

Major Research Paper

**International Factors and Rising  
Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia:**

*China's Belt and Road Initiative and the role of elite coherence  
in Malaysia and Indonesia*

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## Abstract

The degradation of rights and democracy in Southeast Asia marked by the last five years has captured the world's attention, initiating a prominent debate and vast literature about this increasingly salient issue. This paper acknowledges that there are domestic causes to this matter but chooses to focus on *how international factors contribute to the rise of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*. To find out, it looks at two main hypotheses: China's growing presence in Southeast Asia through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Trump administration's Asia policy. It looks at Malaysia and Indonesia, using the method of difference, to determine which hypothesis has the greatest impact. This paper is constructed of three arguments. The first concludes that China's BRI is the most important vector of authoritarianism among the two hypotheses studied. It argues that the illiberal characteristics of the BRI, its holistic approach and its strategic vision make the initiative an effective enabler of illiberal propensities. Although Trump's Asia policy does reinforce the degradation of rights and democracy in Southeast Asia, it lacks coherence and long-term engagement to have a substantive effect. Secondly, it claims that the effect of the BRI is conditional upon the cohesion of the ruling elite. If there is unanimity among elites to embrace the potential offered by the BRI, authoritarian tendencies will be stronger. On the contrary, divided elites will dampen such tendencies. Finally, this paper argues that the effects of the BRI on authoritarian tendencies in Southeast Asia, notwithstanding the position of the ruling elite, will not last if the enthusiasm for the Chinese initiative is not shared by civil society.

## Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BN	Barisan Nasional
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FITWI	Freedom in the World Index
MSR	21 <sup>st</sup> -Century Maritime Silk Road
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
US	United States of America

## Introduction

Democracy<sup>1</sup> and civil liberties<sup>2</sup> have been declining for years in Southeast Asia but 2017 is set to be the worse in a decade (Kurlantzick, 2018). The region is seemingly following the trend of rising authoritarianism and waning liberal democracy<sup>3</sup> around the world (Freedom House, 2018). Many political science experts have turned their focus towards this global tendency but few have tried to analyze it on a regional level. This paper recognizes the crisis of liberal democracy is global but deliberately narrows its attention to ask *why civil and political liberties are declining in Southeast Asia*. This strategic refocusing will allow us to find more precise answers and understand underlying regional dynamics. Among the factors contributing to the rise of authoritarianism in any country, domestic politics undoubtedly plays a role. As the following analysis demonstrates, internal factors such as separatism or nationalism can explain the decision of a government to act (or not) in an authoritarian fashion. This study acknowledges these dynamics but is interested in the role played by international factors. More precisely, it tries to find out *how international factors contribute to the rise of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*.

According to the literature on the subject, two main hypotheses stand out. The first one supposes that the Trump administration's foreign policy for Asia fosters authoritarian tendencies and reinforces the perception among the ruling elite that the president of the United States (US) is amenable to a more transactional, fewer values-driven bilateral relationship (Sutton and Harding, 2017). The second suggests that the rise of China and its growing presence in Southeast Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emboldens autocrats and enables the ruling elite to advance a more authoritarian style of governance. Although the external drivers for the retreat of democracy and civil liberties are hardly monolithic, I argue that China, especially through the BRI, is the main

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<sup>1</sup> This paper defines "democracy" based on Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino's four key elements: political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; protection of the human rights of all citizens; a rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens (2004).

<sup>2</sup> This paper defines civil rights based on from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Freedom House's methodology (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Liberal democracy refers to "a democratic system of government in which individual rights and freedoms are officially recognized and protected, and the exercise of political power is limited by the rule of law." (Oxford Dictionary, 2018, [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/liberal\\_democracy](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/liberal_democracy))

international influence and that the US's foreign policy behaviour in Southeast Asia reinforces the trend, but in a secondary fashion.

I argue that the BRI is the main international influence on authoritarianism tendencies in the region because it proposes a holistic approach and puts forward a strategic long-term vision which meets actual needs of the participating countries. At the same time, core characteristics of China's initiative, like the "no political strings attached policy"<sup>4</sup>, carry genuine illiberal features (Xinhua, 2018 & Boghani and Conway-Smith, 2013). As a result, the BRI offers to those in power stability, investments and strong economic growth without having to compromise on domestic governance, making the initiative particularly effective in enabling authoritarian propensities. In summation, I argue that the more a country accepts BRI-related projects, the more likely it is to evolve towards authoritarianism. This, however, is conditional upon the cohesion of the ruling elite; if there is unanimity among this group to embrace the potential offered by the BRI, the leaning towards authoritarianism will be stronger. On the contrary, a divided elite will dampen this tendency. This research also demonstrates that authoritarianism, notwithstanding the position of the ruling elite, will not last if the enthusiasm for the BRI is not shared by civil society.

The objective of this paper is to determine how international factors contribute to the rise of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia. To investigate this question, I use the method of difference<sup>5</sup> by comparing the developments of political rights and civil liberties in Indonesia and Malaysia over the last five years (2013–2017). This timeframe was selected because both hypotheses take effect, in addition to the noticeable degradation of liberal democracy during that period. Malaysia and Indonesia are good candidates for a

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<sup>4</sup> The qualification of Chinese projects as "no-strings attached" is controversial. No conditions on human rights and democracy do not mean there are no conditions at all. Observers have noted that China does exert indirect pressure on political elites and parties when its immediate interests are at stakes (Xinsong, 2017). In the case of Sri Lanka for instance, the asymmetry between the lender and the borrower is such that it placed the latter in a very fragile bargaining position (Kreps and Flores-Macías, 2013). As Jean-François Gautrin of the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research explains it, "Chinese foreign policy has a set of non-negotiable values that are expected not to be challenged by "friendly" partners (Gautrin, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> The method of difference is best described by John Stuart Mills as "If an instance in which the phenomenon under investigation occurs, and an instance in which it does not occur, have every circumstance save one in common, that one occurring only in the former; the circumstance in which alone the two instances differ, is the effect, or cause, or a necessary part of the cause, of the phenomenon." (Mills, *A System of Logic*, Vol. 1, 1843).

comparison since they present close similarities but differ in the outcome that is being studied here. Although Southeast Asia is a very heterogeneous region, Malaysia and Indonesia share a similar culture, language, geography and religion. They have close historical ties, have both experienced European colonization, and are experiencing rapid growth and urbanization. Moreover, they both shared generally good relations with the US and China in the early 2000s. Still, the health of their liberal democracy has been following a distinctive trajectory during the last five years. Since 2013, there has been continuous regression in political rights and civil liberties in Malaysia that are not comparable in Indonesia (Freedom of the World, 2017). The goal of this paper is to investigate why.

This research is divided in three sections. The first section includes a brief description of the decline of liberal democracy around the world and establishes the historical context for liberal democracy's current concerning trends in Southeast Asia. It reviews the recent developments in both Malaysia and Indonesia and compares legislation, other formal and informal rules, making use of indexes and NGO reports to demonstrate the course each country is following.

The second section analyzes China's influence in both countries. It gives a brief overview of the elevated economic and geopolitical importance of Southeast Asia for China and explain how the BRI fits in this relation. It describes the nature of the BRI and exposes the elements that make it an effective vector of authoritarianism. It examines the participation of each country in the initiative and analyzes the reaction of the ruling elite in both to determine whether their behaviour could have had an impact on their method of governance.

The last section considers the potential impact of the Trump administration on authoritarian tendencies in Malaysia and Indonesia. To begin, it underlines the contrasts between the main features of both Obama and Trump's Asia policy. It then focuses on bilateral relations of the US with Malaysia and Indonesia and looks at how the characteristics of Trump's foreign policy shifted the perception of the US among the

traditional elite of both countries. It concludes that Trump's foreign policy in Southeast Asia has an impact on the ruling elite but that this one is limited due to the lack of coherence and long-term engagement.

This subject is relevant for many reasons. First, it is important to disentangle common perceptions about the relationship between the US and Chinese behaviour in Southeast Asia and the rise of authoritarianism in the region. By using the comparative method, it puts into perspective possible causes and tries to evaluate their effect. Second, it contributes to the debate on China's propensity to export its economic and political model abroad. With the BRI (and Trump's presidency) still being in its early stage, the goal here is not to provide definitive answers. However considering the scope of China's BRI, its possible impact on Eurasia and beyond, and the potential for long-lasting impacts of Trump's presidency in Asia, an investigation of these trends is necessary. It can only serve to enrich the current debate on the impact of Chinese and American policies on political regimes in the region. This paper is also thought-provoking because it draws attention to the importance of elite cohesion in the development of authoritarian states. It explains in a comprehensive fashion how the unity of this privileged group of the society has a tremendous impact on the ideological path a society will follow. Finally, it highlights the relevance of public opinion, even in fragile democracies, on the stability and durability of authoritarian tendencies. This finding is fascinating to those who are interested in the role of civil society on democratization and civil rights in Southeast Asia.

## Chapter 1—Challenges to Democracy and Civil Liberties

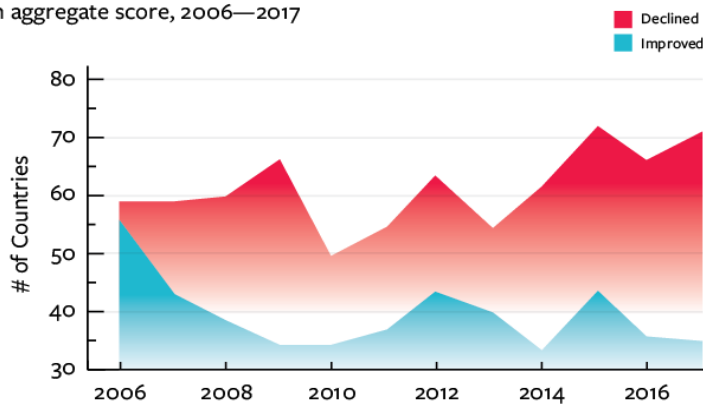
### Rising Authoritarianism Around the World

The fall of the Soviet Union and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe convinced many in the West that liberal democracy was a superior political, economic and moral regime compared to autocracy. The economic successes of Western countries were indeed evident, thus inciting countries in transition or development to embrace capitalism, democracy, and human rights to spur economic growth and establish good relations with the United States (Mounk & Foa, 2018). From Brazil to Chile, the Philippines to South Korea, the “third wave of democratization” as Samuel Huntington called it, sparked citizens around the world to demand a political system governed by democratic norms and values that can guarantee economic development and prosperity. As the world entered the new millennium, the position of liberal democracy as the political system to emulate was undeniable.

**Figure 1**

#### Twelve Years of Decline

Number of countries that declined and improved in aggregate score, 2006—2017



[www.freedomintheworld.org](http://www.freedomintheworld.org)

Over the last 12 years however, the star of liberal democracy has consistently waned and more than ever, 2017 has seen it battered and weakened in every corner of the globe. Once promising democratic nations such as Hungary, Turkey or the Philippines, are flirting dangerously with autocratic tendencies (Freedom House, 2018). Centralization of power in the executive, politicization of the judiciary, attacks on the independent media,

the use of public office for private gain, crack down on civil society, extrajudicial killings or arbitrary imprisonment; the use of illiberal measures by “democratic” governments abound (Rose, 2018).

At the same time, these measures are taking place in a growing context of indifference by the standard-bearers of human rights and democracy. Washington, Brussels and other democracies in the West are facing a myriad of internal challenges themselves. The recent elections in the US and European countries have put the spotlight on the failure of democracy to adequately improve standards of living and wealth redistribution. US President Donald Trump and right-wing populists in Europe were quick to tap into this anger for political gain. Both distrust the norms and rules on which liberal democracies are based, and share a genuine contempt for human rights and the rule of law (Mounk & Foa, 2018). Consequently, liberal democracy is facing an existential crisis in its native lands, which undeniably casts a shadow over its attractiveness abroad. Besides, the world’s leading autocracies, China and Russia, are becoming increasingly authoritarian at home and confident abroad, seizing the opportunity to push their economic and political system as credible and efficient alternatives (Freedom House, 2018).

### [Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia](#)

This tidal wave of dissatisfaction against liberal democracy has inevitably landed on the shores of Southeast Asia. Indeed, 2016 and 2017 have been difficult years for democracies of the region, a worrying tendency which seems set to reverse the gains made in the last thirty years (Pepinsky, 2017). Literally every country has shown undemocratic fractures. After a noticeable democratic transition in 2015, Myanmar’s army has shown brutality in its handling of the Rohingyas crisis in 2017, reminiscent of the military regime’s worst practices. Vietnam and Laos, two closed communist regimes, tightened their grip over civil society (Marston, 2018). Hun Sen in Cambodia has managed to dissolve the only opposition party, clearing the path for his re-election in 2018. Thailand remains under military rule. Duterte in the Philippines is an example of authoritarian regression and shows open disdain for human rights with his violent anti-drug campaign. “Competitive-authoritarian” regimes like Singapore and Malaysia are

becoming less competitive and intolerant to opposite views (Pepinsky, 2017). Even Indonesia, the region's most genuine democracy, appears to have succumbed to intolerance as Islamist groups succeeded in prosecuting and imprisoning Jakarta's Governor Basuki Tjahaja "Ahok" Purnama under blasphemy charges (L. Connelly & Busch, 2018). Notwithstanding the hard-fought gains of the last thirty years, democracy and human rights gains remain brittle in most of Southeast Asian nations.

The following paragraphs will review Indonesia and Malaysia's historical context with a prominent focus on the 2013-2017 period to analyze the trajectory they have taken. Even if they faced analogous challenges, the government in Kuala Lumpur has become more favorable towards taking autocratic measures. This exercise establishes the foundations for an evaluation of the role that external influences have on the regression of civil and political rights in these two countries.

## Indonesia

Indonesia has come a long way since independence. The Dutch rule lasted over 350 years and was marked by its brutality (Chenoweth & Allen, 2017). The country became independent in 1949 after a bloody war against the Netherlands, only to fall under the iron fist of Sukarno and Suharto. The latter established a systematic dictatorship notorious for its aggressive foreign policy, the government-sponsored bloodshed against suspected communists, and an extremely high degree of control over the media, judiciary, civil society and political opposition (Chenoweth & Allen, 2017). His regime lasted 31 years and crumbled down in the face of strong protests led by the Indonesia Democratic Party-Struggle and the severe economic condition resulting from the Asian financial crisis in 1998.

Indonesia has made remarkable progress to the point that some consider it the only true democracy of Southeast Asia (Kurlantzick, 2018). Although for much of its recent history Indonesia has lived under colonial or repressive authoritarian regimes with few concerns for political representation or basic civil liberties, it moved quickly in the opposite direction since its first democratic election in 1999. There has been an alternation of

power during the three subsequent elections (deemed generally free by national observers), new constitutional provisions to eliminate anti-democratic features were adopted and direct elections, at the national, provincial and local level were put in place (Chenoweth & Allen, 2017). Successive democratic governments adopted international standards such as the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights as well as the eight ILO conventions. Overall, Indonesia has established a “significant pluralism in politics and the media and has undergone multiple, peaceful transfers of power between parties” (Freedom House, 2017).

According to the Freedom of the World 2017 Index, Indonesia is “partly free” with an aggregate score of 65 out of 100<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, Indonesia has the best score of Southeast Asia when it comes to political rights, with a noticeable improvement in the electoral process due to the free and fair election of President Widodo in 2014. Reports by the Economist Intelligence Unit and Freedom House show a certain degree of degradation of civil liberties in the last two years. In 2016, militant Muslim groups have sealed the fate of Basuki Tjahaja “Ahok” Purnama, the former governor of Jakarta, by accusing him of blasphemy. These demonstrations of intolerance culminated with large protests in Jakarta involving anti-Christian and anti-Chinese slogans, eventually leading to the imprisonment of Ahok. This example of chauvinism of the Indonesian society is among the reasons why it was downgraded to the “partly free” category. Nevertheless, international watchdogs agree that democratic politics have been firmly implanted in Indonesian society (D. Scott, 2017). The intolerance shown by certain segments of the population can be worrisome for coexistence in a multi-ethnic society such as Indonesia but it does not overcome the solid gains in political rights made since the transition to democracy (Chenoweth & Allen, 2017). In short, liberal democracy is resilient in Indonesia because even while civil liberties have slightly declined, political rights continue to be firmly upheld.

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<sup>6</sup> 0 being the least free, 100 the most free.

## Malaysia

To understand contemporary governance in Malaysia, one must comprehend the power struggle that conducted to its independence. Politics in this country are heavily based on ethnicity. Malays, which are Muslims, account for slightly over 50% of the population, followed by 24% of Chinese and 8% of Indians (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017). When the Federation of Malaya gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the party under which Malays clustered, concluded that “the more prosperous non-Malay ethnic groups, which played a dominant role in the merchant economy, would enjoy citizenship and cultural autonomy while bumiputera (ethnic Malays and other indigenous groups) will retain special privileges” (Chenoweth & Allen, 2017). This agreement allowed the creation of the Barisan Nasional (BN), a grand coalition dominated by the UMNO, transcending ethnic lines to incorporate Chinese and Indians parties.

Although Malaysia avoided dictatorship, it cannot be considered a consolidated democracy. On the contrary, the BN coalition has been the longest-ruling coalition in the world (61 years) until its defeat of May 2018, and did not refrain from using doubtful manoeuvres to guarantee its position (Germain, 2018). Prior to the launch of the BRI in 2013, the BN already had made use of illiberal tactics to make structural changes to Malaysia’s political institutions and secure its dominance upon Malaysian politics (The Editorial Board of the East Asia Forum, 2018).

Illiberal features characterized Malaysia politics before the Najib Razak administration but reports monitoring civil and political rights show that threats to civil liberties and political rights have increased since 2014. According to the Freedom of the World 2017 index, Malaysia is “partly free” with an aggregate score of 44 out of 100. Most troubling, the country has lost one point per year since 2014, a continuous downward trend. Unlike Indonesia, this tendency affects both the political and civil rights stream.

On the political right stream, the illiberal drift coincides with the 2013 election, which saw the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan win 51% of the overall vote but only obtain

41% of the seats in the federal parliament, due to gerrymandering, phantom-voting and politicization of the Electoral Commission by the ruling coalition (Germain, 2018). Since this hard-won victory, the BN of Najib Razak arrested multiple opposition figures, including the leader of the Pakatan Harapan Anwar Ibrahim, under suspicious charges of sodomy and corruption. Najib has restricted the opposition's access to media and hindered campaigning activities, while shrinking decision-making processes around the ruling coalition's inner circle. This reality combined with the government ethnic cronyism and blurred distinctions between public and private enterprises create conditions for rampant corruption (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017). Indeed, Najib Razak is among the prime suspect of the 1MDB scandal, an enormous embezzlement in which he would have received nearly \$700 million of deposits in his personal bank accounts from the national investment fund (The Wall Street Journal, 2015) This everlasting affair has weakened the BN coalition and Najib himself, who retaliated in a typical authoritarian fashion. In response, he purged the government apparatus of those demanding accountability, restricted public discussion on the subject and even fired the attorney general in charge of investigating the affair to settle the matter once and for all.

The poisonous political climate inevitably reflected upon governance. The government's readiness to crack down on the opposition is reflected on its tight control over the media (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The ruling coalition restricts publications, censors books and films, and monitors the web through far-reaching laws and institutions it controls. As the shutdown of the *Malaysian Insiders* in 2016 demonstrates the government "engages in legal harassment of critical voices, charging them under defamation laws such as the Official Secrets Act, and the Sedition Act— all of which include imprisonment as a possible penalty" (Freedom House, 2017). In the same vein, the government recently adopted a strict and vague "anti-fake news" legislation (Germain, 2018), which many fear will be manipulated to clamp down government critics. Najib also inflames religious and ethnic division to strengthen its position among Malays and further jeopardizes the delicate social cohesion of the country (East Asia Forum, 2018). Freedom of assembly and association are tarnished by the *Societies Act*, which gives absolute discretion to the

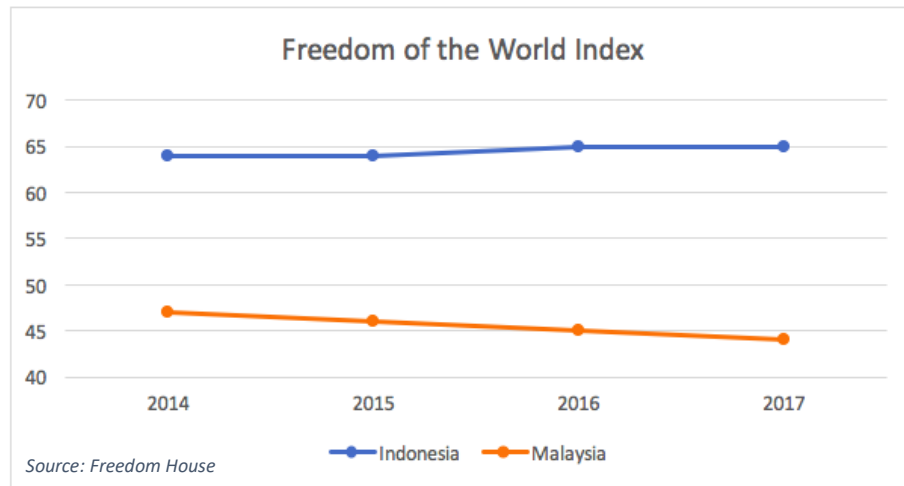
Ministry of Home Affairs to declare an organization illegal and to clamp down over political parties or public demonstrations.

In sum, the aforementioned measures and legislation expose the concerns over liberal democracy in Malaysia. The stunning victory of the Pakatan Harapan, however, is considerably reassuring for the health of the Malaysian democracy. Still, the leader of the winning coalition, Mahatir Mohamad, is not a newcomer in Malaysian politics. On the contrary, Mahatir, 92 years old, was the country's longest-serving prime minister, from 1981 until 2003. Moreover, he "has no reputation as a committed democratic or civil libertarian" and is undeniably one of the architects of cronyism and authoritarian culture that spread in Kuala Lumpur (Kurlantzick, 2018). It remains to be seen if these practices have mellowed with time or are just as sharp as before.

## Key Takeaways

The previous section reveals different takeaways. First, the degradation is more important in Malaysia than Indonesia. Even if the demonstration of intolerance and nationalism are worth pointing out in Indonesia, its results remain relatively stable versus the continuous decline observed in Malaysia.

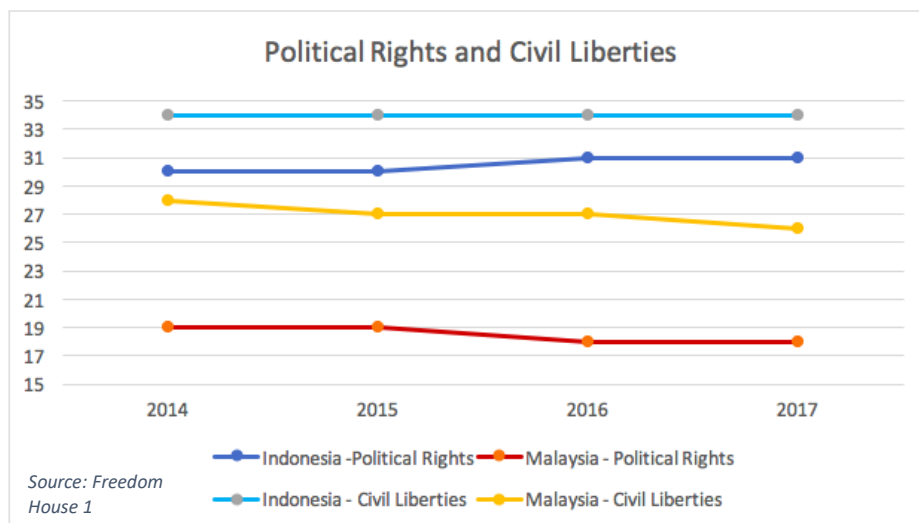
**Figure 2**



**\*\*0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free\*\* 2**

Second and more specifically, both political and civil rights have deteriorated in Malaysia, while political rights remain firm in Indonesia. This twofold action denotes a more comprehensive leaning of the Malaysian regime towards authoritarianism.

**Figure 3**



**\*\*0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free\*\***

**\*\*Political Rights/40, Civil Liberties/60\*\***

Following Linz, an authoritarian regime is “a political system with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive or intensive political mobilization, except at some point in their development, and at which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits, but actually quite predictable ones. In authoritarianism, there may or may not be a rule of law, space for a semi-opposition, or space for regime moderates who might establish links with opposition moderates, and there are normally extensive social and economic activities that function within a secure framework of relative autonomy” (Linz & Stepan, 2010). Features such as the exercise of power by a restricted group, within formally ill-defined limits and a flexible rule of law can already be found in Malaysia pre-2013 but the actions the administration of Najib Razak took after its re-election further aggravated the situation and contributed to a hardening of the regime. The question now is to understand what external factors emboldened the ruling elite in Kuala Lumpur to take illiberal measure, and why these have not happened in neighbouring Indonesia. Two hypotheses stand out. The first one supposes that the Trump administration’s foreign policy for Asia fosters authoritarian tendencies and reinforces the perception among the ruling elite that the president of the US is amenable to a more transactional, fewer values-driven bilateral relationship (Sutton and Harding, 2017). The second suggests that the rise of China and its growing presence in Southeast Asia through the BRI emboldens autocrats and enables the ruling elite to advance a more authoritarian style of governance. This paper argues that the illiberal characteristics of the BRI, its holistic approach and its strategic vision make China’s grand initiative an effective enabler of illiberal propensities and the main international influence over the rise of authoritarianism.

## Chapter 2—China’s Growing Presence in Southeast Asia

It has been exposed in the previous chapter that political rights and civil liberties have suffered significantly more in Malaysia than in Indonesia over the last five years. On the surface, the immediate causes of this regression appear largely driven by domestic concerns. However, I argue that this illiberal drift in Malaysia was emboldened by external factors. This paper seeks to determine which external dynamics gave the Najib administration in Kuala Lumpur the opportunity to opt for a stronger style of governance at the expense of political rights and civil liberties, and why the ruling elite in Indonesia has not followed the same path. Among the possible causes, the rising influence of China’s BRI in Southeast Asia and its impact on the ruling elite stand out. This chapter includes a brief description of the BRI and exposes the elements that make it an effective vector of authoritarianism. It reviews the development of Beijing’s initiative in both Malaysia and Indonesia and compares the behaviour of the ruling elite to illustrate the impact it had on their inclination towards authoritarianism. Finally, I look at the position of civil society to highlight its effect on the stability and durability of authoritarian tendencies.

### Main Hypothesis and Causal Mechanism

The main hypothesis of this paper is that embracing China’s BRI rhetoric and BRI projects emboldens autocrats and enables the ruling elite to advance a more authoritarian style of governance. The argument is that China proposes a holistic approach and puts forward a strategic long-term vision which meets actual needs of the participating countries. At the same time, Beijing’s grand initiative carries genuine illiberal features (Xinhua, 2018 & Boghani and Conway-Smith, 2013). As a result, the BRI offers to those in power stability, investments and economic growth without having to compromise on domestic governance. This makes the initiative a particularly effective enabler of authoritarian propensities. In sum, I argue that *the more a country accepts BRI-related projects, the more likely it is to evolve towards authoritarianism*. This, however, is conditional upon the cohesion of the ruling elite; if there is unanimity among this group to embrace the potential offered by the BRI, the leaning towards authoritarianism will be stronger. On the contrary, a divided elite will dampen this tendency.

## The Belt and Road Initiative

As defined by Elizabeth Economy, China under President Xi has entered a third revolution characterized by “a reassertion of the state in Chinese political and economic life at home, and a more ambitious and expansive role for China abroad” (Economy, 2018). It is a stark contrast from Deng Xiaoping’s famous quote: “hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership.” To better measure this “more ambitious and expansive role” abroad, one must look at the Belt and Road Initiative.

Figure 4



Unveiled in 2013, this grand plan proposes a web of hard and soft infrastructure across Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, with China at its core. It covers a multitude of investment plans, brand new or ongoing, designed to promote economic cooperation and coordination among countries along the proposed routes, facilitate trade and reduce barriers, efficiently allocate resources and further market integration (HKTDC, 2017). At the Belt and Road Economic Cooperation Forum in Beijing in 2017, President Xi estimated the BRI will require \$900 billion in investment, but some experts believe the exact number turns around \$8 trillion (HKTDC, 2017). To fund its endeavours, China has created two structures. First, Beijing has committed \$40 billion to the Silk Road Fund, a state-owned investment fund established in 2014 specifically to finance BRI-related

projects. The Chinese government has initiated its capitalization while China's big policy banks like China Development Bank or China Exim Bank, will advance the rest of the money (Crandall & Crandall, 2017). The second structure is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). This multilateral financial institution was founded in 2015 with a special focus on developing infrastructure and now regroups over 80 members scattered around the world.

### China's Interests in the BRI

The creation of the BRI is closely related to the strategic interests of Beijing. Given the geographic and cultural proximity, the strategic location and the economic vitality of the region, it goes without saying that Southeast Asia is a priority region within BRI.

#### *Economic Interests*

Trade between the two regions has been on the rise since the beginning of the 2000s, a trend that foreshadows the BRI (Arase, 2015). Southeast Asia is now China's fourth export market and its third trading partner (Blanchard, J-F, 2018). From this perspective, the creation of the BRI contributes to supporting and even expands China's trade opportunities. As the BRI is set to improve maritime and land connectivity between Southeast Asia and China, it is poised to boost trade, provide new business opportunities and reinforce the position of Chinese enterprises. At the same time, it acts as a platform to address China's chronic excess capacity. Beijing also sees the BRI as the perfect vitrine to export its technological and engineering standards through Asia, a crucial aspect to further develop the country's industry (Cai, 2017). The BRI also secures China's access to the raw materials of Southeast Asia. Besides investments in connectivity infrastructure projects, significant investments under the BRI label continue to be targeted at Southeast Asia's fisheries, mines, oil and gas fields, pipelines and power plants (Blanchard, 2018)

#### *Geostrategic and Political Interests*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the sea-based portion of the BRI, relies heavily on the waters of Southeast Asia. At the crossroad of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the region constitutes the trajectory of strategic sea lanes for China and

global trade, such as the Malacca Strait. Improving maritime connectivity through BRI-related investments is not only essential for the MSR's success but is also a major security safeguard for China because it improves its capacity of reaction and strengthens its resilience in case of disruption over those sea lanes. (Kapahi, 2018). The focus on the construction of ports, railways and roads in countries such as Malaysia and Myanmar for instance, will "help reduce the costs, time and instability of resources shipments" and consequently improve China's security (Blanchard, 2018).

Political interests in the BRI have been downplayed by Chinese officials to avoid suspicions, opting instead to championing connectivity and win-win interactions based on mutual interests. However, Beijing has obvious interests in seeing the BRI succeed. First, it is an instrument to forge stronger relations with Southeast Asian nations, in the hope that stronger economic ties will lead to closer cooperation in other areas. Further integrating Southeast Asian economies into China's orbit has the potential to see these countries adopt pro-China policies and champion Beijing's interests at ASEAN and in other multilateral organizations (Blanchard, 2018). This phenomenon has already begun to unfold around the delicate topic of the South China Sea. Interests of China and its Southern neighbours are miles apart on this issue. However, Beijing has skillfully used a carrot-and-stick approach, balancing diplomacy, trade opportunities and military assertiveness to coerce and soften the position of its rival (Tham, 2018). In this regard, the BRI is instrumental, as it represents the prize of cooperating with Beijing on this delicate topic.

The previous paragraphs have shown how Beijing has catalyzed its economic and political weight to advance its interest in Southeast Asia. Despite China's official discourse of win-win relations, the BRI has the potential to go further than economies of Southeast Asia and encourage the latent authoritarian tendencies of the ruling elite. Because it proposes a holistic and long-term approach and meets actual needs of the participating countries, it is tempting for many countries to get on board. At the same time, the terms on which BRI-related projects are based carry genuine illiberal features (Xinhua, 2018 & Boghani and Conway-Smith, 2013). Concretely, the power of attraction of the BRI is hard to resist and brings in dangerous elements of authoritarianism.

## BRI Offers a Holistic Approach

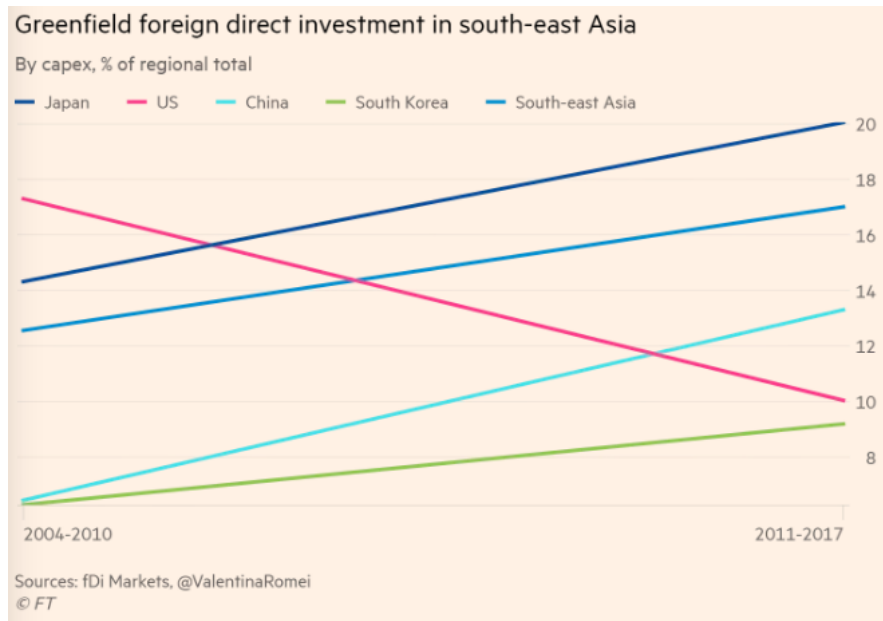
In recent years, China has dramatically increased its position in Southeast Asian economies. Since 2009, it is ASEAN's largest trading partner and this trend has only increased with the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement in 2010, which contributed to further interconnecting economies (Kapahi, 2018).

**Figure 5**



To give an illustrative example, Beijing now accounts for about 20% of the value of all goods imported in the region versus 5% in 2000 and it has outpaced Japan, the US and the EU in relative trade share with all ASEAN countries (Reed, 2018). Put aside trade, China has increasingly become an investor in Southeast Asia. In 2016 only, \$30 billion in Chinese investment poured in the rapidly developing economies of ASEAN (Guild, 2018). As shown in the Figure 6 *Greenfield foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia* below, Chinese investments in Southeast Asia are growing faster than those of other major investors. In the light of this reality, it is evident that Southeast Asian economies are more intertwined with China's than before.

**Figure 6**



However, the BRI adds a distinct feature to China’s investment relations with Southeast Asia; a holistic and long-term approach. First, BRI-related investments are not confined the development of hard infrastructure. They spread out to soft infrastructure (i.e. trade and transportation agreements, special economic zones, etc.), a Digital Belt and Road and even cultural ties with university scholarships and other people-to-people exchange (Hillman, 2018). Beijing devotes significant resources at “organizing BRI events, promoting BRI stories, and conducting other outreach” in China and abroad to demystify the project and convince foreign audiences (Hillman, 2018). Therefore, the BRI goes beyond strictly trade and investment and encompasses various segments of the society. Second, BRI-related investment has modified the trajectory of Chinese FDI. Investments of Chinese companies in Southeast Asia have historically clustered around energy and raw materials. In the context of the BRI, infrastructure investments are now the major and most visible component of the initiative, but the initiative encourage diversification in other less traditional subsectors of investment. For instance, Beijing invested massively in connectivity-related infrastructure (ports, railways, and roads), satellites, real estate, agriculture, manufacturing, public utilities, technology and urban development (HKTDC, 2018). As a result, BRI goes beyond traditional approach to aid and development; it is a

holistic approach that affects and mobilizes the entire society of a country. Consequently, its benefits and risks are shared by the whole nation.

### BRI Meets Infrastructure Needs

ASEAN countries are attractive foreign direct investment destinations for China because of the necessity for infrastructure modernization. The needs for major investments in the upcoming years, most particularly in railways, road networks, electrification grid or ports, are critical. It is not a coincidence that when first proposed in 2013, this web of hard and soft infrastructure development received a warm welcome in most Southeast Asian capitals. Indeed, the region needs approximately \$3.15 trillion in infrastructure until 2030 to keep up with rapid economic growth, a skyrocketing population and devastating climate change prospects (Asian Development Bank, 2017). The ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2015, the organization's strategy to improve regional connectivity and develop transport infrastructure, has seen very little progress so far (Majumdar, 2017). Except for Singapore, many ASEAN nations are confronting financing deficits, giving an opportunity for China to step in (Knight-Frank, 2018). As part of its goal to improve connectivity within Asia, the BRI brings China's expertise in construction as well as the funding to develop new deep-water ports to increase trade along the route and facilitate exports of goods from landlocked regions by railway networks (HKTDC, 2017). This approach benefits China's interests while also being consistent with the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2015 objectives. As a result, participation in the BRI is hard to turn down for Southeast Asian leaders because they fulfill an immediate necessity.

### BRI-Related Projects Have Illiberal Characteristics

While the two previous paragraphs expose the strong attractiveness of the BRI over Southeast Asian countries, this section underscores the elements that make it a vehicle of authoritarianism. BRI-related projects are characterized by the nature of financing and the style of aid and investment. These projects generally take the form of loans. Because "China has shown little inclination to adhere to internationally recognized norms of debt sustainability, such as the sovereign lending principles issued by the UN Conference on Trade and Development," it has the leverage to craft the leasing terms it judges preferable

(Fontaine & Kliman, 2018). This ineluctably raises concern that Beijing might use this economic leverage to gain the upper-hand against debtor countries and put pressure on host governments. Still, many get over these worries and accept the loans due to the fact they fulfill a need, create economic development and because they are offered on very generous terms (Fontaine & Kliman, 2018). In short, this feature of the BRI embarks participating country on a slippery slope of indebtedness and risks losing sovereignty over Beijing.

Another characteristic of BRI-related loans is its intrinsic link with China's foreign policy principle of non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs (Xinsong, 2017). China is eager to promote its vision for commercial relations as in contrast of the Western approach. As Chinese officials like to put it, China's approach to trade has no political strings attached<sup>7</sup> (Xinhua, 2018 & Boghani and Conway-Smith, 2013). Beijing has touted its way of doing business as absent of conditions like the respect of human rights, democracy and labour provisions (Kreps and Flores-Macías, 2013). This policy contrasts with Western countries' or international organization's investment policies, which normally involve such safeguards (Fontaine & Kliman, 2018). As a result, the BRI becomes very attractive for Southeast Asian leaders who can develop their countries' infrastructure without having to compromise on domestic policies (Arase, 2015). At the same time, the BRI goes beyond being another partnership for infrastructure projects. Beijing proposes a "community of common destiny," a China-centred regional community where neighbours and participant countries will link their economic future to the "China Dream" (Xinhua, 2013). For all the reason mentioned above, the BRI is an effective vector of authoritarianism.

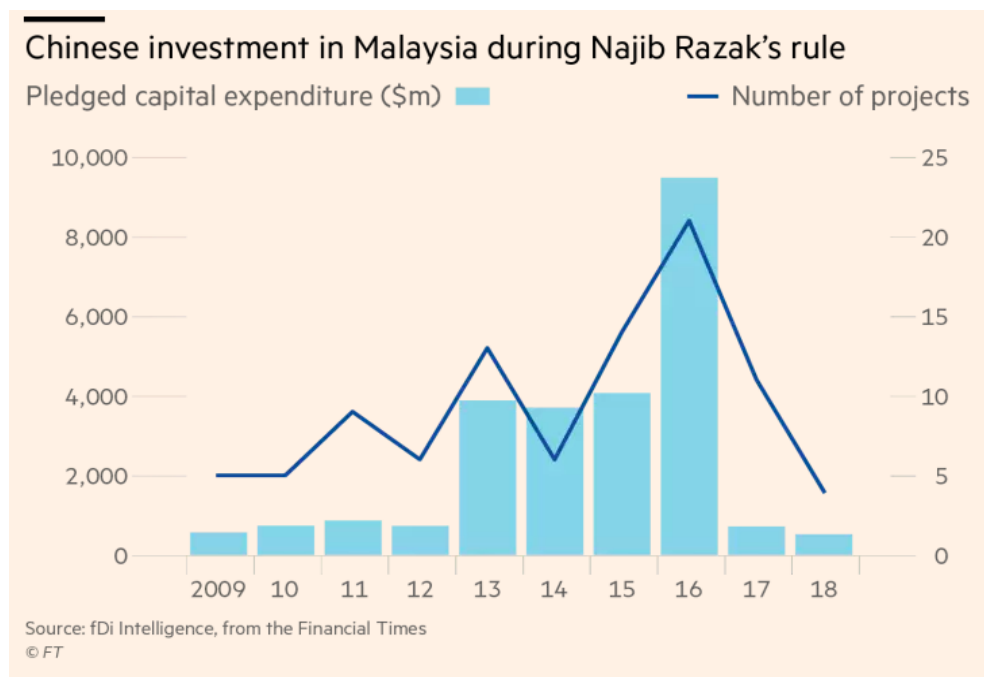
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<sup>7</sup> As noted on p.7 this is controversial. The Chinese government boasts that its commercial relations and aid are free of political conditions (human rights, labor provisions, democracy), while observers point out that conditions are implicit and linked to asymmetric economic relationship Beijing contributes to create with the recipient countries (Xinsong, 2017).

## Malaysia and the Belt and Road Initiative

China and Malaysia's relationship is branded as "special" for many reasons (Han, 2018). They have increasingly close economic ties (China is Malaysia's top trading partner since 2009), Kuala Lumpur was the first Southeast Asian country to normalize ties with communist China in 1974, relations have been elevated to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership, and more particularly, a fifth of Malaysia's 31 million people is considered ethnic Chinese. This relation became particularly promiscuous under Najib Razak. His administration has been among the staunchest supporters of the BRI since the beginning. As shown in the Figure 7 *Chinese investment in Malaysia during Najib Razak's rule*, Chinese FDI surged literally after the announcement of the initiative in 2013. This translated into rapid economic benefits for the Southeast Asian country. Malaysia is now the fourth-largest recipient of Chinese FDI in the world versus 20<sup>th</sup> in 2015 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017).

**Figure 7**



This position has paid off for Kuala Lumpur with strong economic growth peaking with 5.8% in the last quarter of 2017, the country's highest annual growth rate since 2014 (World Bank, 2018). China is now Malaysia's largest export and import market,

accounting for 19% of its global trade (Lowy Institute, 2018). Senior Analyst David Han even called it a “game changer for Malaysia’s infrastructural and economic development” (Han, 2018).

**Figure 8**



In the context of the BRI, China invested massively in development projects such as the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park in Pahang, the East Coast Rail Link, the Xiamen University Malaysia and the Alibaba-led Digital Free Trade Zone among others. Since 2013, it is a total of \$25 billion that Beijing has pledged to Malaysia in loans and investments (Bland, 2018). For the Najib administration, embracing China’s BRI is poised to “derive massive benefits to Malaysia in terms of excellent infrastructure, connectivity, social facilities, better living standards and abundant business opportunities” (Lau, 2017). From the perspective of Beijing, investing massively in Malaysia is an opportunity to showcase its capacities and use the country as an export platform to other countries in Southeast Asia (Negara & Suryadinata, 2018). China is now overwhelmingly integrated into Malaysia’s economy, with large-scale investments in a broad range of sectors such as railways, ports, real estate, steel manufacturing, finance, solar cells manufacturing, e-commerce, pharmaceutical, and information technology (The Star,

2016). Although it was set to continue to grow, the uncertainty following Mahatir's election in Malaysia will possibly decelerate FDI flows from China in 2018 (Bland, 2018)

### Indonesia and the Belt and Road Initiative

It is not a coincidence if President Xi Jinping chose the Indonesian Parliament to unveil the 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road. Indonesia is geographically, diplomatically and economically paramount in Southeast Asia. The archipelago is strategically located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and is Southeast Asia's most populated country, the fourth largest on the planet. It has the largest economy of the region, possesses huge reserves of natural resources and yields considerable diplomatic clout within ASEAN. Trade relations between China and Indonesia have been on the rise, especially after the implementation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement in 2010. Like other Southeast Asian nations, Beijing is Jakarta's largest import and export market, accounting to 17% of its global trade (Lowy Institute, 2018). From Indonesia's perspective, above the already warm economic ties, it is the strong focus on hard infrastructure that echoed favourably to the ears of the Widodo administration. Indonesia lacks crucial investment in its infrastructure, limiting its ability to reach its full economic potential (Indonesia Investment, 2017). According to the *World's Logistics Performance Index 2016* of the World Bank, a tool to evaluate the countries' performance in trade logistics, Indonesia ranks 63<sup>rd</sup> in terms of infrastructure development (in comparison, Malaysia ranks 32<sup>nd</sup>) (World Bank, 2017). HSBC believes the archipelago requires infrastructure spending of \$1,162 billion between now and 2030 to reach its full potential (Vasagar, 2016). In response, President Joko Widodo proposed a gigantic \$327 billion five-year plan to develop Indonesia's infrastructure shortly after his election in 2014. Needless to say, the funding for this ambitious initiative would not come solely from Jakarta; Indonesia was out to get the most out of China's BRI.

Since 2013, the results are nuanced. Chinese investment in the country has indeed sharply increased and some of the BRI-related projects have begun. However, many of them are facing important delays (Bland, 2018). By far the largest infrastructure project, the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail was awarded to Chinese contractors in 2015 and was

expected to be the perfect vitrine to promote China’s high-tech sector as well as its technical and engineering standards (Cai, 2017). Officially initiated in 2016, the \$6 billion project has so far been plagued by land-clearance issues (Negara & Suryadinata, 2018). With 10% of the work completed, the expected delivery for 2019 is seriously jeopardized (Nikkei Asian Review, 2018). The second-largest BRI-related project, the Morowali Industrial Park on Sulawesi Island is a \$1.6 billion deal for a carbon-steel factory and a power plant which has been signed but construction has not yet begun (Sangadji, 2018). Because of its importance, the delays in the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail has obviously cast a shadow over BRI-related projects in Indonesia but has not discouraged the Widodo administration. New airports, industrial parks, ports, roads and tourist resorts in partnership with Chinese companies are still on the drawing board.

Beijing has welcomed Indonesia’s participation into the BRI and this is evident by its strong economical backing. As shown in Figure 9 *China’s outward investment in Indonesia*, Beijing has already begun investing heavily in Indonesia prior to the launch of the BRI. The archipelago is now China’s 26<sup>th</sup>-largest recipient of FDI, an increase from 44<sup>th</sup> place in 2015 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017).

**Figure 9**



What the graph does not show is the evolving nature of Chinese investment after the launch of the BRI. Chinese FDI in Indonesia was initially clustered around a handful of traditional sectors like energy, manufacturing and raw materials (Global Business Guide Indonesia, 2015). Following the election of Joko Widodo in 2014, Chinese investments gradually expanded to other industries such as electricity, transportation, mining and infrastructure (Knight-Frank, 2018). Beijing has now surpassed Japan to be the second-largest foreign investor behind Singapore (if investment from Hong Kong is calculated together with China's) (Reed, 2018). This development is a pertinent example of the holistic approach of the initiative. Still, the difficulties surrounding the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail, mainly the delays to obtain permits and acquiring land, have dampened the confidence of many Chinese investors (Bland, 2017). In a country where the local and national government are often in conflict, navigating through policies can be a tumultuous challenge some Chinese companies are refractory to overcome.

## Analysis

The first section of this paper has shown that liberal democracy has plummeted from 2013 to 2017 in Malaysia while it has stayed relatively resilient in Indonesia. During the same period, Chinese investments have increased in both countries, although on much larger scale in Malaysia. Previous paragraphs demonstrated the power of attraction the BRI has and exposed the elements of authoritarianism it embodies. To investigate the impact of the BRI on governance, one must look at those who enact rules and legislation, namely, the ruling elite.

## Response of the Ruling Elite to the BRI

An interesting aspect of this analysis is the behaviour of the ruling elites. The cohesion among the elites of the BN in Malaysia contrasts with the division between the traditional Suharto-elite and the Widodo administration in Indonesia. To depict the power relationship in this case, it is relevant to refer to the elite theory. According to Shannon Deric, "the basic characteristics of the elite theory are that power is concentrated, the elites are unified, the non-elites are diverse and powerless, elite interests are unified due to common backgrounds and positions, and the defining characteristic of power is

institutional position” (Deric, 2011). In Malaysia, the ruling elite conforms precisely to Deric’s definition, as it clustered around the BN’s strategy of embracing the BRI. This policy became evident after the 2013 elections, which saw the coalition losing the overall vote but retaining in extremis a majority in parliament. This was the worst-ever performance for the BN (before the 2018 defeat). It caused panic among the ruling elite, which contemplated for the first time the possibility of losing power. These results set in motion a twofold strategy by Najib and the BN: to consolidate their power around their base of voters, in part by promising strong economic growth, while cracking down on the opposition and dissident voices. Whereas the latter depended on the administration’s will to act, economic development was largely conditional to foreign factors. In a happy coincidence, China launched the BRI the same year. For Kuala Lumpur, the BRI was the opportunity to negotiate tens of billions in loans and investments to support Malaysia’s development without having to compromise on domestic governance.

China completed its share of the bargain, pledging over \$30 billion in enormous investment projects across the country and contributing significantly to its economic development (Bland, 2018). Beijing also remained faithful to its principle of non-interference in internal affairs of other states (Han, 2018). China’s principle of non-interference is a highly debatable issue which the Malaysian opposition claimed as very suspicious. Still, it gave Najib an unofficial licence to crackdown on rights and democracy. During the five years of its last mandate, the BN oversaw a “broad crackdown on freedom of expression, jailing civil society activists and writers on sedition and other charges” (Kurlantzick, 2018). Simultaneously, BRI-related investments spurred in Malaysia, confirming the Najib administration in its belief that Beijing would not interfere in Malaysian internal affairs on the base of human rights and democracy violations. Overall, the ruling elite of the BN has stayed united on the principle of partnering with China to foster prosperity (Cheng-Chwee, 2017).

In Indonesia, the elite do not conform to Deric’s definition because it is not unified. The traditional Suharto-elite opposes the Widodo administration and its position towards the BRI. In the 2014 presidential election, Joko Widodo won over Prabowo Subianto, an ex-

Lieutenant General from the Indonesian nomenklatura. Hailed as Indonesia's first leader from outside the Jakarta elite, Widodo now has to navigate between hostile Suharto-era figures and outdated institutions inherited from three decades of military rule (Busch, 2017). Consequently, Widodo faces a staunch opposition from his adversaries on multiple topics including China, some supporting the administration's strategy of opening while traditional elites being refractory of rallying behind him. On the one hand, President Widodo has skillfully played his relation with Beijing, fostering "close engagement with China for pragmatic benefits and avoidance of a direct challenge to Chinese policy" (Pepinsky, 2016). This is evident in his warm attitude towards Chinese investments and the BRI while avoiding recognizing the existence of territorial disputes. On the other hand, opposition groups have played the anti-Chinese sentiment, as seen with the Ahok saga, to weaken President Widodo ahead of the 2019 elections. Suspiciousness towards Beijing is deep-rooted in Indonesia, reminiscing the "Suharto-era narrative based on the triangular threat posed by Indonesian communism, mainland China and the ethnic Chinese minority" (Nabbs-Keller, 2018). In a country with a history of dictatorship and where military figures possess considerable leverage over domestic politics, it is difficult to believe that in this position, the Widodo administration could have opted for a dramatic authoritarian shift. The BRI is so holistic, involving so many aspects of the society, that it needs a broad consensus among the ruling elite to overcome its apprehension. Especially in a country historically suspicious of Chinese ambitions, and traditionally inward-looking, this process of explanation and trust building within the elite was necessary to overcome distrust. Contrary to Malaysia, the Widodo administration failed in this task. The President could not get the support of the traditional economic elites nor the confidence of the military over his China policy. Consequently, the opportunity provided by the BRI to increase the use of authoritarian methods is diminished.

### Response of the Civil Society to the BRI

The enthusiasm shown by the administration in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur for BRI-related projects has not trickled down to civil society. Despite multiple attempts to advocate and demystify the project by the Malaysian and Indonesian administrations,

local entrepreneurs feel left out the bonanza and civil society is concerned about sovereignty (Straits Times, 2018). In the case of Malaysia, the complacency towards Beijing, precisely the embrace of the BRI, has brought wariness among Malaysians who fear the Najib administration will hurt the country's sovereignty and lead it into a debt trap (Han, 2018). This had repercussions on the perception Malaysians nurture towards China. The sentiment is more acute in Indonesia. There is a growing resentment among Indonesians towards what they perceive as a Chinese threat to their country (Bland, 2017). The saga around Ahok, the ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta accused of blasphemy, has put in the spotlight the sensitivity surrounding the Chinese, Chinese corporations and China in general. The *Financial Times* reports that the Ahok saga "sparked the spread of a series of wild rumours about Indonesia being invaded by millions of Chinese workers and undermined by Chinese plots to poison the food supply" (Bland, 2017). This incident is reminiscent of the suspicion around China that tainted the Malaysia election.

The series of events in Malaysia are interesting because they complement the principal argument that the decision of a government, in symbiosis with the ruling elite, to accept BRI-related projects increases strongly the likelihood of evolving towards authoritarianism. Indeed, the Malaysia opposition has skillfully reached out to those, civil society and small entrepreneurs alike, who were discontent and concerned about China's increased position in the country. The Parakan Harapan successfully associated the ruling elite of the BN as those selling off Malaysia's sovereignty to China. This phenomenon demonstrates that authoritarian methods of governance fuelled by the BRI will not last in time if the enthusiasm for the BRI itself is not shared by the society. On the contrary, if crucial segments of the civil society appear to be sidelined by the government to the profit of China, they will mobilize against it and question its overall usefulness. In the light of the Malaysia election, this is an aspect policy-makers in Beijing should take note of.

This chapter looked at one of the most important political and economic factors that have modelled the relationship between China and Southeast Asia in the last five years, the Belt and Road Initiative. It identifies its outlines, its attractiveness and its characteristics.

What comes out of this section is that embracing China's initiative can provide an incentive to use authoritarian methods of governance at little economic and political costs. However, this section also shows that adopting these methods is difficult if there is a conflict within the ruling elite. The BRI was welcomed in both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, but its implementation has faced stronger opposition and administrative hurdles in Indonesia. As Matthew Busch explains, its embrace by the Widodo administration is not necessarily welcomed within the traditional elite circles. It indicates that a divided elite can weaken the incentive initially provided by the BRI to move towards authoritarianism. Finally, this chapter demonstrates that even if there is cohesion between the elite, civil society can play a role slow down the process of authoritarianism.

## Chapter 3 — The Foreign Policy of the Trump Administration

The last section of this paper assesses from another angle the degradation of liberal democracy in Southeast Asia. It investigates whether the lack of commitment for promotion of human rights and democracy by President Trump has played a more important role than China's BRI in reinforcing autocratic propensities in the region. This segment begins with a description of Obama's "Pivot to Asia" to put in perspective the role of the US in the region before Trump. Then, it moves on to explain the major outlines of President Trump's "America First" foreign policy. More specifically, this subsection underlines two fundamental characteristics of Trump's vision of foreign relations, mainly its transactional approach and its unwillingness to pursue the promotion of liberal democracy. The chapter continues with an assessment of the US relations with Indonesia and Malaysia and explains how they unfolded under the Trump administration. Finally, it looks at how the characteristics of Trump's foreign policy shifted the perception of the US among the traditional elite of both countries. It concludes that Trump's foreign policy draws support among the ruling elite of Southeast Asia but that its impact is limited due to a lack of coherence and long-term engagement.

### From the "Pivot to Asia"...

Since the conclusion of the Vietnam War, Southeast Asia has more than often stayed on the margin of US foreign policy (Kurlantzick, 2017). In the shadow of large Asian powers like China, Japan or India, Southeast Asian nations have generally received less attention from policy-makers in Washington (Lowy Institute, 2017). Up to a certain point, this changed in 2011 when the Obama administration announced its "Pivot to Asia" policy. This strategy responds to acute competition between China and the US in Asia and plans to redirect the US's focus from the Middle East and Europe to the Asia-Pacific. In 2011, the then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton defined the policy in five key areas of actions, mainly "strengthening bilateral security alliances and deepening working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights" (Clinton, 2011). Underpinning these was a deliberate focus on engaging Southeast Asia (Lowy Institute, 2017). On the

political front, the US supported multilateral engagement with Southeast Asian countries by opening their first mission to “ASEAN in Jakarta in 2010, joining the East Asia Summit in 2011, the establishment of ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership in 2015, and President Obama’s hosting of ASEAN leaders in Sunnylands, California, in 2016” (Lowy Institute, 2016). On the security front, Washington demonstrated its commitment to its regional allies and to a rules-based order in Asia-Pacific. Concretely, this translated by signifying its intent to rebalance 60% of its military forces towards the region by 2020. On the economic front, the US proposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral free trade agreement encompassing 12 countries of the Pacific Rim, including four Southeast Asian nations (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam).

From the perspective of Southeast Asian nations, the “Pivot to Asia” policy was perceived as an opportunity to counterbalance Beijing’s influence by bringing in Washington, and an occasion to expand economic relations. However, the emphasis set on the promotion of liberal democracy by the Obama administration eventually irritated Southeast Asian leaders. It became clear that criticisms of human rights abuses and democracy by the US greatly annoyed some of them who viewed this as an affront to their sovereignty (Bush, 2012). For instance, the condemnation of the 2014 coup in Thailand and the denunciation of President Duterte’s war on drugs both chilled the relations with Bangkok and Manila (BBC, 2016). Still, the initiatives embodied in Obama’s Pivot to Asia have largely improved US economic, political and strategic ties with Southeast Asian countries (Green, 2016). They resulted in “a broad and deep range of ties to the region and its institutions” with an avowed purpose of advancing democracy and human rights (Kurlantzick, 2017).

### ... To an “America First” Foreign Policy

The possibility of Donald Trump winning the 2016 election brought concerns over the “deep range of ties and institutions” mentioned above. His campaign statements in which he promised to overturn Obama’s policy towards Asia conveyed a great dose of uncertainty over the US’s role in the region. Almost a year and a half in power, it is now possible to evaluate the outlines of an “America First” foreign policy. This strategy is

best characterized by two main components: its transactional approach and its absence of commitment to liberal democracy.

### Transactional Diplomacy

Trump's foreign policy approach has been labelled "transactional" by Roberto Menotti, who describes this kind of diplomacy as an "approach—to competitors, potential partners and friends alike—based on open-ended negotiations and no preconditions" (Menotti, 2017). This vision is based on a *quid pro quo* logic that nothing the US does for others is free; when the US gives, something must be given back in return. It is a zero-sum game where everything is negotiable. Consequently, a transactional foreign policy is disconnected from a broader strategic considerations and commitments as well as in certain areas of foreign policy that are, nevertheless, important to Southeast Asia countries. Transactional diplomacy has been most distinguishable in Trump's trade policy. His abrupt decision to withdraw from the TPP "signalled that he would embark on a very different trade policy that would be more transactional, defensive and bilaterally focused" (Searight, 2018). From Trump's perspective, multilateralism produces "bad deals," where the American interests are diluted within the larger interest of the group. His repudiation of the agreement is therefore not very surprising.

Transactional diplomacy also applies to political interactions between states. Convinced that engaging within multilateral bodies was not the most effective way to advance American interests, Trump opted instead for a focus on bilateral relations and a preference for a personal approach to negotiations. He also disregarded American foreign policy expertise by the "slow staffing of Asia policy positions at the State and Defense Department, including the failure to appoint an ASEAN ambassador" (Searight, 2018). Trump initially gave the impression that he might retained at least some aspects of the Pivot to Asia when he participated to the APEC summit, the East Asia Summit and US-ASEAN summit in 2017, a surprising marathon of multilateral events for a leader who does not believe in their benefits. Still, his subsequent decisions and his public disdain for multilateralism and diplomatic conventions are blatant and contrast with Obama's "Pivot

to Asia,” which contributed to building a sustained, high-level engagement with Southeast Asia and multilateralism with ASEAN to address regional issues.

Transactional diplomacy does have some advantages but also carries many disadvantages. It makes the US position more flexible and allow for the reassessment of “sacred cow” such as NATO or NAFTA, which up to some point can be beneficial for the US. It also provides Washington the opportunity to compete with China by removing the barriers of respect for human rights and democracy and interact with every nation. However, transactional diplomacy has a negative impact on the credibility of the US as a reliable and steady partner. This procedure works as a case-by-case basis. If the setting in which a deal was struck evolve to the detriment of the US, a transactional president will most likely ask for its renegotiation (Hadar, 2017). Furthermore, transactional diplomacy is grounded in the present and does not have a long-term vision. Consequently, it demands frequent renegotiation and brings uncertainty.

#### Absence of Commitment to Liberal Democracy

Menotti defines transactional diplomacy as an “approach [...] based on no conditions.” This vision of diplomacy helps understand the second core characteristic of Trump’s foreign policy, which is the absence of commitment to liberal democracy. From the global leadership on rights to its war on the press; Trump’s lack of interest for democracy and human rights has already begun to shape US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. The consequences of this indifference are best shown by the State Department’s decision to “cut resources for programs on democracy promotion and possibly remove it as a central priority” (Kurlantzick, 2017), which undeniably weakens civil society groups who monitor the actions of their government and defend civil liberties and political rights. His personal hostility towards the US press has considerably weakened the US credibility as an advocate for an open and free press in Southeast Asia. On the contrary, the President’s actions have given an unexpected ally to autocrats of the region keened to crackdown on their own press (Kurlantzick, 2017). President Trump is also unwilling to condemn most foreign leaders on their track record on democracy and human rights while eager to build relations with them (Fuchs, McKeown and Harding, 2017). He publicly praises autocratic

rulers such as Duterte of the Philippines and shows willingness to boost ties with authoritarian leaders like Thai coup-maker Prayut Chan-ocha or Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc. Trump's approach is inward-looking and overlooks human rights and democracy concerns as long as US interest are secure, leaving little effective leverage in place to constrain authoritarian regimes (Hui, 2017).

The absence of commitment to liberal democracy is a significant departure from traditional US foreign policy and it sends "a demoralizing signal to those in Malaysia, [Indonesia], and across the world who wants the United States to stand up for democracy and fight corruption" (Sutton and Harding, 2017). By avoiding the promotion of democracy and human rights, Trump risks reinforcing the trend towards authoritarianism. Although liberal democracy has been going through a difficult time in Southeast Asia prior to the Trump presidency, the provisions to support liberal democracy under Obama have at least prevented further aggravation. Trump's Asia policy, on the contrary threatens to accelerate this trend.

### US-Malaysia Relations

Malaysia, like other countries in the region, has been particularly skilled at balancing the competition between the US and China to its advantage. Even if Beijing's clout has undeniably expanded on the peninsula over the last five years, especially in the economic realm, it does not mean the US has been inactive. Kuala Lumpur has embraced Obama's "Pivot to Asia" by supporting the US's multilateral approach towards ASEAN while strengthening bilateral relations, "with both side elevating ties to the level of a comprehensive partnership and Malaysia becoming a member of key U.S.-led initiatives, be it the TPP or the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL" (Parameswaran, 2017). In response, the US began to consider Malaysia as a "Comprehensive Partner" in 2014, meaning "increased bilateral consultations and cooperation on politics, diplomacy, trade, investment, education, people-to-people ties, security, the environment, science, technology and energy" (Obama White House, 2014). However, in the last two years of Obama's tenure, relations between Malaysia and the US began to cool down. Kuala Lumpur began to distance itself in response to Washington's rebuke against the

crackdown on Malaysia media and political opponents as well as the US Department of Justice investigation into the 1MDB corruption scandal (Hiebert, 2017). In summation, the Najib government was receptive towards the idea of increased trade and military engagement with the US but was not as welcoming of the human rights commitment it imposed (Hui, 2017).

Trump's Asia policy inevitably had effects on the US-Malaysia relations. First, it created a lot of uncertainty for Malaysia, especially in the economic field. Trump's unilateral decision to withdraw from the TPP and his threat to investigate and punish countries having large trade surplus with the US placed Malaysia in a delicate position. Moreover, Trump's Muslim ban antagonized many Malaysians. However, the new administration also brought a window of opportunity for Najib Razak to re-engage with the US. Indeed, Trump's unwillingness to press other countries on rights and freedom gave the possibility for the Najib administration to reach out to the new president despite the accusation and scandal around his government. On this level, he succeeded, as he was received to the White House by Trump in September 2017. This visit, the first for a Malaysian leader since 2004, has cemented the US-Malaysian relations, reassuring Kuala Lumpur about the US military commitment in the region and its future economic policy. It reinforces the Malaysian government in its domestic actions because it removed the expectations that the US will fight for human rights in democracy. However, the outcomes of the meeting are mostly economic and do not demonstrate a reinforcement of the bilateral relation (Landler, 2017). This gives a clue about the limit of Trump's influence on the elite. In comparison with the BRI, Trump's foreign policy lacks the long-term, strategic and holistic approach of the TPP. It offers targeted trade deals and broad statements which are not backed by a coherent strategy. Unless the US backs its Asia policy with the necessary means, the effect of Trump's foreign policy on the rise of authoritarianism in Malaysia will be limited.

### US-Indonesia Relations

Since Indonesia consolidated its democracy, the US has struggled to engage with Jakarta and establish the kind of trustful bilateral relations it shares with other countries in the

region. As part of its “Pivot to Asia,” the Obama administration tried to do so by formally elevating the bilateral relationship to the level of strategic partnership (Parameswaran, 2015). This decision reflected a desire to deepen collaboration in the diplomatic, security, economic and human rights realms. Indonesia, after all, is Southeast Asia’s largest and most populous country, a regional leader and probably the most genuine democracy of the region. Accordingly, it has the potential to be a natural security and economic partner for the US (Kurlantzick, 2018).

Under this new partnership, Jakarta and Washington pledged to build closer military-to-military ties, increase intelligence and cooperation on counterterrorism, increase economic ties and vowed to hold an annual high-level ministerial dialogue (Parameswaran, 2015). However, this relationship “has long underperformed its potential” (Kurlantzick, 2018). Indeed, even if Indonesian and US interests aligned on many topics, the potential of cooperation in both the bilateral security and economic relationships has failed to meet expectations. This has to do in part with Indonesia’s inward-looking politics. Indonesia, despite its importance for the region, has traditionally embraced economic nationalism and overlooked foreign affairs to focus on domestic matters (Kurlantzick, 2018). Moreover, President Widodo has been largely viewed by observers of Indonesian politics as a leader “less concerned with geopolitical challenges and more with ‘concrete’ outcomes, such as trade and investment” (Laksmiana, 2018). This type of leadership echoes the transactional diplomacy of Donald Trump. This might be the right approach to reinforce bilateral relations since it suits the leadership style of the presidents of both countries (Kurlantzick, 2018). Consequently, discussions between representatives of the two nations over the past year revolved around “economic bilateralism and unilateral security arrangements,” mainly trade deficits, counterterrorism and China (Laksmiana, 2018). As the US administration sent Vice President Mike Pence in 2017 and Secretary of Defense, James Mattis in early 2018 to Indonesia, it aimed at signalling their intention to uphold the strategic partnership forged under the Obama administration and give more content to its security component (Parameswaran, 2018).

At first sight, the familiarity between Trump and Widodo's style of governance could have fuelled authoritarian tendencies in Jakarta. However, the position Trump has taken on trade and the Muslim ban has reduced the likelihood of a closer relationship. In this case, the transactional approach of Washington has ended up harming its larger interests in Indonesia. By focusing on topics of disagreements, Trump alienated what might have been a receptive country. As it in the case for Malaysia, a lack of coherence and strategy undermined Washington's influence and thus, its impact on the rise of authoritarianism.

## Analysis

The previous paragraphs have discussed the relation between Trump and the development of bilateral relations with Malaysia and Indonesia. To investigate the impact of his foreign policy on governance, it is useful to assess the reaction of the elite.

### Response of the Ruling Elite to Trump's Foreign Policy

There is a stark difference between the assessments of Donald Trump's foreign policy, depending on where you stand on the social ladder. Those in positions of power like decision-makers and economic elites are satisfied with Trump's approach. Brian Harding and Trevor Sutton have interviewed Indonesian and Malaysian elites in government, business and media and found out that "elite Indonesians and Malaysians perceive Trump and his Cabinet as less likely than prior administrations to press them on human rights, corruption, and environmental issues." They "related favourably to Trump's blatant embrace of conflicts of interest and hoped it was a sign that the US president was amenable to a more transactional, fewer values-driven bilateral relationship" (Sutton and Harding, 2017). This indicates that the ruling elite in Indonesia and Malaysia are feeling closer to Trump or at least to what he embodies. He has brought a "pervasive sense among business and political leaders of Southeast Asia that the rules of the game have changed and everything is now flexible (Sutton and Harding, 2017). To summarize, Trump's foreign policy effectively brings a perverse effect among the ruling elite to act in an authoritarian fashion. Moreover, in both countries, the ruling elite has a cohesive position on his presidency. In theory, this unity should mean that Trump's foreign policy

is a significant and effective influence on the retreat of liberal democracy. However, it is not the case.

### The Weaknesses of Trump's Foreign Policy

Although it has the potential to fuel authoritarianism, Trump's foreign policy is the lesser factor of the two studied in this paper. The distinctive features of his foreign policy have proven to be a double-edge sword, being the incentive for authoritarianism while also injecting uncertainty, incoherence and a preference for short-term engagement. As previously explain in the case of Indonesia, transactional diplomacy can work against American interests by focusing on disagreements and antagonizing its interlocutor. In the case of Malaysia, it is instead the lack of coherence and long-term engagement that weakens its influence. Uncertainty and instability are realities that any government will prefer avoiding and Trump embodies them. His administration's strategy for Southeast Asia seems at least *ad hoc* and works in silos instead of being cross-sectoral. Moreover, it lacks the financial means to be effective and credible against the BRI's massive financial structure (L. Connelly, 2017). Meanwhile, China is extremely proactive. The BRI is holistic and literally proposes a long-term vision for the countries willing to jump in. It offers solutions not only in trade but in every aspect of the economy and even beyond. It is backed by massive financial means and advertised on very advantageous terms. Finally, the BRI is considered as a guarantee of stability and modernization. In short, despite both the BRI and the Trump's foreign policy embodying the necessary features to foster authoritarianism, the BRI is more effective because of its coherence, holistic approach and long-term vision. This makes the difference upon the cohesion of the elite.

### Response of the Civil Society to Trump's Foreign Policy

In Malaysia, as in Indonesia, the perception of the US by the public "has undergone sharp swings over the past 15 years, driven mainly by two events: the Iraq War and Barack Obama's first presidential election (Harding and Sutton, 2017). This opinion is generally correlated with the ideal of the US as the global leader in human rights and freedom and a support for civil society against authoritarian rulers (Mahavera, 2017). As Obama left and Trump came in, views of the US in both Malaysia and Indonesia also shifted. Donald

Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric did serious public relations damage for the US. According to the Asian Barometer Survey, only 50% of Malaysians and 45% of Indonesians have a favourable opinion of the US (C. Bush, 2017). Only those two countries among all Southeast Asian nations have a result under 50%. This outcome is not a surprise considering that both are predominantly Muslim nations, Indonesia being the largest in the world, and are active and engaging with the global Muslim community (Fitriani, 2017). Many are worried that this rhetoric is a sign "the Trump administration has discriminatory predispositions that may well underpin the conduct of US foreign policy" as far as Southeast Asia (Fitriani, 2017). For activists and opposition parties of both nations, traditional US policy kept "[democracy and human rights] in the international spotlight" and "boosted the morale of civil society because it gave them the sense they were not alone" (Mahavera, 2017). On the basis that a mobilized civil society has the capacity to hold back authoritarian propensities of an administration, as the case of Malaysia demonstrates, we can suppose that any illiberal shift influenced by Trump's foreign policy will have provoked significant mobilization. The US of Trump is a toxic and deeply dividing subject in both Malaysian and Indonesian society, up to a point that appearing to align too closely with his administration has the potential to harm significantly their respective government. Thus, the views of the Trump administration are so negative among the population that appearing to cooperate with Washington undermines its popular support.

This chapter looks at the evolution of the US's foreign policy from Obama's "Pivot to Asia" to Trump's "America First." It then continues to evaluate whether this new approach has emboldened the ruling elite to use authoritarian methods of governance. What can be concluded is that Trump's history as a businessman seems to resonate with the business elites in both Southeast Asian and its transactional approach appears to be closer to Southeast Asian elites' preferences. In short, he gives the ruling elite a perception of increased impunity, a feature perceptible in both Malaysia and Indonesia. However, the influence of Trump over the rise of authoritarianism is limited. First, we must acknowledge that the democratic erosion in Malaysia had started prior to Trump's election. Therefore, he is not the cause but can still be an influence. More importantly,

the erratic and uncertain foreign policy of the Trump administration towards Asia is strikingly different from China's decisive and calculated approach. What is more conceivable is that the erosion of liberal democracy within the US and its decision to refocus inward, could considerably weaken its attraction as a role model to pursue in Malaysian and Indonesian civil society, creating a vacuum ready to be filled by China.

## Conclusion

This paper acknowledges domestic dynamics play a key role on the rise of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia but chose to focus on international factors. In this regard, it looked at two hypotheses, namely China's BRI and Trump's foreign policy, to be the main international enablers of illiberal propensities. The outcome of this study is that both embody genuine characteristics with the potential to trigger authoritarian tendencies. In the case of Trump's foreign policy, it is even more blatant as it contrasts with the US traditional position in this regard. Nevertheless, the research shows that the BRI is more effective in translating these illiberal characteristics into concrete influence. It is possible to summarize it in three key takeaways: the importance of a holistic, long-term approach, the cohesion of the elites and the role of civil society.

First, China's influence on the adoption of authoritarian methods of governance is greater because it proposes a holistic, long-term approach. The BRI is a project sold as a perennial "journey" to its interlocutors, encompassing investments in multiple sectors of the economy. It also appears more suited to the needs of recipient countries and is grounded in the principle of non-interference. Therefore, Beijing appears as a reliable and stable partner, focused on the long-term rather than on immediate results. On the contrary, the US of President Trump takes a very short-sighted approach to its relationships with other countries. Even if the endorsement of democratic values is out of Trump's transactional diplomacy, it neglects constructing a coherent approach based on strong and multifaceted pillars. As a result, his policy aligns with Southeast Asian countries on certain issues such as defence and the promotion of rights and democracy, but antagonizes them on other like trade. The case studies of Malaysia and Indonesia illustrate that ruling elites identify themselves with Trump's transactional approach but appear skeptical of his trustworthiness as a partner. At a time when China shows growing assertiveness abroad, Trump's inward-focus policy harms US leadership in the region. Although both can embolden authoritarianism, China's BRI is more structured and influential in Malaysia and Indonesia, having more impact on the decision by the ruling elite to advance a more authoritarian style of governance.

The second takeaway relates to the distinctive role of the traditional elite in the decision-making process of acting in an authoritarian fashion. The division of the ruling elite in Jakarta seems to have considerably slowed down the development of the BRI, at the expense of the Widodo government, which appears keen to see increased cooperation with China. His administration failed to rally the traditional Jakarta-elite to endorse the BRI and instead ended up antagonizing them. Considering the considerable leverage the Indonesian elite held over the economy, the BRI could difficultly develop and the Widodo administration could not reap its benefits. On the contrary, the BN of Najib Razak showed unity around the decision to embrace the potential offered by the BRI. While the Malaysian government increased their use of authoritarian methods, BRI-projects flourished across Malaysia and economic growth spurred. To summarize, the cohesion of the elite has a significant impact on the tendency to lean towards authoritarianism.

Finally, this paper brings to light the role of civil society in the equation. It illustrates how the authoritarian influences yielded by external factors cannot take root if these same influences antagonize civil society. In this regard, the general election in Malaysia is an ideal case study. The authoritarian shift taken by the Najib administration was eventually rolled back in the general election, as the Parakan Harapan was skillful enough to rally minor opposition groups and civil society activists who shared a common goal of defeating Najib and renegotiating key BRI projects. Ultimately, the lasting impact of authoritarian influences is fragile if society remains suspicious of its source.

The three aforementioned takeaways are ground for further discussion on the external factors of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia. As the BRI progresses and evolves, it will be interesting to monitor the political trajectory of other participating countries. As a matter of fact, Thailand and Cambodia, two heavy BRI-recipient nations, are set to hold elections in the upcoming six months. In both cases, there are causes for concerns. Cambodia's democracy is in shamble and the country is increasingly leaning towards authoritarian rule, while the Thai junta shows no signs of halting assault on human rights and democracy (Gerson, 2018). On the ground of this reality, we can suggest that the

ruling elite in Phnom Penh and Bangkok are significantly united around the decision of their government to lean towards authoritarianism. As both countries are considerably entrenched in the BRI, we can also suppose that there was a consensus among the elite to reap the most out of China's largesse. It will be interesting to follow how civil society will respond to those challenges. Their decision to frame positively or negatively China's BRI and mobilize (or not) against it will have a direct impact on the entrenchment of authoritarianism in both countries. As the BRI is now firmly implemented in these nations and their elites appear to have agreed on the matter, it now depends on the capacity of the civil society to hold back the rising forces of authoritarianism.

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