

Non-Alignment via Multi-Alignments

Evidence from Southeast Asia in the Trump 2.0 Era

23 January 2026, Friday

15:00-16:30 (Japan Time)

Seminar Room (No.213)

Inamori Foundation Memorial Building, CSEAS, Kyoto University



No
Reservation
required

Colloquium 2025

ABSTRACT

The majority of Southeast Asian countries, like many Global South states, have been pursuing their goal of non-alignment via the means of multi-alignments. This strategic trend predated but has accelerated during the second Donald Trump Administration. “Non-alignment” refers to a position of not-taking-sides with either the United States or China, while “multi-alignments” refers to an emerging policy approach where states sandwiched between the two competing giants respond to the intensifying power rivalry and uncertainties by forging multiple inclusive alignments (i.e., partnerships that are underpinned by *convergence* of interests, *consultation* and/or coordination of actions, and the intended impact of *compatibility-enhancement*) with major powers and key players in and out of the region without upgrading any alignment into an “alliance,” i.e., alignment with a binding mutual defence commitment. These include countries who took part in the 1955 Bandung Conference (which led to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961), as well as countries which once pursued alliance-first policy during the Cold War decades. For instance, Vietnam, which once formed a single-sided alliance with the Soviet Union from 1975 to 1991, has in recent years forged numerous strategic and comprehensive strategic partnerships with countries near and far. Malaysia, another country who shifted from alliance-first (Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement, 1957–1971) to an alliance-allergic policy, has strengthened its decades-long ties with Western powers on defence, development and diplomatic domains, while simultaneously enhancing and exploring multifaceted collaborations with partners from ASEAN, ASEAN-plus, and other non-West circles. Even Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia, renowned for its “*bebas dan aktif*” (independent and active) principle in external affairs, has pursued similar multi-alignments over the past decade in an active, adaptive and inclusive manner (e.g., Indonesia-Australia Defence Cooperation Agreement; the “2+2” foreign and defence ministerial meetings with Japan, but also with China, respectively; senior officials’ level dialogues with the United States). This seminar explains how and why most ASEAN member states and a majority of other states have insisted on pursuing non-alignment via multi-alignments even and especially when power pressures are mounting and space for manoeuvring is shrinking in the Trump 2.0 era.

PRESENTER

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Dr. Kuik Cheng-Chwee is Professor of International Relations at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and concurrently a non-resident senior fellow at the SAIS Foreign Policy Institute, Johns Hopkins University. He is currently on sabbatical as the Japan Foundation 2025 JFSEAP Visiting Fellow (September 2025–February 2026) at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Kyoto University. Previously, he was a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Princeton-Harvard “China and the World” (CWP) Program and a Visiting Research Fellow at Oxford University. Professor Kuik’s research focuses on non-great powers’ alignment choices, Asian security, and international relations. Cheng-Chwee’s publications have appeared in such peer-reviewed journals as *International Affairs*, *Pacific Review*, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. He is author of *Theorizing Hedging: Explaining Shifts and Variations in Alignment Choices* (Cambridge, forthcoming), co-author (with David M. Lampton and Selina Ho) of *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (2020) and co-editor (with Alice D. Ba and Sueo Sudo) of *Institutionalizing East Asia* (2016). Cheng-Chwee serves on the editorial boards of *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, and several other international journals. He holds an M.Litt. from the University of St. Andrews and a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University. He has been listed in Stanford University’s Top 2% Scientists, subfield International Relations, in 2023, 2024, and 2025.



Chair: NAKANISHI, Yoshihiro (CSEAS)