

Exploring the Feasibility of the Taking Sides Strategy in Southeast Asian Countries -- Malaysia's Response to the US-China Conflict as an Example



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ABSTRACT: Although it has been widely accepted in international relations discourse that Southeast Asian states generally adopt hedging strategies when faced with conflicts from external powers, however, this paper argues that when the intensity of confrontation and conflict between major powers exceeds the capacity threshold of small states, they tend to adopt either direct or ambiguous taking sides strategies in order to maintain their security by actively adhering to or being forced to follow a major power. According to Robert Putnam's two-level games theory, leadership characteristics, capability threshold, state trust, structural pressure and system stability are the main factors that influence whether a small Southeast Asian country adopts a strategy of taking a side. Malaysia, for example, has adopted either direct or ambiguous taking sides strategies in response to the Sino-US conflict. By siding ambiguously with China or the US at different times, Malaysia has effectively consolidated its economic cooperation with major powers such as China and the US and gained actual economic benefits, reducing the risks and uncertainties posed to Malaysia by the great power game.

KEYWORDS: taking sides strategy, hedging strategy, big power conflict, small power response, two-level games theory, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

For other non-conflicted states in the international political system, how to choose their own position and side when two or more states are in conflict becomes a crucial issue. In international relations (IR), competition and conflict between states are inevitable political phenomena in international politics. The repercussions of violent conflicts and collisions between these countries greatly threaten and influence the interests of other small and medium-sized countries and pose great hazards to their security, particularly when the two or more countries involved are all major ones. Hence, in order to deal with such competitions and confrontations between large powers and to better safeguard their own security and interests from threats and infringements, small and medium-sized countries in international relations need to think carefully about what strategy to pursue. In response to rivalry from big powers, these nations have evolved to choose the "taking sides" strategy rationally and appropriately. The "taking sides" approach does not appear to be the best option for many small countries in Southeast Asia when dealing with big power conflicts because it is challenging for Southeast Asian nations to pick a particular side in the big power game because of the relatively close ties brought on by the compound interdependence between nations. To mitigate the risks caused by significant power struggles, they frequently employ "balancing" or "hedging." Because of its unique geographic location and complex international environment, Southeast Asia is a conflict-prone and resource-intensive region in international politics. Many countries rely on Southeast Asia's location and resources to develop their import and export trade and foreign economies, which is why it has been extensively discussed and noted by scholars of international relations.

While studying the confrontation between powers in Southeast Asia, scholars have typically focused on two views, according to a literature review. The first viewpoint is founded on the well-established "balancing" method. The so-called "balancing" strategy describes how Southeast Asian nations support or disagree with the foreign policies of powerful nations in order to formulate their own reactions to great power competition. From a realism standpoint, academics have offered two contrasting interpretations on the "balancing" technique. Realists like John Mearsheimer (2014) stresses that as China becomes more powerful, it will challenge the US's right to be the world's leader. This would lead to a violent struggle between the US and China, with Southeast Asian nations eventually joining the US to resist China's growth. The opposing viewpoint is anti-realist, like that of

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Samuel Huntington (1996), who contends that the supremacy and maintenance of Chinese tribute civilization in East Asian culture is why so many Southeast Asian nations have decided to endure and advance in the face of China's growth. The second viewpoint originates from a hedging tactic. A single "balancing" strategy does not appear to be able to adequately explain the external strategies of all countries in international relations as international politics becomes more complex. This is especially true when some small and medium-sized countries adopt a hazy stance between balancing and follow in order to protect their own security and interests in the face of the great powers. To categorize these instruments as "hedging" methods, some academics have established the idea of "hedging" in finance. The prevalent perspective on the term "hedging," however, bases its meaning on that of finance and suggests a different one for use in international relations, highlighting that it is more of a weapon for tiny governments facing out against powerful nations. Hedging is a relatively independent policy and method of avoiding being forced to take sides and maintaining relative independence in order to avoid the impact and harm to small countries' national interests caused by the great powers' fierce competition in the face of the uncertainty and instability caused by the rise of the great powers (Kuik,2008). Nonetheless, other academics have varied perspectives on "hedging" because of the process. Some scholars investigate the use of hedging methods in Southeast Asia from a risk viewpoint and suggests two logics: "risk offsetting" and "risk transformation" (Shi,2016). Wang Yuzhang (2021), for instance, claims that hedging is a delayed-following strategy. He argues that hedging strategy is a type of strategic behavior used by small and medium-sized strategic players to transform and offset risks based on a variety of difficulties and their own vulnerability. The factors and tools that affect how tiny governments deploy "hedging methods" outside have also been discussed by certain academics. In contrast to other researchers, they have suggested five tools for implementing hedging strategies: engagement, restraint, prevention, containment, and checks and balances (Wang,2018; Yang,2020). Yang (2020) also claims that structural pressures and national capabilities are the primary factors influencing the implementation of hedging strategies. The Australian National University's Evelyn Goh is a representative foreign expert on "hedging strategy," and her main point of view on "hedging" is that the basic goal of "hedging" is for a nation to take a number of steps to avoid picking one side over the other too early in the great power conflict, keeping a reasonably neutral stance in the process. She also outlines three "hedging" strategies used in Southeast Asia. The first is a non-directive or soft balance, focusing on collaboration with other powers like the US as a deterrent to the growing expansion of Chinese power in the region; the second is the hope that Chinese leaders will act more in accordance with inherent international principles when drafting China's foreign strategy, avoiding the imposition of more Chinese power on international cooperation and countering offensive Chinese dominance with a constructive hive mind(Goh,2016). On the other hand, is of the opinion that "hedging" is primarily used by Southeast Asian nations to avoid Chinese hegemony, US withdrawal from the region, and an unstable regional order. Goh contends that "hedging" in Southeast Asia is based on the interaction and linkage between these three factors or checks and balances. Wu's research is more concerned with the threat or significant challenge posed by China's rapid expansion than with the need for minor nations to decide which side to support in the face of rivalry between superpowers. Cheng Chwee Kuik, a renowned Malaysian expert in the subject of "hedging," is another notable researcher. He contends that Malaysia's "hedging strategy" is not a reaction to China's rise but rather a reflection of the Malaysian political elite's assessment of whether China's ascent represents a threat or an opportunity for the governing class. In order to avoid five outcomes—the risk of becoming involved in Sino-US conflicts, the uncertainty of long-term US commitments, the risk of alienating recent rising powers, the risk of dependence on the dominant power, and the deterioration of domestic authority—Malaysia should instead develop a comprehensive partnership with China while reducing its military reliance on the US (Kuik,2008; Kuik,2016). Goh 's study considers the growth of great powers as an important indicator of whether it is a threat or an opportunity, whereas Kuik's view is more from the standpoint of the domestic governing elite.

However, some academics have used the term "balanced diplomacy" in a more general sense to define the methods and tools required for some Southeast Asian states to deal with the development of big powers as well as the "hedging" strategy. Scholars of international relations have concentrated more on studies of "balanced diplomacy" by minor governments, such as those in Southeast Asia or Central Asia, or on "balanced diplomacy" dominated by a single state. The effectiveness of "balanced diplomacy" is also emphasized, highlighting the degree to which the presence of ongoing international events or interstate rivalries can positively impact the application of "balanced diplomacy" by minor governments. The following categories can be used to categorize the mainstream viewpoints:

One school of thought, some scholars contend that terminology such as "great power," "balanced," and "diplomacy" must be defined in order to distinguish it from "balanced" and "controlled" diplomacy. However, they underline that protecting national interests is the primary goal of "balanced diplomacy" for tiny states, and they suggest four the elemental approach, systemic determinism, the wide demand perspective, and the survival and development perspective are the key study philosophies (Jin&Sun, 2017). According to Li (2016), there are numerous ways to implement the "balance of great power diplomacy" for tiny states,

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including balances, following, hedging.

The second category is supported by academics like Qie Qingliang, who contends that the dynamic balance of major powers in a given area—a relative dynamic balance that is always evolving and changing over time—is the essence of the balance of power. (Qie,2005; Shekhar,2012)

The third classification is based on academics like Wang Chuanjian, who proposed the concepts of "symmetrical balance" and "asymmetrical balance" under "balanced diplomacy of great powers" and used the seesaw principle to examine the two dynamic balances of "dominant factors" and "additive factors" (Wang&Zhang,2021).

The fourth type is dominated by academics like Wang Shuchun and Wang Hongchun(2016) who emphasize the role of the international system in influencing state behavior from a theoretical and practical point of view, further examining the nature and characteristics of sub-systems or regional systems within the state system and analyzing the differences between the multilateral and bilateral alliance systems under the influence of geopolitical trends.

In conclusion, it is widely believed by scholars of international relations that Southeast Asian nations frequently adopt hedging strategies as a necessary reaction to the rise of great powers and conflicts, while the strategy of taking sides is not thought to be applicable to the current state of international politics, and relatively little research has been done in this area. In light of Robert Putnam's two-level game theory, the research question of this paper is whether Southeast Asian nations will use the strategy of taking sides in order to resolve great power disputes. Additionally, it explores and analyzes potential influences on this strategy in Southeast Asian nations.

2. DIFFERENT MODELS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONS BETWEEN SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES AND MAJOR POWERS

The Southeast Asian nations have been working and developing towards integration since 1967, when Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand founded the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Bangkok, and since 1976, when ASEAN was established, in the hopes of establishing a reliable management mechanism to coordinate the external policies and directions of the member states. Nonetheless, because states are logical actors in international politics, they will choose the best strategies to advance their own interests. There are three distinct models, including the friendly and supportive type, the conflictive and contradictive type, and the cooperative and pragmatic type, but due to each country's unique historical growth and national conditions, the specific performance in handling big power disputes is also diverse (Zhang,2020).

2.1 Friendly and supportive

When dealing with large powers, these nations are more likely to support one another. They are also more likely to take a major power's side and adopt that power's mindset as their own position and focus while negotiating and expressing their opinions on crucial international issues. Since China has provided significant economic and financial support to Burma, Laos, and Cambodia during both their historical development and the establishment of their modern economies, these nations—including Burma, Laos, and Cambodia—have generally more favorable and trusting attitudes toward China than other Southeast Asian nations. Particularly, a sizable number of Chinese multinational corporations have entered the countries and assisted in enhancing the infrastructure requirements for their economic development, so boosting the economies of these nations. Also, China has frequently stated that it stands with these nations fully in the international arena, and this political mutual trust has assisted them in building a foundation for beneficial and cooperative relations with China.

2.2 Conflictive and contradictive

The vast disparity between these countries' comprehensive power and that of the major powers has resulted in certain structural contradictions between them and the major powers, which will always prevent these countries from putting aside their concerns about the rise of major powers, directly affecting their practical cooperation with the major powers. As a result, these countries are more cautious and concerned when developing relations with the major powers. The continuance of contradictions may potentially result in direct conflict and confrontation between the two countries as well as an unstable foundation for the development of ties with major powers. The two most significant Southeast Asian nations in this group are Vietnam and the Philippines. Due to direct disputes with China over territory disputes in the South China Sea, which resulted in discussions and even direct armed battles with China, both Vietnam and the Philippines are very circumspect and conservative in their interactions with China. This fundamental contradiction has made it so that Vietnam and the Philippines will not readily side with China in particular international negotiations but will instead follow other powers like the United States or insist on their own positions to express their attitudes and views. Such differences and contradictions have since turned into obstacles and factors affecting the development of these nations as well as China.

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2.3 Cooperative and pragmatic

These nations are characterized by the fact that, despite having some contradictions and differences with major powers, these issues are not the primary barrier to or influence preventing the development of relations with major powers. Instead, these nations give more thought to the benefits and interests that developing relations and cooperation with major powers can provide to themselves, and this has evolved into the primary driving force for their interaction with major powers. Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Brunei make up the majority of these nations. They occasionally have disagreements with China, such as over the South China Sea, but unlike Vietnam or the Philippines, who perceive China differently, these nations do not use coercive measures to engage in direct war with China over the South China Sea. The cooperative and pragmatic nations of Southeast Asia are more cautious not to let the differences between the two nations obstruct the growth of their relations with China and emphasize the significance of real economic collaboration. maximize financial gains.

In short, while dealing with great powers like China, Southeast Asian nations exhibit three distinct patterns of behavior, and these patterns of behavior will also affect their attitudes and positions toward great powers like China.

Table 1 Three patterns of treatment of great powers in Southeast Asian countries

Three models for dealing with great powers	Specific countries
Friendly and supportive	Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar
Conflictive and contradictive	Vietnam, Philippines
Pragmatic and cooperative	Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei

Source: Zhang,2020

3. THE STRATEGY OF "TAKING SIDES" IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO-LEVEL GAME THEORY

Since it is the main method of establishing contacts with other nations, any country's choice of external strategy is crucial to its development plan. Correct implementation can effectively encourage the growth of bilateral ties between the nation and other nations. A badly planned external policy, on the other hand, can result in strained ties with foreign nations or even enmity or violent war between the two sides. The state must therefore carefully evaluate which foreign policy to implement in order to further its objectives. Many academics have examined the decision of a state's foreign policy from many angles in the field of international relations. Instead of analyzing the implications for foreign strategy in terms of domestic politics alone, as scholars of international relations have done in the past, Robert Putnam is keen to observe that there is a link between domestic and international politics and that this link has implications for foreign strategy. Robert Putnam, on the other hand, has studied how foreign strategy is conducted from the perspective of how domestic and international politics interact. He proposed his classic Two-Level Games Theory "powerfully explains how a state's external strategy is influenced by both domestic and international politics.

In Figure 1, Putnan divides the "two-level game theory" into vertical and horizontal levels. Putnan assumes that negotiators on behalf of the state play a two-way game at both the domestic and international levels, with the horizontal level being the level at which negotiators negotiate with representatives of other states to negotiate specific issues at the international level, and with those actors who ratify and implement at the domestic level(Putnan,1988).The first phase of the game and the second phase's full acceptance by the domestic electorate hold the key to a "winning set." Only if the game is well played and accepted by the majority of voters will the negotiations' outcome be noteworthy.

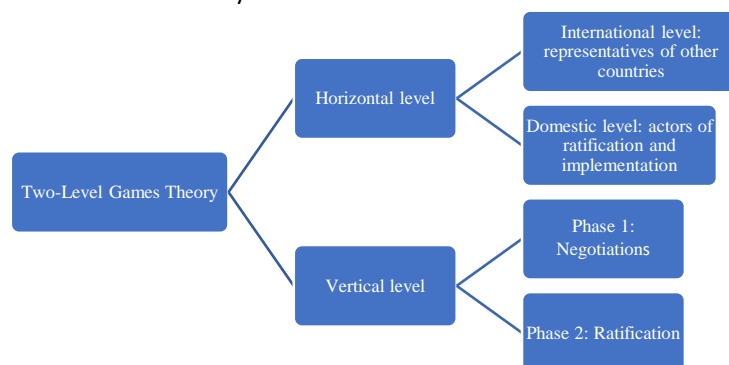


Figure 1. Models for Two-Level Games Theory

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According to the "two-level game theory," as nations formulate their foreign and domestic policies, they are impacted by both internal and external influences. The "choosing sides" approach is still seen as an alternative national strategy, despite the fact that Southeast Asian nations currently have a relatively excellent strategic option in the "hedging strategy" given the current state of world politics. A country will choose its own strategy to protect its security and interests based on changes and developments in the actual situation as a rational actor in international politics, and only when the conditions are met will the "hedging strategy" become a viable alternative for Southeast Asian nations. Domestically, these conditions include leadership qualities, capability thresholds, and state trust. Internationally, these conditions include structural pressure and system stability, as indicated in Figure 2, and each limitation is discussed below.

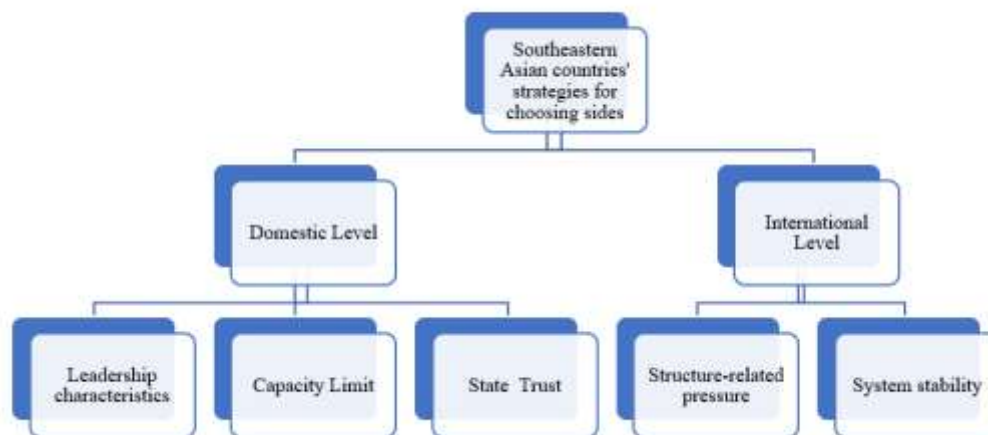


Figure 2. Influencing Factors of the "taking sides" approach.

3.1 Leadership characteristics

Leadership characteristics often refer to the temperament or character of the head of state or government. The formation of national policies and directives as well as the political life of the nation are both slightly impacted by this temperament or character. Max Weber distinguished three formal types of political dominance and authority: legal, traditional (patriarchal, patriarchal, and feudal), and charismatic (family and religion) (modern law and state, bureaucracy). Charismatic authority, also known as charisma, highlights the outstanding talent and reputation of the leader, attracting people to follow him and even live by him, relying in his own power to lead them to a wonderful life based on his reputation. The general policy or foreign policy of a state is not decided by strict elections, etc., but rather by the personality of the leader if the political figurehead is of the Karisma variety. In the case of the taking sides strategy, this implies that the Southeast Asian nation must adhere to or depend on one of the major powers in order to survive. If the leader of a country in Southeast Asia has gained the people's trust through his high political prestige and strong personal skills, he can establish friendly relations with the leaders of the major powers by virtue of this trait. The "pick a side" strategy can thus be applied in this situation, with smaller states choosing whether or not to adhere to the larger state with which they have a friendly relationship based on the traits of their leaders. As a result, this personal friendship based on the political leader can somewhat be transformed into friendship and cooperation between states.

3.2 Capability Limit

A higher capability threshold means the state is better prepared and equipped to handle external crises and risks, and that it can take better action to resolve emergencies quickly and lessen their negative effects. A lower capability threshold means the state is not sufficiently ready to handle external crises and events. The country is less equipped to handle external crises and events the lower the capacity threshold, and the riskier the situation, the greater the possibility that it would endanger national security. A nation's overall strength determines its capacity threshold. A nation will be better able to protect its own security and its many interests if its economic, military, and cultural strengths are strong. This will also give it a stronger foundation and more diverse tools with which to confront external crises. Similar to this, if an external crisis is more severe than a country can handle, that country will lack the tools necessary to handle it and will need to rely on other nations with higher capacity thresholds to assist it in managing the crisis safely; otherwise, it will be in danger. In the case of ASEAN, which is characterized by an alliance of small states with varying capacities, the use of hedging strategies is still common in Southeast Asian countries because they continue to believe that international political conflicts have not escalated to a serious level or have not passed the threshold of their capacity and that they have enough capacity to handle such emergencies. They prefer to rule Southeast Asia as little states and limit the influence of other forces. This structural stability is predicated on their capability threshold, therefore if a political incident occurs

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in the future that sparks a regional or world war, the little nations of Southeast Asia won't be able to stop it or deal with the aftermath.

3.3 State trust

A nation's level of goodwill toward another nation based on political and economic concerns is referred to as its "national trust." A country's high level of national trust in another country indicates solid bilateral relations between the two nations, and the two will continue to communicate and keep close touch as a result. A country will be cautious and concerned about establishing bilateral connections owing to potential disputes with the other country if it has a low degree of state trust in that country, which will have an impact on the sustainability of the relationship. National trust is typically measured by the level of interaction between nations (economic, political, military, and diplomatic). The more frequently two nations cooperate and communicate with one another on an economic, political, and military level, the more stable the foundation of their mutual trust will be, and the more national trust will grow. Nonetheless, the degree of trust only has a limited impact on a nation's foreign policy and does not fundamentally dictate it. When it comes to following or depending on tiny countries in Southeast Asia, major countries that have regular and close ties with them will always take precedence; yet huge countries who lack state trust with small countries won't be the target or the object of their selecting sides.

3.4 Structure-related pressures

Little states are subject to external pressures in addition to domestic ones. Pressure on structures is the first. It is sometimes referred to as "structural pressure" when conflicts between the comparatively stronger states within a structure result in varied degrees of threat and oppression for the relatively weaker states. This is how nations and countries form their bilateral interactions with one another. Small and medium-sized countries share the same international political structure as a very small number of large countries. As a result, the game and conflict between some of these large countries will pose significant risks and concerns for other small and medium-sized countries as well as exert significant structural pressure on small countries. Due to this pressure, tiny countries in the major power clash will be forced to make wise decisions and take them into account; if they don't, their combined overall might would make them weak. Small states cannot afford to face the expenses and penalties of failure to take sides in the event of failure due to their combined weakness. The benefits of the dominant power's dominance of the international order will instead be enjoyed by the small state as a result of this relationship of dependence if a small state is successful in siding with a major power and that power is successful in defeating another major power in the international political contest to become the dominant power. The risk of taking sides is therefore equal, and for small states, in addition to domestic factors, the structural pressures brought about by the competition of the great powers make it necessary for them to carefully consider whether they can cope with and bear such structural pressures. If they are unable to do so, they must adjust their foreign policy and positioning, for example by surviving in dependence on the great powers in order to maintain the state. Yet, if a small state rejects dependence, it may need to change its foreign policy and positioning in order to survive and sustain the stability of the entire system, such as by relying on a major state (Wen,2022). On the other hand, if a small state rejects dependence on or support from a large state, the large state will unavoidably take steps to restrain the small state's development for the stability and growth of the entire structure in order to prevent interfering with its management and dominance of international politics.

3.5 Systemic stability

Furthermore, systemic stability refers to the notion that governments and countries create a hierarchical system in international politics through certain interactions, in which various states interact and preserve the stability of the system in accordance with particular laws. There will be an effect on the system once several states are engaged in conflict and struggle within it, which will damage the system's stability. In modern international politics, systemic stability is vital because, as the division of labor has become more intense, there is a certain amount of reliance between nations, and this connection helps to keep the system stable to some extent. But, if there is a fundamental lack of stability in international politics, wars and battles between nations will occur much more frequently, and as anarchy develops, international politics will become chaotic. There are large systems and small systems in contemporary cultures; the former is composed of regional interstate cooperation groups or alliances, while the latter are composed of international multilateral institutions with the United Nations or the World Health Organization at their core. The smaller systems must be integrated into the bigger systems in order to preserve their stability because they are interdependent and rely on one another for survival. There are sporadic conflicts and battles in international politics since it is not always stable. For instance, some strong countries employ certain methods to incite regional wars and struggles in order to profit from them in order to control world politics, which gravely jeopardizes the stability of the system in which they are situated. If the other little countries in the system don't work with the large powers and start impeding them, the big powers will take action to get rid of this

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unstable element. As a result, in order to maintain their own system's security and stability through the strong might of the large powers in the system, they must either be compelled or take the initiative to side with those forces.

The rationale behind the "taking sides" strategy for Southeast Asian nations as a whole is that the small states and the big states there share a common structure and system, and that when the big states clash and fight with other big states for their own political purposes, the small states will be subject to structural pressure from the big states' games and conflicts. The system in which the tiny nations are situated is also subject to the effects of disputes between powerful states, thus it is unavoidable that they will need to take certain measures to lessen the structural strain and instability of the system. The tiny states can no longer maintain their neutrality as before and must choose a side among the great powers when the conflict between the major powers escalates beyond their ability to handle it. In a nutshell, "taking sides" is a strategy for boosting one's resilience to danger and defending one's security and interests. In other words, when faced with the issue of survival, small governments will inevitably choose the "take a side" option. It allows tiny states another way to think when deciding how to respond to competition from major states and gives them another way to advance their national security and interests (Zhang&Hu,2021).

4. CASE STUDY: MALAYSIA'S RESPONSE TO THE US-CHINA CONFLICT

In order to retain its own security or advance its own greater national interests, a small or medium-sized country will often take the initiative to follow or be forced to follow the side of a rival power when it is involved in conflict with or competing with a major external power. Direct taking sides and ambiguous taking sides are the two main divisions in the approach of choosing sides. The so-called "direct siding strategy" describes how small and medium-sized countries directly show their support for a major power in times of competition and conflict, use the major power's foreign policy as a model for their own foreign policy, and engage in international politics in accordance with its coordinated planning. For instance, as agents of Nazi Germany during the Second World War, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary participated actively in the armed war against the Soviet Union. In order to curb China's ascent and overseas development, traditional US allies like the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan have frequently adopted the opinions or negotiating tactics of the world's superpower. The ambiguous taking sides strategy, as opposed to the direct taking sides strategy, is more frequently employed by small and medium-sized countries that do not express direct views or attitudes when confronted with a conflict with a major power but instead adopt a relatively ambiguous or neutral attitude to express their position. This avoids direct pressure and resentment from the rival power and can maintain national security in a manner that is reasonably effective (Emmers,2018;Feng,2021;Fan,2021). As participants in international politics, small states' combined power and influence are constrained, making ambiguous siding more effective in protecting their actual security and interests. Direct siding carries greater political risk and expense, and if a small state chooses to side with a large state that loses a competition or conflict with its rival power, the small state as a subordinate state will suffer. Being a subordinate state, the small state will undoubtedly incur significant costs if it chooses to align with a great power that loses a battle or struggle with its rival power. As a result, ambiguous siding strategies lower the risks and risks related to siding and are a safer and more sensible way to preserve national security than direct siding strategies. Yet, abrupt crises are a feature of international politics, and small governments' uncertain policies are founded on their ability to survive them. Small states are obliged to pick a side among contending powers when the international scene becomes tense and polarized, and their choice of strategy shifts from ambiguous to direct. For small states, the actual international political environment will determine whether they should take a clear or ambiguous stance.

Due to Malaysia's regular engagements and exchanges with both China and the United States, an examination of Malaysia's siding strategy will also shed light on the circumstances under which Southeast Asian nations use siding methods in the face of significant power disputes. Malaysia's stance-taking method consists of two primary stages. The direct selection of sides was the first stage, which lasted from 1957 to 1974. The phase of picking uncertain borders lasts from 1981 until 2023.

From 1957 to 1974 made up the first phase. Malaysia primarily used a direct strategy of taking sides at this time. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first prime minister, was instrumental in helping Malaya free itself from British colonial rule. Abdul Rahman adopted the capitalist political system and ideology of Western nations, which were influenced by the political philosophy of the former British colonialists, as a means of establishing Malaysia's political foundation. Abdul Rahman, who was influenced by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, had little faith in and good will for socialist nations like China and the Soviet Union and saw socialism as a major threat to Malaya's security. He also believed that the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was responsible for the long-running insurgency in Malaya. China is assisting with the Colombo Plan's development. In light of this, Malaysia officially forbade the country from establishing diplomatic ties with communist nations like China while drawing a firm line between the US-led capitalist camp and the Soviet-led socialists. Because to the US-Soviet Cold War, Malaysia's siding policy during this time was therefore more of a forced siding (Liu,2020;Li,2021). Due to capacity limitations, Malaysia was compelled to support the US in order to offer collective security by depending on military alliances like NATO to protect Malaysia's

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national security and interests (Selat,2014).

The second phase then came after this (1981–2023). The then-Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Mohamad, had a significant influence on this phase's strategic change from directness to ambiguity. Mahathir recognized Malaysia's true status as a small nation in the international political arena and understood that Malaysia could not afford the price and repercussions of deteriorating relations with the major powers (Gerstl,2020). Mahathir was a visionary and politically astute leader during Malaysia's history. Malaysia's role in international politics and its response to significant power struggles now primarily rely on this ambiguity. Several experts in international relations, however, believe that Malaysia's equilateral distance diplomacy under Mahathir is more of a hedging tactic than a policy of taking sides (Krishnan,2020). They contend that Malaysia rarely adopts a clear position or chooses a side in the contemporary international political arena but rather relies on ASEAN as a group voice of interest, advocating a principle of neutrality and non-interference in international affairs to engage in international politics, highlighting its role as a participant and builder rather than a dominant player in international politics(He,2014), and amplifying its voice in the international sphere (Haacke, 2019; Chen,2020). Hedging, in the author's opinion, is the most significant facet of global politics. The hedging strategy emphasizes the idea of equidistant diplomacy between small and medium-sized countries and the development of two-way interaction with major powers, not directly participating in the competition and contestation between major powers but maintaining a neutral position to maintain their own security (Roy,2005; Rosjadi,1976). While the hedging strategy is different from the strategy of choosing sides but is also inextricably linked. The hedging technique can be viewed in part as a unique form of ambiguity of choosing sides because the equidistance diplomacy it employs aligns with the ambiguity of choosing sides. For instance, Malaysia's stance toward major nations was different both before and after the 2018 general election. Malaysia under Najib was more pro-China and distant from the United States because Malaysian leaders like Najib were more inclined towards China at the time and thought that economic cooperation with China may provide greater real benefits to Malaysia. To support its own economic development, Malaysia thus chose a nebulous strategy of avoiding specific questions about China's relationship to the US, etc. In 2018, the coalition of hope led by Mahathir started to re-examine the economic cooperation with China under former Prime Minister Najib, who believed that Malaysia was trapped in a debt trap with China and that such economic cooperation was inappropriate and unfair to Malaysia (Zhang,2019). As a result, he suspended some projects with China and demanded that the cooperation with China end. He asked that collaboration with China be more in line with the true interests and expectations of the Malaysian population, and he suspended some economic cooperation projects with China. In the meantime, in 2022, with Ismail Sabri as Prime Minister, Malaysia has increased its participation in a number of US-led initiatives, such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the US-ASEAN Special Summit, reflecting the fact that Malaysia has started to skew more to the US side and take a relatively cautious and prudent approach to China (Su,2020; Tan,2020). It currently seems unlikely to recreate Najib's close ties to China. Hence, rather than openly supporting one side or the other, Malaysia has employed various ambiguous leaning strategies at various points in time, favoring China or the US, respectively. This has proven to be more effective in preserving its own security and advancing its own development (Ren,2019; Oxford Analytica,2020).

Although Malaysia has in the past adopted a strategy of taking sides in the face of conflict and rivalry between major powers, this ambiguous siding strategy is constrained by the fact that, as was previously mentioned, small and medium-sized countries can only take sides with those countries that have a higher level of trust in them when the system is no longer stable and structural pressures exceed the country's capacity threshold(Luo,2018;Li,2021). The world's political and economic order has become more unstable after the Russia-Ukraine conflict started in early 2022. It will be very challenging for small nations like Malaysia to take an ambiguous side in future wars between the main powers in international politics or to ensure their own security. They are compelled to take a clear stance in order to follow the powerful nations and protect their own interests. Hence, for small states like Malaysia, taking a side still has a lot of practical significance.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the before mentioned analysis, this paper comes to the conclusion that the strategy of taking sides is not only highly practical and applicable, but it is also not viewed by previous international relations scholars as being inapplicable to current international politics or at odds with what ASEAN countries have been advocating. The main goals are to protect national security, advance national growth, and lessen the effects of great power struggles on tiny states like Malaysia. The example of Malaysia also demonstrates how small states can rationally modify their foreign policies and strategies to better suit the evolution of international politics in accordance with changes in internal and external circumstances, while the choice of sides offers Southeast Asian nations an alternative strategy to balancing, providing a way for small states to survive and cope with their national challenges.

Small nations must reevaluate and modify their foreign policies as the dangers of international politics mount, the crisis

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between Russia and Ukraine is still unsolved, and great power tensions and contradictions are only becoming worse. The discussion and analysis of the strategy of taking sides in this paper can offer Southeast Asian nations a unique perspective on how to handle major power conflicts, which in turn enriches the conversation and helps small and medium-sized nations deal with the escalating tensions on the global stage.

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