**INTRODUCTION**

Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines seem to defy the trend of seeking ‘triangular’ relationships with China and the U.S. While these countries are traditionally allied to the U.S., they seem to move towards China’s orbit. Why is this happening? Furthermore, what will the election of Donald Trump mean for hegemonic shifts in South-East Asia?

**OBSERVATIONS**

- There is an increasing number of countries in Asia that pursue a policy of hedging or triangulation (an attempt to extract maximum benefits from both China and the U.S.), as we have previously noted.
- However, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines seem to be moving away from triangulation and towards China’s orbit.
- Since the military coup in Thailand in 2014, the U.S. has criticized the Thai government. Recently, PM Prayut Chan-o-cha made concessions to China in an apparent attempt to counterbalance American criticism on the coup and his way of ruling.
- Since the 1MDB scandal, a major financial scandal surrounding the Malaysian PM Najib Razak, the U.S. has criticized and investigated Malaysia. Last week, Malaysia and China signed a landmark defense deal, the first time these two countries signed a large defense deal. Since Rodrigo Duterte became president of the Philippines, the U.S. has criticized his heavy-handed rule and war on drugs. Duterte has hinted to a new alliance with China instead of the U.S.

**ANALYSIS**

During the Cold War, anti-communist Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines were allied to the U.S. However, as the Chinese economy boomed, these countries have gradually moved towards a policy of triangulation to benefit from China’s rise. During the present triangulation, the traditional alliance with the U.S. serves as a balance towards being sucked into China’s sphere of influence. However, recently there seems to be an abandonment of triangulation in favor of a move towards China. Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines have all sought closer ties with China, namely in the security realm. On the other hand, countries like Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia have moved closer to the U.S. and continue to seek triangular relationships.

These countries are separated by the degree of American criticism on their domestic politics. Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines have increasingly been criticized by the U.S. When one of the two countries in the triangular balance of power intensifies criticism of domestic politics, seeking a triangular relationship becomes less appealing. As a result, these countries move towards China’s orbit, while American influence in the region wanes. However, both the U.S. and these South-East Asian countries could benefit from the election of Donald Trump. He has openly expressed his indifference to domestic politics of other nations. It is not admiration or a shared illiberal ideology that led Duterte to express his preference for Trump: an isolationist American president means that there will be no interference with Philippine politics. This would also mean that a move towards China is no longer necessary. Hence President Trump, in withholding criticism on other nations’ domestic politics, could improve the position of the U.S. in South-East Asia.

**POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES**

- Countries that are no longer forced to move towards China’s orbit due to American criticism: Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.
- The U.S. could benefit as it retains these countries in its sphere of influence.