Notes from the Field | Hu Chao, We Southeast Asians Can Think for Ourselves. Keep Your Geopolitical Obsession

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DECONSTRUCTING GEOPOLITICAL OBSESSION THROUGH A POST-COLONIAL EPISTEMIC NARRATIVE

Every year, the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore publishes its State of Southeast Asia 2026 Survey Report (https://table.media/assets/documents/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2026-survey-final-single.pdf), asking elites across the region which great power they would choose if forced to align. The results are picked up by wire services, reprinted in European and American newspapers, and dissected across the commentariat for weeks. If more respondents lean toward China, headlines warn of waning US influence. If the balance tips the other way, they speak of a return to order. The survey is treated as a window into the region's soul.

There is only one problem. Most Southeast Asians have never taken this survey, do not know it exists, and organize their lives around considerations that have nothing to do with it. When their leaders are asked the same question directly at forums like the Shangri-La Dialogue, they consistently refuse to answer—with the exception of the Philippines. The question generates headlines, but the region's actual response is a polite, steadfast non-answer. The person buying a Xiaomi phone in Jakarta is not signaling alignment with Beijing; she is buying the phone that fits her budget. The family driving a Toyota in Bangkok is not endorsing Japan's security posture; they are driving a car that runs. The farmer using American fertilizer in the Mekong Delta is not choosing Washington over Beijing; he is choosing the fertilizer that works. None of these transactions register as geopolitical signals to the people making them. It takes a specific kind of analytical machinery to translate them into one.

That machinery is the subject of this commentary. It is not a bad-faith machine. Its operators are not stupid, and the questions they ask are not fabricated. Great power competition is real. Security dilemmas are real. Southeast Asian governments do make complex calculations about their strategic environment. But the machinery through which these realities are processed into geopolitical commentary has a systematic bias: it can only see what fits its categories. Everything else—the infrastructure deficits that define the region's political agenda, the educational systems struggling to equip a young population, the supply chains and cultural networks that constitute daily life—is edited out as noise. This is not an oversight. It is an epistemic structure.

Two commentaries from this year's post-Shangri-La cycle in *Asia Times* illustrate how this structure operates, and together they reveal two different registers in which epistemic violence works.

The first is by Grant Newsham, a retired US Marine Corps officer and fellow at the Center for Security Policy in Washington, published on June 21. His commentary, titled "Apart from China, Asia isn't afraid of a remilitarizing Japan (https://asiatimes.com/2026/06/apart-from-china-asia-isnt-afraid-of-a-remilitarizing-japan/)," runs through a list of countries—India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, the Pacific Islands—and reads their silence on Japan's constitutional revision as tacit endorsement. The Japan Self-Defense Force's regional activities, he notes, are conducted "without any objection from Pacific Island nations," and this absence of protest is offered as evidence of consent.

The mechanism here is transparent. A retired officer in Washington who has never consulted the populations he writes about reduces 700 million people to a single question: can they be counted as part of a coalition against China? The analytical move is crudely efficient—silence equals consent, a proposition that would be dismissed in any ordinary human interaction but somehow passes as rigorous argument in geopolitical analysis. This is epistemic violence in its most recognizable form: an outsider imposes a framework that systematically filters out competing evidence, then presents the resulting silence as proof of the framework's correctness.

But there is a second register of epistemic violence that is both more insidious and more revealing, because it comes from within.

On June 3, Ronny P Sasmita—a senior analyst at the Indonesia Strategic and Economic Action Institution in Jakarta—published a commentary in *Asia Times* titled "Why the Shangri-La Dialogue finally really mattered (https://asiatimes.com/2026/06/why-the-shangri-la-dialogue-finally-really-mattered/)." Precisely because the article is thoughtful and written from a position of genuine concern for regional autonomy, its concessions

are all the more troubling. Sasmita argues that middle powers in Asia are learning to network, bargain, and strengthen their defenses "to avoid becoming tools of US or China." He describes the emergence of minilateral arrangements like the GUIDE initiative for undersea infrastructure protection, which notably excluded both the US and China from its launch.

Consider the line that Sasmita offers as a summary of the new mood among defense officials: "perhaps Asia now needs fewer dialogues and more warships and submarines." The sentence is presented as a hard-nosed realist insight. But notice what it does: it equates security with military tonnage, erases the human reality of the region in a single stroke, and accepts without question that the only valid response to great power competition is to join the competition on its own terms.

Or consider the article's framing of its central goal. The region's achievement at this year's Dialogue, Sasmita concludes, was learning how "to avoid becoming tools of competitive superpower blocs." The formulation sounds like a rallying cry for independence. But it contains a hidden concession: it defines the region's agency entirely in negative terms—as what it resists rather than what it builds. It accepts the premise that Southeast Asia's destiny is to be a tool in someone else's project, and then argues only about which tool not to be.

This is the deeper register of epistemic violence. It does not come from a retired officer in Washington who has never visited the region. It comes from a local intellectual using the same analytical vocabulary as the great powers—"middle powers," "strategic resilience," "minilateralism," "defense expenditures"—and mistaking it for neutral description. The article does not defend the region in its own terms. It translates the region into terms that the machinery of geopolitical commentary can process, and in doing so, it reproduces the very framework that renders the region illegible on its own terms. The hegemonic discourse has been so thoroughly absorbed into the analytical vocabulary that it no longer reads as foreign—even when deployed by a local intellectual writing in defense of regional autonomy. Say it enough times, and even we might start to believe it.

None of this is to fault Sasmita. The internal epistemic violence I am pointing to is not his personal failure—it is the result of cognitive cleansing, not its origin. It is something I feel in his article and in others like it: the slow, almost imperceptible takeover of a region's analytical vocabulary by a framework that was never designed to serve its interests.

This internalization is the core mechanism of what can be called postcolonial cognitive cleansing. Classical colonialism operated through territorial occupation and administrative control. Cognitive cleansing operates through the monopolization of discursive terms. It does not need to control what you do; it only needs to control the language in which you describe what you do. Once the question "which side are you on?" becomes the default framework for discussing the region, everything else—roads, schools, hospitals, trade routes—ceases to be politically legible. It becomes invisible not because it does not exist, but because the framework has no category for it.

This pattern of self-imposed objectification is echoed elsewhere. Consider a third piece published in *Asia Times* on June 8, by a Singapore-based communications professional—yes, another *Asia Times* commentary, to keep our focus sharp for this discussion—who, to his credit, was refreshingly candid. In this op-ed entitled "With or without China, Shangri-La Dialogue is still relevant (https://asiatimes.com/2026/06/with-or-without-china-shangri-la-dialogue-is-still-relevant/)", he admitted the Shangri-La Dialogue was never neutral, but rather "primarily about anchoring the US in Southeast Asia." A former Singaporean diplomat was invoked to lend authority to the claim that Southeast Asia's security can only be guaranteed by a US-managed "balance of power," as though this were immutable natural law rather than a contestable geopolitical choice. But whose balance are we talking about? The framing itself presumes that "balance" means a US-centered order, and that any deviation from this order is instability. This is not analysis—it is a cognitive map that has already decided where the center of the world should be. When routine defense modernizations are automatically read as endorsements of a great power's strategic agenda, the region's own agency disappears from the picture. This is a self-imposed geopolitical obsession—and one confined to those luxury hotels.

Epistemic violence, in the sense developed by postcolonial scholarship, is not simply the production of false statements about a region. It is the foreclosure of the terms in which a region can be known—the imposition of a framework that determines in advance what counts as relevant information and what can be safely ignored. The ISEAS survey, the Shangri-La Dialogue, and the commentary cycle that surrounds them form a closed circuit. They generate questions that the circuit is capable of answering, and they exclude questions that would require a different kind of analysis altogether. Newsham and Sasmita occupy different positions within this circuit, but they are equally constrained by it: one from outside, one from within.

None of this is to suggest that Southeast Asians are passive recipients of this discursive regime. The opposite is true. As an art historian and curator, I encounter a rather different Southeast Asia in my own research. While curating *Bali Island: Art and the World Beyond the Rainforest*, I came across a photograph taken in Bali in 1952. It brought together Singapore-based painters Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang and Cheong Soo Pieng; Chinese artists Luo Ming and Zhou Bichu; the Dutch painter Rudolf Bonnet; and Seow Yi Kee, an Indonesian Chinese businessman who provided local support. Several of these artists had studied or taught in Shanghai before war, migration and artistic travel scattered them across the region.

What geopolitical category adequately describes this photograph? Its network ran through art schools, migration, friendship, Chinese communities and local patronage. Luo Ming alone travelled from China through Penang and Indonesia, joining artists from Singapore in Bali before eventually returning to China to teach. These movements were not marginal to the region's history; they were part of how cultural life in Southeast Asia was made. Yet none fits comfortably into the question that dominates so much contemporary commentary: whose side is Southeast Asia on?

What the machinery of geopolitical commentary cannot grasp is that the region does not need to be liberated from the choice between Washington and Beijing. It needs to be liberated from the question itself. The demand to choose sides is not a request for information; it is a technique of governance. It forces the region to continually rearticulate its position within a framework it had no hand in designing, thereby reproducing the very structure of great-power dominance that the framework claims merely to describe. The history of this region, now known as Southeast Asia, is scarred by colonialism and conflict. Its people understand better than most that peace is not manufactured through abstract "balancing acts." Peace is lived day by day. It means stable jobs, unhindered trade, and functioning schools—not rhetoric about armaments and

deterrence. ASEAN's diplomacy has built a mature multilateral architecture precisely to avoid being forced into binary choices. That is not weakness, indecision, or a failure to "grow up." It is the region's most significant political achievement: a hard-won capacity to engage multiple powers without being captured by any single one. Dismissing this as mere "hedging" is to misunderstand the region's politics at a fundamental level.

The analysts will keep coming to Singapore every June. The surveys will keep running. The headlines will keep asking which side we choose. And we will keep not answering—politely, consistently, steadfastly—before returning to the roads, ports, classrooms, and markets that actually organize our lives. That non-answer is not a failure to decide. It is a decision. It is the region's most consistent political statement, and it deserves to be recognized as such: not as evasion, but as the refusal to have one's existence defined by someone else's question.

The machinery of geopolitical commentary is real, well-funded, and globally distributed. But it is also profoundly parochial. It mistakes its own categories for the world, and in doing so, it misses almost everything that matters about the place it claims to know. That gap—between the machinery's representation of Southeast Asia and the region's actual life—is not a problem to be solved by producing better data within the existing framework. It is a problem that requires a different framework altogether.

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