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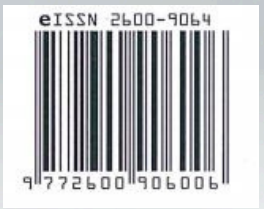

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Actively Choosing Not to Choose: Neutrality-Plus Agency in Southeast Asia

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Introduction: Contextualizing Small-State Power and Agency

In the study of International Relations (IR), some scholars view the term 'small-state power' as an oxymoron. This is especially so for scholars who conceive of 'power' as a capacity to turn one's will and preferences into desired outcomes. By this yardstick, states that are small and weak are clearly not in the position of exercising power in the way that those that are big and strong, whose will, it is argued, often prevails over others. Many IR scholars thus use the words 'small states', 'weaker states', 'lesser powers' and 'non-big powers' interchangeably, in large part because these states are perceived and placed in a different category from those 'big powers', 'major powers' or 'great powers'. Big powers are those that apparently dominate – or more accurately, compete to dominate – international affairs, and whose actions and interactions are perceived to profoundly shape the directions and dynamics of the international system in a direct manner.

Hence, large countries – such as Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria – can be big in terms of territory and/or population, but they are not regarded (at least not yet) as great powers precisely because they still lack the cumulative capacity to convert their key priorities and preferences into desired outcomes beyond their national boundaries and neighbourhoods. Put differently, although these countries are not 'small states' by any measure, they are widely categorized as 'non-big powers' primarily because of their relatively limited capacity to influence system-wide processes and to bring about systemic impacts (Keohane, 1969).

For parsimonious reasons, in this chapter 'small powers' refers to all non-big powers who, on their own, cannot make a systemic impact on the conduct of international affairs. Such a broad conception of 'small powers' includes those non-big powers who are regarded as 'middle powers', i.e., small powers with 3-I agency of initiative, institutionalization and impacts (Kuik, 2020; Evans and Kuik, 2023). That is, 'middle powers' refers to those non big-powers who are capable of exerting and exercising their agency by advancing their own *initiative* (rather than completely following the ideas of a certain big power), partnering with like-minded countries to turn the initiative into an *institutionalized* cooperative mechanism (rather than an ad-hoc or one-off arrangement), as well as transforming the institutionalized mechanism into *impactful* arrangements that shape regional and international affairs.

Small powers – because of their disadvantages in terms of relative capabilities and resources – are constantly exposed to the risks of big-power politics; and they are also more vulnerable to the non-traditional security (NTS) problems that do not respect borders, such as economic globalization, climate disruption or pandemics. However, this does not mean that small powers are necessarily passive pawns in a world seemingly dominated by major powers. In fact, a vast and growing literature of small state studies indicates that small powers can and often do possess varying degrees of 'agency', i.e., an ability to make their own choices to preserve their survival and promote their interests (Fox, 1959; Rothstein, 1968; Vital, 1971; Clarke and Payne, 1987; Hey, 2003; Browning, 2006; Maass, 2009; Fry and Tarte, 2015; Thorhallsson, 2018; Wivel, 2025; Tekiteki, 2026). For a combination of material and ideational factors, some small powers are even capable of 'punching above their weight', influencing and shaping some aspects of regional affairs or global politics, either through norms, institutions or innovative diplomacy (Ingerbritsen et al., 2006; Panke, 2012; Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017; Compaoré, 2018; Long, 2022; Patman et al., 2022; Köllner et al., 2026).[2]

This chapter addresses the question of *how* and *why* small powers – despite their disadvantageous and relative vulnerabilities in a purportedly anarchic international system – are still capable of exercising *some degrees and forms of agency* vis-à-vis the competing big powers in the Indo-Pacific region, aimed at mitigating risks and maintaining manoeuvrability, while still making collaboration possible across the development, diplomatic and defence domains. This chapter focuses on Southeast Asia, an area described by many scholars as one 'where great powers meet' (Shambaugh, 2020; see also Ba and Kuik, 2017; Emmerson, 2020; Hiebert, 2020; Lampton et al., 2020; Strangio, 2020). Largely because of its geographical location, natural resources and institutional dynamics, Southeast Asia has been the epicentre of big power competition *and* cooperation (Kuik, 2022a; Parks, 2023). The intensity of competition and cooperation is likely to grow in the face of the intensifying US–China rivalry and growing power uncertainties during the second presidency of Donald Trump (hereafter Trump 2.0). These enduring trends thus make Southeast Asia a crucial case with which to examine small-power agency. The themes and observations derived here might generate parallel insights potentially pertinent to studying similar dynamics of the agency of the non-big powers in other parts of the Indo-Pacific and other world regions.

To this end, the chapter proceeds in five parts. The first one develops a conceptual framework for analysing small-power agency. This conceptualization sheds new light on understanding the *nature*, *limits* and *manifestations* of small-power agency in the anarchic international system. The second and third parts unpack Southeast Asia's 'neutrality plus' as a form of small-power agency at the *group*- and *individual state*-levels, respectively. They disaggregate and describe the key features of small-power agency. It is 'neutral' in that the policy is about not taking sides (*not* the same as not taking positions); and it is 'plus' in that it entails *active*, *inclusive* and *adaptive* expressions of non-aligned policy. The fourth part explains the *factors* driving the Southeast Asian states' shared inclination and insistence to pursue neutrality-plus policy (the exception is the Philippines, whose policy swings under different administrations). The conclusion sums up by assessing the future of small powers' agency in the Trump 2.0 era.

All in all, this chapter argues that neutrality is not necessarily passive, isolative or static. Far from being a detached or indifferent approach, Southeast Asian states' neutrality-plus policy – both collectively and individually – is a determined choice, a persistent expression, and a prudent pursuit of an *independent* foreign policy via active, adaptive and inclusive statecraft. These 'plus' features and functions – in combination – enable small powers to exercise their agency by turning their quest for autonomy into a continuing pragmatic pursuit of preferred processes and outcomes despite power disadvantages and other vulnerabilities.

Conceptual Framework: The Many Faces of Small-Power Agency

Agency is defined here as an ability to actualize autonomy into asserted actions, i.e., an ability to make – and act – on one's own choices based on one's own preferences and purposes, rather than being pushed around or pressured by others. Put simply, agency is an ability to exercise some degree of autonomy in policymaking. Agency does not guarantee any preferred outcomes. Agency does not mean that a state can always get what it wants; it does not equate to efficacy; and it does not translate into an immunity from any external challenges or problems. Agency, however, entails an instinctive inclination and insistence to express self-preferences, explore options, and ultimately, exercise one's own ability to navigate, live with and leverage upon the given conditions and available options (e.g., the presence of two or more competing powers), in order to produce as optimal and sustainable outcomes as possible (e.g., a stable balance of power at the regional level)

(Kuik, 2021a; Kuik and Rosli, 2023; Kuik, forthcoming). Agency manifests itself in multiple forms, the actual expressions and range of which depend on an individual state's internal needs and external conditions.

This conceptualization highlights several recurring realities faced by all small powers. First, non-big powers, because of their relative disadvantageous position in all asymmetrical power relations under anarchy, realize that they will always be facing the top-down pressures stemming from big-power politics, especially when the two or more great powers of the day are rivals for supremacy. The greater the big-power rivalry, the higher the pressures upon small powers to take sides. However, so long as the rivalry takes place in *peacetime* rather than wartime, such top-down pressures often come *hand in hand* with top-down opportunities. This is so when the rival powers' competition *to court and win support* from non-big powers creates space for the neutralist states to navigate by engaging both powers simultaneously, thereby presenting them with both sources of *apprehensions* and *attractions* they must live with.

Second, while small powers realize that they can neither stop big-power competition from happening nor prevent the competition from affecting them, they are also aware that they could *leverage* the big-power courtship for their own survival (Kuik 2022a; Kuik 2023; Kuik, forthcoming; Samaranayake, 2026). Small powers typically seek to do this by collaborating with all powers, cultivating a favourable balance of power, and creating institutionalized avenues for the rival giants *to compete to cooperate* with regional countries. These tendencies are evidenced by ASEAN states' continuous efforts to pursue the functions of *bridging*, *buffering* and *building*, discussed below.

Third, precisely because of such mixed realities, small powers know full well that they must not take sides, unless and until there exist both an unambiguous threat *and* credibly reliable allied support. Short of that, small powers know that choosing to side with one big power against another will only expose them to the dangers of being entrapped into big-power conflict, being abandoned, and eroding their own agency. They thus are invariably inclined to assert their autonomy by insisting on not taking sides, while making their own choices and acting on those choices in order to mitigate undesirable but unavoidable risks, and maximize converged interests, while maintaining manoeuvrability and fallback options for as long as possible (Kuik, 2021a; Kuik, forthcoming). These inclinations may not necessarily stem from any coherent, well-calculated 'strategy' (in the

strict sense of the word). Rather, they are driven by a survival-seeking instinct to cope with uncertain power dynamics while creating cooperative opportunities as much as possible. Exactly in what ways and to what extent a small power will and can exert its agency depends on the external *and* internal circumstances it is in, including its elites' political needs.

This conceptualization allows us to have a broader understanding of the nature and varied manifestations of small-power agency in world politics. To begin with, it avoids a common problem of conceiving agency in a dichotomous fashion. Agency is about making and acting on one's own choices; the choices, very often, are *not* just either–or ones (Ba, 2018; Pitakdumrongkit, 2025). Agency is not about whether (or not) a small power can make its own policy choices, or whether its choice is pro-United States or pro-China. Agency is not simply about choosing to choose or not to choose, to act or not to act, to confront or not to confront. Rather, it is more about *in what way*, *to what extent* and *why* a state opts to make its own policy choice out of a *range* of available options beyond dichotomy.

Agency, in other words, manifests itself in *a spectrum of choices*. These range from choosing to completely align with one big power against another, to passive non-alignment, to reactively switching sides, and to actively choosing to pursue neutrality *in a variety of ways*, as necessitated by external and internal circumstances. When a small power chooses *not to choose* between the competing powers, this may not necessarily be a 'passive' or 'indecisive' choice (as implicitly hinted or explicitly charged by some observers). In fact, choosing not to choose sides can be *an active choice*. In Southeast Asia, many small- and medium-sized states choose to exercise their small-power agency by persistently rejecting the simplistic trap of a 'with us or against us' narrative, and instead actively opting *not* to side with any power against another. Such an active choice is rooted in historical, structural and domestic reasons, elaborated below.

By thinking about agency in terms of a *spectrum* rather than a dichotomy, our broad conceptualization leads us to link the ongoing debates on 'small-power agency' with the wider alignment literature, especially the 'hedging' research programme. Over the past few decades, and especially since the 2010s, as big-power rivalries have intensified in different and divergent regions of the world, from Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia, from Central Asia to South Asia, and from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa to different parts of Europe, IR scholars observe that the

majority of small powers have avoided the binary choices of 'to balance or to bandwagon'; instead, they have opted to pursue the middle, mixed and mutually counteracting policy that has been termed 'hedging' (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2021a; Kuik, forthcoming; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019; He and Feng, 2023; Marston 2024; Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Kakabadze, 2024).

Hedging is an alignment behaviour that goes by many names. This is in part because it is a 'policy without pronouncement', and because hedging behaviour *manifests itself in many forms* across different regions (Kuik, 2025). Alignment scholars have discussed the very same issue of small-power agency in different regions using different labels. In Southeast Asia, academics and analysts have used terms such as 'bamboo diplomacy' (Busbarat, 2024; Trinh and Do, 2025), 'equidistant diplomacy' (Teo and Koga, 2022; Kuik, 2024a) and 'limited alignment' (Ciorciari, 2010) to denote hedging-like, small-power agency. In Kazakhstan and elsewhere in Central Asia, officials and writers have employed the term 'multi-vector' policy to refer to a similar pattern of small-power behaviour. In more recent years, experts and ex-officials in Latin America, a region long seen as the backyard of the United States, have coined the term 'active non-alignment' to describe the emerging policy choice of the non-big powers in the region (Castañeda, 2023; Heine et al., 2025). Whatever the nomenclature, these expanding literatures are enriching insights into the key *functions* (e.g., mitigating risks, maintaining manoeuvrability, maximizing collaborative ties) of hedging as a form of alignment choice in different regions. However, they have not sufficiently identified the key *features* and *factors* that made hedging a specific form of small-power agency in ways that will facilitate systematic cross-region comparisons by future researchers (Ahram, Köllner, and Sil, 2025). This chapter fills this gap by examining Southeast Asia's 'neutrality-plus' hedging behaviour as a prevalent pattern of small-power agency. It is to these aspects that we now turn.

Neutrality-Plus Agency: Actively Choosing Not to Take Sides at Group Level

Southeast Asian hedging is a form of small-power agency because the behaviour entails *active choices and efforts* to develop favourable processes and desirable outcomes aimed at mitigating perceived risks, while maintaining fallback options. The behaviour, as noted above, is 'neutral' in that the choices are about pursuing the goal of preserving an independent, not-taking-sides stance (but still taking positions: respecting the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, big and small; upholding their coexistence and co-survival; and supporting mutually beneficial dialogue

and collaboration). It is 'plus' in that the small powers' pursuit of neutrality has been carried out actively, not passively; inclusively, not exclusively; and adaptively, not statically. These three features of 'plus', together, serve to add space, augment options and amplify bargaining leverage vis-à-vis the competing great powers, thereby enabling the neutralist Southeast Asian states to assert and advance their small-power agency across levels and across domains.

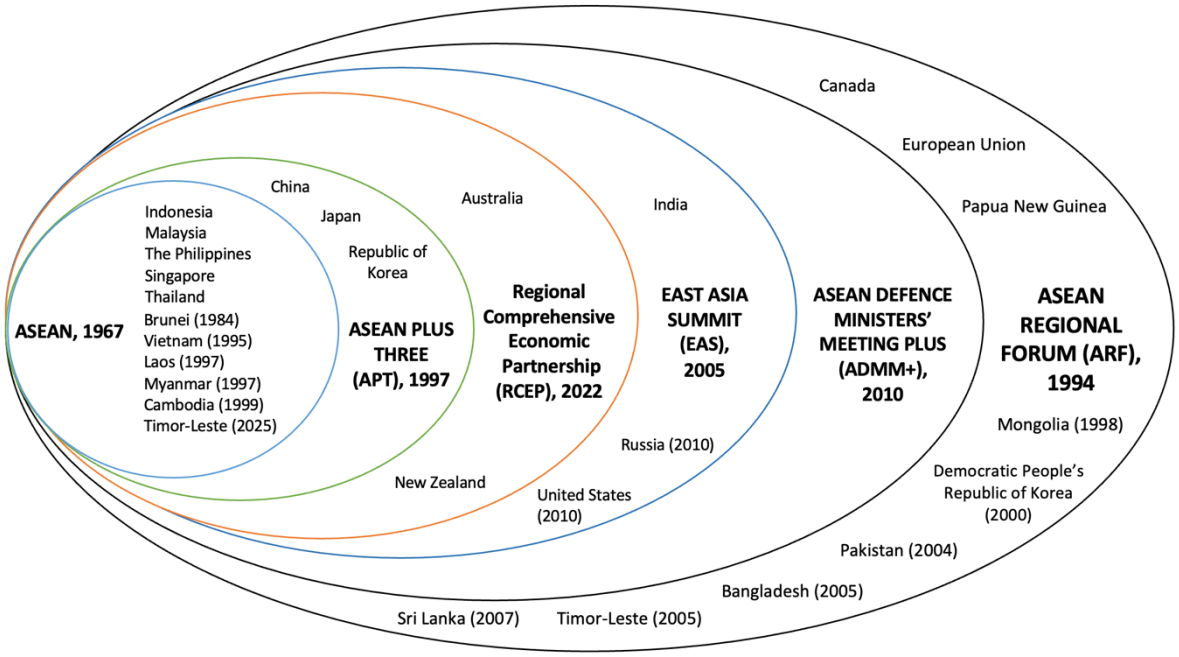
Such small-power agency has been exercised at both the *individual-state level* (as elaborated in the next section) and the *group level*. In Southeast Asia, the group-level agency has been carried out chiefly through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a loose regional body established in August 1967 (Leifer, 1989; Acharya, 2001; Ooi et al., 2015). One of the earliest moments when ASEAN was used by its founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) as an institutional platform to exert their collective agency was in November 1971, when they signed in Kuala Lumpur the declaration of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). ZOPFAN, however, only signalled the neutral *intent* of ASEAN states as a group, and was not yet an indicator of ASEAN's 'neutrality-plus' agency. This was because ASEAN states' alignment acts back then were not yet inclusive: ASEAN's dialogue partners during the Cold War period – namely Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United States, the EU and Canada – were all Western or Western-allied countries (Kuik and Rahman, 2023). At the individual-state level, all ASEAN's original members were then still aligned exclusively with the United States or other Western powers (Khong, 2004; Goh, 2007; Ba, 2009, 2018).

It was not until the post-Cold War era that the ASEAN states' agency of neutrality-plus began to take shape and take off collectively through institutional settings. Since the mid-1990s, the ASEAN-led mechanisms have been created one after another. As will be discussed shortly, these include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, established in 1994), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT, 1997), the East Asia Summit (EAS, 2005), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus, 2010), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, 2022).

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, these ASEAN-centric circles of institutionalized cooperation – officially referred to by the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN member states in shorthand as 'ASEAN-led mechanisms' – involve not just the ASEAN member states (expanding to six in 1984 when Brunei joined; then 10 in the 1990s following the accessions of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar

and Vietnam; and then 11 when Timor-Leste joined as the latest member in 2025) but also ASEAN's circles of partners outside Southeast Asia (Pitakdumrongkit, 2015; Pitakdumrongkit, 2016; Kuik and Rahman 2023). These include not only its traditional partners from the West as well as Japan, as mentioned above, but also newer partners from Northeast Asia (e.g., China) and other parts of the Asia-Pacific (e.g., Russia, India). Over time, the continuous institutionalization of such ASEAN-led mechanisms has expanded into a web of dialogue and cooperative platforms which cover multiple domains, ranging from security and defence, to economic and developmental, and diplomatic and functional (Acharya, 2001; Stubbs, 2008, 2014; Ba, 2009).

Figure 1:
ASEAN and the ASEAN-led Mechanisms



Note: Countries without a year in parentheses next to their names denote that they are founding members of the institution. Otherwise, the year in parentheses next to a country's name denote when it joined the institution.

Source: Updated from Kuik in Shambaugh 2022.

Such a web of small power-led platforms was neither a product of any pre-designed 'grand strategy' by ASEAN as a group, nor a random occurrence. It is the cumulative result of ASEAN states' *active*, *adaptive* and *inclusive* policy of choosing *not* to side with any power bloc against another under

high-stakes, high-uncertainty conditions. Some quick facts illuminate each of these features well, as follows:

Activeness

The establishment of the ARF – the first Asia–Pacific-wide multilateral security forum – in the early 1990s was largely a result of ASEAN states' *active* efforts in engaging partners and exploring new modalities to cope with strategic uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific following the unexpected end of the Cold War (Leifer, 1996; Khong, 1997; Khong and Nesadurai, 2007). Ditto the creations of the other ASEAN-led institutions, including the APT in 1997 and the EAS in 2005. ASEAN countries took the initiative to propose the ideas and promote them with respective circles of partners to actualize them into 13-member and 16-member institutions, respectively (Stubbs, 2002, 2014; Khong, 2004). ASEAN states also took the lead in expanding the EAS by inviting both the United States and Russia to join in 2010.

Adaptiveness

ASEAN states' group agency has also largely been adaptive. Numerous choices and actions have been undertaken to adapt, adjust and respond to *changing circumstances* during *crises or critical junctures*. The APT, for instance, was created largely as a response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Later, ASEAN's decisions to invite Australia, New Zealand and India – all of which are *non-East Asian* countries – to join the EAS, a forum with 'East Asia' in its name, in 2005, and subsequently, to invite the United States and Russia in 2010, thereby enlarging the EAS's membership from 16 to 18, were in part an adaptive effort by ASEAN to respond to a changing regional balance of power, when China's continuous rise began to shape the regional power dynamics in more than one way. A more recent example of the group's adaptive agency was the launch of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. The AOIP, a five-page political document that serves as a guide for ASEAN's engagement in the wider Asia-Pacific and Pacific Ocean regions, was ASEAN's adaptive response to the emergence of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a geopolitical construct, as promoted by the members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad, i.e., Australia, India, Japan and the United States) since the group's revival in 2017, as well as by like-minded countries in Europe (i.e., France, Germany and the Netherlands) since early 2019. The Quad members and these EU

countries are 'like-minded' in several ways, not just in terms of liberal democratic political values, but also in strategic terms: a strong commitment to the 'rules-based' international order, a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific, a strategic counterbalance to a rising China, etc. Many ASEAN members largely share the same commitments, but retain concerns about multiple geopolitical dangers, worrying that any collective acts to counterbalance China – if gone too far – may risk escalating tension, causing regional polarization, marginalizing ASEAN, and entrapping Southeast Asian states into Cold War-style confrontation and big-power conflict that no one wants (Anwar, 2023; Kuik, 2023). The AOIP thus enables ASEAN members to present their own vision of the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing openness, dialogue and a rules-based cooperative framework, but also principles like inclusivity, sovereignty and non-interference.

Inclusiveness

Inclusivity has been a central feature of ASEAN's group agency. This was evidenced both in the enlargement of ASEAN in the 1990s, the memberships of the various ASEAN-led mechanisms, as well as the organizing principles of key ASEAN documents like AOIP, as just noted. After the Cold War ended, the ASEAN-6 states (all non-communist) – as the old members of ASEAN – made a vital choice for ASEAN's institutional expansion in the new era: instead of excluding and isolating non-like-minded countries such as their socialist neighbours in mainland Southeast Asia, the old members opted to include Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999) in ASEAN. As a group, ASEAN also extended olive branches to China, Russia and other actors with different political systems and levels of economic development as dialogue partners. Over time, regardless of their ideological and developmental differences, these countries became enmeshed in the ASEAN-based multilateral processes (Goh, 2008; Ba, 2009).

All in all, as a cumulative result of ASEAN's active, adaptive and inclusive agency of neutrality-plus, these ASEAN-centric circles of institutions have, over the decades, attracted the participation of virtually all major powers and next-tier powers within and outside Asia, which collaborate with regional states and contribute together to regional stability and prosperity. By the 2010s, the ASEAN-led mechanisms have emerged to form the first of its kind *small power-led web of multilateral platforms*, where leaders, ministers and senior officials of big powers, and key players from different parts of the globe participate, meet their counterparts, continuously forge regular dialogue, and

cooperate in not one but multiple domains: not just diplomatic and functional but also developmental and defence.

The concurrent involvement of multiple powers in these multi-domain platforms make 'institutional hedging' possible (Rüland, 2011; Oba, 2019; Mueller, 2021; Kuik, 2022b). This refers to a continuous process where small powers, that are disadvantaged in terms of size and strength, use institutional platforms as a *means* to signal neutrality and actively engage stronger powers not only for maximizing cooperation but also for minimizing, mitigating and managing multiple risks stemming from uncertain power realities. Specifically, the ASEAN-plus platforms have enabled the ASEAN states to perform the hedging functions and exert their group-level agency by pursuing the mutually reinforcing multilateral processes of *bridging*, *buffering* and *building* (for a more elaborated analysis, see Kuik, 2022b). To illuminate these briefly:

- **Bridging**: The inclusive, regularized, institutionalized nature of ASEAN-led platforms allows all members and participating countries to bridge interests and bind each other together in continuous dialogue and continuous cooperation. Without institutions, all inter-state interactions might take place only on a random, ad hoc or one-off basis. Without such bridging and binding processes, all cooperation will have a lower possibility of sustained continuity and expansion.

  By bridging and enmeshing all powers and partners in constant dialogue, collaboration and socialization (Ba, 2006; Khong and Nesadurai, 2007; Goh, 2008; Stubbs, 2008; Stubbs, 2014), the ASEAN-led mechanisms have served the group's shared interest of hedging against the risks of becoming irrelevant or marginalized (Kuik, 2022b; Kuik 2023).

  The bridging function has been particularly transformative, albeit understudied, in the case of the APT, which bridged and bound Southeast and Northeast Asia – two distinctive sociocultural subregions but economically and strategically interdependent zones – into one diplomatically integrated region (Stubbs, 2002; Ba 2009; Kuik 2022a; Kuik, 2022b). Since establishing the APT in 1997, the Southeast Asian states have tied the three Northeast Asian states in virtually all East Asian-wide regional cooperation and integration efforts across several levels (summit, ministerial and working) and across a range of domains (from finance

and currency swap to public health, security and transport, to education, energy and environment). The continued participation of the three Northeast Asian powers as founding members in all the ASEAN-led institutions (i.e., ARF, APT, EAS, ADMM-Plus) have accorded ASEAN considerable leverage to bridge and enmesh other powers beyond East Asia, including the United States and Russia, into ASEAN-based multilateralism.

- **Buffering**: ASEAN states' neutrality-plus agency has enabled ASEAN-led mechanisms to serve the function of 'buffering': using institutional balance of power as a non-military means to cushion power pressures, cultivate adaptive options and create space for weaker states to manoeuvre. Without the ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms that involve all competing powers, each of the Southeast Asian states would be exposed, individually, to the asymmetric power relations vis-à-vis each of the more powerful actors.

  ASEAN-led mechanisms make buffering possible by leveraging the presence and participation of multiple competing powers as mutually constraining *and* countervailing forces for the purposes of denying dominance and diversifying partnerships, as well as facilitating bargaining and competitive cooperation (Leifer, 1996; Emmers, 2003; Koga, 2022). For small powers, the buffering processes serve as an institutional shield and shock absorber to mitigate multiple risks: losing autonomy, becoming dependent or being subservient to a dominant hegemon (Paul, 2005; He, 2008; Pempel, 2010; Lee, 2016; Kuik, forthcoming).

  Examples of an ASEAN-based buffering function include: (a) broadening the inaugural EAS in 2005 from the 13 APT countries to a 16-member mechanism (by including India, Australia, and New Zealand), in large part as a geopolitical move to boost the regional balance of power vis-à-vis China's growing influence; (b) expanding the EAS into an 18-member entity in 2010 by including the United States and Russia; and (c) simultaneously upgrading ASEAN's relations with both China and Australia to 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' (CSPs) in 2021, a move aimed at avoiding privileging one power over another, followed by elevating ASEAN–US and ASEAN–India to CSPs in November 2022.

- **Building:** While bridging is about institutionalising collaborative ties and buffering about facilitating checks and balances to ensure continuous cooperation, building is about constructing mechanisms and cultivating more avenues for creating concrete, mutually beneficial collaboration among all members and partners.

  Numerous scholarly works have examined the building functions of ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms, highlighting various forms of multilateral utility or hedging utility of the small state-led institutions in the wider context of regional integration and global governance (Rüland 2011; Pitakdumrongkit, 2015; Pitakdumrongkit and Klaisringoen, 2019; Ciorciari, 2019; Mueller, 2021; Koga, 2022; Kuik, 2022a). The utility of the ASEAN-based building functions is especially significant in areas where the demand for regional public goods is high (Lee, 2016; Quah, 2019; Kuik, 2021d). Building typically is manifest in a gradual transformation of group-wide consensus into sustained regional cooperation (Fennell, 2022).

  The building function of ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms is neither predetermined nor static, but accumulative and adaptive. Layers of cooperative mechanisms have been gradually added to each ASEAN-led institution, mostly in response to emerging crises and shared challenges throughout the post-Cold War decades. The APT, for example, was established by ASEAN states and China, Japan and South Korea, comprising the three major Northeast Asian economies, in response to the 1997 East Asian financial crisis (Stubbs, 2002; Terada, 2003), as noted above. Under the APT framework, the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), a network of bilateral currency swap arrangements among the 13 states, was established in 2000 to provide mutual support for participating countries in times of liquidity need (Beeson, 2014; Dent, 2016). Ten years later, the APT's members multilateralized the initiative by creating the CMI Multilateralization (CMIM) to establish a common decision-making mechanism (Ciorciari, 2011; Pitakdumrongkit, 2015; Lee, 2016). Since the early 2000s, the APT has gradually evolved into a multi-sector, multilevel East Asia-wide cooperative platform, as the 13 countries expand their coordination in non-financial sectors, including public health (after the SARS outbreak in 2003), transnational crime, environment, energy, education, information, transport, and so on. The APT processes thus set the stage for the creation and institutionalization of the EAS in 2005 (Emmers, Liow, and Tan, 2010; Camroux, 2012; Cook and Bisley, 2016), in turn paving the way for the negotiations and the eventual conclusion of

the RCEP in 2022. Without APT and EAS, it would probably be impossible to witness the creation and institutionalization of RCEP as the world's largest trade pact.

The above analysis by no means suggests that ASEAN's collective agency of exercising institutional hedging via bridging, buffering and building is well coordinated or coherently implemented. Rather, the ASEAN states' group-hedging behaviour is more a result of *converging* interests and outlooks, largely out of shared external vulnerabilities and shared domestic priorities.

Neutrality Plus at Individual-State Level: Evidence from Indonesia and Vietnam

Southeast Asian states' group agency has been pursued hand in hand with parallel and more concerted activist efforts at the individual-state level. In fact, the two are mutually reinforcing. Together, they persistently signal the states' position of choosing not to choose sides in active, adaptive and inclusive manners across domains and across circles of partnerships. Without the group-level agency through institutionalized multilateral platforms, it would be extremely difficult for the small powers in Southeast Asia to collectively pursue their neutrality-plus policies towards competing powers at the same time. And without the individual-state level agency – especially on the part of the core ASEAN members whose external outlooks largely converge with one another – it would be impossible for ASEAN to have any meaningful degree of group identity and regional centrality.

This section unpacks Southeast Asian states' neutrality-plus agency at the individual-state level, focusing on Indonesia and Vietnam. They are among the core member states of ASEAN: the former being the biggest country in Maritime Southeast Asia, whereas the latter the biggest in Mainland Southeast Asia. These two countries have been selected on the ground of 'most different, similar outcome'. To begin with, they are very different in virtually all major internal attributes, i.e., politically, socio-culturally and economically. Indonesia is the largest democracy in Southeast Asia, whereas Vietnam remains a one-party state structured on Marxist-Leninist ideology. Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority multi-ethnic country in the world, whereas Vietnam is largely homogenous with the Kinh (Viet) as the dominant majority. With regard to development, Indonesia relies more on its vast natural resources, huge domestic market and large-scale infrastructure, whereas Vietnam's development is fuelled more by centralized, export-driven

growth, a foreign capital-dominated electronics sector, and faster investor-friendly, streamlined regulatory policies. Regarding external policies, Indonesia – a post-colonial country with deep memories of using armed conflict and diplomatic struggle to gain its hard-won independence – has emphasized strategic autonomy through its 'free and active' (*bebas dan aktif*) non-aligned principle. It has been 'alliance-allergic' since its proclaimed independence in 1945 and its eventual achievement of independence in 1949. Vietnam, by contrast, once pursued an 'alliance-first' policy during the Cold War when it entered a formal alliance with the Soviet Union on 3 November 1978, which ended only in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Yet, despite these major differences, the two countries today display similar alignment behaviour, i.e., pursuing neutrality plus, like most other Southeast Asian states. They have both done so by adopting the seemingly paradoxical approach of 'non-alignment via multi-alignment', i.e., pursuing the *goal* of non-alignment via the *means* of multi-alignment (Kuik and Evans, 2022; Köllner, 2025): signalling a neutral, non-aligned position but stepping up efforts to forge multiple partnerships and alignments in inclusive, active and adaptive manners.

These keywords must be defined and distinguished clearly. Partnerships in international relations refer to cooperation between two or more states aimed at pursuing shared interests. Alignments are the higher, more institutionalized forms of partnerships, which can be in the defence, diplomatic or development domains. Not all partnerships can be regarded as alignments. Alignment is a partnership with 3Cs: a relatively high *convergence* of interests, regular *consultation*, and some degree of *compatibility-enhancement coordination.* Alliances are the highest form of alignment. Not all alignments can be qualified as alliances. An alliance is an alignment with a *binding, mutual defence commitment*.

Accordingly, 'non-alignment' refers to an end, a policy goal where a state exercises its agency of choosing not to choose sides vis-à-vis the competing powers (i.e., the United States and China), whereas 'multi-alignment' refers to a means, a policy approach where a state actively pursues the goal of not taking sides by forging multiple alignments in an *inclusive* and *adaptive* manner. It is inclusive in that the multiple alignments are developed openly, concurrently with all major powers and key players, without excluding or targeting any actor. It is adaptive in that the *extent* of consultation and the *degree* of compatibility-enhancement coordination in each alignment is neither

fixed or static, but instead dynamic and ever-evolving. Each alignment is constantly being calibrated and recalibrated based on the changing conditions and changing needs. Examples of such changing circumstances include: a potential danger becoming a more direct threat; a patron reducing or retracting its security commitment; a vital partner doubling its alignment investment because of increasingly converged interests.3[12]

As will be discussed shortly, both Indonesia and Vietnam have responded to the intensifying big-power rivalry and uncertainties by exercising their agency of neutrality plus. They have both signalled their not-taking-sides goal not by passively declaring their non-aligned position, but by actively cultivating multiple inclusive partnerships and adaptive alignments with powers and players within and outside Asia, with an eye to mitigating risks and maintaining manoeuvrability while still maximizing the opportunities and benefits of cooperation.

Active neutrality

Both Indonesia and Vietnam have been actively signalling their not-taking-sides position, persistently taking actions to underscore and reaffirm their neutrality. Evidence suggests that at certain junctures when either country was perceived to be tilting too close towards either power, its leaders would make statements or take actions to stress their neutral, non-aligned position. Take Vietnam during the pandemic period, when the frequent visits by Joe Biden Administration senior officials left the impression of an emerging de-facto alignment between Hanoi and Washington. In late August 2021, about a month after US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit and shortly before the arrival of US Vice President Kamala Harris in Hanoi, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh met with Chinese Ambassador Xiong Bo, declaring that 'Vietnam does not align itself with one country against any other' (Pearson and Bose, 2021).

Indonesia, too, has been taking similar active efforts to project and reiterate its position of staying neutral amid growing big-power rivalry. In October 2024, in his speech after being inaugurated as President, Prabowo Subianto emphasized that 'Indonesia will continue to choose a free and active, non-aligned path' (Aulia, 2024). In November 2024, right after visiting China, Prabowo travelled to Washington, DC, meeting with President Biden and making a telephone call with President-elect Donald Trump. His US trip was interpreted by the *Jakarta Post* as an effort 'to solidify his

American rapport', and 'an intentional display of his attempt to balance Indonesia's relations with polarized powers' (Tanamal and Ghifari, 2024).

Inclusive diversification

Indonesia and Vietnam have also sought to ensure their independent, non-aligned positions by diversifying their developmental and strategic links in an inclusive, multi-dimensional way. Economically, both countries, like their fellow ASEAN members, have maintained diverse trade and investment ties. In terms of infrastructure development, while Indonesia has demonstrated a higher degree of receptivity towards China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) than has Vietnam, both have pursued a diversified, balanced connectivity-building approach.

Strategically, both countries have pragmatically adopted an open and inclusive diversification approach in developing their defence and security partnerships. Under Presidents Joko Widodo 'Jokowi' (2014–2024) and Prabowo, Indonesia has been expanding its strategic portfolios over the past decade. On the one hand, it has steadily enhanced its military alignments with its Western and Western-centric partners. Indonesia has continuously upgraded its long-standing defence ties with Australia, such as by signing the bilateral Treaty on Common Security in November 2025 and the inauguration of the trilateral Australia–Indonesia–Papua New Guinea Defence Ministers Meeting in December 2025 In addition, Jakarta has also maintained senior officials-level dialogues with the United States, and established Indonesia–Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meetings, known as the '2+2' back in 2015, while expanding defence cooperation with France, Germany, South Korea and other countries. On the other hand, Indonesia has simultaneously developed a steadily progressive defence and security alignment with China, underscoring the *inclusive* nature of its strategic outlook. Under Jokowi, Indonesia institutionalized consultative arrangement with China by elevating it to a High-level Dialogue Cooperation Mechanism in 2021, while the two countries conducted joint naval exercises. Under Prabowo, Indonesia kick-started the 2+2 ministerial dialogue with China in April 2025, in effect deepening its neutrality-plus posture.

Vietnam has, over the past two decades, gradually developed extensive layers of Comprehensive Partnerships (CPs) and Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships (CSPs), an ongoing trend that has accelerated in recent years. These partnerships are not merely symbolic but are of concrete strategic

value: they are varying forms of 'alignments without alliance'. As of 2025, Vietnam has maintained 10 CSs and 14 CSPs. The CSPs are: China (2008), Russia (2012), India (2016), South Korea (2022), Japan (2023), the United States (2023), Australia (2024), France (2024), Malaysia (2024), New Zealand (2025), Indonesia (2025), Singapore (2025), Thailand (2025) and the United Kingdom (2025). Such CSP profiles suggest that Vietnam attaches strategic importance to three types of countries: major powers; neighbouring ASEAN fellow members; and middle powers. The CSs include: Germany (2011), Italy (2013), the Philippines (2015), Brazil (2024), Czechia (2025) and Kazakhstan (2025). Like Indonesia, Vietnam has steadily enhanced long-term defence and military alignment with Japan, as well as signalling its clear intention of developing stronger strategic ties with South Korea.

Adaptive offsets

Indonesia and Vietnam have also exercised their neutrality-plus agency through a practice that can be termed 'adaptive offsets', i.e., a deliberate act of pursuing opposite, contradictory and mutually counteracting measures to *negate and cancel out* the perceived risks, with the ultimate aim of ensuring space for fallback maneuverability and survivability (Kuik, forthcoming). Examples of such mutually counteracting measures include a deliberate display of concurrent defiance and deference to the competing powers. 'Deference' is saying 'yes' and showing respect, whereas 'defiance' is saying 'no' and showing autonomy (Kuik and Lai, 2025). Motivated by survival-driven pragmatism, hedgers like Indonesia and Vietnam have long sought to simultaneously pursue *both* approaches to offset multiple risks while forging mutually beneficial partnerships with both powers. This is because deference without defiance exposes them to the risks of external subservience and internal resentment. Defiance without deference, on the other hand, risks political provocation, strategic entrapment and economic losses. By concurrently but selectively and partially demonstrating both deference and defiance, Indonesia and Vietnam, like other hedgers, have sought to adaptively mitigate and offset these different risks according to changing circumstances while maintaining space for manoeuvrability and fallback measures (Kuik, forthcoming).

Through such adaptive offsets, Vietnam and Indonesia seek to develop robust relationships to the greatest extent possible with both contending powers (working toward the best outcome), while cultivating as many layers of protection as possible to offset the risks of uncertainties (preparing

for the worst scenarios) *as a hedge* to keep all options open as long as possible amid increasing uncertainties.

Several examples illustrate both countries' adaptive offsets. Indonesia under Jokowi, for instance, pursued a two-pronged approach vis-à-vis China. On the one hand, Jakarta has defied Beijing by conducting a series of high-profile military exercises in response to China's growing presence near Indonesia's Natuna Islands and by developing high-level strategic ties with more defence partners. But it is doing so side by side with cooperative acts: developing an increasingly institutionalized strategic partnership with China, selectively embracing the BRI (e.g., choosing China over Japan in building the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail), and showing deference to Beijing by keeping silent on the Xinjiang issue (despite Indonesia being the world's largest Muslim-majority country). According to Dino Patti Djalal (2020), founder of Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) and a former Indonesian ambassador to the United States: among Jakarta's many partnerships, 'Indonesia's partnership with China is perhaps the most substantial.' He added that although some Indonesians are 'wary of the risk of becoming too politically and strategically close to China', their political establishment believes that 'China represents "the future" in that Indonesia's economic fortunes will be inevitably and increasingly tied to China.' This ambivalence thus leads to 'a paradoxical tendency to be close but to also maintain some distance.'

Vietnam has displayed similar patterns of concurrently pursuing selective defiance and selective deference. As one of the four ASEAN claimant countries in the South China Sea, Vietnam has been defying China by challenging Beijing's sovereign claims and maritime actions, often standing up to and confronting its giant neighbour. Despite the power gap, Hanoi is determined to display its resolve in defending its interests in the South China Sea. The months-long standoff over the oil rig HYSY-981 in 2014, for instance, was described as 'a battle of wills', where 'the party with more resolve may win even if it is the less powerful party' (Vuving, 2014). Such defiance occasionally escalated into diplomatic feuds and brief skirmishes, but not all-out armed confrontation. This pattern continued during the pandemic period. In early April 2020, Hanoi accused the Chinese Coast Guard of deliberately sinking a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the Paracel Islands. Later that month, when China set up two new administrative districts on the Paracel and Spratly Islands (which Beijing referred to as 'Xisha' and 'Nansha') under Sansha city (created in 2012), Vietnam claimed the move seriously violated its sovereignty (Wong, 2020). Hanoi's defiance has been

boosted by emerging partnerships with the United States and other countries which perceive China as a threat. In March 2020, the aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* visited Vietnam, the second time a US warship has docked in the country since the Vietnam War ended in 1975 (the first was in March 2018) (Pham and Humphrey, 2020). Besides the United States, Vietnam has also forged and strengthened strategic partnerships with other powers, including Japan, South Korea, India and Australia, as noted above.

As Vietnam steps up its multitrack alignments (but not alliances) with these partners (despite ideological differences with all of them), it has adopted a seemingly contradictory approach of showing deference and partnership vis-à-vis China. Vietnam has done so by simultaneously forging strong cooperation in selected domains, primarily under its communist party hat (as single-party communist states, they are ideological partners which regularly hold party-to-party exchanges), its regional hat (Vietnam was the chair of ASEAN in 2020), and its bilateral commercial hat (China is Vietnam's largest trading partner, and Vietnam is China's largest trading partner in the ASEAN region). Xinru Ma and David Kang (2023: 379) observe that despite the increasing tension between Vietnam and China, the 'overall frequency of high-level exchanges between these two countries is far higher than most countries.' In its 2019 Defence White Paper, Hanoi declares: 'Viet Nam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliances, siding with one country against another, giving any other countries permission to set up military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries nor using force or threatening to use force in international relations' (Ministry of National Defence, 2019: 23–24). Vietnam's adaptive offsets approach has seemed to work well thus far. Since 2021, Vietnam has been undertaking and expanding its island-building efforts 'at every remaining Spratly outpost', on a scale to match, and 'likely surpass' China's own reclamations (AMTI, 2025). To date, China has displayed only a muted response, restraining itself from taking forceful actions against Vietnam, in contrast to Beijing's coercive acts against the Philippines (Koh, 2025).

One caveat is in order. While Indonesia and Vietnam have both exercised the neutrality-plus agency actively, inclusively and adaptively, this by no means implies that they have pursued such policy in the same degrees and manners. Perhaps the best example to illustrate the subtle differences in the two countries' neutrality-plus statecraft is to contrast their responses to Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) initiative. Both Southeast Asian states have, in recent years,

moved to steadily strengthen their respective strategic alignments with Japan, as noted. However, while Indonesia's successive leaders have enthusiastically embraced the initiative by exchanging official notes as an OSA partner and accepting Japan's offer of equipment (high-speed patrol boats, with a target of enhancing coastal surveillance capability) (Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026), Vietnam's reaction thus far has appeared to be highly cautious. In the joint communiqué issued in late April 2025 on the occasion of Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru's visit to Vietnam, while the two governments declared that they agreed "to establish a 2+2 dialogue mechanism at the deputy foreign and defence minister level", they also stated that regarding the OSA programme, 'the Vietnamese side will actively study and respond if there is a specific need' (Vietnam News Agency, 2025).

Explaining the Roots and Drivers of Neutrality-Plus Agency

The previous two sections described *how* small powers exert their agency of neutrality-plus via group- and individual state-levels to hedge against multiple risks. This section will explain *why* most small powers opt to exercise such agency in the ways they do. Specifically, it will analyse why – *despite the limitations* of hedging as an alignment policy – small powers still resist the temptation to take sides and use alliances to maximize security (and by extension, prosperity), instead insisting on signalling neutrality and acting on such a position in an active, adaptive and inclusive way.

I argue that a concatenation of factors is at work. That is, while *historical* and *structural* imperatives combine to compel small powers to persist in neutrality by actively pursuing the paradoxical policy of non-alignment via multi-alignment, it is *domestic* reasons that ultimately drive and shape the substance of their alignment choices (e.g., with whom to forge alignments, in what prioritized domains, to what extent, and at what price).

Historical and structural factors explain small powers' choices of staying neutral and pursuing the goal of non-alignment via the means of multi-alignment, i.e., showing 'alliance-allergic' tendencies but continuously stepping up efforts to forge multiple alignments according to changing strategic circumstances.

Most Southeast Asian countries, like many Global South states, are alliance-allergic actors. These include Indonesia and other historically non-aligned countries who took part in the 1955 Bandung Conference (which led to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961), as well as countries which once pursued an alliance-first policy during the Cold War decades (e.g., Vietnam, Malaysia) and countries who are formally treaty allies but in practice pursue an 'alliance-plus' policy (e.g., Thailand). These varying categories of countries are 'allergic' to alliances (as an exclusive military pact targeted at specific threat) in that although they are aware of the many benefits of joining a military alliance, they are also deeply mindful of the price, drawbacks and trade-offs involved. While allying with a stronger power allows a junior ally to maximize security and prosperity, acquiring these benefits necessarily exposes the weaker actor to the risks of abandonment, entrapment and autonomy erosion (Kuik, 2024a; Kuik, 2024b).

Such an allergic outlook is rooted in both historical and structural reasons. *Historical memory* matters. All Southeast Asian states, except Thailand, were victims of centuries-long colonization. Virtually all of them, including Thailand, were also victims of decades-long Cold War politics in one way or around. These historical memories thus push these states to view big-power politics in a realistic, cold-headed manner: it is in the DNA of big powers to compete, and that when big powers compete and fight, smaller and weaker actors are among the first to suffer.

More recent historical experiences matter as well. Vietnam learned from its Cold War experience in allying fully with the Soviet Union about the efficacy *and* limits of alliance-first policy. As noted above, Vietnam and the Soviet Union formed an alliance in November 1978, though their strategic ties had been forged much earlier. With the backing of its big-power ally, Vietnam sought to establish a Hanoi-centred domination of Indochina. It imposed a patron–client relationship with Laos and then invaded Cambodia in December 1978. The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, however, ended that backing and Hanoi's alliance-first policy. Throughout the post-Cold War era, as regional reconciliation and international integration become the main themes in Vietnamese foreign policy, Hanoi has shifted to a pragmatic, neutral, alliance-allergic position.

The dynamics of big-power competition and their struggle for superiority, are, fundamentally, *structural* dynamics. They are structural in terms of both origins and outcome. The causes of big-

power politics are systemic, interactive (action–reaction between the competing giants), and beyond any actor's preferences and control. Nothing in the international system – certainly not the smaller and weaker states – can effectively prevent any great powers of the day from competing; and no one can predict how they compete. The consequences of big-power struggle are systemic and top-down as well: no one can pre-empt how and how badly one will be affected, and no one can prescribe how best to protect oneself from being harmed by the big power's actions and interactions, which might be in any direction. When elephants fight, the smaller animals suffer. When elephants stop fighting and start flirting, the smaller animals suffer even more. When big powers make their own deals, small powers lose their bargaining leverage: when you are not at the table, you are *on* the table. Either way, the situation is beyond their control and preferences. Either way, they suffer. Such sense of systemic vulnerability is particularly acute among those who were abandoned and/or entrapped before. The deeper the sense of vulnerability, the greater the level of vigilance.

As the US–China rivalry deepens and power competition widens, Southeast Asia – like many other regions sandwiched between the two superpowers – sees a growing danger of being entrapped into a possible great-power conflict, potentially over Taiwan or the South China Sea. For claimant countries (like Vietnam) and littoral states (like Indonesia) in the South China Sea, there is also an increasing concern that big-power action–reaction might harm their maritime rights and maritime resources in the overlapping claim areas. Furthermore, mounting uncertainties in big-power intentions and commitments in the Trump 2.0 era are multiplying the dangers of multi-front punishment, abandonment and marginalization.

While the neutrality-plus policy – pursued through active, adaptive and inclusive multi-alignments – cannot prevent any of these dangerous scenarios from happening (nothing could), it serves to mitigate the associated risks and keep options open, while still maintaining space for manoeuvre and opening collaboration in ways that allow the ruling elites to pursue their domestic priorities.

The structural and historical reasons thus combine to explain why small powers like Vietnam and Indonesia – despite their differences in both internal attributes and external outlooks – have both stuck to a not-taking-sides position and actively pursue a neutral-plus policy in an inclusive and adaptive manner. They are acutely sensitive about all forms of top-down dangers associated with

an exclusive alliance (or any policies akin to taking sides), especially those external risks that might spill over into internal politics, posing a range of domestic challenges to the government of the day. For instance, when pressures from a big-power ally or partner lead to some involuntarily concessions or compromises, the governing elites are likely to face immediate and open criticisms – from the opposition, rival elites, pressure groups, and the public – such as claims they were sacrificing sovereignty, autonomy and other national interests. Such a political price or trade-offs are acceptable only when a smaller power is confronted by an immediate, clear-cut existential threat it must push back against at all costs (Kuik, 2024). Short of that, a state would be more worried about multiple systemic-level dangers stemming from an uncertain power structure and unpredictable inter-great power relations.

Fundamentally, it is *domestic* reasons that determine the *approaches* through which individual states pursue the 'plus' aspects of their neutral, not-taking-sides policies. Domestic-level factors drive and limit the substance of the small-power alignment choices, i.e., alignments with whom, in what prioritized domains, to what extent, and at what price or trade-offs. Domestic factors are multiple and complex. Chief among them is the ruling elites' political needs to enhance and legitimize their domestic authority to rule (Kuik, forthcoming).

From Indonesia to Vietnam and to other parts of Southeast Asia and elsewhere, successive governments and leaders have sought to pursue multiple pathways of legitimation to strike a balance between competing demands and expectations across societal segments. These pathways include: developmental-based *performance* legitimation, identity-based *particularistic* legitimation, and ideology-based *procedural* legitimation (for elaboration, see Kuik, 2023; Kuik, forthcoming).

The political elites' relative emphasis on different pathways of legitimation lead to varying external outlooks and risk perceptions, and by extension, different trade-off calculations and policy choices (including the choices regarding the manner and extent of counteractive offsets). Legitimation defines which types of returns *are prioritized* (based on political desirability) and which perceived risks *are taken more seriously than others* (based on political acceptability or unacceptability). This process, accordingly, determines the *range* and *ranking* of both prioritized returns and perceived risks, and ultimately, the trade-offs between them.

The ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) elite draws its political legitimacy not only from delivering economic performance and conforming to socialist ideological narratives, but also from projecting and mobilizing the party's image as the defender of Vietnamese identity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The relative importance of such identity-based legitimation dictates that no Vietnamese leader can afford to play down China-related risks, particularly if issues of security and sovereignty are involved. This is especially so given the Vietnamese people's enduring memory of thousands of years of Chinese domination, as well as growing anti-China sentiments, in the face of China's increasingly assertive actions over the South China Sea. However, the continuing importance of performance and procedural legitimation has also compelled the ruling CPV elite to preserve overall stability in Sino- Vietnamese relations. Such domestic logics underpin the CPV elite's concurrent adoption of selective defiance and selective deference vis-à-vis Beijing (Kuik and Tso, 2022; Kuik, 2024b).

In Indonesia, the relative salience of development-based legitimation pushes their leaders, from Jokowi to Prabowo, to prioritize partnerships capable of boosting their country's growth prospects and bringing economic gains, over potential security concerns (Kuik, 2024b). For these leaders, political maximization necessitates economic maximization. They have thus engaged and even embraced China in the development and diplomatic domains, leveraging external asymmetry for legitimizing internal authority (vis-à-vis domestic constituencies). That is, members of the political elite have viewed China's growing power as bringing opportunities to be leveraged (instead of dangers to be distanced from) for enhancing their performance in delivering economic fruits, creating jobs and raising domestic technological capacity for developing new growth engines. Neutrality-plus approaches thus provide the needed room for the leaders to strike a balance between external postures and internal political necessities.

Conclusions

This chapter conceptualized and operationalized 'neutrality plus' as a form of small-power agency in the Indo-Pacific era. While our empirical cases are ASEAN as a group and selected Southeast Asian countries, the conceptual insights and thematic observations derived here are of relevance for studying other non-big powers in other world regions. The chapter makes at least three contributions to the literatures of small states, agency and power in world politics, and alignment

choices more broadly. First, small-power agency manifests itself in many forms, often beyond binary choices. Second, institutions matter: the ASEAN-based institutional platforms, notwithstanding their inadequacies, provide essential avenues for the Southeast Asian small powers to exercise and exert their agency via bridging, buffering and building processes. Third, small-power agency has multiple roots: the varied and nuanced manifestations of a small power's agency are necessarily the product of factors at multiple levels, i.e., historical, structural and domestic. When these conditions change, small powers' choices will change accordingly. Future research should focus on, among other matters, the future and feasibility of neutrality-plus and small-power agency in the Trump 2.0 era.

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[1] For competing analyses of the manner in which some small powers perform 'middle power' diplomatic actions, see Cooper et al. (1993), Emmers and Teo (2018) and Nesadurai (2025).

[2] Taken together, while an inclusive type of alignment posture usually manifests in multiple alignments without any 'direct-balancing' arrangement (an exclusive alliance that is directly targeting at a third country), the adaptive nature of all alignments may eventually turn one (or more) of them into an exclusive alliance, if and when the emergence of a direct threat necessitates a direct-balancing arrangement. When that happens, a small power is compelled to take sides, ending its neutral position and replacing hedging with realist-style balancing.

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