

Community of Shared Future - China's Strategy to Shape Southeast Asian Order

Ho Quoc Phu, MA

Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes how China utilizes its "Community of Shared Future" initiative as a strategic tool to reshape the Southeast Asian order in order to advance its national interests and consolidate its regional leadership role. Based on an overview of international research works and an analysis of foreign policy, the article clarifies the core contents of the initiative, its implementation methods in Southeast Asia, and assesses its impact on the regional power structure. The research findings indicate that China is gradually promoting a regional order through economic cooperation, infrastructure investment, and the establishment of bilateral cooperation mechanisms. The article proposes several recommendations for ASEAN countries, especially Vietnam, in responding to this shifting regional order.

Keywords: *community of shared future, China, regional order*

I. Introduction

China's rise in the 21st century is closely tied to the expansion of its global influence and its ambition to reshape the international order in ways that align with its strategic interests. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China's foreign policy has become more proactive, flexibly combining elements of hard power, soft power, and international institutions to promote its central role in global governance [4]. In the context of increasing geo-strategic competition, China advocates for a "post-American" model of international order, in which it plays a leading role [3].

The "Community of Shared Future" initiative was conceived within that context, serving as an ideological framework to redefine the global power structure in a way more compatible with China's interests and governance model. Far beyond rhetorical expression, this initiative is being materialized through concrete tools such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), thereby gradually shaping new cooperation norms and minimizing the influence of traditional Western institutions [10].

Southeast Asia plays a crucial role in the implementation of this initiative, not only due to its geo-strategic position but also because of its high economic connectivity and ASEAN's central role in the regional structure. This is also a region of competition for direct influence between China and the United States, making the shaping of the order a strategic priority for Beijing [8]. On that basis, this study poses the central question: How does China use the "Community of Shared Future" initiative to shape the regional order in Southeast Asia? The objective is to analyze the content, tools, and strategic impacts of this policy, thereby suggesting theoretical and practical issues within the evolving regional power structure.

II. Literature Review

In the study of China's foreign strategy and the regional order in Southeast Asia, international scholarly works can be broadly categorized into three main approaches: (i) Theoretical approaches to regional order and structural power, (ii) Practical policy approaches to China through major initiatives, and (iii) critical approaches regarding the limitations and strategic consequences of this policy. Each approach provides an important academic foundation for clarifying how China implements its "Community of Shared Future" initiative in Southeast Asia as a tool to shape a new regional order.

Firstly, the body of work grounded in theories of regional order and structural power provides the conceptual foundation for this research. A prominent example is Feng Zhang's "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or Pre-hegemonic" [10], where the author analyzes the differences between the Western-style international order and China's vision of a "post-hegemonic order" characterized by Chinese civilization. Similarly, Baogang He, in "The Chinese World Order: Traditional Chinese Foreign Relations" [5], explores historical factors and Confucian thought in the creation of the "Tianxia" order model - China is the center and surrounding nations are "modern vassals". These studies suggest that the "Community of Shared Future" initiative is not only strategic but also a product of the long-term ideological foundation within Chinese political culture.

Secondly, the body of work approaching practical policy focuses on analyzing the specific tools China uses to promote its regional influence. In Nadège Rolland's "China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative" [7], the BRI is viewed as the central axis of a strategy to reshape the power structure in Eurasia and Southeast Asia through infrastructure investment, financial connectivity, and bilateral cooperation mechanisms. William A. Callahan's work, "China's 'Asia Dream: The Belt and Road Initiative and the New Regional Order,'" also demonstrates how the BRI is integrated into a broader vision of a "new Asian order," where China replaces the traditional leadership position of the United States. These analyses help clarify the relationship between the "Community of Shared Future" and the BRI as two parallel strategic pillars.

Thirdly, critical approaches in research emphasize the limitations and unintended consequences of China's order-shaping policies. Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, in "The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress", argued about the unreliability of Chinese foreign policy. More recently, Johnston (2019), in "The Failures of China's Soft Power" [6], pointed out skeptical and even counterproductive reactions from neighboring countries when China attempted to impose influence through bilateral mechanisms and conditional aid packages (pp. 114-125). Similarly, research by John Wong and Sarah Chan highlights the contradiction between the discourse of a "Community of Shared Future" and China's hardline interests in the South China Sea, which has led to divisions within ASEAN [9]. Overall, these approaches not only help establish the theoretical foundation and analytical framework for this study but also clarify the multi-layered and complex manner in which China implements the "Community of Shared Future" initiative as a tool to restructure the Southeast Asian regional order in its favor. They provide a solid academic foundation for analyzing the content, tools, and strategic impacts of this initiative in the context of increasing power competition in the region.

III. Research Methodology

This article employs three primary research methods: qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, and strategic comparison. The combination of these methods allows for a comprehensive approach to the research phenomenon, from China's ideological foundations to its specific policy behaviors in Southeast Asia.

First, qualitative content analysis is applied to process and decode key Chinese policy documents, including political reports from Party Congresses, speeches by General Secretary Xi Jinping, China-ASEAN joint statements, and regional cooperation agreements. This method helps identify core themes, theoretical models, and policy instruments that China utilizes in promoting the "Community of Shared Future" initiative. It provides a crucial foundation for understanding the internal logic of the policy and the evolution of China's approach toward the region.

In addition, discourse analysis is employed to uncover the deeper meanings of key concepts such as "Community of Shared Future," "regional order," and "common development" found in Chinese political documents, speeches, and official media. This method not only clarifies China's discursive strategy in legitimizing its initiative but also helps decode how Beijing seeks to influence the perceptions of Southeast Asian countries through a standardized and strategically disseminated language system.

Finally, strategic comparison is applied to contrast China's "Community of Shared Future" policy with the corresponding approaches of other major powers, such as the United States (Indo-Pacific Strategy), Japan (Free and Open Indo-Pacific – FOIP), and the European Union (Global Gateway). The purpose of this method is to highlight the differences in how major powers aim to shape the regional order, thereby more clearly identifying China's specific role and its power-shaping trends in Southeast Asia. The combination of these three methods allows the article to achieve a systematic, multi-dimensional perspective that reflects the complexity of current regional influence competition.

IV. Research Findings

4.1. The Strategic Content of the “Community of Shared Future”

The “Community of Shared Future” initiative is a key component of China’s new strategic thinking under Xi Jinping, reflecting a fusion of traditional ideological foundations and modern reformist orientations. Theoretically, this initiative is built upon the connection between the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the legacy of traditional political thought - particularly the “Tianxia” model, which regards China as the center of a harmonious and orderly system. Feng Zhang argues that the order China pursues is not a rigid replacement of Western hegemony but rather a cooperative “post-hegemonic” order, in which China plays a leading role in international norms and ethics [10]. This approach suggests that China seeks to reshape the global structure based on its own values, rather than integrating into a Western-established order.

Moreover, the “Community of Shared Future” carries a dual strategic objective: both consolidate China’s leadership role in the region and undermining the long-term influence of the United States. On the positive side, China emphasizes the aspect of “common development and shared benefits” as a tool to attract Southeast Asian countries, positioning itself as a responsible and non-confrontational development partner. According to William A. Callahan, the initiative is not merely a discourse about the region’s future but also a means to “soften” hard power relations, helping China reposition itself within a rapidly changing regional order [1]. However, this objective runs alongside a strategy to gradually reduce the dependence of regional countries on U.S. institutions and security patronage, particularly through establishing bilateral cooperation mechanisms with China instead of relying on ASEAN or U.S.-backed multilateral institutions [3].

The intertwining of cooperative orientation and strategic ambition makes the “Community of Shared Future” both an idealistic initiative and a tool for restructuring the order in a way that benefits China. Rather than relying on military power as the central instrument like traditional superpowers, China implements this initiative through soft power, economic-financial mechanisms, and infrastructure investment programs - most notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Nadège Rolland observes that the BRI and the “Community of Shared Future” are two synchronized branches of the same strategy aimed at recreating the Eurasian geo-economic and geopolitical space, with China as the “connecting hub” [7]. Thus, the strategic content of this initiative clearly reflects China’s ambition to be a creator, rather than merely a participant, in shaping the Southeast Asian regional order.

4.2. Implementation Tools in Southeast Asia

One of the key tools China uses to implement the “Community of Shared Future” initiative in Southeast Asia is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which serves as the material foundation for realizing Beijing’s strategic vision. Through large-scale investments in infrastructure, energy, logistics, and finance, China not only promotes economic dependency among countries in the region but also gradually establishes a structurally influential network. Nadège Rolland describes the BRI as the “material manifestation” of the ambition to reshape the Eurasian geo-economic space with China at the center [7]. Projects such as the Laos-China railway, the Kyaukpyu port (Myanmar), and the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (Cambodia) exemplify the integration of developmental infrastructure and strategic orientation, where economic factors are used as instruments of sophisticated geopolitical power.

In addition to material initiatives, China actively employs regional forums and political-academic cooperation mechanisms as means to spread its “normative power.” Through forums like the China-ASEAN Forum, the Belt and Road Initiative Forum, and academic-policy conferences, China not only promotes concepts such as “win-win development” and “South-South cooperation” but also creates alternative dialogue spaces to Western-led institutions. W. Callahan argues that China is constructing a “new regional imaginary,” in which China-influenced values gradually replace universal Western principles such as liberal democracy and market competition [1]. Through these efforts, China seeks to redefine the “regional order” not only materially but also in terms of ideas and perceptions.

Finally, a notable feature of China’s implementation of the initiative in Southeast Asia is its preference for bilateral mechanisms over multilateral cooperation, especially in relations with ASEAN member states. Promoting direct cooperation with individual countries - such as Cambodia, Laos, or more recently, the Philippines - allows China to increase its influence without being constrained by ASEAN’s consensus-based decision-making. Carlyle A. Thayer points out that this “divide-and-conquer” strategy undermines ASEAN’s internal solidarity, thereby weakening its ability to maintain centrality in shaping the regional structure [8]. This approach not only provides China with greater flexibility in negotiations and in shaping its interests, but also creates a hierarchical dynamic within ASEAN, providing favorable conditions for the implementation of the “Community of Shared Future” initiative according to China’s orientation.

4.3. Impacts on the Regional Order

China's implementation of the "Community of Shared Future" initiative in Southeast Asia is generating structural shifts in the regional order - most notably, toward a hierarchized power structure in which China ascends to a central position, while ASEAN countries are drawn into uneven dependencies. Through bilateral cooperation mechanisms, Beijing is reconfiguring the regional connectivity network based on levels of participation in China-led economic and financial projects, thereby eroding the consensus-based principle that has traditionally been the foundation of ASEAN. The growing divergence of interests among ASEAN members - particularly in the South China Sea dispute - is increasingly exacerbated by Chinese influence and pressure. As a result, the regional order is becoming more asymmetric, where smaller states are prone to a form of "conditional dependency," undermining ASEAN's neutrality and autonomy as a collective entity.

In addition to the stratification of power, the competition between two order models - one led by China and the other by the United States - is becoming increasingly pronounced, deepening the confrontational nature of the regional structure. While the United States and its allies promote a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) model emphasizing democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation, China pursues the "Community of Shared Future" initiative with a focus on economic cooperation, political stability, and non-interference in internal affairs. China is pursuing a long-term strategy to gradually replace U.S. influence through parallel institutions that are economically attractive but carry fewer institutional constraints. This creates a strategic "gray area" where Southeast Asian nations are forced to re-evaluate their positions between two polarizing power orbits.

A new type of regional order is gradually taking shape, characterized by a "cooperation-dependent order," in which power is no longer defined primarily by military strength but rather through networks of financial, infrastructural, and institutional connectivity. China, as the largest financier of development projects in the region, is leveraging structural power to reshape the strategic operating space of ASEAN countries. According to John Wong & Sarah Chan, this form of power may be more sustainable than traditional coercive power because it creates an ecosystem of interdependence, in which China holds an irreplaceable role in the regional value chain and development [9]. In this context, the regional order is no longer characterized by the strategic balance it once had, but is increasingly dominated by a web of dependencies established by China - an unfolding process that is quiet yet profound and has the potential to shape Southeast Asia's power structure in a lasting way throughout the 21st century.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

In its rise to becoming a leading power, China has sought not only to expand its economic and military influence but also actively working to reshape the regional power structure through the "Community of Shared Future" initiative. This initiative reflects a new strategic mindset from China: rather than direct confrontation or coercive imposition, China combines hard power (investment, infrastructure), soft power (political discourse, development values), and institutional power (establishment of bilateral and regional cooperation mechanisms). This integrated approach allows China to gradually restructure the Southeast Asian regional order in ways that serve its interests, while simultaneously diminishing the traditional influence of external powers such as the United States and Japan.

The impact of this strategy on the regional order is multi-layered and increasingly evident. On one hand, it deepens the economic and financial dependencies of Southeast Asian countries on China-led connectivity networks. On the other, it causes power stratification within the region, weakening ASEAN's consensus and central role. At the same time, the parallel existence and competition between different models of order - namely, the "Community of Shared Future" and the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) - are intensifying the polarization of Southeast Asia's geostrategic landscape. This indicates that the regional order is shifting from a state of power balance to one shaped by conditional cooperation, with China playing a pivotal role.

From both academic and policy perspectives, it can be asserted that the "Community of Shared Future" initiative is not merely a foreign policy tool, but also an expression of China's long-term and strategic order-building mindset in the 21st century. This represents a non-traditional approach - not relying primarily on military power - but achieving significant effectiveness thanks to its sustainability and adaptability to each target nation. This study contributes to clarifying how China shapes the Southeast Asian regional order through non-confrontational instruments, while simultaneously highlighting the urgent need for regional countries to enhance institutional capacity, strengthen internal cohesion, and develop smart adaptive strategies within an increasingly complex strategic competitive environment.

5.2. Recommendations

Given China's rapid rise and the ongoing reshaping of the Southeast Asian regional order through the "Community of Shared Future" initiative, an urgent strategic priority is to reinforce ASEAN's centrality to safeguard the regional power balance. To achieve this, ASEAN must promote internal connectivity, enhance strategic consensus, and boost collective action capacity. The core recommendation is to reaffirm the principle of ASEAN consensus based on long-term interests, while improving coordination effectiveness across economic, security, and political domains. The establishment and timely finalization of a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea is a crucial step to institutionalize ASEAN's role in managing regional issues. To effectively implement these measures, ASEAN should accelerate the ASEAN Connectivity 2025 Initiative, establish regional policy research centers capable of providing strategic advice, and strengthen internal dialogue to maintain a unified stance in interactions with external initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the "Community of Shared Future."

For Vietnam, the key requirement is to enhance strategic adaptability in the context of increasingly deep and complex great power competition. Based on a steadfast independent and self-reliant foreign policy, Vietnam needs to pursue a proactive, flexible strategy that diversifies its partnerships, while playing an active role in shaping regional norms. Maintaining stable, substantive, and equitable cooperative relations with China should proceed in parallel with expanding strategic ties with the United States, Japan, India, the European Union, and other potential partners. Implementation measures include strengthening strategic analysis capacity by developing policy research centers (think tanks), promoting the role of academic institutions in foreign policy advisory processes, establishing in-depth bilateral and multilateral dialogue channels, and actively participating in regional forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) to foster balanced and sustainable cooperation initiatives.

From an academic and policy-making perspective, in-depth research is needed to clarify the interactive relationships among the three key strategic tools China is deploying: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the political-ideological "Community of Shared Future" initiative. The aim is to fully identify how China integrates economic, institutional, and discursive tools to create a coherent and systematic regional order. Research should focus on the coordination mechanisms among these three components, the degree of influence on each ASEAN member state, and appropriate response strategies. As for solutions, it's crucial to establish interdisciplinary research groups at strategic institutes, universities, and public policy centers; foster international academic cooperation to share data and research methods; and integrate research findings into Vietnam's policymaking process and within ASEAN's strategic coordination framework. This forms a crucial foundation for the region to develop proactive policy responses, based on solid academic knowledge and a long-term vision.

REFERENCES

1. William A. Callahan (2018), China's "Asia Dream": *The Belt Road Initiative and the new regional order*, Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, London, pp. 226-243.
2. Peter Cai (2017), *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Lowy Institute, Sydney, pp. 1-24.
3. Rush Doshi (2021), *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 65-110.
4. Elizabeth Economy (2018), *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 157-180.
5. Baogang He (2022), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional Chinese Foreign Relations*, Routledge, London, pp. 87-104.
6. Alastair Iain Johnston (2019), *The Failures of China's Soft Power*, Foreign Affairs, New York, pp. 114-125.
7. Nadège Rolland (2017), *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Washington D.C., pp. 1-56.
8. Carlyle A. Thayer (2019), *China's Strategy in Southeast Asia: The Case of Cambodia and Laos*, Contemporary Southeast Asia, Singapore, pp. 145-166.
9. John Wong & Sarah Chan (2020), *China's Engagement in Southeast Asia: Soft Power and Hard Interests*, RSIS Working Papers, Singapore, pp. 10-32.
10. Feng Zhang (2021), *Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or Pre-hegemonic?*, *International Affairs*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 23-41.