

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

## The Asia Chessboard Podcast

# **“Caught in the Middle of the Chessboard: Southeast Asia's Response to China's Rise”**

RECORDING DATE

**Thursday August 20, 2020**

SPEAKERS:

**Murray Hiebert**

*Senior Associate of the Southeast Asia Program*

**Greg Poling**

*Senior Fellow of the Southeast Asia Program and Director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*

HOST:

**Mike Green**

*Senior Vice President for Asia and Japan Chair, CSIS*

- Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to The Asia Chessboard, the podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Hannah Fodale: This week, Mike is joined by two CSIS colleagues from the Southeast Asia Program, Murray Hiebert and Greg Poling, to discuss Murray's new book, "Under Beijing's Shadow: Southeast Asia's China Challenge." In his book, Murray details the response of different Southeast Asian countries to China's rise, and argues that countries view China both as an opportunity and a challenge. In formulating U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia, how do we deal with these countries' competing economic and security interests?
- Mike Green: Welcome to The Asia Chessboard. I'm Mike Green, and I'm joined by two of the leading thinkers on Southeast Asia in Washington and indeed anywhere: Murray Hiebert, who is our principal guest because Murray has written a fascinating book called Under Beijing's Shadow: Southeast Asia's China Challenge, which we'll get into in detail on this podcast. Then I'm joined by my colleague at CSIS, Greg Poling, who runs the Southeast Asia Program and is a solid Southeast Asia hand himself.
- Mike Green: We'll have a discussion about Murray's book, about dynamics within Southeast Asia, and the larger strategic game that's being played out between the U.S. and China, a game that almost no one in Southeast Asia wants, but it is their reality and, in many ways, the subject of Murray's terrific book. The book is getting early praise from some very senior scholars and political figures in the U.S. and in the region--Murray, Congratulations--and we'll get into it.
- Mike Green: First, on this podcast, people are always interested to find out how you got into this subject. You've had an amazingly interesting career, starting work in Vietnam after the Vietnam War, basically, and then Far Eastern Economic Review, The Wall Street Journal, across the region. I like to introduce you and embarrass you by saying he's a true Southeast Asia wallah. He has been attacked by cobras and imprisoned by Mahathir. I don't know if the first one's true. I know the second one is. Tell us a bit how you got into the region and why you stuck with it. What attracted you?
- Murray Hiebert: Yeah. Well, I'm really a very much an accidental Southeast Asia watcher. I grew up in landlocked, icebound Manitoba, Canada, and I was blissfully going along. As a college student, I ended up in Guadeloupe in the French West Indies. I discovered you could be warm in July, which I thought was a novel idea.
- Murray Hiebert: I grew up also as a Mennonite. Fortunately, I didn't grow up in a buggy. We could use cars, but the Mennonites have this aid grouping called the Mennonite Central Committee, which gives communists fits if you say that, but I wanted to go overseas. I applied for a job either in Central or South America. They said, "Well, we don't have any jobs, but we've got a job in Vietnam." I said, "Well, that's not my thing." They said, "Well, that's where we've got a job."

- Murray Hiebert: I got a job there and also spent time in Laos, and I fell wildly in love. I don't quite know why. Maybe it's the food. Maybe it's the people. They really get to you. They're very dynamic and energized and very open. The Vietnamese in particular are very open. I think it's because they're along sea, and they've been invaded so often they think it's better to co-opt foreigners, maybe.
- Murray Hiebert: Then, yeah, I eventually segued into journalism and was in Thailand, back in Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and did a short stint in China. Yeah, for 20 years I lived in Southeast Asia.
- Mike Green: You wrote for The Wall Street Journal and for the Far Eastern Economic Review, which went out of print about 20 years ago.
- Murray Hiebert: 2004.
- Mike Green: Yeah, not quite 20 years ago. For people in my generation it was like a life raft, getting that and understanding what was happening in the region. We've just got to divert for a second. You were jailed by Mahathir for your journalism. You've got to tell us about that, and the hunger strike.
- Murray Hiebert: Well, so I was a journalist in Malaysia. After Vietnam, I went to Malaysia, and I was getting all kinds of stories about the rent-a-judge problem, that situation where really elites could get a judge that would be very favorable to them, and then they'd give a ruling that would be in their favor.
- Murray Hiebert: Well, there was this kid that was a student at the International School of Kuala Lumpur, and he sued. The father was an appeal court judge. His mother sued the school for \$2.4 million U.S., no small change, for the fellow students kicking him off the debating team because they felt he was fabricating evidence constantly.
- Murray Hiebert: I went to the trial. After I had gone to the trial for about a week, I decided to write a story about it. Actually, I began by talking about how Malaysia was trying to woo foreign schools to set up in Malaysia. Anyway, that piece in the end was called "See You in Court."
- Mike Green: Was that for the Far Eastern Economic Review or The Wall Street Journal?
- Murray Hiebert: The Far Eastern Economic Review. That piece was called "See You in Court," and the judge was outraged and nailed me with contempt of court. Now, having grown up in Canada, I'm familiar with Commonwealth law that you cannot write about court proceedings like you can in the U.S., but you have an escape hatch if you have a story lawyered, in which a lawyer reads it and decides you don't have malicious intent. We had it lawyered twice, but the judge never let us use that for evidence.

- Murray Hiebert: The family dropped the case against the International School of Kuala Lumpur and everybody just went after me. I was found guilty in a trial where we could have no defense. Their lawyer, the prosecuting lawyer, he would say things and then he'd answer his own questions. My lawyer was good, but he just really couldn't say anything. We asked to bring in the lawyers. They wouldn't allow that. We asked if I could testify.
- Murray Hiebert: It was very interesting, because they went through the article like it was a theological book, and they would decide what certain words mean and they would exegete it. "What does 'see you' mean in 'See you in court'?" You just want to say, "Oh, no," because you know, Mike. You've written. As journalists, you don't think about every word for half an hour.
- Mike Green: Mahathir was in charge?
- Murray Hiebert: He was the prime minister.
- Mike Green: You were working for a pretty high-profile international magazine. Do you think this was coming from the top?
- Murray Hiebert: It certainly got a yellow light, green light, from the top. The lawyer that was going after me, Gopel Sri Ram, had been the lawyer that helped Mahathir in 1988 to reconstitute UMNO, his party, because it had been ruled unconstitutional, had done something illegal. It had done something wrong. He helped Mahathir get out of that, and so Mahathir may have just given him this.
- Murray Hiebert: I was found guilty, and I appealed. They took away my passport for two and a half years. Eventually my appeal was heard and the verdict was upheld, and I was sentenced to, instead of three months, initially I was sentenced to six weeks, and I got out after 30 days for good behavior.
- Mike Green: The book, which I really recommend people read, if you know Southeast Asia well already, you'll learn something new. If you're following Asia, this book will tell you about the center of gravity for, in my view, U.S.-China strategic competition, which is Southeast Asia. But it reads like it was written by somebody who was imprisoned by Mahathir and went on a hunger strike. You get out there. You really get out there, and you dig deep and find things out. I'll turn to Greg in a moment, because we're joined by Greg Poling as well, but tell us quickly the bottom-line takeaway or argument in the book.
- Murray Hiebert: I guess the bottom line is that countries are a little bit schizophrenic about China. On the one hand, they want to take advantage of the opportunities. China's economic opening in the late '70s was a huge boon for Southeast Asia. The middle income economy suddenly started taking off, so they love the trade stuff. They're a little ambivalent on the infrastructure projects. They're very nervous about what's happening in the South China Sea and what's happening now in the Mekong. They really view, though, China as both a challenge and an

opportunity. They see it much closer than the U.S., and they really don't feel that China is this big threat. It's a threat, but not so big.

- Mike Green: When you ask a lot of policymakers in Washington about Southeast Asia strategy, the first thing many will go to is infrastructure, is countering BRI using the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. But one of your findings is actually infrastructure is not that attractive. Can you say a bit more about that? Then I'd like to get Greg's view. Laos is enormously indebted, more than its GDP in debt to China, because of BRI. There are some countries that are already very, very dependent, but how broad did that finding go about infrastructure? Because we're spending a lot of time with the Australians and the Japanese trying to counter BRI, but should we not be worried about it?
- Murray Hiebert: No, I think people should be worried. Countries want infrastructure. I think I'll answer your second question first. For the U.S. to work with Japan and Australia to help provide an alternative to the BRI is really useful, because they need so much infrastructure and they don't want China building all of it. All of theirs is North-South, which all roads lead to Beijing, right?
- Murray Hiebert: They have had a terrible time getting many of these projects off the ground, even tiny Laos, which is now in the process of building a railroad. Yes, they have too much debt to China, but they negotiated for five years to knock down the interest rate, to knock down what they had to provide, how much land on each side of their railroad.
- Murray Hiebert: The Thais, you would have thought the Thais, after the coup in 2014, would have wanted to let China build its railroad. They have negotiated over 25 rounds in the last six years, and they still haven't gotten anywhere. The Thais don't like their economic conditions, the interest rate. The Chinese want to bring in their technology, they want to bring in their engineers, and the Thais aren't interested.
- Murray Hiebert: The one that surprises me maybe the most is Myanmar. They haven't done Kyaukphyu, the big port. They just hold off. The generals had signed an MOU, but Aung San Suu Kyi has just dragged her heels. They finally talked the Chinese down from 7.3 billion to a little over 1 billion, but nothing has happened. They came to this agreement in October 2018.
- Murray Hiebert: We could go on. They have a lot of difficulty getting it off the ground. The other fear in a lot of countries is, of course, too many Chinese workers.
- Mike Green: Yeah. Greg, you follow this pretty closely. How do you explain the challenges to China happening? Is it partly because we're doing Free and Open Indo-Pacific? Is it partly because there are alternatives, or what do you think? Are Chinese just inefficient at this? How do you explain it?

- Greg Poling: I think, as Murray's book highlights, we have to appreciate the agency of Southeast Asian parties here. Generally when Southeast Asian parties are upset or pushing back on something China does, it's because it's in their interest to push back on whatever China does. Of course, the U.S., as an alternative pole, plays an enormous role in giving I think strategic space to smaller countries to act, but sometimes we can overestimate our own role in the autonomous decisions of these countries.
- Greg Poling: BRI really highlights this because there's a sense around the U.S. sometimes, when you listen to the arguments, that if the U.S. isn't competing dollar-for-dollar with China, then therefore there must be no alternative and Southeast Asians have to just take whatever deal China's offering. Of course, that's not entirely true. I mean, for one thing, if you're on a bridge or a road in Southeast Asia, you're probably on one that was built by Japan, not by China, but more importantly, you don't have to compete with China dollar-for-dollar. Sometimes just making the Chinese bid and act more transparently is all it really takes.
- Greg Poling: Murray highlighted Kyaukphyu. I'd love to hear more on that from Murray, because I think it really highlights an underappreciated role that the U.S. and the Australians and the Europeans play here, which is you don't have to compete with the Chinese dollar-for-dollar. You just have to make it known that you might bid, or maybe it's the case of Kyaukphyu, you send six guys from USAID to go help look over the contract. Southeast Asian countries are pretty good at renegotiating with the Chinese themselves, if they feel like they have the space to do that.
- Mike Green: For people listening who don't know Kyaukphyu, it's a port in Myanmar, and is part of what the Indians called the String of Pearls infrastructure projects in ports that would give China dual-use civil-military capabilities all along the rim of the Indian Ocean, which we did a satellite surveillance study of a few years ago. People were worried about it, but it's not happening. I just want to make sure people know what that is. It's not a food. Murray, how do you explain that? What's happening with Kyaukphyu?
- Murray Hiebert: I mean, some of it is what Greg said, but I'd go further and also add that I think people forget how nationalistic Myanmar is. I thought the Vietnamese were nationalistic, but the Burmese people are incredibly nationalistic. I think, Mike, on a trip that you and I were on in 2012, it was very clear they were not selling their souls. They're not going to sell their souls to anybody. The studies that Greg was referring to, Aung San Suu Kyi set up a project bank where she has several Western-educated economists who'd worked at the World Bank or for Japanese banks. They came in and looked at some of these projects, and they just find them outrageous. China really took advantage of the military.
- Murray Hiebert: One project that I learned about just before the last elections in 2016, when there was still a quasi-military government, they gave them vegetable seeds, little tractors, irrigation pumps, and declared that these were worth 300 million,

and told them that they could give these to farmers or sell to farmers to get good will for the election, so they'd vote for the ruling party. They have to pay this thing back in 2026, in hard currency at 4% interest. It's ridiculous.

Murray Hiebert: I mean, everywhere you go, you hear people say, "We would like Japanese interest rates, like 0.75," but the complaint they have with the Japanese is, the Chinese, they start working even before the feasibility study is done. The Japanese, they go on and on. It takes three to five years to complete these things, and they're impatient.

Mike Green: The Japanese, as you know, in almost every opinion poll taken in the region, are far more popular than China or the U.S. or Australia or India or anyone, for those reasons. In the book, you talk about the other powers. We'll come back to the U.S. in a minute. Part of our strategy, I think, is going to have to be aligning with countries like Japan and Australia on Southeast Asia a bit more. You're very bullish on Japan. You heard a lot of very positive things, it seems like. Less so India. It seems that I picked up in the book a bit more frustration about India and, I was surprised, a bit of frustration about Australia. Maybe you could talk a minute about how the other powers in Asia are viewed, and not just how they're viewed, but how influential are they.

Murray Hiebert: Well, yeah. I think Japan, as you picked up, has a very positive view in the region. They were the biggest trading partner before China. They are still the biggest investor in many places, or second to the U.S. They've given an awful lot of aid. Some of it I don't think is terribly useful. You don't need too many more children's hospitals. You need to get these medical people out of the cities, into the rural areas. Nevertheless, they do have a very positive image.

Murray Hiebert: India is viewed as never quite arriving. Promising they're going to look East and then they're going to act East, and then nothing really happens. In the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership trade agreement, that was roughly completed at the end of last year, and only because India finally got out, pulled out. They were very frustrated, because India was just putting roadblocks, protectionism, on all their products.

Murray Hiebert: Vietnam is okay, appreciates India doing a little bit. They're training the Vietnamese how to use five Russian submarines. Some of the military cooperation, and then also the fact that India has not pulled out their oil company, while many others have pulled out under the pressure of the Chinese and the South China Sea.

Murray Hiebert: I don't think I was trying to be as negative on Australia as you perceived, but there was a huge frustration in Vietnam when their prime minister visited in, I don't remember, April, May last year. There was a little of China putting a lot of pressure in the South China Sea and harassing the dickens out of the Vietnamese and the Malaysians, and Scott Morrison never agreed to say

anything public about it. He probably would today, right, because the relations have changed immensely in the last year.

- Mike Green: Big changes in Australia. The reason I said it was you quote a Vietnamese academic based in Canberra who highlighted the China Choice literature of Hugh White and others, that Australia is stuck because it's so dependent on China for trade. I don't think that's the zeitgeist in Australia in 2020, though. I think you just have that one reference. The defense budget's gone up in Australia in big ways. They're doing more exercises.
- Mike Green: Let's go back to the U.S. You've been in this business a little longer than I have, but it seems like it's like cicadas. Every seven years or something, there's this chorus that comes out of the region saying the U.S. is retreating. In the late '70s when you first went, in the '90s because of the financial crisis, in the 2000s because of the War on Terror. Obama even got it because he wasn't pro-TPP at first. Now, of course, the Trump administration gets it. Is this just the usual chorus lamenting American withdrawal? Or do you think there's palpable concern, or even worse, lack of concern?
- Murray Hiebert: Well, there's a little bit of that too, right? Oh, which is depressing. I think that if the U.S. reelects the current president, I think Southeast Asia will check out. Well, I'll start where you asked the question, actually. Yes, they go in cycles, and they always complain a little bit. I guess you would maybe think that they would have liked the Obama rebalance, but they said it was nice rhetoric and nothing happened. They'll cite the Lower Mekong Initiative, just a tiny bit of money, 14 million or something over I forgot how many years.
- Murray Hiebert: Then Trump really bothers them. So much of his relationship with them is just based on their trade surplus. Five of the 16 countries that were on the list of ne'er-do-wells that have trade surpluses were from Southeast Asia, and they're all nervous. A year ago, he called Vietnam a worse violator than the Chinese on an NBC interview. There's appreciation when Pompeo will say the things that he did last summer on the Mekong, or China's being too aggressive. What he did just a month ago, five weeks ago in the South China Sea, but you don't show up at meetings, which is the same problem they had with the Bush administration, right, Mike? They thought, "At least the Obama's guys show up at meetings."
- Murray Hiebert: They are really nervous right now. As you know, they're so dependent on China economically, and they are part of the supply chain. The bigger economies are all part of the supply chain through China. They are digitally engaged. If there's a bifurcation of the IT sector, the digital space, and of the supply chain, they probably have to go with China. It's not like they would like to. They always said, even they're now saying it, "We don't want to make a choice," but the U.S. is just economically far away. If the international economic and digital space bifurcate, there's a lot more going on with China than there's going to be for us.

- Mike Green: Except for Vietnam, which is saying it will ban 5G and will work with Samsung. They're maybe the outlier, but you're right. That bifurcation is a real challenge. In 2004, Condi Rice told me, I was in the White House, that she wasn't going to the ASEAN Regional Forum. I said, "It's not the Treaty of Versailles. It's not like you'll be missing some historic event, but if you skip it, they will complain, I guarantee." Boy, they did. That was it.
- Mike Green: President Bush made every summit, every APEC summit. He's the only American president to make every one. Clinton, Obama, both missed multiple APEC summits. Bush made every one, even right after 9/11, but Condi skips two ASEAN Regional Forum meetings and that's it. You are nailed. You are pegged. You can imagine the reaction to President Trump skipping the East Asia Summit and sending Robert O'Brien instead. Not a good look.
- Mike Green: Greg, you raise a really important point, which is most of what we're seeing in Murray's book is the agency of ASEAN states, and it's not because we're asking them. It's because they have their own nationalism and their own interests. Circling back to you, what is American agency in this? What should the U.S. be doing to level the playing field a bit? I think we'd all agree, the stupid thing is to ask them to choose, so we can set that aside. That's not a good policy, but short of that, where is U.S. agency in this? How do we shape this in the coming year?
- Greg Poling: The U.S. can't ask them to choose. You're absolutely right. I think the U.S. shouldn't be afraid to pursue its own national interests without necessarily asking for permission. The goal for U.S. policymakers is figure out what U.S. interests are in the region, and then figure out how best to sell that to as many partners in Southeast Asia as possible, and keep them along for the ride. Southeast Asia doesn't get a veto.
- Greg Poling: There are going to be things, 5G is perhaps a good example, where there will be differences between U.S. interests and those of some of our Southeast Asian partners, and that's okay. I mean, it's okay to have some friction in some of these relationships. The problem with the current administration is that it's an awful lot of friction, as Murray said, on the econ front, and without a whole lot of respect for the agency of Southeast Asia, right? You can upset them here and there, but you also have to give way on certain issues too. That's what diplomacy is all about. Like anything else, it's going to be a calculus.
- Greg Poling: I also think that we have to remember that, while we talk about Southeast Asia as a shorthand, it's a pretty diverse region, as Murray said. There will be some things where we have to work with the region as a region, and there'll be something where you have to work with the Philippines or Vietnam or whoever, and not worry so much that you're upsetting Cambodia and Laos and Myanmar in the process.
- Mike Green: Murray's book opens with a chapter on China and what it's up to, and it's an exploration. It's not a conclusive chapter. It explores different views, in part

because I think you're setting up the subsequent chapters to look at key ASEAN states and how they view it. Rather than positing this is what China's doing, you open up the possibilities in that chapter, and then let your interviews and your research show how each state sees it. It's a really fun read, by the way, because it's colorful. It's good reportage in addition to good analysis.

Mike Green: I want to turn back to Greg before getting your take on this, because I have to confess, I was reading it and in the back of my mind, I was rating the ASEAN countries. A little voice in my head said, "Don't ask them to choose, don't ask them to choose," but as I was reading it, I was thinking, "Who would they choose?" Caveating that we shouldn't ask them to choose, let me ask Greg first and then back to Murray on how he came out of the research on this one.

Mike Green: Who of the 10 ASEAN states, Greg, should we be more worried about and who should we be less worried about than we currently are, in terms of being co-opted and coerced by China? Because there are some common views, but it is a diverse region with obviously different regime types, different levels of economic development and religious and ethnic and societal histories. Greg, who do you worry about more than most of us and who do you worry about less than most of us, of the ASEAN states, when it comes to Chinese coercion and hegemony and all the rest?

Greg Poling: Yeah. I mean, the easy answer is Cambodia, right? I think it's also important that we look at this relatively. It's not about who's closest to China or most in China's pocket. It's who was not in China's pocket a few years ago who shifted the farthest, or who's most important strategically to the U.S. and who is becoming less reliable as a result.

Greg Poling: On that metric, I worry about the Thais. I think the Thai alliance has become largely a historical anachronism. We no longer have shared interests or shared threats. It's really tied together by the prestige of the mil-mil relationship. That's not exactly going to stand up over the long term if we don't get to fixing it.

Greg Poling: I worry about Malaysia, largely because I think Malaysia is entering a long period of political turmoil, and the Chinese are much more willing to take advantage of that than we are.

Mike Green: That's interesting. I mean, not too long ago, the administration here was high-fiving, was celebrating Mahathir's comeback because he rejected a major Chinese investment project. You saw that as not a strategic shift so much as a tactical or a political thing?

Greg Poling: I'll make way to Murray on this. I hope he agrees with me on this. I think there is no country in Southeast Asia that this administration read worse than Malaysia. I think they were wildly premature and off base on the way they interpreted the elections, as evidenced by the high-fiving on the East Coast Rail Line, which

wasn't actually canceled. It was briefly suspended and renegotiated for a slightly better deal, for domestic political reasons.

- Mike Green: Anybody who's more resilient in the face of Chinese pressure or temptation than we think?
- Greg Poling: I think everyone knows Vietnam is, so I guess I don't have to say that.
- Mike Green: You know the saying, right? You both heard it, that Vietnam is shaped the way it is because of 3,000 years of having China on its back. It goes way back.
- Greg Poling: Yeah. I mean, I don't worry as much about Indonesia as some people do, because I think Indonesia distrusts both Washington and Beijing pretty equally, and that's not going to change. Indonesia is going to do what's right for Indonesia. Over the long term, if we can get through to 2022, I have less concern about the Philippines than some people, but Duterte is still going to Duterte for the next two years, and that's problematic.
- Mike Green: Murray, this is a little bit like the old Foreign Service exam, where candidates were given a budget and asked, "Where do you spend it?" Where would you invest U.S. diplomacy right now? Where should we be most worried and least worried?
- Murray Hiebert: I really think that we should not give up on Myanmar and Cambodia. I do believe in human rights. I think what Myanmar did to the Rohingya is repulsive and gross and inhumane and all that stuff. I think it's a country that's the crossroads from China to Southeast Asia. It's the crossroads from India to Southeast Asia. It's a country of over 54 million people. It's way too big to ignore, and we ignored them when they were the junta. Then China moved in, and it had huge advantages.
- Murray Hiebert: Then Secretary Clinton, President Obama visit, we do this, it rebounds toward Myanmar in a way. They made a lot of changes and opened up the country immensely, but then they took this horrible act. Now, we just throw them over the cliff or we ignore them. The embassy keeps chugging along a little bit, but they have no defender outside of Mitch McConnell in the Senate. They have no defender in the administration. I think it's too important.
- Murray Hiebert: I think also I would say the same about Cambodia. Cambodia has to go through a transition. Hun Sen is what now, 68 or something? He's going to transition. I guess it looks like he's going to hand it to his son, but his son will have a far more complicated time than Hun Sen, and he'll have to accommodate more factions. Patrick Murphy is now the ambassador there. I remember talking to him before he left and saying, "What are you going to do, whack them on human rights, or are you going to try to take it partially back from the Chinese?"

- Murray Hiebert: He didn't answer, but I think really we could play a more active role in these two countries. I hate saying put aside human rights, but you know what? We do it all the time. Vietnam is not going to win the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval from many human rights organizations, yet it's so strategically important that we overlook it.
- Murray Hiebert: I'm not quite as worried about Thailand as Greg is. The Thais are masters at just bending with the wind and playing all sides. I sense they've cooled off a little bit on the Chinese. That they stand up to the Chinese on their railroad was a big deal. They're giving them, the Chinese, not very much. American investment's far bigger, as is American military engagement. But I know what Greg is saying, and I don't totally disagree.
- Murray Hiebert: Malaysia is a worry. I don't know how it's going to shake out on this whole thing. Whether it's going to find its way back to quasi-democracy or just have royal coups or what, I don't know. I totally agree with Greg on Indonesia. It's the one really I feel very good about. They're going to hold everybody off at arm's length.
- Mike Green: Yeah. I was in Jakarta last in mid-November last year, and the Indonesians are never going to do what we ask. In fact, if we want them to do stuff, we probably shouldn't ask, but they're going to do a lot to prevent anybody. Also, it'll be just a function of geography and size and inertia, but they will stop countries from hegemonic control of Southeast Asia or go a long way towards it, just because they're the most consequential, biggest player. They're not going to be agile and they're not going to choose sides, but they're going to protect their interests. Right now, China is infringing on their interests a lot in Detun and elsewhere. I think that's shifting.
- Mike Green: It's so interesting, though, because what you guys might have answered two years ago would have been different. A year or two ago people thought Brunei was lost, and forget Laos, but now Brunei is putting out statements on the South China Sea that are kind of muscular, vis-a-vis China. Even Laos, as you pointed out, is pushing back a bit on debt trap.
- Mike Green: I think the takeaway in terms of U.S. strategy and U.S. policy is, in a way, I hate to say this on a strategy podcasts, but don't be too strategic. Don't make any assumptions about any of these countries in Southeast Asia. Constantly invest in the relationships, constantly, because they're looking out for their interests. They are internally conflicted, but there's more agency, as Greg said, than we realize.
- Mike Green: The democracy and human rights part is tricky. I think we have to play the long game. We have to invest in civil society and we have to invest in religious freedom. When I was sent to Vietnam in 2005 by President Bush, before Phan Van Khai the premier's visit to Washington, a big deal then, I laid it out. I said, "We need a long-term sense of evolution. We're not asking for revolution. It's in

your strategic interests." When we're consistent and engaged, we have more latitude to be more subtle and get more done on these things. It's when we fly in, wonder how it's going to look in the U.S. press and then fly out that we do no help.

Mike Green: This is why this book is so fascinating, because it is a journey through Southeast Asia on the ground, looking at how these big, strategic issues look on the ground. Any student, any diplomat, businessperson interested in Southeast Asia, should read it. It's a fun read. You can read it on the plane if you fly, or at home if you're Zooming.

Murray Hiebert: When you fly.

Mike Green: When you fly. Hey, I wanted to close by asking you, Murray, now that you finished this, what's the next book you want to read? Sorry, hint. Greg is working on a book on the South China Sea, but in addition to that, what is the next book you'd really like to see somebody write on Southeast Asia?

Murray Hiebert: You know, two of my Far Eastern Economic Review colleagues did books on Indonesia a long time ago. There is not really a book that takes a macro look at Indonesia and its role in the region. It is the fourth-largest country on the planet, and yet everybody knows where Bali is, and nobody knows where Indonesia is. It's crazy. I'd like to see a new look at Indonesia.

Mike Green: Excellent. Greg, when's your book? I'm sorry to put you on the spot. When's the book coming out on the South China Sea?

Greg Poling: If I get to finishing it, hopefully early 2021.

Mike Green: Excellent. Thanks, Greg. Murray, congratulations. The new book is *Under Beijing's Shadow: Southeast Asia's China Challenge*, from Rowman and Littlefield and CSIS, and this is the fulcrum of the U.S.-China strategic competition, and they don't want to be the fulcrum. It takes a strategic discipline and a level of nuance and subtlety which may not be very American, and yet it could be. It could be, and your book really helps show how it could be. Thank you all.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia Program's work, visit the CSIS website at [csis.org](https://www.csis.org) and click on the Asia Program page.