Southeast Asian Nations Wary of Choosing Sides in Rift Between U.S., China

WASHINGTON – Although China is exerting pressure on the nations in Southeast Asia to side with it in the growing global struggle with the United States, most of them want to avoid having to choose, preferring to maintain strong economic ties with both while seeking close security relations with America, a panel of Asian experts said Nov. 19.

But the lack of a strong and steady military presence in the region, partly due to a shortage of Navy ships, and inconsistent demonstration of interest from Washington have caused some Southeast Asian countries to question U.S. staying power, the four think tank scholars and former government officials told a Hudson Institute forum.

Some of the panel members argued that America weakened its influence in the region when President Donald Trump decided to abandon the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which allowed China to take the lead in forming a version of the trade agreement that excludes America from the economically growing region.

The experts also expressed concern that fear of antagonizing their powerful and aggressive regional neighbor has prevented the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from reaching unified positions on regional issues, allowing China to seek to influence them individually, which is its preferred tactic. The ambivalence also threatens the viability of the association itself, they said.

Noting the sharp differences in proposed visions for the region expressed by Chinese president Xi Jinping and U.S. Vice President Michael Pence at an ASEAN conference last week, “the long-standing concern in the area that they would be forced to

choose is at an all-time high," said Amy Searight, director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"Clearly, they do not want to be forced to choose. They want strong economic ties with both, but want strong diplomatic, security ties with the U.S., but not at the expense of economic ties with China," Searight said.

"China is very good at trying to create false binary choices … creating the sense that the countries have to choose," she said. That is strengthened by China's claim that "America is part of the past, while China is part of the future," and if the Southeast Asian nations are partners with the United States they cannot have close ties with China.

"That reinforces the strategic choices China is trying to make them make," she said.

Searight and John Lee, a senior fellow at Hudson, argued that it was not wrong for the ASEAN countries to avoid a sharp choice between the competing powers if they would make unified stands on the principles they stand for.

"Refusal to choose a set of principles allows China to do what it wants," Lee said. Although the ASEAN countries want to remain neutral, "that only works when the major powers agree. China clearly wants to change the international order in Asia," which is not in the interest of the ASEAN countries, or the United States and its regional partners Japan and Australia, he said.

Having recently returned from a trip to the region, Patrick Cronin, director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for a New American Security, said there is a "real fear" that the China-U.S. tension could lead to economic disruption. Although the smaller countries want the money China offers for infrastructure and other purposes, they are suspicious of the frequently onerous conditions the loans carry, Cronin said.

“But they are uncertain about America’s staying power,” he said, repeating a statement made by Eric Brown, a Hudson senior fellow who moderated the program.

Cronin noted that the United States could use its maritime power to increase its influence in the region, but he and Searight said that potential has not been realized because there has been little evidence of a U.S. military buildup in Southeast Asia, despite the recent jump in defense spending.

Cronin said the number of ASEAN countries who have requested Navy port visits has increased, but “the problem is the strength of the Navy. It needs more ships.”