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Revisiting Balance of Threat Theory: The Case of Contemporary Southeast Asia in the Context of Great Power Contestation

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ABSTRACT

Southeast Asian countries, situated at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, are increasingly exposed to intensifying great power competition between China and the United States (US). According to Balance of Threat (BoT) theory, states are more likely to align tightly with a less threatening power in response to rising threats characterized by a rival's aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions. Based on these indicators, BoT would predict stronger alignment between Southeast Asian countries and the US to balance against the perceived threat from China. However, alignment behavior in the region varies, suggesting the need for closer empirical scrutiny. This study reexamines BoT theory in the Southeast Asian context through a structured comparative empirical analysis of ten countries between 2000 and 2021. The findings reveal that while BoT's core prediction holds in some cases, alignment outcomes are mixed. Thus, the theory receives only partial support in explaining Southeast Asian states' responses to China's rise.

Keywords: *Balance of Threat theory, Southeast Asia, alignment behavior, great power competition, US-China rivalry, Indo-Pacific, threat perception, security cooperation, comparative analysis, regional security*

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the world's most strategically significant regions, largely due to China's growing power[1], assertive territorial claims, and rising tensions with neighboring countries. These developments have fueled concerns about China's intentions and intensified great power rivalry, particularly with the United States (US). Washington has officially identified China as a challenge to its global power and interests[2], with recent flashpoints—including Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan[3] and the downing of a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon[4] —further escalating tensions. The Biden administration has explicitly stated its goal to "out-compete" China[5], and scholarly attention to this rivalry has grown accordingly. [6]

[1] This rise is marked by China's growing aggregate power, reflected in its expanding GDP and military budget, which has translated into advanced offensive capabilities such as fifth-generation fighters, aircraft carriers, integrated combat systems. For example, see: *The Military Balance 2024*, vol. vol.124 (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

[2] See: *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, U.S. Department of State (2019), 5; *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*, The White House (2017), 2 & 25.

[3] Vincent Ni, "China halts US cooperation on range of issues after Pelosi's Taiwan visit," *The Guardian*, August 6, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/05/china-halts-us-cooperation-nancy-pelosi-taiwan.

[4] Helene Cooper, "Downing of Chinese Spy Balloon Ends Chapter in a Diplomatic Crisis," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/04/us/politics/chinese-spy-balloon-shot-down.html.

[5] *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*, The White House (2022).

[6] See: Nguyen Cong Tung, "Uneasy embrace: Vietnam's responses to the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy amid U.S.–China rivalry," *The Pacific Review* 35, no. 5 (2022/09/03 2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1894223; Huong Le Thu, "Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Concepts: From Resistance to Reticence to Reaction," *Security Challenges* 16, no. 3 (2020); Sung Chul Jung, Jaehyon Lee, and Ji-Yong Lee, "The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2021/01/02 2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1766909; Zack Cooper, "The Future Indo-Pacific Order," *Security Challenges* 16, no. 3 (2020), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26924332.

As the rivalry goes on, the US has sought to involve regional states in its Indo-Pacific initiatives[7], most notably through the Quad, which includes Japan, Australia, and India.[8] Australia and Japan have actively increased their military capabilities in response to China's growing power[9], while India—despite being less focused on military expansion—maintains longstanding border tensions with China in the Himalayas.[10] Unsurprisingly, China has expressed concern over both the Quad's development and broader US actions in the region.[11] Although the US has not explicitly framed its efforts as forming a balancing coalition—preferring terms like "balance of influence"[12] "—its behavior nonetheless reflects an intent to strengthen regional partnerships. This includes outreach to countries beyond the Quad,[13] encouraging closer security ties under the broader narrative that China's actions are coercive and destabilizing.[14] The US government has emphasized that whether China succeeds in reshaping regional norms depends on the collective response of the US and its partners.[15]

Given the intensifying rivalry, it is understandable that US initiatives in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly seen as pressuring regional states to "take sides."[16] As great power competition unfolds, Southeast Asian (SEA) countries—situated at the heart of the region and in close proximity to China and key flashpoints like the South China Sea—are crucial stakeholders. Not only does the US appear to view them as essential to reshaping China's strategic environment, but their responses will also significantly shape the regional balance, particularly in the event of direct confrontation between major powers.

According to Balance of Threat Theory (BoT)—one of the leading alliance theories in International Relations—states are expected to form alliances to counter perceived threats. The theory posits that when a state possesses high levels of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions, nearby states will seek to balance against it.[17] If faced with two

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[7] Tung, "Uneasy embrace: Vietnam's responses to the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy amid U.S.–China rivalry," 6.

[8] Although Quad members are reluctant to frame their cooperation as a response to China, many analysts view the initiative as driven by concerns over China's rising power and assertiveness. See: Shannon Tiezzi, "China's Two-Pronged Response to the Quad," *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/chinas-two-pronged-response-to-the-quad/.

[9] In this light, Australia is trying to increase its capability by AUKUS cooperation. See: Ben Westcott, "Analysis: Australia's Decades-Long Balancing Act between the US and China Is Over," *CNN*, September 18, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/16/australia/australia-china-us-aukus-submarine-intl-hnk/index.html. In this regard, Japan also prepares more capabilities as mentioned in its recent security documents. See: *National Security Strategy of Japan*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2022); *Defense Programs and Budget of Japan*, Japan Ministry of Defense (2022); *National Defense Strategy of Japan*, Japan Ministry of Defense (2022).

[10] Vedika Sud, "Indian and Chinese troops clash on disputed border," *CNN*, December 13, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/13/asia/india-china-border-dispute-skirmish-tawang-sector-intl-hnk/index.html.

[11] For example, see: C. Raja Mohan, "Why China Is Paranoid About the Quad," *Foreign Policy*, May 17, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/17/india-china-quad-summit-modi-xi-biden/. See also the example on how China critique on AUKUS as one of the US and its ally's regional initiative: "Aukus: China denounces US-UK-Australia pact as irresponsible," *BBC*, September 17, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58582573.

[12] Indo-Pacific Strategy of The United States, 2022, p.5.

[13] For examples, see: Kristien Bergerson, *China's Efforts to Counter U.S. Forward Presence in the Asia Pacific*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Comission (March 15, 2016); Patrick M. Cronin, "Deepening the US-Indonesian Strategic Partnership," *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/deepening-the-us-indonesian-strategic-partnership/; Zhan Debin, "South Korea should not blindly follow the US and the West in making its China policy," *Global Times*, July 20, 2022, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270973.shtml; Khang Vu, "China's Wedge Strategy Towards the US-Vietnam Partnership," *The Diplomat*, August 25, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/chinas-wedge-strategy-towards-the-u-s-vietnam-partnership/; Ralph Jennings, "Why the Philippines Picked America Over China," *VOA*, August 5, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_why-philippines-picked-america-over-china/6209178.html.

[14] This is apparent in the US' official documents about the Indo-Pacific. See: *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*, 2 & 25; *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, 5; *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, The White House (2022), 5.

[15] *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 5.

[16] Le Thu, "Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Concepts: From Resistance to Reticence to Reaction," 55.

[17] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Cornell University Press, 1987), 17-28 & 263-64.

potential threats, Stephen M. Walt, the theory's originator, argues that states will align with the power they perceive as less threatening.[18] Walt defines alliance as formal or informal security cooperation, typically signified by defense treaties, military base agreements, or long-term joint training arrangements.[19]

While there is a narrative suggesting that regional countries may perceive either China or the US as a threat[20], Southeast Asian states generally view the US as less threatening. Despite its global military capabilities, the US is geographically distant from the region and lacks the aggressive posture that characterizes China's behavior. In contrast, China has ongoing security tensions with regional actors including Australia[21], Taiwan[22], Japan[23], India[24], and several Southeast Asian countries over South China Sea[25]. Table 1 presents a comparative assessment of threat levels posed by China and the US based on BoT. As shown, it could be seen that regarding to the theory, Southeast Asian countries are more likely to align with the US, which posed lesser dangers.

Table 1: Comparison of Threat Levels from China and the US for Southeast Asian Countries.

	China	US
Massive Aggregate Power	√	√
Proximity with Southeast Asians Countries	√	-
Offensive Capabilities	√	√

[18] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 264-65.

[19] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 12 & 274.

[20] Le Thu, "Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Concepts: From Resistance to Reticence to Reaction," 56.

[21] For more information about this, see: "China-Australia tensions explained in 500 words," *Aljazeera*, December 1, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/12/1/australia-china-tensions-explained-in-500-words; Erin Handley, "Australia-China relations continued to sour in 2021. What can we expect in 2022?," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*, December 29, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-29/australia-china-relations-in-2022-tensions-trade-rights-olympics/100719632; Daniel Hurst, "Australia's foreign minister denounces China's 'secret' security deal with Solomon Islands," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/28/australias-foreign-minister-denounces-chinas-secret-security-deal-with-solomon-islands; "Aukus: China denounces US-UK-Australia pact as irresponsible."

[22] The problem between China and Taiwan is quite complicated where the US recognize the One China Policy but still continuing a "robust unofficial" relationship with Taiwan that includes trade and arms sales. See: "What is the 'One China' policy?," *BBC*, October 6, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-38285354. In response, China criticized the relationship between the US and Taiwan by stating that improper handling of this issue could possibly harm US-China relations. See: "Xi tells US to handle Taiwan 'properly' to avoid damaging ties," *Aljazeera*, March 19, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/19/xi-warns-us-over-taiwan-impact-on-relations; "Xi says improper handling of Taiwan issues will hit China-U.S. ties," *Reuters*, March 19, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/xi-says-improper-handling-taiwan-issues-will-hit-china-us-ties-2022-03-18/.

[23] China and Japan are having issues over territorial boundaries in several location such as in the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Island dispute, See: Hui-Yi Katherine Tseng, "China's Territorial Disputes with Japan: The Case of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands," *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014).

[24] See: Aditya Sharma, "What is next in the China-India border conflict?," *DW*, January 28, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-next-in-the-china-india-border-conflict/a-60586745.

[25] Located at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, the South China Sea has been disputed persistently by the claimant states such as China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines. While Indonesia has not declared itself as a claimant, Indonesia still having serious concern about what happened in the South China Sea, especially in regards of China's assertiveness in its claim. For more information about Indonesia position, see: Lisa Yosephine, "Minister echoes Indonesia's stance on the South China Sea," *The Jakarta Post*, June 21, 2016, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/06/21/minister-echoes-indonesias-stance-on-south-china-sea.html; Tom Allard, "Asserting sovereignty, Indonesia renames part of South China Sea," *Reuters*, July 14, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-politics-map/asserting-sovereigntyindonesia-renames-part-of-south-china-sea-idUSKBN19Z0YQ. The issues over the South China Sea have contributed to the regional security dilemma, especially due to concern about China' intention in these waters. For more information, see: Rizky Widian and Arimadona, "Cooperation & Security Dilemma In The South China Sea," *Global Strategis* 12, no. 2 (2018): 98-99.

Aggressive Intentions (such as Claiming Territory)	√ (Especially in the South China Sea)	-

Source: Illustrated by the Author.

Contrary to BoT, some Southeast Asian countries have been hesitant to join US efforts to counter China.[26] Many view the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework as pressuring them to choose sides.[27] Despite this, the US has continued to engage the region—seeking to strengthen alliances with Thailand and the Philippines, while deepening ties with key partners such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam.[28] The engagement to the Southeast Asian countries captured by the public on several occasions.[29] However, not all targeted states demonstrate the level of commitment associated with tight alignment.[30] While the US has expanded its military presence in countries like Singapore and the Philippines, it is worth noting that the Philippines has been a treaty ally since long before China emerged as a major rival.

Hence, while BoT remains a useful framework to understand alignment behavior, the variation in Southeast Asian countries in alignment to the US amidst threat from China cast doubt to the theory's main argument. Indeed, several literatures have noted the limitations of the theory. For instance, the theory seems to focuses narrowly on security-related variables—power aggregate, proximity, offensive capability, and aggressive intentions—while overlooking the role of other factors such as domestic politics, economic relations, or historical enmity, which may moderate or even constrain alignment decisions.[31] Further, as Cooreman (2020) shows in the case of Vietnam, states may behave differently based on how they value disputed territories—suggesting that perception of threat is not only material but also shaped by issue prioritization.[32] This underscores the theory's limitation in capturing responses to threats that go beyond structural power and perceived aggressive intentions. More, Walt's original definition of alignment seems to lacks the granularity to capture nuanced behaviors like limited alignment or hedging, which are prevalent in SEA.

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[26] Jung, Lee, and Lee, "The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region."

[27] Le Thu, "Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Concepts: From Resistance to Reticence to Reaction," 55.

[28] *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*, 46; *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, 6; *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 9.

[29] For examples, see: Cronin, "Deepening the US-Indonesian Strategic Partnership."; Vu, "China's Wedge Strategy Towards the US-Vietnam Partnership."; Jennings, "Why the Philippines Picked America Over China."; Brad Lendon, "US gains military access to Philippine bases close to Taiwan and South China Sea " *CNN*, April 4, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/04/asia/us-philippines-military-base-access-intl-hnk-ml/index.html.

[30] Stephen Walt gives an important insight about this. In his book, he identified alliance network by members of the by the existence of formal security treaty or significant level of security cooperation between countries and the great power. In this case, it could be reflected by something like permanent training. See: Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 274. Further, since significant level of military cooperation is an important thing for the conception of alliance in the theory, agreement of military bases also appears to be an important element to identify alliance network.

[31] For example, see: Hunter S Marston, "Navigating great power competition: a neoclassical realist view of hedging," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 24, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcad001; Mingjiang Li, "The People's Liberation Army and China's Smart Power Quandary in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015/04/16 2015), https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.1002910; "Implications of the Recent Philippines-China Naval Stand-Off," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, updated May 7, 2020, accessed April 6, 2025, https://amti.csis.org/implications-of-the-recent-philippines-china-naval-stand-off/; Tomotaka Shoji, "Vietnam's Security Cooperation with the United States: Historical Background, Present and Future Outlook," *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security*, no. 19 (2018).

[32] Dominik H. Cooreman, "Balance of Threat in the South China Sea: Vietnam's Multi-Faceted Approach to Maximizing its South China Sea Interests in the Face of Dominant Chinese Power as a Case Study in Great Power-Middle Power Dispute Dynamics" (Master of Arts New York University, 2020).

A substantial body of literature highlights how Southeast Asian countries adopt strategic hedging in response to intensifying great power rivalry.[33] Strategic hedging here refers to efforts to maintain good relation with the great powers to achieve more benefits from them.[34] Scholars also note that the Southeast Asian countries aim to "enmesh" the great powers within ASEAN-led frameworks, allowing them to benefit from US security presence while continuing to draw economic gains from China.[35]

The enmeshment strategy is reflected in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which presents the region not as a zero-sum arena of rivalry but as one that emphasizes cooperation and ASEAN centrality.[36] Southeast Asian countries have expressed concerns that the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework pressures them to choose sides.[37] While the US has acknowledged ASEAN centrality and sought to align FOIP with AOIP[38], Southeast Asian perceptions of regional dynamics often diverge from Washington's view.[39] Literature on strategic hedging and enmeshment provides valuable insight into how Southeast Asian states navigate great power competition, but it has yet to fully examine the variation in responses—an angle that could help evaluate the applicability of BoT.

Looking further, there are also some literatures that specifically discuss on the balancing topic in the Southeast Asia. One analyzes how Thailand and the Philippines, as US treaty allies, resist China's assertiveness while supporting US regional leadership.[40] Another argues that no Southeast Asian country is actively balancing against China[41], while others suggest that indirect or internal balancing strategies are at play.[42] These works offer valuable insights into regional balancing dynamics and highlight the complexity that BoT may overlook. However, they do not directly test BoT's core claims, leaving the question of alliance formation underexplored.

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[33] Some examples of literatures on strategic hedging in the Southeast Asia could be seen from: Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007); Jung, Lee, and Lee, "The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region."; Iis Gindarsah, "Strategic hedging in Indonesia's defense diplomacy," *Defense & Security Analysis* 32, no. 4 (2016/10/01 2016), https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2016.1233695, https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2016.1233695; Wen Zha, "Southeast Asia amid Sino-US Competition: Power Shift and Regional Order Transition," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad006; David Martin Jones and Nicole Jenne, "Hedging and grand strategy in Southeast Asian foreign policy," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab003.

[34] Jung, Lee, and Lee, "The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region."

[35] Evelyn Goh, "Southeast Asian perspectives on the China challenge," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4-5 (2007/08/01 2007), https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390701431915.

[36] *ASEAN Outlook on The Indo-Pacific*, ASEAN (2019), https://asean.org/speechandstatement/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/.

[37] Le Thu, "Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Concepts: From Resistance to Reticence to Reaction."

[38] *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*; *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*; *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*; *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*.

[39] ASEAN create its own vision about the Indo-Pacific called ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). In contrast with the Indo-Pacific envisioned by the US where it explains the existence of a revisionist actor with dangerous behavior, the AOIP tend to see the Indo-Pacific in more win-win than zero-sum game where the region is seen as a closely interconnected region of dialogue rather than rivalry, with ASEAN having a central and strategic role in it. For more information, see: *ASEAN Outlook on The Indo-Pacific*; Tam-Sang Huynh, "Bolstering middle power standing: South Korea's response to U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy from Trump to Biden," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 1 (2023/01/02 2023): 8, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1928737.

[40] Linda Quayle, "Southeast Asian perspectives on regional alliance dynamics: the Philippines and Thailand," *International Politics* 57, no. 2 (2020/04/01 2020), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00193-9, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00193-9.

[41] Ann Marie Murphy, "Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy: Exploring the Linkages," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017/09/02 2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1354566.

[42] Moch Faisal Karim and Tangguh Chairil, "Waiting for Hard Balancing? Explaining Southeast Asia's Balancing Behaviour towards China," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2016), http://www.jstor.org/stable/44162371.

One of the few works that directly addresses external balancing and alliance behavior in Southeast Asia is Ciorciari's study, which argues that regional states engage primarily in limited, rather than tight, balancing with the US against China.[43] Although his work does not directly critique BoT, it offers valuable insight by introducing a typology of alignment—tight, limited, and nonalignment—based on the depth of security cooperation. Tight alliances, in his view, are grounded in formal treaties and institutionalized defense ties, closely reflecting Walt's definition. This study adopts Ciorciari's typology but modifies it by treating the existence of a formal alliance agreement as sufficient to indicate a tight alliance, given the high level of commitment such agreements imply. Unlike Ciorciari's broader framework, however, this study focuses specifically on testing BoT and extends the analysis beyond his original scope.

The literature reviewed above suggests that BoT's predictions warrant further testing, as Southeast Asian alignment behavior often diverges from what the theory anticipates. While many studies highlight the influence of factors beyond Walt's original threat variables—such as economic dependence, domestic politics, and hedging—they rarely engage directly with BoT's core proposition: that alignment is driven by perceived threat, based on aggregate power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions. This article focuses specifically on testing those original variables to evaluate whether they still explain alignment behavior in the Indo-Pacific from 2000 to 2021. While the findings may inform future research on how other factors shape alignment, this study centers on the fundamental question: Does perceived threat alone drive alignment? The answer contributes to ongoing debates about the foundations of alliance formation.

Methodology

This study employs a structured comparative empirical analysis to examine Southeast Asian alignment behavior in response to Chinese threats from 2000 to 2021. Relying primarily on empirical data from datasets and reports, with some supplementary information from media sources, the analysis remains qualitative in nature. It applies the same four BoT variables—aggregate power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions—across all Southeast Asian states. Rather than using process tracing or statistical modeling, the study adopts a cross-case comparative approach with a longitudinal dimension, tracking alignment patterns over time. Alignment is categorized as tight, limited, or non-aligned, based on formal defense agreements, joint exercises, arms transfers, and basing access, ensuring consistency across cases (see Table 2).

Table 2: Degree of Alignment.

Genuine non-alignment	Limited/ Partial Alignment	Tight Alignment[44]
● Allow for delegation exchanges and share of information. ● No great powers access to defense facilities, including on a commercial basis	● Preferential arms transfer and sales. ● Cooperation on joint training or other forms of military assistance but does not entail commitment for military support in a crisis or engage in joint combat operations ● Does not entail basing privileges.	● Formal treaties or informal arrangement. ● Institutionalized security arrangements (e.g. NATO/ SEATO). ● High commitments/ obligation. (e.g. mutual defense) ● Basing privileges. ● Joint military operations.

[43] J.D. Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975* (Georgetown University Press, 2010).

[44] This classification by Ciorciari seems to be matched with the criteria of alliance by Walt. See: Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 274.

Source: Ciorciari (2010).[45]

This study defines alignment strictly in security terms, using a structured classification system to track trends over time and ensure cross-case consistency. While Ciorciari requires at least two indicators for tight alignment[46], this study adopts a slightly different approach: the presence of a formal defense treaty alone is considered sufficient to indicate tight alignment. Such treaties reflect a high level of commitment and can serve as a foundation for deeper security cooperation, including joint combat operations. Hence, tight alignment reflects what Walt defines as an alliance, making the concept of tight alignment in this study largely equivalent to his definition.[47] Security agreements are classified as limited alignment if they lack the defining features of tight alignment. Agreements that allow for joint exercises or broader defense cooperation are coded as limited alignment from the year they are signed, unless later revoked, expired, or replaced. Even unimplemented agreements—such as joint statements or MoUs—are included, as they reflect intent to engage in security cooperation. Excluding them would risk underestimating Southeast Asian states' alignment tendencies.

In this study, non-alignment includes instances where cooperation is mentioned broadly but lacks a clear focus on defense or security. For example, joint statements that exclude security-related content are classified as non-alignment. A country may be economically close to a great power without aligning in the security domain, which is the key focus of this research. Additionally, visits or exchanges between defense officials that do not result in formal or informal agreements are also considered non-alignment, as they do not necessarily indicate meaningful engagement. This framework is used to assess Southeast Asian countries' alignment with competing great powers.

This study proposes that if BoT's predictions hold, Southeast Asian countries—or at least the majority—should exhibit tight alignment with the US in response to rising regional threats. To evaluate this, the study examines four independent variables drawn from BoT: aggregate power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions. These are assessed against the dependent variable—Southeast Asian alignment levels. The analysis is structured into four subsections, each addressing one of the variables. Aggregate power is measured using China's Global Power Index (GPI) to explore whether changes in China's global power share correlate with alignment behavior. The proximity section examines how geographic closeness and factors such as buffer zones influence alignment. Offensive capabilities are assessed by tracking China's mobile weapons strength across air, land, and sea domains. Aggressive intentions are proxied through an analysis of territorial disputes and are further reinforced with perception-based data on regional trust in China. The final section summarizes findings across the four variables, discusses research limitations, and outlines directions for future study.

Southeast Asia and the Balance of Threat

As noted earlier, this section is divided into four parts, each analyzing one of the factors that, according to BoT, influence alliance formation. The analysis begins with China's aggregate power, followed by geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions.

a. China's Aggregate Power and Alignment Behavior in Southeast Asia

While BoT argues that states balance against threats, it places particular emphasis on aggregate material power as a key indicator of threat perception. The underlying assumption is that greater material power enhances a state's capacity to impose threats on others.[48] Unsurprisingly, Southeast Asian

[45] Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975*.

[46] Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975*, 9.

[47] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 274.

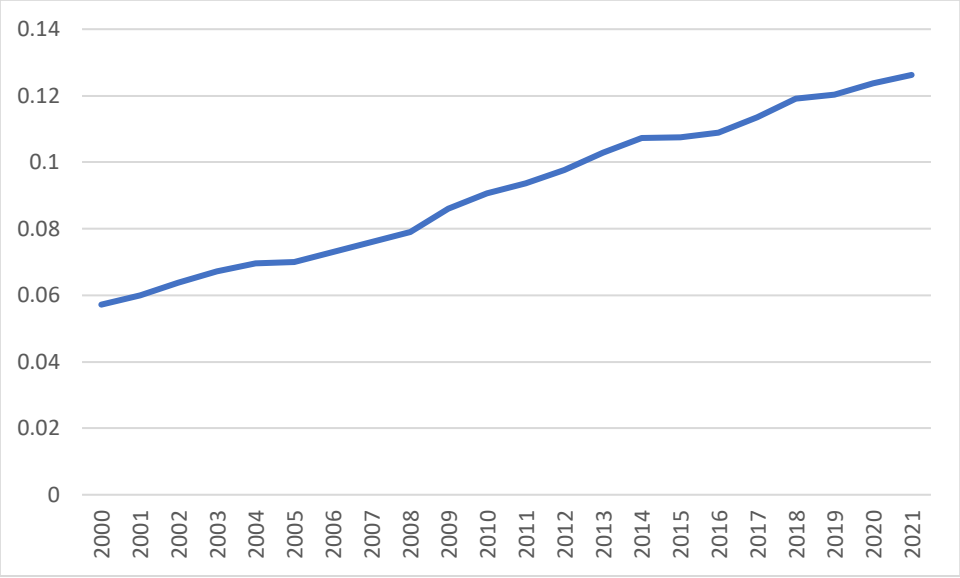
[48] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 22.

countries have expressed concern over China's growing power—for instance, Indonesia has questioned China's regional intentions.[49] In this context, it becomes important to assess whether the rise of China's aggregate power has shaped the alignment dynamics of Southeast Asian countries toward the US.

In BoT, aggregate power is typically measured through indicators such as military capabilities, population, and economic development.[50] To assess this variable in relation to Southeast Asian alignment, this study uses China's Global Power Index (GPI), developed by the Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures. The GPI reflects China's annual share of global power based on a composite of economic, demographic, technological, diplomatic, and military indicators, drawing from sources like the World Bank and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

The GPI builds on indices like the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) by incorporating additional elements such as technological advancement, nuclear capabilities, and international engagement. As such, it offers a more comprehensive measure of aggregate power and aligns well with BoT's conceptualization—capturing both its core components and broader dimensions. China's aggregate power, as reflected in the GPI, is visualized in Graph 1 below. The GPI builds on indices like the CINC by incorporating additional elements such as technological advancement, nuclear capabilities, and international engagement.[51] As such, it offers a more comprehensive measure of aggregate power and aligns well with BoT's conceptualization—capturing both its core components and broader dimensions. China's aggregate power, as reflected in the GPI, is visualized in Graph 1 below.

Graph 1: China's Aggregate Power (2000–2021)



Source: Visualized by the Author from GPI dataset by Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures.[52]

Higher GPI values indicate a greater share of global power held by China. As could be seen in the graph, China's share of global power has continued to rise over time. This index is then compared with Southeast Asian countries' alignment levels to assess whether growing Chinese power corresponds

[49] Rizal Sukma, "Indonesia's Response to the Rise of China: Growing Comfort amid Uncertainties," in *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan*, ed. Jun Tsunekawa (2-2-1 Nakameguro, Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-8648, Japan: The National Institute for Defense Studies, 2009).

[50] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 274.

[51] For more detail information, see: "National Power," Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, accessed April 21, 2024, https://korbel.du.edu/pardee/content/national-power.

[52] "National Power."

with closer alignment to the US as a less threatening alternative. These comparisons are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: China's Power Aggregate and Southeast Asian Countries Degree of Alignment with the US (2000-2021)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
China's GPI	0.057	0.06	0.063	0.067	0.069	0.070	0.072	0.075	0.079	0.086	0.090	0.093	0.097	0.102
Degree of Alignment														
Brunei														
Cambodia														
Indonesia														
Lao PDR														
Malaysia														
Myanmar														
Philippines														
Singapore														
Thailand														
Vietnam														
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021						
China's GPI	0.107	0.1074	0.108	0.113	0.119	0.120	0.123	0.126						
Degree of Alignment														
Brunei														
Cambodia														
Indonesia														
Lao PDR														
Malaysia														
Myanmar														
Philippines														
Singapore														
Thailand														
Vietnam														

= **Non-Alignment**

= **Limited Alignment**

= **Tight Alignment**

Source: Illustrated by the Author.

In Table 3, the degree of alignment is represented by cell colors, with tight alignment shown in green. As previously noted, tight alignment refers to cases where a country has formal treaties or informal arrangements involving binding obligations, institutionalized security ties (e.g., NATO), access to basing facilities, or substantial joint military operations. From Walt's perspective, this level of security

cooperation reflects what he defines as an alliance—making tight alignment, as used in this study, largely equivalent to Walt's definition.[53] Such alignment remains relatively rare among Southeast Asian states.

As shown in Table 3, only two Southeast Asian countries—Thailand and the Philippines—meet the criteria for tight alignment. Both maintain longstanding security relationships with the US based on formal defense treaties that include collective defense commitments, implying mutual obligations in response to shared threats.[54] The Philippines signed its Mutual Defense Treaty with the US in 1951, while Thailand's alliance originates from the 1954 Manila Pact, later reinforced by the Thanat-Rusk communiqué (1962), the 2020 Joint Vision Statement, and the 2022 US-Thailand Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership.[55] Given that these alliances predate China's rise, their tight alignment is unlikely to be a direct response to China's growing power. However, China's increasing strength, as shown in Graph 1 and Table 2, may reinforce the rationale for maintaining these alliances.

Limited alignment—represented by light blue cells in Table 3—refers to security relationships involving preferential arms sales, joint training exercises, or other forms of cooperation that exclude binding defense obligations or basing privileges. This category is the most common among Southeast Asian countries, accounting for over half of the total data points (130 of 220). While some states were non-aligned with the US in the early 2000s, limited alignment became more prevalent as China's global power increased. This shift is reflected in the growing number of joint exercises, including Garuda Shield (now Super Garuda Shield) with Indonesia[56], Keris Strike with Malaysia[57], Valiant Mark with Singapore[58], and Angkor Sentinel with Cambodia.[59] Vietnam's case is more gradual. Early ties with the US were constrained by post-war issues such as POWs and normalization. However, since 2010, the relationship has steadily advanced through MoUs, joint statements, and arms transfers.[60]

The prevalence of limited alignment in Southeast Asia suggests that many countries seek military cooperation with the US in response to China's rising aggregate power, as shown in Table 3. The US itself views exercises like Garuda Shield[61] with Indonesia and Tiger Balm[62] with Singapore as key to deterring aggression and promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific. These activities serve both as deterrence and preparation for potential threats linked to China's growing capabilities. However, the dominance of limited alignment—rather than tight alignment—indicates that while Southeast Asian

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[53] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 274.

[54] "U.S. Collective Defense Arrangements," U.S. Department of State, accessed February 4, 2025, https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/treaty/collectivedefense/.

[55] "U.S. Relations With Thailand," U.S. Department of State, 2024, accessed February 4, 2025, https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-thailand/?utm.

[56] "Super Garuda Shield: U.S., Partners Train in Indo-Pacific ", U.S. Departement of Defense, updated September 12, 2023, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3523152/super-garuda-shield-us-partners-train-in-indo-pacific/.

[57] "U.S. and Malaysia Enhance Military Cooperation through Exercise Keris Strike 2021," U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, updated November 2, 2021, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2830728/us-and-malaysia-enhance-military-cooperation-through-exercise-keris-strike-2021/.

[58] "U.S. Security Cooperation With Singapore ", U.S. Departement of State, updated January 20, 2025, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-singapore/.

[59] "U.S., Cambodian Forces Partner for Angkor Sentinel 2016 ", U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, updated March 14, 2016, accessed February 5, 2025, https://kh.usembassy.gov/u-s-cambodian-forces-partner-for-angkor-sentinel-2016/.

[60] See: Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975*; Lewis M. Stern, "U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Deepening Ties, Adding Relevance," *Strategic Forum* no. No. 246 (2009).

[61] "Indo-Pacific Exercise Offers Effective Deterrence ", U.S. Department of Defense, updated October 11, 2022, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3184720/indo-pacific-exercise-offers-effective-deterrence/.

[62] "US and Singapore Armies Conduct 40th Annual Tiger Balm Exercise," U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, updated May 14, 2021, accessed February 6, 2025, https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2618514/us-and-singapore-armies-conduct-40th-annual-tiger-balm-exercise/.

countries value US engagement, they stop short of fully aligning as Thailand and the Philippines have. This suggests that BoT's expectation that states will rally around the less threatening power is only partially supported. Notably, this does not mean that all other Southeast Asian states consistently exhibit limited alignment with the US.

Table 3 also highlights instances of non-alignment, shown in grey. This category reflects the absence of substantial military cooperation, though it may still include defense delegations and information sharing—without granting great powers access to defense facilities, even commercially. Indonesia, for example, was under a US arms embargo in the late 1990s due to its military's role in post-crisis unrest. Although relations were later repaired, the country initially exhibited non-alignment before shifting to limited alignment. Laos followed a similar trajectory, marked by early US disengagement and historical distrust, before gradually moving toward limited alignment.[63] Myanmar, by contrast, remains largely non-aligned with the US, primarily due to sanctions tied to its internal political situation.[64] Cambodia presents a more dynamic case: it moved from non-alignment to limited alignment between 2004 and 2017, then reverted to non-alignment in 2018 following the suspension of US military assistance amid democratic backsliding and deepening ties with China.[65] A brief military education agreement[66] in 2019–2020 no indication that this agreement was renewed. In 2021, Cambodia lost eligibility[67] for the US military academy program, reinforcing its return to a non-aligned position.

Although non-alignment with the US is not widespread in Southeast Asia, it raises the question of whether these states align with China instead. Further data suggests that alignment patterns in the region are more complex than US-focused analysis alone reveals. Despite facing varying degrees of threat from China's growing power, many Southeast Asian countries also engage in military cooperation with Beijing. Table 4 presents the degree of alignment between Southeast Asian states and China.

Table 4: China's Power Aggregate and Southeast Asian Countries Degree of Alignment with the China (2000-2021)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
China's GPI	0.057	0.06	0.063	0.067	0.069	0.070	0.072	0.075	0.079	0.086	0.090	0.093	0.097	0.102
Degree of Alignment														
Brunei														
Cambodia														
Indonesia														
Lao PDR														
Malaysia														
Myanmar														

[63] Joshua Kurlantzick, "Troubling legacy of a forgotten war haunts Laos," *Nikkei Asia*, Febryary 10, 2017, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Troubling-legacy-of-a-forgotten-war-haunts-Laos.

[64] For examples, see: *U.S. Sanctions on Burma*, Congressional Research Service (October 19, 2012); *U.S. Restrictions on Relations with Burma*, Congressional Research Service (March 18, 2020); "Imposing Sanctions on Burma's Military Regime Three Years After the Military Coup," U.S. Embassy in Burma, accessed February 4, 2025, https://mm.usembassy.gov/imposing-sanctions-on-burmas-military-regime-three-years-after-the-military-coup/.

[65] *Cambodia*, (Congressional Research Service, July 27, 2023).

[66] Ry Sochan, "Cambodia strengthens military ties with the US," *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 21, 2019, https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-strengthens-military-ties-us?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[67] Kimseng Men, "Cambodian Cadets at American Military Academies Lose US Funding," *Voice of America*, July 06, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/student-union_cambodian-cadets-american-military-academies-lose-us-funding/6207892.html.

Philippines								
Singapore								
Thailand								
Vietnam								
	2014	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**
China's GPI	0.107	0.1074	0.108	0.113	0.119	0.120	0.123	0.126
Degree of Alignment								
Brunei								
Cambodia								
Indonesia								
Lao PDR								
Malaysia								
Myanmar								
Philippines								
Singapore								
Thailand								
Vietnam								

= **Non-Alignment**

= **Limited Alignment**

= **Tight Alignment**

Source: Illustrated by the Author.

Table 4 applies the same alignment categories to evaluate Southeast Asian countries' security relations with China and reveals that all maintain limited alignment. This suggests a regional openness to military cooperation with China, despite its rising power. However, this does not indicate bandwagoning, as none of the countries exhibit tight alignment with Beijing. Rather, the findings reinforce that BoT's prediction—that states will align with the less threatening power—is only partially supported. Most Southeast Asian states neither engage in tight alignment with the US nor avoid engaging China militarily. Notably, even the Philippines and Thailand—Washington's two treaty allies in the region—fall into the limited alignment category, highlighting the region's complex, non-zero-sum approach to great power competition.

Southeast Asia's limited alignment with China is based not only on MoUs and joint statements, but also on joint military exercises and arms transfers. While many Southeast Asian countries have long participated in annual exercises with the US—some dating back before 2000, like Tiger Balm with Singapore[68], they have also welcomed China in similar activities, such as Falcon Strike with Thailand and Aman-Youyi with Malaysia.[69] China has increasingly filled strategic gaps left by the US, particularly in countries like Cambodia, where US military assistance was suspended in 2018. In 2020,

[68] "U.S. Security Cooperation With Singapore ".

[69] For more information on China participating in Falcon Strike exercise, see: "China, Thailand host joint air force exercise "Falcon Strike 2018"," China Military, updated September 7, 2018, accessed February 4, 2025, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/9275202.html. For more information on China participating in Aman-Youyi exercise, see: "Malaysia-China Defence Relations: Disruptions Amid Political Changes and Geopolitical Tensions," ISEAS, updated 2021, accessed February 4, 2025, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-57-malaysia-china-defence-relations-disruptions-amid-political-changes-and-geopolitical-tensions-by-ngeow-chow-bing/.

China's ambassador to Cambodia described the bilateral relationship as one of "ironclad brothers," coinciding with the expansion of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base. Although reports of exclusive Chinese basing rights—an indicator of tight alignment—have been denied, the relationship remains within the bounds of limited alignment.[70] Still, this case illustrates how China is expanding its security footprint in the region, particularly where US engagement has declined. China has filled the gap not only in Cambodia but also in Myanmar, which lacks access to US military equipment. Between 2000 and 2021, approximately 43% of Myanmar's arms imports came from China, highlighting its dependence on Chinese weaponry. Similar patterns are observed in Cambodia and Laos, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Comparison of Total Volume of Arms Exports from China and the US to Southeast Asia

	Total Exports to Southeast Asian Countries	**US's Exports to Southeast Asian Countries (2000-2021)**	**China's Exports to Southeast Asian Countries (2000-2021)**
Brunei	496	88 **(18%)**	-
Cambodia	294	-	147 **(50%)**
Indonesia	7880	1065 **(14%)**	343 **(4.3%)**
Lao PDR	276	-	103 **(37%)**
Malaysia	4307	131 **(3.0%)**	88 **(2.0%)**
Myanmar	4144	-	1766 **(43%)**
Philippines	1851	535 **(29%)**	-
Singapore	11237	5680 **(51%)**	-
Thailand	4031	723 **(18%)**	595 (15%)
Vietnam	8167	108 **(1.3%)**	-

Source: Adapted by the author from SIPRI dataset on arms transfer.[71]

[70] For more information about Ream Naval base issue, see: Jonathan Head, "Does China now have a permanent military base in Cambodia?," *BBC*, October 8, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2k42n54kvo; Sakshi Tiwari, "Ream Naval Base Not For China; US Warships Welcome At Cambodia's Beijing Aided Port – Deputy PM," *The EurAsian Times*, October 3, 2024, https://www.eurasiantimes.com/ream-naval-base-creates-tensions-between/.

[71] See: "Arms transfers database," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), accessed February 4, 2025, https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/ImportExport. Notes: (1). This table reflect the total volume of transfers of arms from both China and the US from 2000-2021; (2). The symbol "-" indicates no identified deliveries of arms from either China or the US to the respective recipients; (3). The numbers are in millions. However, it does not represent monetary values. Instead, it reflects scores from SIPRI trend-indicator values (TIVs); (4). In this writing this data provides insights into the military

Table 5 shows that around 50% of Cambodia's and 37% of Laos's arms imports came from China. Along with Myanmar, these cases reflect a pattern in which China fills the arms transfer gap in non-major Southeast Asian countries—those less prioritized by the US in its Indo-Pacific strategy. In contrast, major[72] regional players explicitly targeted by US engagement[73]—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—receive more arms from the US than from China. Even Brunei, though not a key US partner, receives substantial US arms transfers while having none from China. This suggests that seven out of ten Southeast Asian countries enjoy greater access to US arms, indicating a degree of alignment, albeit mostly limited in nature. In short, while most Southeast Asian states align with the US in the face of China's growing power, their alignment tends to be limited rather than the tight alignment BoT would predict. Notably, Thailand—despite its status as a US major non-NATO ally—receives similar volumes of arms from both China and the US, further illustrating the region's openness to engagement with both powers.

In sum, the comparison between empirical data and the alignment behavior of Southeast Asian countries amid China's rising aggregate power reveals three key points. First, most Southeast Asian countries align—albeit limitedly—with the US, engaging not only in MoUs and joint statements but also in regular military exercises and arms transfers. Second, these countries also pursue limited military cooperation with China, not just economic engagement, adding nuance to existing literature that emphasizes hedging strategies. Third, China has filled security cooperation gaps in countries where US engagement is absent, such as Cambodia and Myanmar. These findings suggest that BoT's prediction—that Southeast Asian states would side with the US to counterbalance China—is only partially supported. While alignment with the US exists, it is predominantly limited in nature, and most states also maintain limited ties with China. Given the lack of widespread tight alignments, BoT's expectations are not fully realized. However, the consistent pattern of limited alignment with the US does indicate that perceived threat still plays a role, supporting BoT's core logic to a degree.

b. Southeast Asia's Proximity to China and Alignment Behavior

The next BoT variable influencing alignment behavior is geographical proximity[74], based on the idea that nearby threats are more dangerous due to their ease of projecting power.[75] Thus, observation to test whether closer proximity is somehow related to alignment behavior should include assessment about how close China is with the Southeast Asian countries. To assess whether proximity to China correlates with Southeast Asian alignment behavior, this study compares the distances between each country's capital and Beijing. However, recognizing the limits of objective distance alone, the analysis

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significance of arms deals in which the bigger the number and percentage of the TIVs the more significant the arms transfer from either China or the US to the recipient countries. For more details on how the formulas for TIV works, please refer to: "Sources and methods," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), accessed February 4, 2025, https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods.

[72] Major Southeast Asian countries refer to those that possessed more edge on economic and military capability compared to the other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The mentioned countries are also the ones that refers as "Emerging Asia" by the IMF. See: *Regional Economic Outlook for Asia and Pacific: Sailing into Headwinds*, International Monetary Fund (October, 2022).

[73] For more information on how the US regard them as strategic, see: *National Security Strategy of The United States of America*, 46; *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, 6; *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 9.

[74] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 276. In this regard, Walt's observation on the Middle-East implies that countries are more sensitive to threats that are close so they care more about regional dynamics rather than global power balance between superpowers. See: Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 269-70.

[75] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 23. In this regard, Walt also borrows the explanations from other literatures such as: Harvey Starr and Benjamin A. Most, "The Substance and Study of Borders in International Relations Research," *International Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1976), https://doi.org/10.2307/2600341, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2600341; K.E. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* (Valmy Publishing, 2018).

also considers geographic factors such as natural barriers and buffer zones.[76] A country may be geographically close to China but protected by features that reduce vulnerability. If BoT holds, states closer to China should align more closely with the US, which is geographically distant and thus perceived as less threatening.

Before proceeding with the analysis, a clarification is needed. In SEA, proximity and aggressive intention are often intertwined—for instance, a country may be geographically distant from Beijing but close to disputed areas in the South China Sea. While proximity to China's territorial claims is relevant, this study excludes such factors from the proximity analysis to avoid overlap with the aggressive intention variable, which is addressed later. Instead, this section focuses solely on whether geographic closeness to China—measured by capital-to-capital distance and geographic features—relates to alignment behavior. Table 6 outlines the proximity and geographic characteristics of each Southeast Asian country in relation to China.

Table 6: Distances from Southeast Asian Capitals to Beijing and Geographical Barriers

	Distance to Beijing (in Km)	Barriers
Myanmar	1787	-
Lao PDR	2216	-
Vietnam	2328	-
Cambodia	2446	√
Philippines	2867	√
Thailand	3309	√
Brunei	3831	√
Malaysia	4399	√
Singapore	4474	√
Indonesia	5216	√

Source: Illustrated by the Author.

Table 6 compares the proximity of Southeast Asian countries to China's capital and identifies whether geographic barriers or buffer zones exist along their borders. Most Southeast Asian countries are separated from China by either natural barriers or intermediary states. Maritime Southeast Asian countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and the Philippines—are distanced from China by the South China Sea and are geographically farther from Beijing. On the mainland, Cambodia and Thailand are buffered by Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. These barriers may limit China's ability to project power directly and, from a realist perspective, reduce the urgency to balance.[77] According to BoT, states closer to a threatening power and lacking natural defenses should be more inclined to align with a less threatening alternative—namely, the US. If BoT holds, countries like Myanmar, Laos, and

[76] For instance, Mearsheimer (2001) explain that geographical barriers like huge body of water inhibit power-projection capabilities. For more detail information, see: J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Norton, 2001), 114-28.

[77] Mearsheimer argue that geographical barriers and buffer zone could inhibit balancing behavior and inducing buck-passing strategy instead. Buck-passing strategy here refers to behavior when a country passing its responsibility to balance against threatening power to other states that might be located closer to the threat. For more detail explanation about this point, see: Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 329-33.

Vietnam—those with direct borders and minimal geographic protection—should exhibit stronger alignment with the US. Table 7 evaluates this proposition by presenting their respective alignment levels.

Table 7: Degree of Alignment (Shorted by Geographical Proximity with China)

Degree of Alignment														
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Myanmar														
Lao PDR														
Vietnam														
Cambodia														
Philippines														
Thailand														
Brunei														
Malaysia														
Singapore														
Indonesia														

Degree of Alignment								
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Myanmar								
Lao PDR								
Vietnam								
Cambodia								
Philippines								
Thailand								
Brunei								
Malaysia								
Singapore								
Indonesia								

= **Non-Alignment**

= **Limited Alignment**

= **Tight Alignment**

Source: Illustrated by the Author

Table 7 shows the degree of alignment between Southeast Asian countries and the US using the same criteria as Tables 3 and 4. Among Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam—countries closest to China and lacking significant geographic barriers—limited alignment with the US accounts for 26 out of 66 data points (2000–2021), or roughly 39%. The remaining majority reflects non-alignment, with Myanmar contributing most to that category. Laos, which shifted to limited alignment after 2006, holds 15 of 22 data points (68%) in that category. Vietnam began limited alignment in 2011, making up 11 of 22 data points (50%). These figures suggest that even the Southeast Asian countries geographically closest to China do not exhibit strong alignment with the US. While limited alignment is present—especially in Laos and Vietnam—it falls short of supporting BoT's prediction that proximity to a threat increases

alignment with a less threatening power. In fact, taking together, these three countries show more instances of non-alignment compared to others in the region.

Non-alignment is also evident in Cambodia—a country relatively close to China but separated by buffer zones. Ranked fourth closest to China among Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia was non-aligned in the early 2000s and again in 2018 and 2021. When combined with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, these four countries show 46 out of 88 data points (52.2%) as non-aligned and 42 (47.7%) as limited alignment. With non-alignment slightly outweighing limited alignment, the data offers little support for BoT's prediction that proximity to a threat leads to alignment with an alternative power. Additionally, these countries—except Vietnam—lean toward China in military cooperation. As shown in Table 5, arms transfers to Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia are dominated by China. This is further supported by developments such as China's influence in Cambodia, which led to the suspension of US military assistance, and Laos's military cooperation with China on the Ream Naval Base.

A different pattern emerges among Southeast Asian countries located farther from China and protected by geographic barriers. These states mostly fall under limited alignment, except for the Philippines and Thailand, which maintain tight alignment with the US. Notably, both rank mid-range in proximity to China. If BoT's proximity-based logic held fully, these two would exhibit limited alignment, while more distant countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia would remain non-aligned. However, the opposite is observed. As shown in Table 5, countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia receive more US arms transfers and maintain long-standing annual military exercises with the US, including Garuda Shield, Keris Strike, and Tiger Balm. These patterns suggest that proximity alone does not determine alignment behavior.

The findings in this section suggest that BoT's prediction regarding geographical proximity is not well supported. The countries closest to China—Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia—do not exhibit tight alignment with the US and are largely characterized by non-alignment or limited alignment. Meanwhile, mid-range countries like the Philippines and Thailand maintain tight alignment with the US, and more distant countries—Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei—consistently show limited alignment with a slight tilt toward the US, particularly in military cooperation. While BoT acknowledges that proximity can lead to either balancing or bandwagoning[78], it emphasizes a stronger tendency to balance against nearby threats.[79] Yet, with the exception of Vietnam, the closest states appear to lean toward China rather than balancing it. Their limited engagement with the US and growing military cooperation with China—despite the absence of tight alignment—undermine BoT's argument that geographical proximity to a threat drives alignment with a less threatening power.

c. China's Offensive Capabilities and Southeast Asia's Alignment Behavior

Offensive capability is another key factor in BoT, as it enables a state to threaten others.[80] The theory suggests that large, mobile military forces signal strong offensive potential.[81] In this study, mobile weapon systems—those capable of crossing borders and projecting force—are used as proxies for offensive capabilities and are compared against the alignment behavior of Southeast Asian countries. In this case, aerial and maritime weaponry—such as combat-capable aircraft, ships, submarines, and aircraft carriers—are used as proxies for offensive capability. These platforms are especially relevant in

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[78] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 24-24 & 153.

[79] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 158-65 & 78-80.

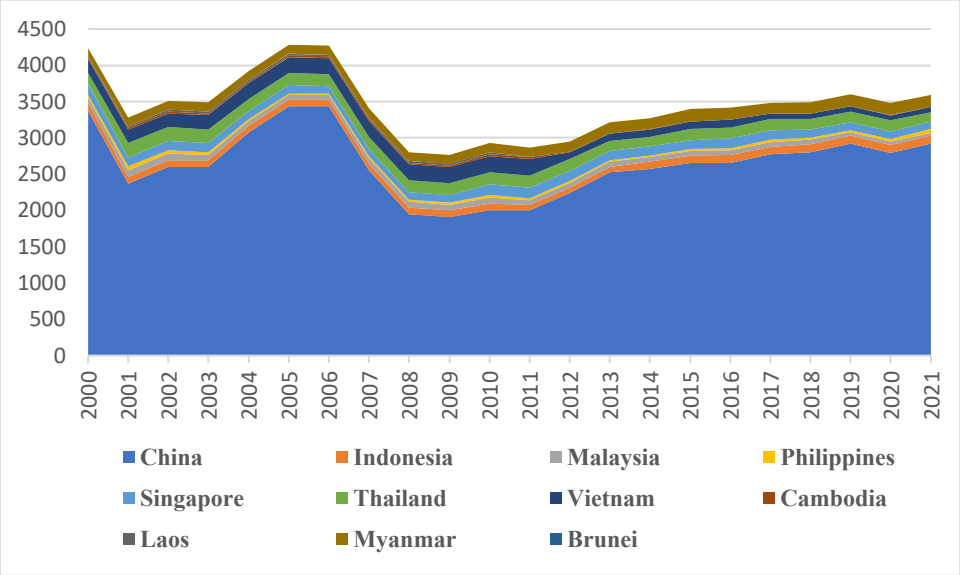
[80] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 24. Similar perspective seems to be shared by others like Jervis (1978). See also: Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 200-05, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2009958.

[81] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 24; Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure it?," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (1998), https://doi.org/10.2307/2539240, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539240.

SEA, where most countries are connected to China by sea. While air and naval assets can serve both defensive and offensive purposes[82], their presence often generates perceived threats, particularly in contested areas like the South China Sea. For example, China may view these weapons as essential for defending territorial claims, while other claimant states see them as offensive provocations. Given their mobility and strategic utility, these weapon systems are appropriate indicators for assessing China's offensive capacity in relation to Southeast Asian countries' alignment behavior.

While land-based weapons like armored vehicles are generally less relevant for maritime conflicts, they can still reflect offensive capability in specific contexts. As three Southeast Asian countries share direct land borders with China, this study includes main battle tanks (MBTs) as an additional proxy for China's offensive strength in those cases. These data—covering air, naval, and land-based systems—are compared with Southeast Asian countries' alignment behavior to assess whether China's offensive capabilities influence their inclination toward the US.[83] The analysis begins with Graph 2, which compares aerial weaponry between China and Southeast Asian countries.

Graph 2: Comparison of Combat-Capable Aircraft Between China and Ten Southeast Asian Countries (2000-2021)



Source: Adapted by the Author from IISS Military Balance Reports.[84]

As shown in Graph 2, China possesses an overwhelming number of combat-capable aircraft compared to the ten Southeast Asian countries. Beyond sheer quantity, China has also advanced significantly in aerial technology. In 2017, it introduced the Chengdu J-20, a fifth-generation stealth fighter now deployed across all major regions of the country. [85] This was followed by the J-35A, a medium-sized stealth fighter designed for mass production and lower cost, while maintaining high

[82] See: Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 204. See also: Jack S. Levy, "The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1984): 225-26, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600696, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2600696.

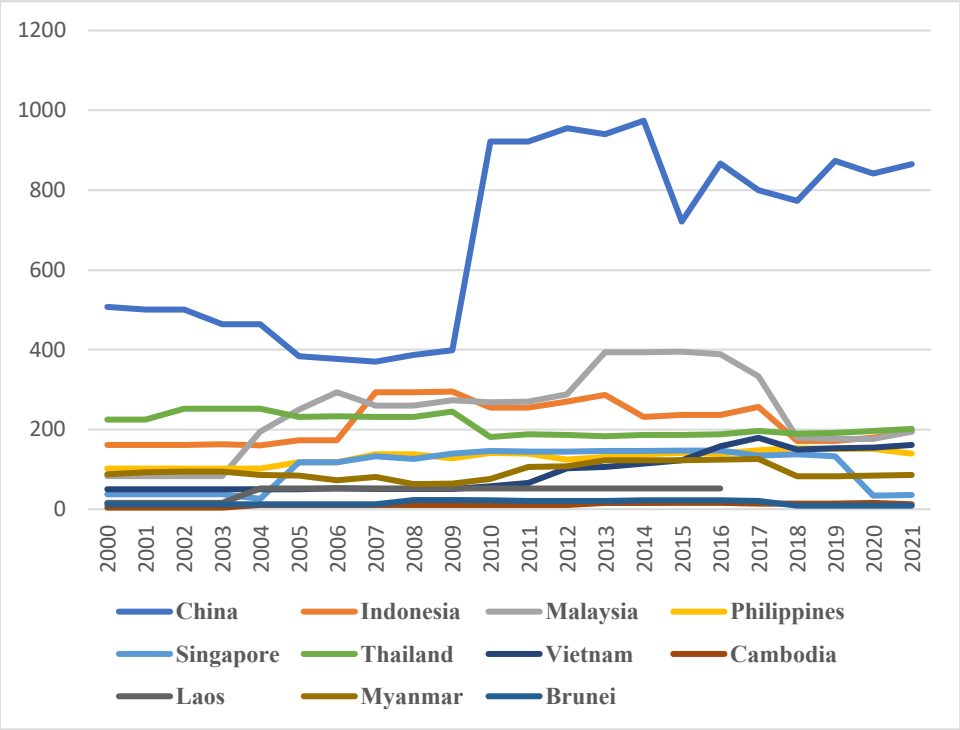
[83] The data on weaponries in this writing are adapted from IISS Military Balance reports from the year 2000-2022. See: "The Military Balance," (IISS Website, 2001-2023). https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tmib20.

[84] Notes: (1). The design of the of the Graph is adjusted in a way that reveal the gap between compared countries. This writing found that other design reveal less of the Southeast Asian countries dynamics since the gap in the data with China is too big; (2). The IISS Military Balance reports shows no record of Brunei having combat capable aircrafts from the year 2000-2021.

[85] See: Franz-Stefan Gady, "China's First Fifth-Generation Fighter Jet Enters Service With the PLAAF," *The Diplomat*, March 14, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/chinas-first-fifth-generation-fighter-jet-enters-service-with-the-plaaf/; Liu Xuanzun, "J-20 fighter jet active in all five PLA theater commands: delegate," *Global Times*, October 20, 2022, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202210/1277527.shtml.

combat capability. China is also reportedly developing a sixth-generation fighter.[86] In contrast, Southeast Asian countries—except Singapore, which has acquired fifth-generation aircraft from the US[87]—operate or plan to acquire fourth or 4.5-generation jets. China's numerical and technological edge in air power clearly gives it an offensive advantage over the region. The next section turns to naval capabilities, shown in Graph 3.

Graph 3: Comparison of Combat-Capable Ships Between China and Ten Southeast Asian Countries (2000-2021)



Source: Adapted by the Author from IISS Military Balance Reports.[88]

Graph 3 shows that China has a significantly larger number of combat-capable ships than the ten Southeast Asian countries. Although Vietnam briefly surpassed China in 2007, IISS *Military Balance* reports (see Graph 2, note 2) did not include China's paramilitary vessels from 2000–2009, meaning China's actual numbers may have been higher. This numerical advantage underscores China's ability to assert maritime claims—particularly in the South China Sea—relative to its Southeast Asian

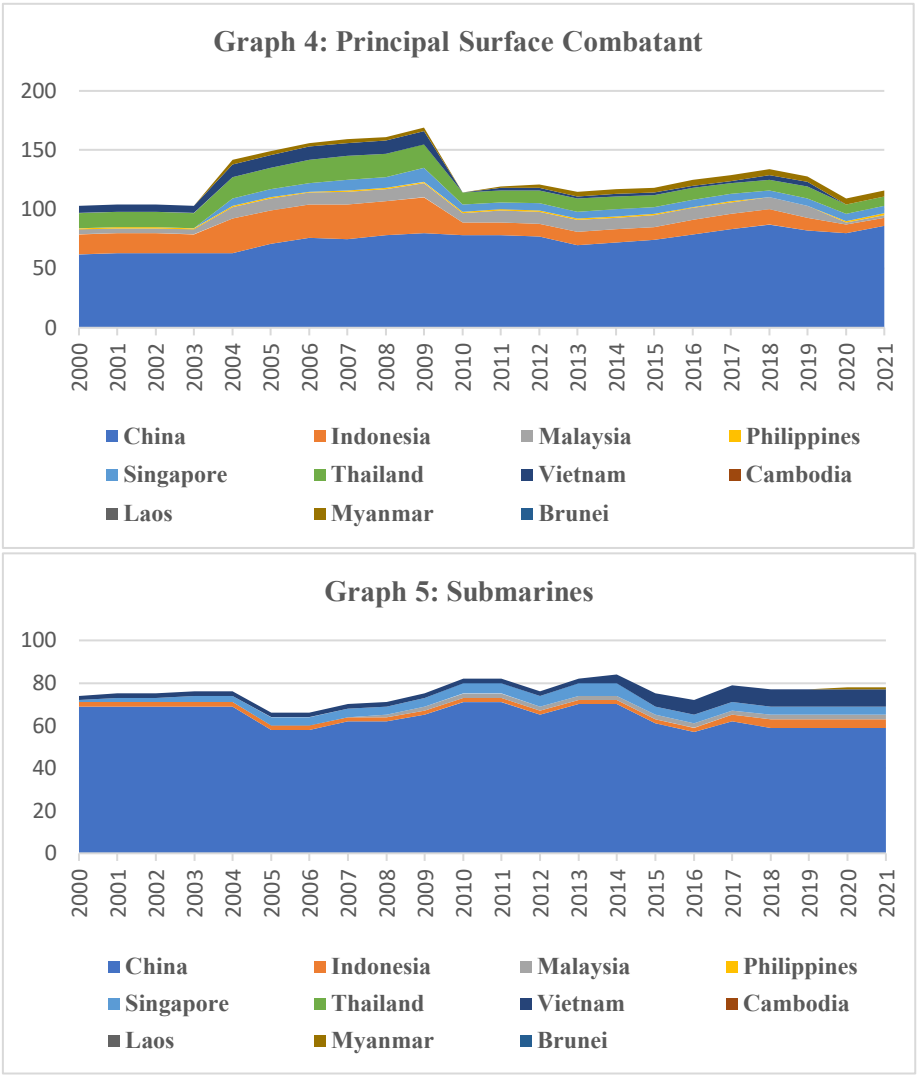
[86] See: Liu Xuanzun and Yang Sheng, "Three types of stealth fighter jets star Airshow China opening," *Global Times*, November 12, 2024, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202411/1322920.shtml; Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, "PLA Air Force to debut J-35A stealth fighter jet at Airshow China," *Global Times*, November 5, 2024, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202411/1322452.shtml.

[87] For more information, see: Brad Lendon, "The message to China behind Singapore's US F-35 jet plan " *CNN*, March 11, 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/06/asia/singapore-f-35-fighters-analysis-intl/index.html.

[88] Notes: (1). Since there are some indications that some Southeast Asian countries as well as China using paramilitary forces and since some of these forces possess combat capable ships, the units shown in the graph also include combat capable ships belong not only to the respective navies but to their paramilitary as well; (2). From the year of 2000-2009 the IISS datasets do not record China's paramilitary ships, indicating that the number of combat capable ships of China might be higher than the record shows; (3). Regarding the naval weaponries data of Singapore, the IISS reports did not record Singapore's paramilitary ships for the year of 2004 as well as 2020 and 2021 which implies that in these years, the Singapore might possess more combat capable ships than the record reflected; (4). Similarly, data on Indonesia's paramilitary ships from 2018 onwards seems to be partially unrecorded, indicating Indonesia might have more paramilitary ships than expected; (5)
While Laos is a landlock country, the reports that Laos possessed some combat capable ships under the armies; (6) The IISS Military Balance reports implies no paramilitary ships owned by Cambodia and Laos.

neighbors. While Graph 3 captures overall naval strength, Graphs 4 and 5 further highlight China's dominance in key categories, including main surface combatants and submarines

Graph 4 & 5: Comparison of Principal Surface Combatants and Submarines Between China and Ten Southeast Asian Countries (2000-2021)



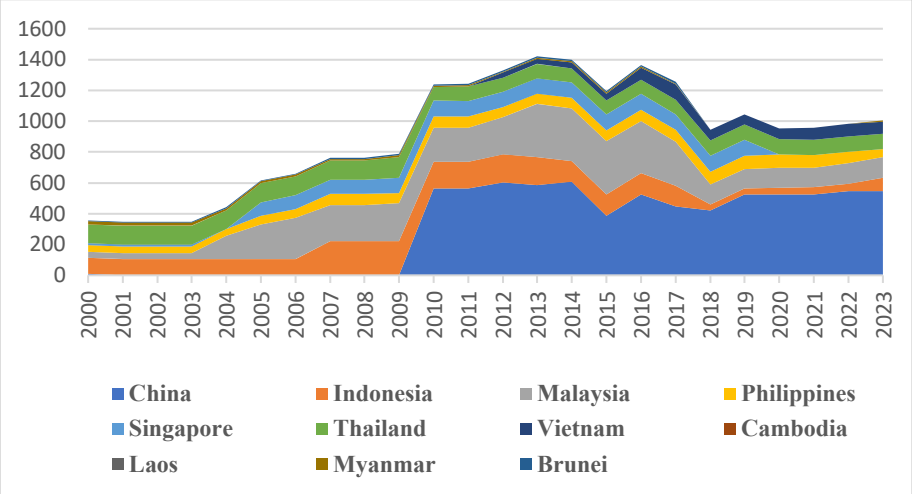
Source: Adapted by the Author from IISS Military Balance Reports.[89]

Graphs 4 and 5 show that China holds a clear advantage over the ten Southeast Asian countries in both principal surface combatants and submarines. Principal surface combatants—such as aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and frigates—typically have a full-load displacement above 2,200 tonnes and are equipped for high-seas combat.[90] Dominance in this category reflects China's significant power projection and offensive maritime capabilities. Additionally, as shown in Graph 6, China also maintains superiority in combat-capable paramilitary vessels.

[89] Notes: (1). The data on principal surface combatant include aircraft carriers; (2). The IISS Military Balance reports indicated no existence of principal surface combatants for Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos; (3). The IISS Military Balance reports indicated no existence of submarines for Brunei, Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand, and Laos.

[90] *The Military Balance 2024*, vol.124, 538.

Graph 6: Comparison of Paramilitary Ships Between China and Ten Southeast Asian Countries



Source: Adapted by the Author from IISS Military balance Reports.[91]

As shown in Graph 6, China has more combat-capable paramilitary vessels than the ten Southeast Asian countries. Notably, IISS *Military Balance* reports did not fully account for China's paramilitary fleet before 2009, suggesting its actual size may be significantly larger. The 2022 IISS report identifies the China Coast Guard (CCG) as the world's largest[92], strengthened further by the 2021 CCG Law, which expanded its role in law enforcement and maritime power projection. [93] China has repeatedly used the CCG to assert claims in the South China Sea, including incidents in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ)[94], Scarborough Shoal[95], and the Natuna area[96]. Alongside the PLA Navy and maritime militia, the CCG plays a central role in China's maritime strategy.[97] Its fleet includes Zhaotou-class cutters—paramilitary ships with a displacement of about 12,000 tonnes, even larger than many principal naval combatants like destroyers and frigates.[98] The size and presence of these vessels

[91] Notes: (1). From the year of 2000-2009 the IISS datasets do not record China's paramilitary ships, indicating that the number of combat capable ships of China might be higher than the record shows; (2). Regarding the naval weaponries data of Singapore, the IISS reports did not record Singapore's paramilitary ships for the year of 2004 as well as 2020 and 2021 which implies that in these years, the Singapore might possess more combat capable ships than the record reflected; (3). Similarly, data on Indonesia's paramilitary ships from 2018 onwards seems to be partially unrecorded, indicating Indonesia might have more paramilitary ships than expected; (4). While Laos is a landlock country, the reports that Laos possessed some combat capable ships under the armies; (5). The IISS Military Balance reports implies no paramilitary ships owned by Cambodia and Laos.

[92] "Chapter Six: Asia," *The Military Balance* 122, no. 1 (2022/12/31 2022): 238, https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2022.2022931.

[93] "Chapter Six: Asia," 234 & 38.

[94] For incident near the oil block, see: James Pearson and Khanh Vu, "Vietnam, China embroiled in South China Sea standoff," *Reuters*, July 17, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/vietnam-china-embroiled-in-south-china-sea-standoff-idUSKCN1UC0M4/.

[95] For incident in Scarborough Shoal, see: "South China Sea: Philippine coastguard accuses Chinese vessels of 'dangerous, blocking manoeuvres'," *South China Morning Post*, February 11, 2024, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3251664/south-china-sea-philippine-coastguard-accuses-chinese-vessels-dangerous-blocking-manoeuvres.

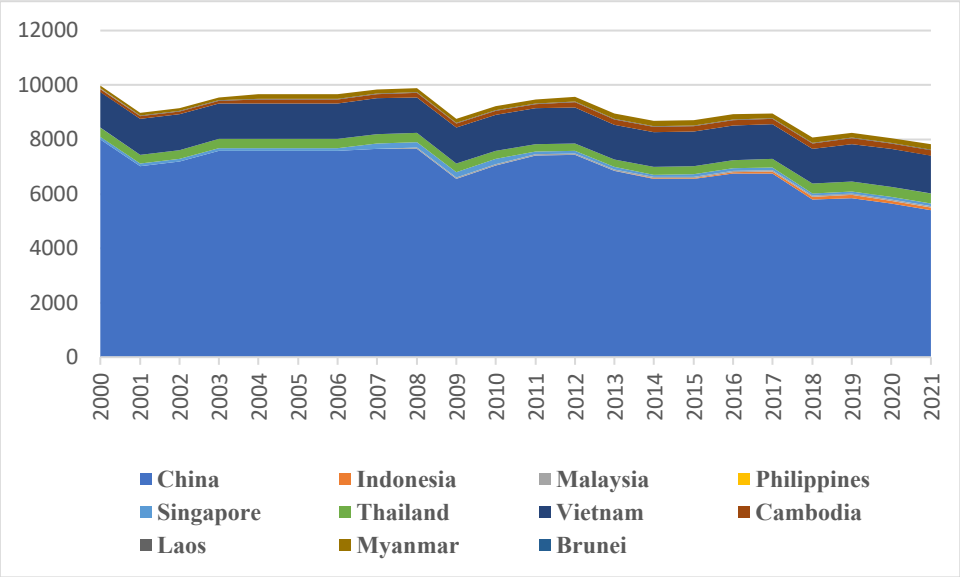
[96] For incident in Natuna, see: Haeril Halim, Anggi M. Lubis, and Stefani Ribka, "RI confronts China on fishing," *The Jakarta Post*, March 21, 2016, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/03/21/ri-confronts-china-fishing.html.

[97] "Chapter Six: Asia," 238.

[98] Some reports that it is the largest ships for paramilitary purposes. See: "Chapter Six: Asia," 238; "A new law would unshackle China's coastguard, far from its coast," *The Economist*, December 3, 2020, https://www.economist.com/china/2020/12/03/a-new-law-would-unshackle-chinas-coastguard-far-from-its-coast. For comparison, Destroyers is usually have FLD around 4,500 – 9,749 tonnes while Frigates class FLD are about 2,200 – 9,000 tonnes. For these ships classification, refer to: "Chapter Six: Asia," 516.

raise serious concerns among other claimants, particularly the Philippines.[99] In sum, China's naval superiority—especially in paramilitary capacity—is evident when compared to the Southeast Asian countries. In addition to naval capabilities, this study also examines land-based power relevant to Southeast Asian countries sharing a direct border with China. To assess China's advantage in this area, main battle tanks (MBTs) are used as a proxy. The comparison is presented in Graph 7 below.

Graph 7: Comparison of Main Battle Tank (MBT) Between China and Ten Southeast Asian Countries



Source: Adapted by the Author from IISS Military balance Reports.[100]

Graph 7 shows that China holds a significant numerical advantage in main battle tanks (MBTs) compared to the ten Southeast Asian countries. This superiority is further reinforced by China's continued development of advanced MBTs, including the mass-produced Type-96 and the more sophisticated Type-99 series.[101] The Type-99A, equipped with features like laser-guided missile jammers and digital maintenance systems, is considered one of the most capable pre–fourth generation MBTs.[102] China is also reportedly developing a next-generation MBT[103], further widening its advantage in land power.

The assessment of China's offensive capabilities highlights its clear advantage over the ten Southeast Asian countries. If BoT's prediction holds—that greater offensive capability induces tighter alignment—one would expect stronger alignment with the US. However, interpreting this relationship

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[99] For more information on Philippines concern about the large CCG Ship, see: Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Philippines Challenge 'Monster' China Coast Guard Cutter, U.S. Carrier Vinson Drills with Philippine Forces in South China Sea," *USNI News*, January 20, 2025, https://news.usni.org/2025/01/20/philippines-challenges-monster-china-coast-guard-cutter-u-s-carrier-vinson-drills-with-philippine-forces-in-south-china-sea.

[100] Notes: The IISS Military Balance reports indicated no existence of submarines for Brunei & Philippines.

[101] See: Amber Wang, "China's latest main battle tank could soon be ready for service, analyst says," *South China Morning Post*, October 11, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3195585/chinas-latest-main-battle-tank-could-soon-be-ready-service; Franz-Stefan Gady, "China Reveals New Main Battle Tank," *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/china-reveals-new-main-battle-tank/.

[102] "Chinese Tanks: Roles and Capabilities of All Five Models in Production Today," *Military Watch*, June 28, 2021, https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/chinese-tanks-how-capable-are-they.

[103] See: "China's Semi-Autonomous Next Gen. Tank Needs Just Half the Crew of its Western Rivals - Unveiling Imminent ", *Military Watch*, October 11, 2022, https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/china-s-semi-autonomous-next-gen-tank-needs-just-half-the-crew-of-its-western-rivals-unveiling-imminent; Zhang Tong, "China's futuristic smart tank can turn drones against drones, leaked images suggest," May 28, 2024, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3264397/chinas-futuristic-smart-tank-can-turn-drones-against-drones-leaked-images-suggest.

also requires consideration of geographic factors discussed earlier. Since offensive weapons are designed for mobility and territorial penetration, their perceived threat varies by domain. China's air power, for example, can project force across the entire region, especially against nearby states—suggesting closer countries should show greater alignment with the US.[104] Naval weapons pose a more direct threat to countries with overlapping maritime claims in the South China Sea, so those exposed should be more inclined to align. In the case of land power, represented here by MBTs, the threat is most relevant to countries sharing a direct land border with China. To evaluate these expectations, this study refers again to Table 6, which reflects alignment behavior within its geographic context and serves as a useful basis for comparison in this section.

In the context of China's superior air power, Table 6 shows that the countries closest to China do not exhibit tight alignment with the US. Among the five nearest Southeast Asian countries, only the Philippines—ranked fifth—maintains such an alliance. Thailand, ranked sixth in proximity and buffered by geographic barriers, is the only other country with tight US alignment. While China's air power, including aircraft carriers, could threaten the Philippines across maritime distance[105], the same applies to other sea-separated countries like Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore—none of which show tight alignment. This suggests that China's aerial superiority alone does not explain the Philippines' or Thailand's alignment with the US, as neither proximity nor distance consistently correlate with tighter alignment across the region.

Regarding China's overwhelming naval advantage, Table 7 shows that among the Southeast Asian countries connected to China by sea and concerned with China's maritime claims—such as Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore—only the Philippines maintains tight alignment with the US. While this may appear to challenge BoT's prediction, a broader comparison reveals that maritime Southeast Asian countries are generally more inclined to align with the US—albeit mostly in limited forms—than their mainland counterparts. Countries like Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia tend to remain non-aligned or lean toward China. As shown in Table 5, maritime states also receive more US arms transfers, whereas mainland states rely more on Chinese weaponry. This pattern suggests that China's superior naval capabilities may influence Southeast Asian alignment behavior, but not strongly enough to drive tight alignment—except in the case of the Philippines.

When it comes to China's advantage in land power, Table 7 shows that the countries closest to China—such as Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam—tend to exhibit non-alignment rather than aligning with the US. As seen in Table 5, Myanmar and Laos (and Cambodia, which is geographically close to China) receive most of their arms transfers from China, with Vietnam being the exception. This pattern weakens the BoT argument that superior offensive capabilities—proxied here by China's large number of MBTs—would push nearby countries to align with the US. In fact, proximity to China's land power appears to correlate more with non-alignment or closer defense ties with China. Notably, Thailand, despite being a US treaty ally, is also a buyer of Chinese MBTs[106], further suggesting that Chinese land power has limited influence in driving Southeast Asian countries toward alignment with the US.

In sum, the analysis of China's offensive capabilities across air, land, and sea suggests that BoT's prediction—that such capabilities drive alignment—is only partially supported. Despite China's clear advantages, there is little evidence of tight alignment with the US, even when accounting for factors like shared borders, power projection, and proximity. However, in the case of limited alignment, some

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[104] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 23.

[105] China possesses three aircraft carriers including the two operational: the Liaoning & Shandong, and one unit in development, the Fujian. See: *The Military Balance 2024*, vol.124, 235.

[106] For more information, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, "Thailand to Buy Battle Tanks from China " *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/thailand-to-buy-battle-tanks-from-china/; Wassana Nanuam, "Army to buy 14 more Chinese tanks at cost of B2.3bn," *Bangkok Post*, Janruary 21, 2019, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1615074/army-to-buy-14-more-chinese-tanks-at-cost-of-b2-3bn.

patterns emerge. Maritime Southeast Asian countries—Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore—show an early and consistent inclination toward limited alignment, likely influenced by China's naval dominance. As reflected in Table 5, these countries also receive greater access to US arms. Including the Philippines, which maintains tight alignment, five countries collectively show a tendency to align with the US—four limited, one tight—despite China's growing military power.

d. China's Aggressive Intentions and Southeast Asian Alignment Patterns

The final key variable that distinguishes BoT from balance of power theory is aggressive intention. BoT argues that the more aggressive or expansionist a state appears, the more likely others are to align against it. [107] However, assessing aggressive intention is inherently difficult. In the anarchic international system, intentions are uncertain[108]—today's friendly posture may turn hostile tomorrow. While difficult, aggressive intention can still be inferred from state behavior. Actions such as territorial claims—especially when asserted forcefully—can signal expansionist intent. In this context, China's claims in the South China Sea are widely perceived as aggressive, particularly by other claimants and nearby states. Repeated intrusions into EEZs that China considers its own have heightened regional concerns.[109] Although China frames its actions as defensive—viewing the South China Sea as part of its core interests—many Southeast Asian countries see them as offensive or even expansionist.[110] Regional leaders often perceive China as a revisionist power.[111] Therefore, this study uses territorial claims and assertiveness in defending those claims as practical indicators of aggressive intention.

Thus, this study intends to examines all known territorial disputes between China and the ten Southeast Asian countries as a basis for assessing perceived aggressive intention. Countries with active disputes are considered exposed to a high level of aggressive intent, as they risk losing territory they claim as their own.[112] Those without direct disputes but experiencing Chinese intrusions—such as into their EEZs—are categorized as facing moderate aggressive intent, given the potential loss of economic resources. Finally, countries with neither disputes nor reported intrusions are classified as experiencing lower levels of aggressive intent, though they may still feel threatened by China's broader power advantages. Table 8 presents this classification, ranking countries from closest to furthest from Chinese territory.

Table 8: Southeast Asian Countries' Exposure to Aggressive Intentions

Countries	Exposure Level	Geographical Border
Myanmar	Less	Direct
Lao PDR	Less	Direct
Vietnam	High	Direct
Cambodia	Less	Undirect: Buffer Zones
Philippines	High	Undirect: Sea

[107] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 25.

[108] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 3.

[109] For examples, see: Sylvia Yazid and Rizky Widian, *Diluting Rivalries between Great Powers*, Friedrich Naumann Foundation For Freedom (2023).

[110] Ann Marie Murphy, "China's Grand Strategy toward Southeast Asia: Assessing the Response and Efficacy," ed. David B. H. Denoon, *China's Grand Strategy : A Roadmap to Global Power?* (New York: New York University Press, 2021). 140-41.

[111] Murphy, "China's Grand Strategy toward Southeast Asia: Assessing the Response and Efficacy," 140-41.

[112] Realist like Mearsheimer even argue that territorial integrity is strongly related to a state's sense of survival and will try to maintained it. See: Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 31.

Thailand	Less	Undirect: Buffer Zones
Brunei	High	Undirect: Sea
Malaysia	High	Undirect: Sea
Singapore	Less	Undirect: Sea
Indonesia	Moderate	Undirect: Sea

Source: Illustrated by the Author.

Table 8 reveals several key observations. First, among the countries closest to China, only Vietnam appears to face a high level of aggressive intention, as Myanmar and Laos have no territorial disputes with China from 2000–2021. Second, Vietnam—with both a direct land border and overlapping maritime claims—likely experiences the highest level of aggressive intent. Third, countries separated from China by sea are more likely to face aggressive behavior, as many have active maritime disputes. These findings provide a useful foundation for analyzing the aggressive intention variable. The discussion now returns to Table 6 for comparison with alignment behavior.

As shown in Table 7, countries exposed to moderate or high aggressive intention—such as Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia—tend to exhibit stronger alignment with the US. In contrast, countries facing lower levels of aggressive intent, particularly those closest to China (except Vietnam), show patterns of non-alignment. Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia also lean toward China in terms of military cooperation, as reflected in arms transfer data, which may further explain their limited or non-alignment with the US. Although China does not directly threaten these states through territorial disputes, they may still perceive risks due to China's aggregate power and offensive capabilities. A similar rationale may apply to Indonesia, which, despite only moderate[113] exposure to aggressive intent, maintains limited alignment with the US due to its relative distance from China. While BoT's prediction holds for some cases, the overall picture is more complex. Among South China Sea claimants, only the Philippines maintains tight alignment with the US. Other Southeast Asian countries with territorial disputes—despite facing high levels of aggressive intention—remain in limited alignment, making it difficult to fully support the theory's claim that higher threat levels lead to tight allignment.

Taken together with the earlier analysis on proximity, it appears that Cambodia and Thailand are in the "safest" positions, lacking both territorial disputes and shared borders with China. According to BoT, they should show low alignment with the US—an expectation reflected in Cambodia's stance but contradicted by Thailand's tight alignment. If the theory held fully, Thailand would likely to align limitedly to the US. The case of Vietnam also challenges BoT's predictions. Despite facing the highest threat level—due to China's superior power, shared land border, and ongoing territorial disputes—Vietnam remains only in limited alignment with the US. As Table 4 shows, Vietnam receives minimal arms transfers from the US, far less than most other Southeast Asian countries with similar access.

To deepen the analysis, this study draws on perception data from the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute *State of Southeast Asia* surveys (2019–2021), which assess how Southeast Asian countries view

[113] Although Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea, it put concerns in the disputes. See: Widian and Arimadona, "Cooperation & Security Dilemma In The South China Sea."; Allard, "Asserting sovereignty, Indonesia renames part of South China Sea." Indonesia also experienced intrusion by Chinese ships. For examples, see: "Indonesia seizes Chinese fishing boat and crew in escalating Natuna Islands row," *ABC News*, May 31, 2016, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-31/indonesia-seizes-chinese-fishing-boat-and-crew/7461334; "Cina protes penembakan kapal nelayan, TNI AL: "Kami tidak brutal"," *BBC*, June 20, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2016/06/160620_indonesia_tnial_bantah_kapalcina; Fadli and Dian Septiari, "Indonesia eyes response to Chinese activity in Natunas," *The Jakarta Post*, December 30, 2019, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/12/30/indonesia-eyes-response-chinese-activity-natunas.html.

China's strategic intent. A recurring question asks whether respondents trust China to "do the right thing" for peace and stability (see Table 9).

Table 9: Southeast Asian Countries' Trust That China Will Contribute to Peace and Stability (2019–2021)

	2019			2020			2021		
	No Confidence	No Comments	Confidence	No Confidence	No Comments	Confidence	No Confidence	No Comments	Confidence
Myanmar	37.6	41.2	21.2	50.8	36.5	12.7	59.6	28.2	12.1
Laos	10.4	48.3	41.3	30.5	30.4	39.1	47.5	22.5	30
Vietnam	73.4	21	5.6	77	19.7	3.3	75.4	20	4.6
Cambodia	58.3	20.8	20.9	53.8	7.7	38.5	42.3	30.8	24.9
Philippines	66.6	22.2	11.2	78.8	10.9	10.2	82.1	7.5	10.5
Thailand	51.8	24.1	24.1	62.5	20.9	16.7	67.9	16	16
Brunei Darussalam	37.8	35.6	27	44.7	36.1	19.6	45.5	30.3	24.2
Malaysia	45.8	29.2	25	50.9	24.5	24.6	58.1	16.2	25.6
Singapore	46.9	32	21.1	59	19.4	21.6	57	19.6	23.4
Indonesia	60.9	20	19.1	70.3	17.5	12.2	60.5	23.3	16.3

Source: Adapted by the Author from ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute Reports.[114]

The ISEAS survey data on trust in China reinforces the threat perception patterns discussed earlier. From 2019–2021, Southeast Asian countries consistently showed low confidence in China's role in promoting regional peace. Among those closest to China, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam reported rising distrust—Vietnam's "no confidence" responses remained above 73%, reaching 75.4% in 2021. This aligns with its high threat exposure, despite maintaining only limited alignment with the US. Laos, while geographically close, showed higher trust levels, though declining over time—reflecting fewer aggressive encounters and a more nuanced perception.

Cambodia and Thailand—considered structurally "safer" due to geographic buffers—still exhibit significant distrust toward China, with Thailand's "no confidence" reaching over 65% by 2021. Despite its relatively low threat exposure, Thailand maintains its alliance with the US, contradicting BoT's expectations. The Philippines, a direct maritime rival of China, shows the highest distrust levels—exceeding 80%—aligning with its tight US alignment and high perceived threat. Even countries farther from China, like Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, display majority distrust (above 50%), though with less intensity. Overall, the ISEAS survey supports this study's classification of aggressive intention: countries facing higher threat exposure tend to exhibit stronger distrust, reinforcing the relevance of perceived intent in alignment behavior.

In sum, the findings suggest that Southeast Asian countries exposed to higher levels of aggressive intention—measured through territorial disputes, intrusions, and proximity—tend to align more closely with the US. This is most clearly seen in the Philippines, which faces ongoing maritime tensions with China, exhibits high levels of distrust (ISEAS data), and maintains its tight alignment with the US. However, key deviations challenge BoT's predictions. Vietnam, despite facing the most severe threats—including land borders, territorial disputes, and high distrust—only maintains limited alignment

[114] "State of Southeast Asia Survey," (ISEAS, 2019-2021). https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/.

with the US. Thailand, by contrast, faces minimal threat but remains a US treaty ally. The ISEAS survey adds a useful perceptual layer: distrust in China correlates with structural exposure but does not always lead to higher alignment. These mixed outcomes indicate that while aggressive intention remains a relevant variable, it does not fully explain alignment patterns in SEA. BoT's prediction on this factor is therefore only partially supported.

Conclusion

Stephen Walt argues that no single source of threat can be deemed most important in advance—all four factors likely contribute to alignment behavior.[115] The analysis in this study shows that, aside from geographical proximity, the other three threat variables generally reflect alignment behavior. However, BoT's predictions are only partially supported. At the aggregate level, most Southeast Asian countries exhibit limited alignment with the US, rather than the tight alignment the theory suggests. Only Thailand and the Philippines meet the criteria for tight alignment, marked by formal treaties or deep security cooperation.

A closer look at each variable reveals mixed support for BoT. On aggregate power, most Southeast Asian countries pursued limited alignment with the US despite China's rising influence. Proximity showed little correlation, as countries closest to China did not exhibit stronger alignment. However, China's naval superiority appears to influence alignment behavior, with most potentially affected countries engaging in limited alignment—except for the Philippines. In terms of aggressive intention, countries with territorial disputes, especially in the South China Sea, tend to align with the US, though mostly on a limited basis. Vietnam, despite high threat exposure, remains only a limited partner, while Thailand, which faces minimal direct threat, maintains a tight alignment—both complicating BoT's predictions. In sum, despite these inconsistencies, this study does not reject BoT outright. Most Southeast Asian countries, though aligning only in limited ways and not exclusively with the US, still lean toward Washington amid China's growing power and perceived threats. These findings raise further questions for future research. While Southeast Asian countries appear to perceive China as a threat—evident in their tendency to align, albeit limitedly, with the US—the puzzle is why they stop short of tight alignment. This points to the influence of additional factors. Although China is seen as a threat, Southeast Asian countries may view it as too economically or strategically significant to jeopardize their ties.

Another key implication of this study concerns the tight alignment of the Philippines and Thailand with the US. Although both alliances were established before 2000, it is difficult to argue that China's growing power and assertiveness play no role in sustaining them. Still, the early origins of these alliances suggest that China is not the sole driver—especially when contrasted with the limited alignment of other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, despite also being targeted for US engagement. This raises an important question: What sets Thailand and the Philippines apart? Could it be historical ties, ideological alignment, or other factors? While BoT still offers some explanatory power, these findings highlight its limits. Future research is needed to further test and refine the theory to better capture the complexity of alignment behavior in international politics.

Lastly, this study acknowledges its limitations, particularly the lack of quantified uncertainty in its findings. Future research could address this by applying statistical models with refined measurements to better capture key variables—such as combining geographical proximity and barriers, or measuring aggressive intention more precisely. Such efforts would deepen our understanding of alignment behavior. Nonetheless, the findings presented here offer a valuable starting point for more robust future studies.

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[115] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 26.

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