

Beijing vs. Washington: The Battle for Southeast Asia. “Free Trade” and US Economic Hegemony

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The Strait Times published an opinion piece by the London-based Rob Edens. Wishfully titled, “[South-east Asia fast becoming unfriendly territory for China](#),” it attempts to portray Southeast Asia as increasingly pivoting West toward Washington, coincidentally just as Washington was “pivoting” East toward Asia.

Edens’ attempts to outline Beijing and Washington’s respective strategies in the region by stating:

On the one hand, China’s “One Belt One Road” initiative, for instance, is focused on physical infrastructure; improving road, rail and air networks overland between neighbouring states as a means to oil the cogs of commerce and bring new customers into China’s fold. On the other hand, the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) maintains a discourse of freer trade in the Pacific region, opening up new markets overseas by relaxing tariffs and increasing various standards relating to the process of manufacture.

Lost on Edens appears to be the fact that physical infrastructure built beyond China’s borders becomes a long-term asset for those who cooperate in its construction, while Western “free trade” is in all reality, submission to foreign economic hegemony. Many aspects of “free trade” agreements are in fact, stripped verbatim from treaties that defined Colonial Europe and its subjugation of Southeast Asia.

“Free Trade” is Code for Economic Hegemony

Edens seems to believe that “free trade” is a viable incentive to lure Southeast Asia away from China. However, upon historical examination, it is more a means to coerce it away.

Thailand in the 1800’s, then the Kingdom of Siam, was surrounded on all sides by colonized nations. Gunboats would eventually turn up off the coast of Siam’s capital and the Kingdom made to concede to [the British 1855 Bowring Treaty](#). Upon examining these terms imposed via “gunboat policy,” how many of them echo verbatim the terms found among modern “free trade” economic liberalization?

1. Siam granted extraterritoriality to British subjects.
2. British could trade freely in all seaports and reside permanently in Bangkok.
3. British could buy and rent property in Bangkok.
4. British subjects could travel freely in the interior with passes provided by the consul.
5. Import and export duties were capped at 3%, except the duty-free opium and

bullion.

6. British merchants were to be allowed to buy and sell directly with individual Siamese.

Compared to modern day examples of “free trade,” and in Iraq’s case, free trade imposed once again by the barrel of a gun, it is nearly impossible to distinguish any difference.

The Economist would enthusiastically enumerate the conditions of “economic liberalization” imposed upon Iraq in the wake of the 2003 US invasion in a piece titled “[Let’s all go to the yard sale: If it all works out, Iraq will be a capitalist’s dream.](#)” They are as follows:

1. 100% ownership of Iraqi assets.
2. Full repatriation of profits.
3. Equal legal standing with local firms.
4. Foreign banks allowed to operate or buy into local banks.
5. Income and corporate taxes capped at 15%.
6. Universal tariffs slashed to 5%.

Iraq is a perfect modern day example of a nation overrun by brute force and made to concede to an entire restructuring of its economy, giving foreign powers not only access to their natural resources, markets, and population, but uncontested domination over them as well. It was absolute subjugation, both militarily and economically. It was modern day conquest. And it is something Washington seeks to repeat elsewhere, including Southeast Asia.

It’s America’s “Island Dispute” with China, Not Southeast Asia’s

Edens would continue claiming:

However, regional attitudes are changing, largely as a result of the bullish stance China has taken in recent years over territorial disputes. The nations of South-east Asia are increasingly reluctant to accept any threats to their sovereignty in the form of Beijing’s repeated incursions into their exclusive economic zones.

However, it should be noted that the US itself in its own policy papers has noted that these “disputes” are being intentionally provoked by Washington itself, often with ambassadors and envoys repeatedly finding themselves attempting to pressure nations across Southeast Asia to “join” the dispute. The goal of using Southeast Asia as a collective Western-dominated bloc to encircle and contain China with has been stated US policy since the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971.

A relatively recent example of this can be seen when US Ambassador to Thailand Glyn Davies berated the Thai government for not “adding its voice” to calls for China to “peacefully resolve conflicts over its appropriation of islands in the South China Sea.” Similar messages and accompanying political and economic threats, have been delivered to other capitals across Southeast Asia.

Edens doesn’t seem to understand that what he is watching is a dispute created by Washington, and a confrontational reaction from across Southeast Asia extorted out of each

respective nation by Washington.

Edens mentions the Philippines and their legal dispute with China brought before the Hague. He fails to mention that the legal team representing the Philippines is in fact headed by Washington-based law firm Foley Hoag and that their representative is in fact an American.

The New York Times would reveal this in their report, "[In Victory for Philippines, Hague Court to Hear Dispute Over South China Sea](#)," as well as reveal one of the "incentives" likely being used to encourage the Philippines to continue participating in what is mainly Washington's confrontation with Beijing:

The Philippines — represented by an American lawyer, Paul Reichler, of the Washington law firm Foley Hoag — contends that it has the right to exploit oil and gas in waters in a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone extending from territory that it claims in the South China Sea.

Dangling the spoils of victory over the government in Manila – in this case, oil – along with less public threats over what will happen if Manila does not cooperate, is likely what has caused the Philippines to squander diplomatic currency with Beijing, money in unnecessary military expenditures, and both time and energy that could be better spent invested in its own future in Asia Pacific, rather than Washington's.

Nations Not Cooperating Will Suffer Washington's Wrath

Edens then turns his attention toward Thailand, claiming:

In the grip of a military junta since last year, the former Land of Smiles is slowly being turned into some southern version of a North Korea.

One might forgive the London-based writer for thinking so, apparently having never set foot in Thailand before or after the coup, and apparently only reading what he sees in the British papers.

In reality, up to and including the day before the coup, US-backed dictator Thaksin Shinawatra was mass murdering his opponents in the streets with a paramilitary political front known as the "red shirts," all while building a hereditary dictatorship that saw not only himself as prime minister, but also his brother-in-law and sister as well.

More relevant is the fact that during Shinawatra's decade plus grip on power, he capitulated to every demand made by Washington, including sending troops to Iraq, hosting the CIA's abhorrent rendition program, and attempting to illegally pass a US-Thai free trade agreement without parliamentary approval.

Since Shinawatra's ouster from power in 2006, and more recently his sister's ouster from power in 2014, he and his political dynasty have received unswerving support from the West, seeking to undermine Thailand's existing political institutions, and reinstall the Shinawatras back into power.

These facts are never mentioned by Edens, nor is it explained how Thailand is being turned into "North Korea" by the military simply for intervening and putting a stop to obvious

abuses of both power and human rights, or subsequently arresting members of this political group – a group that has employed terrorism and pursued open, armed insurrection.

Edens is making it clear, intentionally or not, that nations failing to heed the demands of Washington will be isolated and undermined, rhetorically, politically, economically, and even militarily, just as it is doing to China.

China Seeks Collaborators, Washington Seeks Colonies

Edens claims that Thailand has become a “prime breeding ground for Chinese foreign policy.” In some respects that is true. Thailand seeks a regional partner, not a foreign master. China has not placed any preconditions on Thailand regarding its internal politics in exchange for regional political and military cooperation or joint economic expansion.

In reality, it is likely Southeast Asia collectively prefers this arrangement with Beijing, over the preconditions and client regime status mandated by Washington. What Edens and others in the West attempt to hold up as “evidence” of growing tension in Southeast Asia is more likely the result of backdoor meetings and insinuated threats prodding weaker capitals in the region continuously toward wider confrontation with China. However, none of this is sustainable.

Even as Edens and others hold up evidence that their strategy of tension is working, those on the ground in Southeast Asia can see the waning influence of the West, increasing awareness of the poorly hidden coercion used by the West to cling to the influence it has remaining, and the slow and steady influence of China.

China is a regional neighbor, unlike Washington who attempts to impose its agenda from the other side of the planet. China benefits from a stronger Asia, while Washington sees any rising power or region as a threat that must be controlled, and failing that, divided and destroyed.

It would be wrong to say the rest of Asia is not watching China’s rise with caution. It would also be wrong to say that China does not possess the potential to some day equal or exceed the unwarranted power and influence Washington has wielded in the region. But it would be equally wrong to say that Asia prefers very real Western subjugation to a potential Chinese variety. It seeks a multipolar region where all nations rise together and a balance of power and a respect for national sovereignty is maintained. That is a balance collaboration with the West simply will not yield.

So despite Edens optimistically claiming the “ball” is “squarely in Washington’s court,” the truth is after centuries of the West using and abusing Asia, Asia now is using the West, to raise itself up before pushing it out.

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