



Beyond Great Power Rivalry: Indigenous Southeast Asian Frameworks of Order in a Fragmented World

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Beyond Great Power Rivalry: Indigenous Southeast Asian Frameworks of Order in a Fragmented World

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

The ongoing war among the United States, Israel, and Iran reflects a broader transition towards a fragmented global order characterised by a weakened normative consensus and persistent instability. While conventional hedging remains relevant, it is no longer sufficient in an era of continuous geopolitical, informational, and cognitive disruption, requiring Southeast Asia to complement external balancing with internally grounded frameworks of societal resilience, such as “memayu hayuning bawono”, which is the Javanese philosophy of preserving and maintaining the harmony of the world”, and related regional traditions.

COMMENTARY

The ongoing war among the United States, Israel, and Iran reflects a structural shift in global politics: from a rules-based order to a fragmented system characterised by selective norm enforcement, recurring escalation risks, and diminished global restraint. Although the theatre of the war is the Middle East, its effects are global, transmitted instantly through digital networks that shape perception, polarisation, and domestic political dynamics.

This erosion of shared restraint mechanisms is unfolding alongside wider geopolitical recalibration. The rise of China, Russia's assertiveness, and NATO's evolving security posture – including an acknowledgement of the need for greater self-defence and burden-sharing – signal a less predictable security architecture. Alliances and countries are increasingly prioritising their strategic interests over universal stabilisation roles.

In Southeast Asia, this creates another exposure. The region must continue to manage traditional great power balancing while simultaneously confronting second-order disruptions: algorithmically amplified polarisation, AI-generated disinformation, and cognitive warfare targeting perception, attention, and decision-making. External conflicts are therefore no longer distant events; they are rapidly internalised, shaping domestic social and political fault lines.

From Hedging to Internal Resilience

Conventional hedging – maintaining balanced relations among competing powers without formal alignment – remains a key feature of Southeast Asian foreign policy. However, it is increasingly insufficient as a standalone strategy.

Hedging assumes a relatively stable external environment in which risks are episodic and manageable through diplomatic calibration. By contrast, the present environment is characterised by persistent instability across the military, informational, and cognitive domains. Geopolitical shocks are now amplified in real time by digital platforms, artificial intelligence systems, and cognitive warfare techniques that systematically shape perception and trust.

As a result, external balancing alone cannot address the most pressing vulnerabilities facing Southeast Asian societies: internal fragmentation, identity polarisation, and narrative manipulation. This limitation of hedging underscores the need for an additional layer of resilience, grounded in internally embedded normative frameworks, to enable societies to interpret, absorb, and regulate ongoing geopolitical turbulence.

Indigenous Frameworks as Governance Logic

In Indonesia, one such framework is the Javanese ethical philosophy of *memayu hayuning bawono*, understood as the duty to preserve and maintain the harmony of the world. Rather than cultural symbolism, it can be interpreted as a governance logic centred on managing equilibrium amid conditions of uncertainty.

The philosophy translates into three operational principles:

Prevention over reaction. Stability depends on early identification of social, informational, and cognitive imbalances, particularly in digital spaces, where misinformation and polarisation escalate rapidly amid cognitive warfare. Early detection of viral conflict narratives – for example, those around Middle East escalations circulating on platforms such as TikTok, Telegram, or X – enables timely intervention before they harden into domestic identity-based hostility.

Proportionality in response. Policy and communication responses must restore equilibrium rather than exacerbate fragmentation. For example, public messaging on the United States-Iran escalation requires disciplined framing to avoid binary or emotionally charged narratives that risk importing external polarisation into domestic ethnic or religious relations.

Distributed responsibility for cohesion. Social stability is not solely a matter for the state. Families, educators, religious leaders, and community actors play a direct role in shaping interpretation and building resilience to external cognitive influence. Media literacy education and contextual religious guidance are practical tools for strengthening societal immunity to misinformation and AI-generated content.

Not a Rejection of Modernity

The adoption of indigenous frameworks does not imply disengagement from contemporary technological realities. Southeast Asia is deeply embedded in digital ecosystems shaped by social media platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, artificial intelligence, and cognitive warfare dynamics that blur the boundary between information, perception, and behaviour.

The challenge is not technological adoption, but maintaining sound judgement in an environment overloaded with information. While younger generations may no longer be familiar with traditional philosophical concepts such as *memayu hayuning bawono*, their underlying logic can be applied to contemporary governance, education, and communication frameworks.

Importantly, this approach is not exclusive. It is one example among several indigenous and regional traditions that prioritise balance, restraint and relational order.

Regional Parallels

Across Southeast Asia, comparable governance logics already exist and, in several cases, are already put into practice.

Malay political ethics emphasise *keadilan* (justice) and *kesantunan* (civil conduct) as the foundations of legitimacy and social order. Buddhist-influenced traditions throughout mainland Southeast Asia emphasise restraint, compassion, and harm reduction as stabilising ethical principles. Across Austronesian societies, relational reciprocity and social equilibrium remain enduring normative foundations.

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development further reinforces this orientation by recognising that sustainable peace, inclusive governance, and resilient institutions require culturally grounded, locally contextualised approaches that strengthen social cohesion and reflect local realities.

In Singapore, this logic is reflected in a highly institutionalised governance model of social equilibrium. The state adopts a preventive orientation that prioritises managing social fault lines upstream before they escalate into fragmentation.

This is evident in calibrated public communication during external crises to prevent imported polarisation, structured inter-ethnic and inter-religious engagement to sustain trust, and integrated counter-radicalisation approaches that combine enforcement, rehabilitation, family engagement, and reintegration. These measures

collectively reflect a systems-based approach in which cohesion is actively maintained rather than assumed.

Taken together, these diverse expressions suggest that Southeast Asia already possesses a latent regional epistemology of balance – both culturally embedded and institutionally operational – that is increasingly relevant in an era of cognitive warfare and digitally mediated conflict.

Policy Implications for Southeast Asia

Three implications follow.

Strategic communication resilience. States must develop culturally grounded narratives capable of countering algorithmically amplified polarisation, disinformation, and cognitive warfare.

Integrated counter-extremism frameworks. Policy responses must link global grievance narratives to local resilience structures, particularly in digital ecosystems where ideological content is rapidly trans-nationalised and cognitively reinforced.

Principle-based diplomacy. As major powers – including the United States, China, and Russia – recalibrate their strategic priorities, Southeast Asia, through ASEAN, should move beyond reactive hedging toward a normatively grounded positioning based on regional principles of restraint, balance, and social cohesion.

Conclusion

The war among the United States, Israel, and Iran reflects a broader transition towards a fragmented and persistently unstable global order. External guarantees are increasingly conditional, while global norms are increasingly contested.

For Southeast Asia, resilience will benefit from external balancing and on strengthening internal normative and interpretive capacity. Indigenous frameworks such as *memayu hayuning bawono*, alongside comparable regional traditions and their institutional expressions, offer practical governance logics for this task.

They should be understood not as cultural nostalgia, but as operational infrastructure for resilience in an era defined by geopolitical volatility, digital disruption, and cognitive warfare.

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