

# “Now We’re at The Asian Century”



## Dr. Gedaliah Afterman



## A Closer Look: South-East Asia Geopolitics

### DR. GEDALIAH AFTERMAN

**Dr. Gedaliah Afterman** is the Head of the Asia-Israel Policy Program at the Abba Eban Institute.

Well experienced in International Relations, he takes particular interest in Asian regional security,

**Chinese foreign policy** as well as superpower competition and its impacts globally and in the Middle East.

His previous roles include serving as a diplomat at the **Australian Embassy in Beijing**; International Strategic Policy Specialist at the **Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT)**; Fellow and China Programme Lead at the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI) in Jerusalem.

The International Diplomacy Initiative had the honour to host Dr. Gedaliah Afterman in one of his lectures, to deal with another theme in **the South-East Asian perspective**.

In the last decades we have seen the **World Power System** changing: during the Cold War the World was in a **Bipolarism system**, which was divided into United States Power and Soviet Union Power, from the finish of the Second World War to '90s.

Then the World Power System **started changing again**.

**In 2001**, took place one of the worse Terrorism attack against the United States, as a consequensis **the US started a new foreign policy**, with the superficial purpose to combat the terrorism, which was a new danger for the Nation. In this way until 10 years ago, **the power in the World was Unipolar**; The United States were **the “most powerful” State** in the Global structure.

**In the last decade** until today, we have been living in a **Multipolarism system**. Where there are many States growing, economically, politically and strategically.

**Russia**, under the Putin Administration, is undertaking a foreign policy of **continuous expansion** towards Asian States, with no intention to join with militaristic international organisations (such as NATO). Meanwhile, other Asian States, such as **China**, are growing too, not only economically, but in a strategic way too.

Therefore, in this multipolarism system, where **many big world powers are growing day by day** below our eyes, the International Diplomacy Initiative decided to do “A Closer Look” to this part of our World, to see **What is really changing and Which can be the next World Power System**.

# THE ASIAN COUNTRIES AND ITS GROWING

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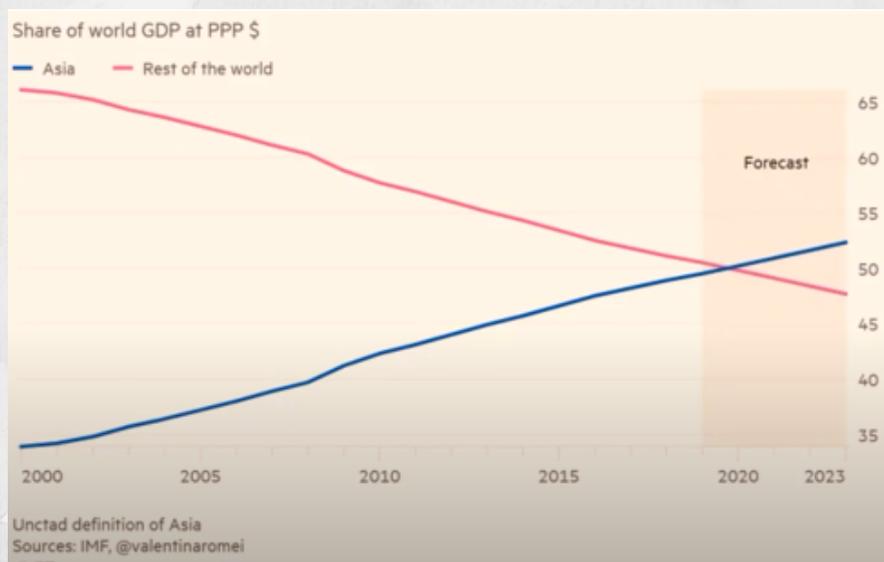
*Following the American point of view, today, China is the centre of Asia, in particular in terms of Trade*

- DR. AFTERMAN

Now, when we read these kinds of statements, we are not surprised, because day by day we hear some new **political or foreign strategies** taken by the Chinese government, and obviously the **importance that China has** in global trade affects us closely every day. During the lecture, Dr. Afterman reported some Datas, with the purpose to understand the importance and the way in which the **Asian States are growing, and impacting the world system.**

In the next nine or ten years, the Asian Impact is estimated to reach about **40% of the Global Economy**, and about **60% of Global Growth.**

The Asian Class will change too, it is estimated that **2.4 Billion people** will be added to the Global Middle Class, which represent **the 90% of China and India population.**



## RCEP: THE WORLD LARGEST FREE TRADE AGREEMENT (FTA)

The RCEP, literally: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, is a proposed agreement between the member states **of the Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN)** and its **free trade agreement partners.** The pact aims to cover trade in goods and services, intellectual property and all subjects in terms of trade.

When we talk about **Global Trade**, we have to keep in mind that the **RCEP is the biggest FTA in the World** in terms of Member States. In fact, this agreement represents 30% of World GDP, and if this trade agreement grows, it will be more and more significant.

These elements are important to keep in mind, especially when we talk about superpower competition.

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*“It has the Potential to change the economic landscape, but we have to see how it develops”*

- DR. AFTERMAN



# SOUTHEAST ASIA BETWEEN THE POWERS

The Southeast Asian region **has been shaped by superpower competition** from the beginning, from the middle of the 20th century, when many of these countries in the region became independent.

In fact, **originally** Asia was formed by **five countries**: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

The Southeast Asian Nations represent a diverse mix of economies, societies, and styles of government, from Indonesia, to Thailand and Singapore. The population there is approximately 640 million people.

An important element to consider is **China's interests in the Southeast Asia** region where it has significant interests, in an economic way, and territorial disputes, (such as with Taiwan). Chinese policy encapsulates **the elements of great power politics**, development assistance, regional security and border issues.

**During the 2000s**, as China continued to grow rapidly and use its economic power to shape relationships and policies in the region, **the US was seen as further disengaging from the region**.

China was careful to alleviate concerns of the US and region neighbours by emphasising its strategy of **"Peaceful development and harmonious world"**.

**From 2008** China adopted a tougher approach towards Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. **Due to its continuous economic growth**, even post-2008 economic crisis. The growth was not only in economic terms, but in a military way too. China's military spending is an important factor in China's rising self-confidence. By 2008, China's military budget had become the second largest in the world, immediately after that of the United States.

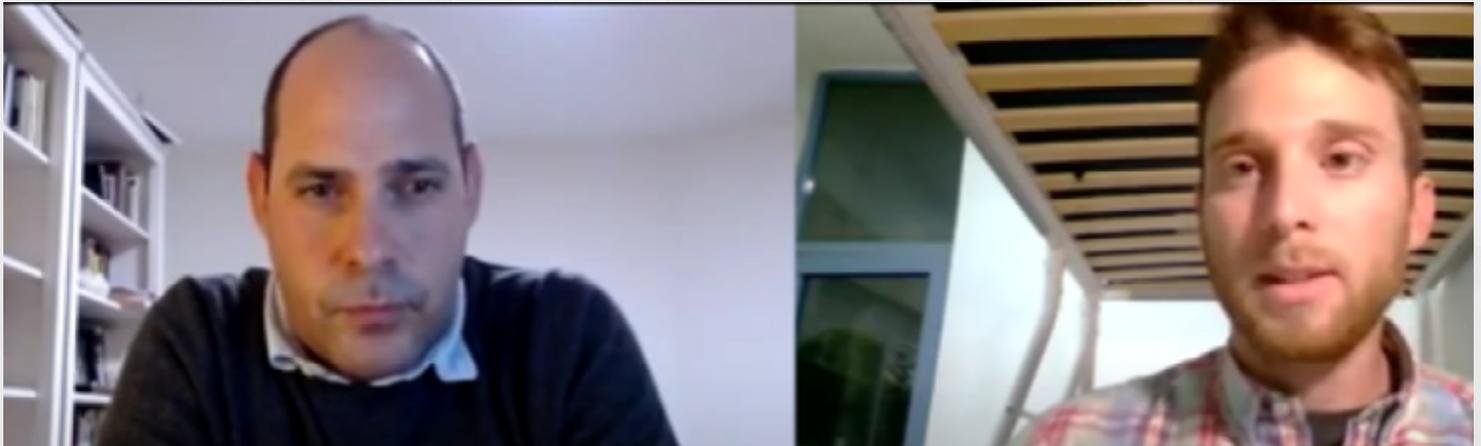
**With this rising national strength, the Chinese leadership appears to be more self-confident than ever before.**

No matter how many challenges lie ahead, the confidence Chinese people have in the development of their Nation, and their expectations for China's Role in international affairs, might outweigh that of the people in any other emerging country.

Meanwhile, **the Obama administration**, realising that the US was facing substantial challenges in the region, decided to **launch its "Pivot to Asia"** to mixed effect.

The "Pivot to Asia" it's a foreign policy with which the US established the multipolarism power system, rebalancing the relative strategic weight assigned to the different regions in the international system.

**This was overturned by the Trump Administration**, which withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. But with the Biden administration it seems to be to return to deal with Asia.



## THE ASEAN POSITION

The ASEAN is a regional grouping that promotes economic, political, and security cooperation, it **was established in 1967**, and today **includes 10 Nations**: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar.

ASEAN Countries hold different views towards China and the United States. As tensions between China and the United States have risen over the 2010s, **Southeast Asian leaders are often heard expressing their desire to avoid choosing sides**. For this reason, the ASEAN was the perfect way to deal with both parts, but it has not been very effective, especially when those powers, in particular China, **have used their leverage over individual ASEAN countries to undermine consensus-building**.

The ASEAN is **based on regional mechanisms** for more effective results. ASEAN countries prefer a multi-polar power dynamic in the region, avoiding a hegemon and providing as many options as possible. Although, China seems to become more and more powerful every day.

**In recent years**, China has clearly become the leading regional economic power. **China's economic growth has brought many benefits** for South-East Asia, but ASEAN countries are also wary of Chinese economic leveraging and bullying.

**ASEAN continue to encourage the US to assume a more active role** but feel disappointment in the US' perceived "withdrawal". Now, we have to see how the Biden administration will work on it.

**Dr. Gedaliah Afterman explained in simple words China's growth and the geopolitical system in Southeast Asia, from the cold war to its current growth. In this article there are some explanations about it, but you can find more information and the link of the lecture on our website!**

**There I reported some interesting interventions, by Dr. Afterman and a Canadian man. Which can be useful to understand the Southeast Asian vision.**

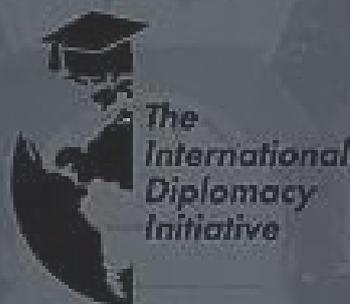
<<I remember on 2010 When I was in Beijing and the foreign Minister Yang Jiechi got a bit annoyed in the Asian Summit when the Singaporean criticised them for the policies in south China and said to him:

*"Listen China is a very big country all of you are small countries and you need to basically do what we say, you just have to live with the way we see things "* and that caused a lot of anxiety for allies. >> - said Dr. Afterman

During the lecture an old man from Canada, join his experience with us, comparing this situation between China growth and the ASEAN Nations, with a particular but perfect little history:

<< I'm from Canada and we are very used to sleeping next to elephants, and as the former prime minister once said:

*"When you sleep next to an elephant you have to be very concerned with every snort or anything that, that elephant might do when you are just a mouse trying to get some sleep next to it" >>*



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