

Hedging and grand strategy in Southeast Asian foreign policy

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Abstract

This article examines recent interest in hedging as a feature of international politics in the Asia Pacific. Focusing on the small states of Southeast Asia, we argue that dominant understandings of hedging are misguided for two reasons. Despite significant advances in the literature, hedging has remained a vague concept rendering it a residual category of foreign policy behavior. Moreover, current accounts of hedging tend to overstate the strategic intentions of ostensible hedgers. This article proposes that a better understanding of Southeast Asia's foreign policy behavior needs to dissociate hedging from neorealist concepts of international politics. Instead, we locate the concept in the context of classical realism and the diplomatic practice of second-tier states. Exploring Southeast Asia's engagement with more powerful actors from this perspective reveals the strategic limitations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the dilemma that Southeast

Asian states face from a rising China challenging the status quo in the western Pacific.

1. Introduction

Hedging has become a key concept in the analysis of international politics in the Asia Pacific (Kuik, 2008; Ciorciari, 2010; Tessman, 2012; Tunsjø, 2013; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Murphy, 2017; Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019). The concept's current prominence reflects scholarly interest in the international behavior of middle powers, small, or 'lesser' states, that is states with 'limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system' (Waltz, 1979, p. 76; Wight, 1986; Shin, 2015) in post-Cold War Asia. These states appeared neither to balance, bandwagon, or buck pass with the great powers in the system as neorealist theory would predict (Waltz, 1979, p. 76). To account for the anomalous mixed association strategies of the region's lesser states and their ambiguous foreign policy behavior, hedging appeared a useful category to fill the behavioral gap between outright opposition and alignment.

According to the prevailing understanding, hedging provides an insurance policy (Medeiros, 2005; Tunsjø, 2013) mainly, although not exclusively, for the region's smaller states that face the implications of a 'Thucydides Trap' (Allison, 2017) set by the rising power of China and 'the fear which this caused' (Thucydides, 1972, p. 23) in the United States.

This understanding, however, suffers from two significant limitations. Despite advances in the literature, hedging has remained a residual category next to balancing and bandwagoning. In addition, the neorealist and empiricist constructions of hedging suffer from a propensity to what Michael Oakeshott identified as rationalism in politics, that forces state practices into a procrustean bed of structural or systemic design (Oakeshott, 1981, pp. 5–6; see also Waltz, 1979 especially ch. 4). This social scientific approach (as opposed to a contingent historical mode of understanding) risks, we shall argue, overstating both the intentions and the possibilities for action in either small or middle power state foreign policy.

The arguments we develop are based on the example of the lesser, middle power, and weaker states comprising the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) both individually and collectively. Interestingly, the invocation of Thucydides in the Asian context not

only by Allison but also, *inter alia*, by Kishore Mahbubani, Ong Keng Yong, Bilahari Kausikan, and Kang and Ma, permits us to relate the current dilemmas of lesser states confronted by great power rivalry to an earlier prudent or pragmatic understanding of international politics that emphasized contingency, historical example, and counsel in the practice of statecraft. Such an approach, combining insights from classical realist thinking and diplomatic history, we shall argue, may provide a better understanding of Southeast Asian state behavior and the strategic resources available to middle power or small states. Thus, what is often wrongly described as the strategic allocation of loyalties by Southeast Asian states to the major powers may be better interpreted as a diplomatic practice that is distinctive, yet comparable with ‘lesser’ state diplomacy in other parts of the globe.

The argument proceeds in five stages. The next section reviews the literature on hedging in the Asia-Pacific region, demonstrating the problems associated with the concept. In the second section, we focus in greater detail on the underlying problem of rationalism in the dominant, neorealist, and risk management interpretations (see [Haacke, 2019](#)). The third part develops an alternative reading of hedging as a counsel of prudence in the conduct of statecraft that fits strategic ends to limited means. Building on this perspective, the fourth section shows that hedging in Southeast Asia is a distinctive, but not uncommon form of diplomacy by states lacking the military resources or the capacity of system leaders to formulate or pursue a grand strategy ([Liddell Hart, 1967](#); [Murray, 2011](#)).¹ The conclusion summarizes the argument and deals with its practical implications for the conduct of international politics of the Asia Pacific.

1 For Williamson Murray grand strategy is really a matter ‘for great states and great states alone’. What distinguishes grand strategy is the focus on acting beyond the demands of the present. In other words, ‘they have taken a longer view than simply reacting to the events of the day’. Nor do they concentrate on one aspect of the problem but recognize ‘the political, economic and diplomatic framework’ within which conflict takes shape ([Murray, 2011](#), pp. 1–3). Murray’s caveats notwithstanding, it seems that even the middling size and smaller states do not merely react to events, but also employ their strategic resources, military diplomatic and economic, to take account of the future and use the resources that they have to try and maintain the stability of the regional order adjusting their political ends to limited means ([Liddell Hart, 1967](#), p. 1).

2. Review: hedging as a feature of Asia Pacific international relations

Hedging has assumed a growing importance in the international relations literature of the 21st century and almost exclusively so in the context of the west Pacific and the often ambivalent position of its ‘lesser’, smaller, and middle powers.² The current understanding of the term may be traced back to a late 17th century, English, metaphorical, usage ‘to secure oneself against risk of loss [...] by betting on the other side’. By the late 19th century, it had entered the language of finance. Here, the word came to denote insurance ‘against risk of loss by entering into contracts which balance against one another’ (Fowler *et al.*, 1973, p. 945). Unsurprisingly, the post-Cold War world of globalized markets, derivative trading, and currency speculation saw hedging applied to funds speculating in this form of contractual risk.

It is this understanding of the ‘hedge’ that by a short, but not unproblematic, move came to inform the term’s subsequent etymological translation into the vocabulary of international politics. Robert J. Art applied the term in its original fiscal sense, when he described Europe ‘hedging its security bets’, in a work on the balance of power in the 21st century (Art, 2004). Simply put, hedging describes an insurance policy, which, if successful, minimizes risks while maximizing benefits (Medeiros, 2005; Tunsjø, 2013).

In the context of the Asia Pacific, Evelyn Goh first applied the term in a strict fashion to the policies of Southeast Asian states, embracing ‘a set of strategies aimed at avoiding [or planning for contingencies in] a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward (realist) alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality’ (Goh, 2005, p. 2). Instead, states ‘cultivate a middle position that

2 Waltz used the term ‘lesser states’ for those states that are ‘not system leaders or great powers in a system’ (Waltz, 1979, 73). If they have the capacity of states like France, Japan, Germany or the UK they are sometimes described either as ‘second tier’ (Mead and Gallagher, 2015) or as middle power in the case of states like Australia, Canada or South Korea. In South East Asia the ten states that comprise ASEAN are variously described as ‘small’ and ‘weak’ but also as middle powers in the case of Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. Whatever else they are increasingly constrained in their behavior, both individually and in their multilateral conduct through ASEAN by the rising tension since 2016 between the status quo power, the United States, and the emerging regional hegemon, the PRC.

forestalls or avoids having to choose one side [or one straightforward policy stance] at the obvious expense of another' (Goh, 2005, pp. 2–3). In regard to the changing security architecture in the Asia-Pacific, Goh further contended that 'hedging is the most accurate term to describe the strategy when engagement policies are pursued at the same time as *indirect* balancing policies' (Goh, 2006, p. 1, emphasis in the original).

Goh, in other words, considers hedging as a rational response to a future offering a 'potential transition toward an unstable multipolar regional system with a number of major powers competing against one another' (Goh, 2007, p. 121). To hedge against this possibility, Southeast Asian states 'have chosen neither to pick sides nor to exclude certain great powers, but rather to try to include all the various major powers in the region's strategic affairs' (Goh, 2007, p. 121). Thus, hedging forms part of 'a broader, multidirectional, 'omni-enmeshment' strategy' in which states adopt engagement as the official policy with indirect balancing as the hedge to dealing with a rising China (Goh, 2007, p. 121). Adopting this 'more rigorous definition of hedging,' Goh argues, 'may lead to the conclusion that hedging is, in fact, a luxury of the relatively weak only' (Goh, 2006, p. 2).

Goh drew attention to two distinctive features of the behavior. First, hedging is defined as a policy that is neither balancing nor bandwagoning but 'sits in between' (Goh, 2005, p. 3). It is, in fact, deliberately ambiguous (Kuik and Rozman, 2015). Second, hedging is also *strategic* in that it links actions and mobilizes resources as part of a coherent plan that reflects the existence of a long-term, overarching or strategic goal (see Liddell Hart, 1967; Murray, 2011). Evan Medeiros, for instance, applied the 'underdeveloped' concept of hedging to China and United States 'shadow boxing' for influence in the Asia Pacific (Medeiros, 2005, p. 145).

Medeiros' treatment of great and rising power hedging clearly sits at variance with Goh's view that it is the 'luxury' of the relatively weak. Nevertheless, Medeiros also treats hedging as the one mixed category of foreign policy behavior besides the more clearly defined strategies of balancing and bandwagoning. Hedging becomes an adjunct to its unambiguously defined parent concepts as well as related terms such as 'indirect balancing' or 'limited bandwagoning' (Kuik, 2008). In any case, for Medeiros, like Goh, this mixture of strategies constitutes an essentially *strategic* course of action.

In an attempt to remedy its residual status as a ‘balancing/bandwagoning plus’-type action, a number of scholars sought to refine hedging by adding complexity to the explanation of when it occurs. Tessman for instance locates strategic hedging in the context of system polarity and proposed that hedging is ‘most prevalent in systems that are unipolar and in the process of power deconcentration’ (Tessman, 2012, p. 193).

Differently again, Van Jackson proposed an alternative framework grounded in a logic of complex networks. Within the interconnected networks of politics and economics, the reaction to impulses stemming from a complex structure fraught with multiple kinds of uncertainty explains the rational response of the hedger (Jackson, 2014, pp. 331–356).

Meanwhile, Lim and Cooper offered ‘determinate predictions regarding how secondary states should respond to a rising power beyond the balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy’ (Lim and Cooper, 2015, p. 701). To clarify the practice, they offer a more parsimonious definition of hedging that, unlike Jackson, excludes ‘political and economic engagement.’ Concentrating exclusively on security alignment, their model finds that ‘secondary states hedge by sending signals which generate ambiguity [...] in effect eschewing clear-cut alignment with any great power’ (Lim and Cooper, 2015, p. 709). Their definition radically reduced the number of hedging states in Southeast Asia to Singapore, Indonesia, Burma, and Brunei, states that ‘effectively cultivate positive non-security relations with both great powers while simultaneously sending ambiguous signals regarding their security interests and future alignment choices’ (Lim and Cooper, 2015, p. 712).

In contrast, Kuik and Rozman (2015) consider hedging all pervasive in the current conduct of Asia Pacific statecraft. Reinforcing the dominant understanding of hedging as a strategic insurance policy, they contend that this ‘two-pronged approach’ that is neither ‘pure-balancing nor pure-bandwagoning’ entails three elements: not taking sides between competing powers; adopting opposite and counteracting measures; and using ‘the mutually counteracting acts to preserve gains and cultivate a ‘fallback’ position’ (Kuik and Rozman, 2015, p. 2). Ultimately, as Kuik (2020, p. 5) later argued, small state ‘hedging avoids making a clear-cut choice of siding with one big power’ and

instead ‘involves pragmatic, overlapping, and flexible alignments without rigid commitment’.

In their ‘adaptive’ behavior, Kuik and Rozman further distinguish between ‘heavy hedgers’ and ‘light hedgers’, as actors ‘seek to hedge with different degrees of emphasis on risk-contingency measures’ (Kuik, 2020, p. 5).

Assessing the state of the field in 2016, Korolev (2016, p. 376), like Medeiros a decade earlier, found ‘the hedging research programme ... underdeveloped’.³ Korolev (2016, p. 376) further contended the concept of indirect or strategic, light, or heavy hedging merely ‘follows the logic of adding adjectives’ to the existing lexicon of international relations terms. Merely adding epithets blurs meaningful boundaries between hedging and other types of state behavior, rendering its current use an example of what Imre Lakatos termed ‘concept stretching’ (Lakatos, 1963). Summating the hedging concept, Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have remarked, ‘that’s a great deal to make one word mean’ (Carroll, 1934, p. 205). In the looking glass world of international relations theory, hedging seems to be a term meaning ‘just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’ Hedging has a variety of applications depending upon contingent circumstances, the cases selected, the particular context where hedging is pursued, and the level of analysis applied. Assessing the state of the literature in 2019, Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) found that hedging has variously functioned as a mixed strategy, an insurance policy, a form of alignment, and a response to domestic pressures and/or economic insecurity.

In a special edition of *IRAP* Haacke, Ciorciari and others sought to remedy these difficulties by identifying ‘hedging more rigorously’ and establishing ‘clearer conceptual and empirical boundaries’, whilst, at the same time, not ‘proposing a single definition’ for the term or foreclosing debate (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019, p. 370). In order to pursue this somewhat contradictory agenda, however, Haacke and Ciorciari reinforce the notion that hedging functions essentially as a rational ‘risk management strategy’ (Haacke, 2019, p. 392). Hedging is thus ‘an activity to manage security risks, whereas balancing and bandwagoning

3 Apart from works already cited, the literature on hedging included inter alia: Kuik, 2008; Chung, 2009; Nadkarni, 2010; Pant and Joshi, 2015; B. Tessman and Wolfe, 2011; Wolfe, 2013.

denote security strategies to respond to actors that are seen as posing a security *threat*' (Haacke, 2019, p. 393 emphases added). Ciorciari argues similarly, that the effectiveness of hedging strategies relies on 'adequate risk assessments, a willingness to bear costs to mitigate them and ...the availability of protective options' (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019, p. 372). Although as Ciorciari subsequently shows via a case study of ASEAN's multilateral endeavor to manage security risks in the South China Sea (Ciorciari, 2019) it is not 'a fail safe way to mitigate potential threats' (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019, p. 372). Lesser states lack 'the practical capacity to hedge against major security risks' (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019, p. 372). In a similar vein, but from a structural perspective, Korolev (2019) maintains that where a system moves from unipolarity to bipolarity, as it has in the Asia Pacific over the last decade, the space and luxury for lesser powers to hedge 'shrinks'.

In order to offer an alternative perspective on the debate, the following section will argue that the dominant understanding of hedging as a coherent strategy, despite recent caveats, still misrepresents the character of foreign policy-making among lesser or middle power states. Following intimations in the recent work of Haacke, Ciorciari and Korolev, who all consider hedging a 'prudent form of behaviour' (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019, p. 372), we argue that hedging makes better sense placed in a historical context of classically realist behavior where the practice of prudence, *raison d'état*, and counsel informed by the arts of deliberation and presentation prevail in diplomacy and statecraft especially of 'middle powers' (see Botero, 1589, p. 56).

3. Rational hedging and the absence of overarching strategy in Southeast Asian politics

The previous section has shown that hedging is commonly understood to be strategic, 'rationally' aligning what from a systems or a regional perspective appears an erratic and disjointed series of actions in order to maintain the *status quo*. However, the premise that there is an obvious intent to pursue either an overarching national or regional strategy in Southeast Asia's international politics is far from self-evident. The foreign policy stances Southeast Asian states adopt seem occasionally capricious and sometimes prudent. More particularly, as we will

subsequently show, the domestic calculations of the ruling party or the whim of the latest head of state has often been found a more important influence upon decision-making than the strategic management of security risks. Moreover, Southeast Asia's scholar bureaucrats and political leaders in their political utterances appear to favor a diplomatic style that hints at a rather different view of hedging than the rational-strategic calculus, or risk management strategy that recent scholarship assumes and epistemically imposes on state behavior. The problem, we argue, is therefore not one of conceptual specification but of epistemology. Current scholarship, in other words, situates hedging behavior in Southeast Asia somewhat problematically within a structural functionalist or risk management paradigm that misconceives the historically contingent character of small state diplomacy in the region.

3.1 Hedging and the absence of grand strategy

The recent diplomatic practice of Southeast Asian states offers a series of case studies of contradictory behavior that can only be termed 'strategic' as responses to specific and discrete challenges but otherwise lack an overarching strategic design that any national or regional strategy would demand (Waltz, 1979, pp. 73–77). One obvious recent case was the 'ambiguous' decisions of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte who, on achieving office in 2016, 'set aside' the Hague arbitral tribunal's decision (requested by Duterte's predecessor) that China's expansive claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea had no legal basis. Not content with this foreign policy *volte face*, Duterte also threatened 'separation' from the United States, its treaty ally. Six months later, however, Duterte changed again, indicating his support for the new US President Trump and reasserting his commitment to the US alliance. By May 2018, Duterte's Foreign Minister could even assert that the Philippines 'will go to war' if China 'unilaterally' mines the resources of the South China Sea (Wescott, 2018). Manila's position changed again in February 2020, when Duterte informed the United States that he would end the bilateral Visiting Forces Agreement that guarantees the permanent presence of US forces in the Philippines (Panda, 2020). In June, however, the Foreign Minister announced that the decision had been suspended for six months with its possible extension for another six months. Duterte's increasingly unpredictable policy making

alienated both Washington and Beijing. Whatever else, it can hardly be conceived as an example of a lesser power strategically hedging its commitment to either of the two larger powers.

In a similarly capricious vein, both Malaysia and Thailand responded to western criticism of their government's domestic political conduct after 2016 by initially establishing closer relations with China, before subsequently attempting to reduce China's economic influence and regional ambition. The Malaysian case is particularly instructive showing how hedging behavior can emerge from the predicament of particular domestic circumstances. During Najib Razak's administration (2009–18), international criticism of his handling of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad sovereign wealth fund saw Malaysia align with China and enthusiastically welcome China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to develop infrastructure across Southeast Asia. While, independently, United States, Singaporean, and Swiss authorities launched investigations into the Prime Minister's and his advisers' apparently corrupt international financial dealings, Malaysia became an increasingly important link in the BRI and 'string of pearls' (the Chinese-built ports) stretching from the Bay of Bengal through the Straits of Malacca to Hong Kong and beyond. By 2018, China was Malaysia's major source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and largest trading partner (Jones, 2018, p. 43).

Given that the Straits of Malacca constitute a major choke point for world shipping, the symbolic and strategic impact of Chinese investments set off alarm bells in Singapore. At the time, Singapore was already at odds with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over its support for the Hague tribunal's 2016 ruling condemning China's island reclamation activity in the South China Sea. In contrast, Malaysia ignored the ruling in return for Chinese investment.

At least this was the case until the shock election defeat of Najib's ruling Barisan Nasional government in May 2018, by an opposition coalition led by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad dedicated to exposing and prosecuting the corruption of the Najib regime (Welsh and Lopez, 2018). When serving as Prime Minister between 1981 and 2003, Mahathir had promoted a Look East policy premised on close ties with Japan. Back in power, he promised to review the Chinese investment program in Malaysia, pointedly observing that 'China has a long experience in dealing with unequal treaties ... So, we feel we are

entitled to study, and if necessary, renegotiate the terms' (Jaipragas, 2018). The review intimated a settling of domestic political scores rather than any conscious strategic re-alignment.

The proposed review, however, failed to transpire. Internal divisions within the loose *Pakatan Harapan* coalition led to the resignation of Mahathir in February 2020 and his replacement in an increasingly dysfunctional coalition led by Muhyiddin Yasin.

Similar to the Malaysian case, Thailand's foreign policy in recent years has also reflected internal political instability. In so doing, its attempts to maneuver between the United States and China can hardly be described as instrumentally rational risk management. Bangkok's engagement with China was motivated by the desire to mitigate the growing tensions in its relation with the United States. After the military coup in 2014, most commentators predicted that Thailand would move closer to China and away from its treaty ally in Washington. Yet, as Joshua Kurlantzick (2018) wrote, 'reality was always more nuanced'. Instead, because rapprochement with China was also not without costs, the new regime in Bangkok embarked on a course of trying to avoid, as far as possible, the unwanted effects of its international commitments.

While the United States and other Western countries criticized the 2014 coup and called for new democratic elections, China's *People's Daily* maintained, instead, that pursuing western-style democracy had caused Thailand's political disarray (Prachatai, 2014). China was the 'big winner from Thailand's coup,' not as a result of a proactive foreign policy based on strategic calculation, but because Washington provoked it (Jory, 2014). Although the US government abstained from sanctions, it downgraded military relations with Thailand and cancelled some of its military aid. Washington also left in doubt whether the US-led Cobra Gold exercise, one of the largest exercises held annually with the Thai military, would take place.

China, in contrast, offered Bangkok a weapons deal that included submarines, tanks, and other military equipment. In 2016, the two countries conducted exercise Blue Strike, 'the most comprehensive exercise the two have ever had' (Busbarat, 2017, p. 15). By 2018, China was the leading source of FDI in Thailand. It became one of five ASEAN Mekong states in the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, the first

Southeast Asian institution built by China and which Beijing employs to grant preferential loans and subsidize investment projects.

Faced with China's increasingly ambitious investment initiatives, however, Bangkok also sought to mitigate its growing dependence. The Thai military neither forgot nor abandoned the benefits traditionally afforded by its alliance with the United States. US relations with Bangkok also improved as a consequence of the low priority the Trump administration attached to human rights after 2017. Within the first year of Trump's term in office, Thai junta chief Prayuth Chan-ocha visited Washington and declared his 'determination to preserve the relations between the US and Thailand' ([Bangkok Post Reporters, 2017](#)). Thus, deepening ties with China has above all been a choice informed by short-term political goals rather than a strategic calculation or risk and reward, and '[w]hether this trend will change, if and when the military steps down from power, remains to be seen' ([Murphy, 2017](#), p. 13).

The cases of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand suggest that the Southeast Asian practice of hedging differs from the dominant model that assumes a rationally calculated policy pursuing an overarching logic. The next section elaborates instead how the region's foreign policy elites view hedging not in predictable rational instrumental terms, as the prevailing scholarly orthodoxy assumes, but as a contingent adjustment to unpredictable circumstances and events.

3.2 Hedging and the lesser state foreign policy mind

Bilahari Kausikan, one of Singapore's leading scholar diplomats, offers an interesting insight into the diplomatic as opposed to the prevailing academic understanding of hedging. He considers it a 'strategy' that uses 'major power competition to advance our own interests' through 'preserving as much autonomy as possible' ([Kausikan, 2017](#), p. 68). Kausikan terms the ASEAN state practice 'omnidirectional balancing.' Yet, a close reading of Kausikan's statements reveals that in his view lesser states do not act in a systemic or structurally predictable manner. Instead, they adapt their foreign policy in a tactical fashion to particular and contingent circumstances. 'Balancing', 'hedging', and 'bandwagoning', Kausikan contends, 'are not mutually exclusive alternatives'. Indeed, he argues:

We see no contradiction in pursuing them simultaneously, but this is not always easy. The mix of balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning continually shifts as countries in the region adapt to unpredictable external events over which they have little if any influence (Kausikan, 2017, p. 68).

The same ideas underlie Indonesia's traditional foreign policy lemma *bebas dan aktif* (free and active). As former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marty Natalegawa, explained, a free and active foreign policy is one based on the 'capacity to make independent decision-making, for us to be able to judge each situation on the basis of its own merit and build like-minded [coalitions ...] around that fact' (Natalegawa, 2011).

Similarly, Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Mahathir, advised against having a set strategy in dealing with great powers when he wrote that small states need to practice caution:

Historically small countries on the periphery of a big and powerful state have always had reason to be wary. In this connection, we welcome the many assurances that China will never seek hegemony and will not do anything to harm us. ... I ask you to understand us, if despite these assurances, some concerns linger on, for ... trust does not come easily to us in view of our past experience (Storey, 2013, p. 218).

In fact, minimizing commitment either to particular lines of action or international partners is reflected in the institutional design of ASEAN and its various extensions like the ADMM+ and the ASEAN Regional Forum, which are all nonbinding arrangements. As an association designed to mitigate regional tensions and sustain the *status quo*, ASEAN collates and promotes its shared lesser power perspective in its multilateral regional initiatives. There is an overwhelming emphasis on consensus and flexible engagement as essential ingredients of this shared weaker state, ASEAN way in diplomacy. While this is generally attributed to mistrust between the member states and their overriding concern with sovereignty and internal resilience, these factors could have been countermanded if there were an incentive to strengthen ASEAN's collective capacity to act *vis-à-vis* its more powerful

counterparts in the region and beyond. In the absence of overarching national foreign policies (let alone an ASEAN grand strategy), however, ASEAN remains protean, reacting to changing circumstances as needs arise. This is increasingly the case. It is not enough for Southeast Asian states to anticipate the interests of the respective great powers individually, but as an association of small states they also have to react to the evolving dynamics of increasingly conflicted great power relations by projecting its ambivalent lesser state strategy onto a regional canvas.

3.3 *The problem of rationalism in Southeast Asian politics*

Empirically, the strategic element in hedging is difficult to falsify as there is always some factor to account for even the most counterproductive or idiosyncratic changes in policy. However, the problem here is not conceptual under-specification. The reason the concept remains ‘underdeveloped’ is because the practice of hedging or ‘trimming’,⁴ to use an earlier specification of the practice of lesser states toward great powers, negotiates a path between two policies. The purpose was to achieve a balance ‘dwelling in the middle between two Extreams’ (Halifax and Raleigh, 1912, p. 103). To trim the sails of the ship of state or later to hedge reflects a traditional practice of diplomatic statecraft that has relatively recently been forced into a rationalist framework. The problem with such an approach is that it assumes a structural, empiricist, or risk management perspective rather than a more nuanced historical mode of understanding.

Rationalism, as the English political philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1981, pp. 5–6) explained, developed into a distinctive intellectual style after the Enlightenment that subsequently influenced both the social sciences and the conduct of government. It assumes, as does the recent special edition of *IRAP*, the possibility of certain knowledge. A theoretical and scientific method applied to the realm of politics offers a technique, which not only ‘ends with certainty but begins with certainty

4 The two terms appear within a few years of each other in English political discourse. The conservative and sceptic English *raison d'état* theorist, the Marquis of Halifax classically outlined the policy of ‘trimming’ or balancing between extremes in his *The Character of a Trimmer* (1672). He took the metaphor from the trimming of a ship’s sails, but it is easy to see how it might elide into a ‘hedge’.

and is certain throughout' (Oakeshott, 1981, p. 12). From this perspective, traditional or practical knowledge, as Thucydides or later connoisseurs of statecraft from Machiavelli to Morgenthau or, for that matter, Asian statesmen like Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew, and before them Confucius and Han Feizi understood it, was not really knowledge at all, but mere custom and prejudice (Pye, 1985).

The rationalist technique, evident in much recent discussion of hedging, reduces 'the tangle and variety of experience to a set of principles, which the rationalist will then attack and defend' only upon rational or empirical grounds (Oakeshott, 1981, p. 6). Political activity consequently 'consists in bringing the social, political, legal, and institutional inheritance of society before the tribunal' of the social scientist's model. Waltz leaves some room for 'irrational' behavior when he recognizes that '[s]tates are free to disregard the imperatives of power' (Waltz, 2002, p. 63). Falling outside the rationalist structure of the international system, however, Waltz had no interest in further developing his thoughts on actual state practice, and many of his followers relied on a technique that simply ignores the possibility of nonstrategic or nonmanagerial behavior. Such rational and empirical over-determination, however, need to be distinguished from realism historically understood where hedging might better be treated as a practice based on a set of reasonable, but, at times, conflicting maxims. We develop this argument in the next section.

4. Realism and the counsel to hedge: the prudence of small states

The Australian emeritus editor of *The National Interest*, Owen Harries, observed that realism is not a science or an ideology, but a disposition (Harries, 1996, p. 139). It distrusts human nature and considers international rules conditional rather than absolute. It views states with a monopoly of military power the most important actors in international affairs, while the global society in which these states coexist remains, as it always has been, anarchic (Bull, 2002). This understanding notably informed the thinking of Michael Leifer on ASEAN diplomacy, which he considered an 'imperfect diplomatic instrument,' whose attempts to constrain Chinese ambition in the South China Sea was like 'making bricks without straw' (Leifer, 2005, p. 28). It is also the understanding

that traditionally permeated Thailand's foreign policy as 'bamboo bending with the wind' based on the principles of flexibility and pragmatism born out of necessity in a world where there are no permanent friends or enemies (Kislenko, 2002). The kings of Siam, as Thailand was called until 1939, are widely credited with having avoided Western colonization due to skillful diplomacy 'in adjusting to new international situations' (Fifield, 1958, p. 75). As Anand Panyarachun, former Prime Minister and a central figure in Thai political discourse succinctly put it: 'Thais are pragmatic, not dogmatic, and are good at improvising' (Asia Foundation, 2018, p. 14).

The same approach has characterized Singapore's regional policy and in particular the thought of its founding father Lee Kuan Yew, whose pragmatic vision of geopolitics earned the respect of Henry Kissinger and Graham Allison who both continue to revere him as the modern 'grand master' of 'strategic acumen' (Allison *et al.*, 2012). Reflecting on the practice of the lesser powers in the Asia Pacific in 1967, Lee observed that 'one of the problems in Southeast Asia is that it consists of relatively new and fragile independent nations'. Because of their relative weakness, he maintained, they must accommodate themselves to major external powers. '[Y]ou know', Lee continued, 'you bend with the wind like the bamboo, as the Chinese saying goes, and if it looks as if the East Wind is blowing stronger than the West Wind, then people start bending that way even before the wind comes' (Lee, 1967, p. 7).

Lee disclosed a little understood fact about diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Anticipating power shifts and adjusting policy positions was a reality for lesser states in a geopolitical region, as it was and currently is, sandwiched between much larger external actors. From this realist perspective, strategy is concerned, as Machiavelli explained in *The Prince*, with advice or counsel that considers the world as it is in all its quotidian complexity and not, as the abstract rationalist might think, it ought to theoretically behave. From this viewpoint, prudence, or what Lee Kuan Yew following classical Asian understandings, termed pragmatism or practical reasoning (*shijian* 实践) is the central virtue guiding state behavior and it follows no universal rule. Following this line of classic realist thought, what characteristics does hedging take on? A recent debate amongst the leading proponents of the Singapore school of 'pragmatic' or prudential realism suggests that hedging,

rather than a theoretical concept, is a small-state counsel and therefore a nonstatic, context-specific practice that resembles tactical maneuvering more than strategic action.

The debate commenced with a comment piece for *The Straits Times*, in which former ambassador and Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Kishore Mahbubani, drew ‘big lessons for a small state’ from the example of Qatar (Mahbubani, 2017). Perhaps the most important lesson was that, irrespective of their wealth, ‘small states must always behave like small states.’ Singapore in the post Lee Kuan Yew era, Mahbubani averred, ‘would have been wiser to be more circumspect . . . on the arbitration which the Philippines instituted against China concerning the South China Sea dispute’ in 2016. Significantly, he drew the lesson for small state discretion, not from the structure of regional order, but from Thucydides’ account of the dilemma that the neutral small state of Melos faced during the 20th year of the Peloponnesian War caused ‘by the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta’ (Thucydides, 1972, p. 49).

Mahbubani cites approvingly the point made by the Athenian delegation in their dialog with the Melians that ‘right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’ (Mahbubani, 2017). Mahbubani further contended that a small state ‘needs to be truly Machiavellian in international affairs’ and concluded that the hard truth of geopolitics is ‘that sometimes, principle and ethics must take a back seat to the pragmatic path of prudence’ (Mahbubani, 2017).

Mahbubani’s opinion on Singaporean foreign policy misadventure raised a notable chorus of disapproval. Bilahari Kausikan considered the comment ‘mendacious and indeed dangerous,’ contending that Singapore’s leaders ‘did not hesitate to stand up for their ideals and principles’ (Mohamad Salleh and Hui Min, 2017). More circumspectly, Ambassador-at-Large Ong Keng Yong recognized the Melian dilemma second tier states in Southeast Asia face, having ‘limited options’ to preserve their independence ‘when caught between rising powers’ (Mohamad Salleh and Hui Min, 2017). Ong agreed with both Mahbubani and Machiavelli that they must preserve this independence by being ‘prudent’. However, Ong drew a different lesson from Machiavelli’s advice to rulers, namely that small states best preserve ‘the space to maneuver’ by being active rather than quiescently

‘minding their own business’ ‘on the international stage’ (Mohamad Salleh and Hui Min, 2017).

What the debate shows is that the prudence required of small states, when it comes to geopolitical consequences, can give rise to conflicting, but equally plausible, counsel or advice. Prudence, or hedging, is by nature ambivalent, historically conditioned and somewhat elusive, especially to the modern social scientific mind with its concern with international norms and rational actor behavior.

The term prudence may be traced to the Athenian understanding of politics as it developed in the expediency, which Thucydides identified as the mark of statesmanship in his history of the Peloponnesian War. The Greek understanding also had affinities with older Chinese thought, found both in the sceptical Confucianism of Xunzi and in Sunzi’s classic *The Art of War*, which also observed that ‘he who is prudent [...] will be victorious’ (Mou, 2008, p. 205; Ping-Cheung, 2012, p. 120). In Athens, Aristotle subsequently distinguished *phronesis* as prudence, or practical reasoning. Significantly, the wisdom of prudence, as with that of tactical hedging and trimming, derived from both historic example and practical experience. It was concerned with particulars as well as universals, and ‘particulars become known from experience.’ Its main business was ‘to determine not ends but means to ends, that is what is most useful to do’ (Aristotle, 1924, p. 24). In the Roman republican understanding, revived during the Renaissance by thinkers like Machiavelli, *prudentia*, the Latin translation of *phronesis*, particularly concerned the *virtu* required of statesmen charged with guiding the *res publica* or public thing when faced with political predicaments.

In the hands of European *raison d’état* thinkers following Machiavelli, prudent counsel sought to offer more than abstract moral injunctions when it came to questions of war and governance. Instead, it offered a practical guide, based on historical, usually classical precedents, informed by *ataraxia* that valued calmness of mind as the antidote to zealotry, passion, and enthusiasm.

This historically informed and distinctively contingent approach to statecraft, however, lost its pertinence in a post Enlightenment world increasingly informed by a Kantian, rationalist democratic ethic. Prudence assumed a more specific and politically circumscribed meaning as a modern Enlightenment universalist teleology replaced it. In

Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville presciently identified the democratic system as a threat to the traditional requirements of statecraft in dealing with other states. Democracies, Tocqueville wrote, ‘obey the impulse of passion rather than the suggestions of prudence and ... abandon a mature design for the gratification of a momentary caprice.’ Almost a century and a half later, such concerns about imprudence weighed heavily on the minds of US strategists during the Cold War. It was in this context, that Cold War prudence was often taken to denote frugality or restraint. Prudence was seen as the antidote to unwieldy idealism or democratic excitability, and thus was assumed to be the handmaiden of realism writ large. In foreign policy terms, therefore, it came to connote never exceeding the pragmatic bounds set by the national interest. This is how it lives on in the theory of international relations. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer wrote that ‘prudence dictates that they behave according to realist logic’ (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 51). Yet the point of prudence is that it never dictates. It evolves experientially and situationally rather than by decree. Most of all, it offers a pre-scientific and anti-rationalist guide to practical reasoning.

Contra the rationalism of structuralism or risk management, this practical or case based prudent or hedged approach to conflict differs from it in its sensitivity to the difficulty of applying abstract norms or criteria to the lived experience of difficult cases or casuistry. In the rationalist or structuralist ‘way general ethical rules relate to specific moral or legal cases in a *theoretical* manner, with universal rules serving as ‘axioms’ from which particular moral rules are deduced as theorems’ (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988, p. 23). In contrast, for the prudential or hedging mind ‘the relation is frankly practical with general moral rules serving as ‘maxims’ which can be fully understood only in terms of the paradigmatic cases that define their meaning and force’ (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988, p. 23). Such an approach emphasizes practical statements and arguments that are ‘concrete, temporal and presumptive’ (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988, p. 27). In the practical field of international politics, unlike the exact theoretical or natural sciences, immediate facts, particular and specific situations affect deliberation, presentation, and judgment.

If, as Edmund Burke wrote, ‘the rules and definitions of prudence can rarely be exact; never universal’ (Burke, 1976, p. 87), what type of

a distinctive small-state counsel might hedging therefore be? For Burke, like Machiavelli and Thucydides, there were no set rules in international politics and decisions to hedge and trim had to be made on the basis of the situation at hand. ‘Matters of prudence are under the dominion of circumstances, and not of logical analogies,’ he argued.

In this context, small states would often be forced to compromise when presented with superior force, or adopt a policy of deliberate ambiguity as happens with the casuistic hedging behavior practiced in contemporary Southeast Asia. A great power, on the other hand, had a reputation to maintain, and an array of different enemies, which meant that over-cautiousness could actually damage its long-term security. In other words, prudence operates differently according to status and demands a self-awareness about how others saw you, rather than simply checking one’s own passions. As Burke explained, in a Thucydidean vein,

I do not deny that in small, truckling, states a timely compromise with power has often been the means, and the only means, of drawing out their puny existence. But a great state is too much envied, too much dreaded, to find safety in humiliation. To be secure, it must be respected. Power, and eminence, and consideration, are things not to be begged (Burke, 1976).

Rationalist calculations stress the costs of war and the dangers therein. As Burke argued, however, a truly prudent counsel should not enfeeble pre-existing power. Interestingly, it is on just such grounds that Allison finds a US policy of engagement and hedging with China ‘fundamentally flawed’ (Allison, 2017, p. 18).

Updating Burkean prudence for contemporary consumption, or adapting Confucius who analogously observed that ‘the relation between superior and inferior is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend when the wind blows’ (Confucius, 1893, pp. 12, 19), we might therefore distinguish between an active and reactive prudence. Active prudence entails a clear willingness to take risks for the sake of exploring possibilities open to action, while reactive prudence focuses on modest goals, such as limited order, peace, and accommodation. The latter follows an instrumental conception of international morality coupled with skepticism toward any radical transformation of

the world. In this role, prudence is primarily about restraint, checking excess and hedging ambivalently. This, as Kishore Mahbubani would advise, is the prudence of small or weak states. Hedging from this perspective is hardly a 'luxury', but the necessary mixed prudence of small states caught between a rock and a hard place.

4.1 ASEAN's reactive prudence and the South China Sea

Not all Southeast Asian states' international relations are informed by the reactively prudent diplomatic style outlined above. Nevertheless, it provides a useful framework to analyze the ASEAN states' hedging behavior as a diplomatic method that is distinct, but not fundamentally different, from small state diplomacy elsewhere. After all, prudence, contingency, history, and counsel enjoy a rich tradition that long predates Enlightenment rationalism. Indeed, as Henry Kissinger and others have written, Chinese political thought of a legalist character, following Sun Zi, has always seen statecraft in analogously prudential and contingently calculative terms (Kissinger, 2011, p. 30). To illustrate the usefulness of this historically based, contextual understanding of hedging, this section provides one example of how it applies to Southeast Asian diplomacy. As the following paragraphs show, ASEAN's diplomatic practice reflects well the prudence of an association of small states, all of whom at a national level conduct their foreign relations pragmatically, when not acting capriciously.

Since ASEAN's creation in 1967, the organization developed what has become known as the ASEAN way, a distinctive set of procedural norms and principles that regulate interactions between its members. The ASEAN way of cooperation consists in the use of deliberative practices until consensus is found, the cultivation of personal ties, face-saving, and informality. This mode of operating defines ASEAN's capacity to act in three regards. First, the organization is at least rhetorically bound to uphold the principle of non-intervention; second, it functions according to the requirements of its lowest common denominator and third, it manages conflict rather than resolving it. While the ASEAN way is rhetorically interesting, from a rationalist and structuralist point of view its practical limitations render it inefficient. Since ASEAN has apparently seen little need to move toward a more efficient model, it must be concluded that its members attach value to the

slow, non-interventionist process of consultation. Indeed, when evaluated in terms of Harold Nicolson's neglected explanation of diplomatic method (Nicolson, 1977), the ASEAN way offers insights into the predicament of this league of lesser states faced with a rising hegemon in the South China Sea.

Following Nicolson, the art of diplomacy is sensitive to time and circumstances, it celebrates interpersonal contacts and creates a shared diplomatic rhetoric to ensure continuity and trust. ASEAN's approach to timing reflects this classic view of diplomacy that difficult problems can be left to the benefit of time and that it is important to avoid conflict wherever possible whilst indirectly asserting one's interests. Accordingly, the four ASEAN states with overlapping claims in the South China Sea (Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) agreed to shelve their pending disputes. The same logic has largely dominated their approach vis-à-vis China. While ASEAN declared the conclusion of a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea an objective in 1992, until today it was able to agree with China only on a first reading of the Code (2019). Prior to this, the two parties had negotiated a nonbinding Declaration of Conduct (2002) and a similarly vague and underspecified Framework for a Code of Conduct (2017). Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan referred to the Framework as 'an important document because it represents, in a sense, consensus and more important than that, a commitment ... to make progress on this long overdue issue' (Dancel, 2015). Certainly, it avoids open contestation. Questions like where such a code might apply are spared under rhetorically underspecified and ambiguous conditions.

Rodolfo Severino, ASEAN's Secretary General from 1998 to 2002, famously described ASEAN's way of conflict resolution as 'sweeping problems under the carpet' (Acharya, 1998, p. 62). This became once again clear in the case brought by the Philippines before the international arbitration tribunal against China's claims in the South China Sea. Beijing did not participate in the proceedings and simply ignored the verdict, declaring the tribunal legally incompetent and its findings based on false information. Thus, the verdict did nothing to solve the dispute though interestingly, ASEAN's relations with China improved after it was delivered in July 2016. Besides the Duterte regime's capricious reaction described above, Thailand, Malaysia, and even Vietnam

also played down the ruling knowing ‘only too well that any mention of the award would incur China’s diplomatic wrath’ (Gupta, 2017). At that time, only Singapore endorsed the findings and urged respect for the tribunal’s rulings at a Non-Aligned Meeting in Venezuela in September 2016. Nevertheless, notwithstanding ASEAN’s rhetorical commitment to uphold the fundamentals of international order, no open support came forth for the respect of international law or the Philippines’ choice to recur to arbitration when the ASEAN foreign ministers met two weeks after the ruling (Roberts, 2018, p. 198). Rather, the small state counsel of accommodation led the ASEAN members to extend cooperation with China in maritime affairs, like, for instance, the agreement on a ministry-to-ministry hotline for emergencies. Such was Southeast Asia’s willingness to exercise restraint that its leaders, meeting in Manila in April 2017, praised ‘the improving cooperation between ASEAN and China ... recogniz[ing] the long-term benefits that would be gained from having the South China Sea as a sea of peace, stability and sustainable development’ (ASEAN, 2017).

The prudence of lesser states leads to different conclusions than those of great powers. Hence, the ASEAN members have generally distanced themselves from the US’s stance that a military response is needed in the South China Sea. Instead, they relied on personal encounters in different multilateral fora including the South China Sea workshops since 1990, which is seen as a dialogue process to ‘transform the potentials for conflict ... into areas for cooperation’ (Natalegawa, 2018, p. 117). Endless repetitions of good faith, it is hoped, will eventually lure the great powers into the ASEAN way of accommodation and thus turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

With limited capacity to influence Sino-US strategic competition, however, Southeast Asia’s multilateral strategy of ambiguous maneuvering while letting time solve the problems in the South China Sea has come under pressure. A quarter of a century of Southeast Asian accommodation has allowed China to develop significant capacities to control the maritime and air space of the South China Sea. With the ASEAN states clinging strictly to a diplomatic approach, the United States has been the most vocal actor opposing Beijing’s South China Sea policy. While this goes against the ASEAN diplomatic endeavor to establish a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality, its members face a complex challenge since the scope for hedging and maneuver

diminishes as smaller states and middle powers are forced to choose between China and the United States (see also [Ciorciari, 2019](#); [Korolev, 2019](#); [Liff, 2019](#)). Singaporean Ambassador-at-large Kausikan recognized the uncomfortable situation ASEAN has been put into when he said that the South China Sea has become a ‘proxy’ for the competition between the United States and China on their ideas of regional order ([Viray, 2018](#)).

ASEAN’s 2019 Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was an attempt to recover shrinking territory as the US-promoted regional concept of a ‘free and open’ Indo-Pacific threatened to further alienate China ([Murphy, 2019](#)). Driven by Indonesia, which does ‘not want to have to choose between Beijing and Washington,’ the alternative proposal of an ‘open and inclusive’ Indo-Pacific seeks to ensure ASEAN will have a role to play amongst rival powers and can fall back on different options within an ‘inclusive Indo-Pacific regional architecture’ depending on the circumstances ([Anwar, 2020](#), pp. 113, 114).

Even more tellingly, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased tension it generated in the already strained relations between China and the United States during the Trump presidency, the diplomatic practice of members of ASEAN again evinced their constitutive reluctance to choose between the rising and the status quo power. As Kuik observes, the pandemic witnessed the Southeast Asian states positioning themselves:

...in ways that display all three hallmark elements of hedging: not taking sides, pursuing opposing measures to offset different risks, as well as diversifying their strategic and development links to preserve their autonomy as much as possible ([Kuik, 2020](#)).

Their autonomy, however, has become increasingly constrained. Singapore’s Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, revealed the precise nature of ASEAN’s predicament in June 2020, observing that:

the troubled U.S.-Chinese relationship raises profound questions about Asia’s future and the shape of the emerging international order. Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, are especially concerned, as they live at the intersection of the interests of various major powers and must avoid being caught in the middle or forced

into invidious choices (Lee, 2020).

Although Lee recognizes that the status quo in the Asia Pacific is changing, Singapore, like ASEAN as an organization, cannot take sides but must be 'janus faced' (Downer, 2020). Ultimately, the original ASEAN members do not 'wish to be forced to choose between the United States and China. They want to cultivate good relations with both' (Lee, 2020). Adopting the reactive prudence of small states they hope, Lee writes, that the United States understands that if Asian countries 'promote ties with China, that does not necessarily mean that they are working against the United States,' and *vice versa* (Lee, 2020).

Without cooperation and agreement between China and the United States over their respective spheres of interest, the prospects for an Asian century will become increasingly endangered and the limitations of reactive diplomacy exposed as weakness.

5. Conclusion

Although hedging has become a key term to analyze the international relations of the Asia Pacific, significant difficulties in the application of hedging as a concept have remained. Hedging has been applied to very different types of ambiguous or seemingly contradictory behavior, and assumes, chameleon like, different characteristics in different circumstances. This article argued that the dominant understanding of hedging depends on an empiricist or rationalist model of international political behavior that misleadingly attributes strategic intention to state behavior when this is better interpreted as the result of the contingent adjustment to events as well as responses to particular and changing domestic as well as international agendas. We showed that this latter understanding has a long tradition in both western and Asian political thought that emphasizes the role of events, prudent counsel, contingent circumstance, historical example, and practical experience. To demonstrate the utility of this approach, we reinterpreted hedging as an exercise in reactive prudence, the most important and neglected tool of lesser power statecraft in Southeast Asian diplomacy.

What does the understanding of prudent statecraft mean in practice? For difficult and ambiguous cases, like the Thucydides Trap in the South China Sea, it offers insights into the state's right in decisions

over war and peace. Here history and experience play a central role in determining a wise course. Rather than a ‘logic of hedging’, we would arrive from the historical experience of East and Southeast Asia at a more practical set of maxims to guide the behavior of lesser states that see the utility of simulation and dissimulation (aka hedging) to advance both the common good and the national interest. Ultimately, a small state in troubled cases like that presented by disputes over territorial and jurisdictional waters in the South China Sea would recognize that it ‘must do not what is beautiful to say, but what is necessary in practice’ (Waszink, 2004, p. 545). Since the end of the Cold War, such a mixed prudential view of international politics has largely been unexplored.

A modern Machiavelli would be astonished at how little prepared the political classes in East and Southeast Asia (China apart) are for the use of coercive force. Lacking knowledge of military prudence, they are unlikely to deliberate thoroughly over the reasons for the use of force or the outcome of using it particularly for limited ends. Lack of attention to history leads to the problems encountered along the borders between Southeast Asia’s states and a failure to appreciate China’s long-term strategic interest in the South China Sea. From this perspective, hedging is hardly a ‘luxury’, but the necessary mixed prudence of small states caught between a rock and a hard place.

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