies to build a rail line connecting the east coast with the west coast and southern Thailand, several major real estate projects, and much more. When Najib was overthrown by a coalition headed by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad in 2018, Mahathir put several of the projects on hold while the corruption of the Najib regime was investigated.

The international anti-China mob was delighted, and Mahathir, whom most of the western financial institutions had earlier despised for his courage in confronting them during the “Asia crisis” of 1997-98, suddenly considered him a great hero, for supposedly standing up to the “malign actions” of the Chinese. Much to their dismay, Mahathir traveled to China, and negotiated a new contract, reducing the cost of the East Coast Rail Link by one-third. He said he was “grateful to the Chinese government for recognizing the Malaysian government's financial position and predicament.” The project is being built by the same CCCC that Pompeo has sanctioned.

More recently, in October 2019, Mahathir set up a “China Special Channel” (CSC) as the single window for all investment opportunities from China. Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng said that the CSC would “focus

on attracting and supporting Chinese companies and global multinational corporations located in China looking to set up new bases in order to expand into Southeast Asia.”

During the recent visit of Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Malaysia, the two nations agreed to continue working towards a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, and that it should not be a ground for major power competition “teeming with warships.”

Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen had a different response regarding the “debt trap” charge, when his



Gunawan Kartapranata

The proposed high-speed railway system in Java, Indonesia. Phase 1 will connect Jakarta with Bandung, then continue east to Surabaya.

country was accused of becoming a colony of China:

When some people see China build roads, provide grants and loans to Cambodia to build roads, they say that Cambodia is a satellite country of China, and that Cambodia chooses China over this superpower or that superpower, But I want to ask them—if China doesn’t build this road or this bridge, who builds it instead?



BRI has not been stopped by Pompeo. A tunnel under construction in Indonesia.

He said that if someone could prove that some other country would do it instead of China, he would be glad to step down. Japan and South Korea had built some infrastructure, he added, “but China built thousands of kilometers of roads in the country.”

Indonesia, the largest economy in ASEAN, has been the recipient of huge infrastructure investments from China—government officials have noted that virtually every infrastructure project in the country has a Chinese name associated with it. In 2019, China doubled its investments in Indonesia to \$4.7 billion, replacing Japan as the second largest foreign investor after Singapore. The investments are entirely in capital intensive sectors, large infrastructure and manufacturing. Over one million jobs were created for Indonesians in 2019, mostly in transportation and telecom.



CGTN

Chinese construction of a high-speed rail line in Indonesia, April 19, 2020.

Indonesian Investment Minister Luhut Pandjaitan, speaking in



RFA

Map of the Laos-China railway currently under construction in Laos. The Thai segment has not yet been built.

January at a China Business Forum, said: “If you look at the amount of investment from China, it is a lot. But some people still say, ‘debt trap, debt trap.’ We are not that stupid, you know.” Not only has Indonesia kept its debt-to-GDP ratio below 30%, but the country’s foreign debt to China, at \$17.7 billion, makes China only its fourth largest country creditor! The point is, China’s investments focus on areas that will increase the productivity of the nation as a whole, not the refinancing of old debt or merely extractive industries, which are almost always subject to manipulation by the international financial speculators.

That is one reason that the People’s Bank of China and Bank Indonesia signed an agreement on September 30 to promote “the use of local currencies for trade and direct investment settlement,” to use direct exchange-rate quotations and interbank trading between the yuan and the rupiah.

In Laos, the railroad being built by China in this poor and landlocked country is an incredible engineering feat. More than half of the 414 km rail line is tunnels or

bridges, and is expected to open in December 2021. Eventually, this will become the core of the Kunming-to-Singapore rail connection. The Laos project is to be finished by December 2021 at the cost of \$6 billion.

Naturally, the China hawks are screaming “debt trap,” and indeed the global economic recession due in part to the coronavirus has caused short-term debt problems for the small, poor nation, and the government is negotiating with China to restructure the debt. But the transformation taking place in this country—subjected to the destruction of modern warfare for years during the Indochina war and kept in poverty and backwardness ever since by the western financial institutions—is inspiring. Only degenerate Greenies and bankers who glory in the primitive backwardness of third world nations could not recognize this.

So also, a transformation is taking place in the more advanced nation of Thailand, where China is also building railroads—both a section connecting Bangkok to the Eastern Economic Corridor along the coast to Cambodia, and the first section of a rail connection north to Laos, to eventually link up with the Laos railroad to Kunming, China. Chinese direct investment in Thailand increased five-fold in 2019, to \$8.6 billion, making China the leading foreign investor for the first time. China is also cooperating with Thailand to connect the Eastern Economic Corridor to the Greater Bay Area development zone in the Pearl River estuary, linking Guangdong, Macao and Hong Kong.



RFA

A promotional poster for the 414-kilometer Laos-China railway that promises to transform Laos from a landlocked to a land-linked country.



The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.

Thailand, like all of the ASEAN nations, is ignoring Pompeo’s demand to cut off Huawei, which has been by far the leading developer of the region’s telecom capacities and is far ahead of other tech companies in 5G development. Huawei is building a 5G Innovation Center in Thailand. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha expressed his appreciation for Huawei’s work in Thailand, saying that Thailand will become the region’s digital technology leader.

Myanmar is another case that debunks the “debt trap” lies. Although the huge Myitsone Dam project begun by China in 2009 was suspended in 2011 under popular pressure backed by the international anti-development NGOs, Myanmar and China completed two pipelines in 2013 and 2017 for oil and gas, from the Kyaukphyu on Myanmar’s western coast to Kunming, allowing China to bypass the Malacca Strait in bringing Persian Gulf oil and gas to China. In January 2020, President Xi Jinping visited Myanmar, signing a contract to develop a modern deep-water port in Kyaukphyu as well as a Special Economic Zone. He furthered plans for rail and industrial projects along the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which follows the pipeline route from Yangon to Kyaukphyu, with a “Y” link from Mandalay to Yangon.

COVID-19 Diplomacy

Perhaps more than anything else at this moment of severe economic dislocation in the region caused by the pandemic, China’s assistance in combating COVID-19 is seen as one of the most important reasons that the

ASEAN nations are not responding to Pompeo’s geopolitical effort to isolate and stop China’s development. Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with ASEAN leaders—some in China and some during a tour of the region—in the first weeks of October.

In every case, China’s assistance, not only in medical supplies, but also in helping to build indigenous pharmaceutical and related health facilities is deeply appreciated. Indonesian Investment Minister Luhut, referenced above, met with Wang Yi in China, visiting three major Chinese pharmaceutical firms, arranging both for the delivery of millions of doses of vaccines to begin in November and for help in making Indonesia a hub for pharmaceutical production for ASEAN and beyond. Similar projects are underway in Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia, while Xi Jinping pledged that any vaccine developed in China would be considered a “global public good.”

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin noted that Malaysia is also part of the WHO’s Covax Vaccination Plan aimed at making any COVID-19 vaccine available everywhere, but added that a downside of the international initiative was its requirement for countries “to fork out a large amount of money before we can get a vaccine for our use.”

I will close with words of Dino Patti Djalal from his article that I quoted above. He writes that ASEAN relations are far from “problem free,” noting issues over the South China Sea, Chinese labor, illegal fishing, and others. But “over the years, Southeast Asian governments have learned to engage China in a complex yet growing multi-dimensional relationship in which these differences can be managed.”

As to relations with the U.S., Dino writes that after the presidential election in the United States, the U.S. will need to change Pompeo’s—

strategic messaging to the region, [focusing instead on the] development needs of the countries in the region. ... It should ease up on the obsessive ideological crusade. It should focus more on soft power than hard power. ... And it should not go around scolding countries that want to build good relations with China. ... Today, Southeast Asia wants to get along with the U.S. and China, but they also want the U.S. and China to get along, at least in their region. Is that too much to ask?