

Introduction: Institutional Resilience and Sub-regional Governance across the China–CLMVT Nexus

Pei-Hsiu *Chen**

Department of Southeast Asian Studies,
National Chi Nan University (NCNU)
Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NCNU

Abstract

This special issue examines sub-regional governance within the China–CLMVT nexus, conceptualizing “institutional resilience” as a dynamic process of calibration, legal adaptation, and strategic management under asymmetric power structures. Rather than passive recipients of great power influence, the CLMVT countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand) actively exercise agency to balance economic dependence with political autonomy. Across six contributions, the papers explore how these mainland Southeast Asian states navigate competing external actors — primarily China and Japan — through mechanisms like Myanmar’s frontier state-building, Vietnam’s adaptive hedging with the Belt and Road Initiative, China-Thailand legal interoperability, Sino-Japanese aid coexistence, and ASEAN’s normative role. Ultimately, the collection demonstrates how framework hedging, regulatory transparency and aid dualism shape contemporary Asian governance, offering critical insights into sovereignty, survival, and regional order in a fragmented Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: *Institutional resilience; Sub-regional governance; China–CLMVT nexus; Adaptive hedging; Mainland Southeast Asia; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*

* Lifetime Distinguished Professor, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National Chi-Nan University (NCNU). Email: pchen@ncnu.edu.tw.

1. Introduction

The sub-region of mainland Southeast Asia, commonly demarcated by the CLMVT countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand), has emerged as one of the most critical geostrategic crossroads in the contemporary Indo-Pacific. Positioned at the violent intersection of major power competition, the sub-region simultaneously serves as a primary node for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a contested arena for various competing regional outlooks. To envision the future of sub-regional governance, it is essential to explore how secondary and smaller states navigate asymmetric power structures and how they cultivate systemic adaptability without sacrificing sovereign autonomy. Despite the critical importance of sub-regional dynamics, there has been a noticeable lack of enlightening publications that explore how "institutional resilience" is structurally organized and micro-politically operationalized across international relations, comparative legal structures and historical state-building trajectories in this specific geographic nexus (Womack, 2026; Weatherbee, 2019). For this reason, the *International Journal of China Studies* (IJCS) has organized this special issue, calling upon international scholarship to address how the China–CLMVT nexus shapes and reshapes the parameters of sub-regional governance.

By echoing the significance of institutional resilience in an era of heightened geopolitical volatility, this special issue highlights the following four key features:

- **Strategic Adaptation and Framework Hedging:** Rather than adopting binary responses of pure bandwagoning or balancing, smaller states in the sub-region demonstrate institutional resilience by erecting parallel framework buffers. This mechanism allows them to absorb substantial economic resources while selectively resisting full incorporation into great power political narratives.
- **Legal Interoperability and Regulatory Transparency:** Resilience is structurally rooted in domestic regulatory environments. The formalization of market access through transparent legal instruments, such as "negative lists", constitutes a critical micro-level defense mechanism that stabilizes trade under conditions of geopolitical tension.
- **Institutional Coexistence and Aid Dualism:** The sub-region thrives on a multi-layered governance architecture where competing external

aid regimes — most notably from China and Japan — coexist. This structural dualism prevents monochromatic dependency and expands the strategic bargaining space for recipient states.

- **Historical Frontier Path-Dependency:** Current institutional vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities are deeply bound to historical processes of state-building and frontier fragmentation. Understanding contemporary sub-regional governance requires tracing how historical great power spillovers have long fractured or forged local borderland orders.

2. Understanding Institutional Resilience in Sub-regional Governance

In academic literature, resilience is frequently conceptualized as a psychological trait or a purely ecological capacity to bounce back from external shocks. In the realm of international relations and area studies, however, this special issue defines institutional resilience not as static resistance, but as a dynamic, structural process of institutional calibration, boundary management and the pragmatic cultivation of parallel governance tracks (Suh et al., 2004; Kuang, 2023).

Within the CLMVT space, institutional resilience is visible through the strategic agility of states that must continually reconcile asymmetric economic realities with the imperative of political autonomy. When confronting overwhelming external initiatives, resilient states do not simply collapse into the orbits of great powers. Instead, they construct counterweights, redefine legal terms of engagement, utilize historical relational ties and tap into competing aid networks (Goh, 2007). Institutional resilience is therefore both defensive and proactive; it is the art of structuring engagement so that a smaller state remains deeply linked to, but never fully subsumed by, a dominant neighbor.

3. Mapping the Sub-regional Institutional Architecture

The practice of institutional resilience does not occur in a structural vacuum. It operates within a dense, overlapping grid of multilateral networks, state-sponsored initiatives, and external aid regimes that collectively shape the contemporary Mekong sub-region. Under the overarching shadow of great power diplomacy, various institutional frameworks introduce competing

yet interlocking governance logics. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), for instance, heavily emphasize high-speed infrastructure connectivity, economic corridors, and relational bilateralism designed to foster regional integration. In response, sub-regional states do not merely accept these initiatives passively; instead, they implement indigenous institutional counter-weights to manage potential asymmetries. Vietnam's long-standing "Two Corridors, One Belt" (TCOB) framework serves as a prime example of an autonomous institutional vehicle designed to align with external economic networks while simultaneously preserving national sovereign space.

Concurrently, the sub-regional institutional architecture is further diversified by the persistent presence of other major democratic actors, most notably Japan. Through its triennially renewed "Tokyo Strategy" within the Japan–Mekong cooperation framework, Tokyo promotes an alternative vision centered around high-quality infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and rules-based governance. This multi-layered aid architecture allows recipient states to hedge effectively between competing development paradigms. At the macro-regional level, these sub-regional dynamics are bounded by the normative aspirations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) functions as a collective, non-confrontational diplomatic instrument that seeks to maintain ASEAN Centrality by projecting an inclusive framework for multilateral dialogue, thereby attempting to neutralize zero-sum geopolitical realignments across the wider mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.

4. Tracing the Mixed Trajectories of Resilience: Contributions of the Special Issue

This special issue brings together six exceptional papers that utilize a sophisticated mix of methodologies — including historical process-tracing, comparative legal analysis, deep field interviews, and international relations theoretical frameworks — to dissect the multi-dimensional character of resilience in the China-CLMVT nexus. The contributions are organized into three thematic layers.

Layer 1: Historical Frontier State-building and Crisis Relationalism in Myanmar

The first two papers anchor the volume by examining the historical depth

and contemporary crises of state-building in Myanmar, a state whose geostrategic location makes it uniquely vulnerable to external spillovers.

Chung-Chi Chao, in his paper *The Dragon on the White Elephant: Two Chinas Fracture Burma's State-building in Cold War*, provides a meticulous historical analysis of how external spillovers shattered early Burmese state consolidation. Chao demonstrates how the Kuomintang (KMT) retreat into northern Burma and the subsequent Chinese Communist Party (CCP) support for the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) permanently weakened Yangon's frontier control. This historical intervention catalyzed the creation of a de facto buffer state and an early version of "Modern Zomia". Chao's work reminds us that institutional resilience is historically constrained; the failed state-building projects of the past directly delineate the structural vulnerabilities of the present.

Shifting to the contemporary crisis, Yu Szu-Tu analyzes the modern manifestation of bilateral resilience in *Maintain Stability, Make Compromise: Myanmar's Relations with China after the 2021 Coup D'état*. Utilizing the lens of geostrategy and "relationalism", Szu-Tu explores the puzzle of why China-Myanmar relations remained remarkably unbroken despite the severe domestic turmoil following the 2021 military coup. The study reveals a pragmatic, interest-oriented trade-off: while Beijing prioritized the security of its strategic assets and trade corridors, the military regime deepened its dependence on China for political survival. Szu-Tu highlights how a deep-seated cultural and diplomatic relationalism can function as a resilient mechanism to absorb political shocks and stabilize asymmetric ties during systemic crises.

Layer 2: Institutional Hedging and Comparative Legal Alignment

The next two papers move into the institutional mechanisms of economic governance, focusing on how Vietnam and Thailand deploy frameworks and laws to manage asymmetric interactions with China.

James W. Y. Wang offers a compelling conceptualization of structural autonomy in *Adaptive Hedging and Institutional Framework: Vietnam's Strategy toward China's Belt and Road Initiative through the Two Corridors, One Belt Framework, 2000–2025*. Wang tackles the critical question of why Hanoi has stubbornly maintained the institutional independence of its TCOB framework instead of allowing it to be fully integrated into China's BRI narrative. Through detailed process tracing, Wang conceptualizes this

behavior as “adaptive hedging”. By keeping TCOB linked but not subsumed, Vietnam successfully extracts immense material resources from China’s infrastructure grid while preserving an autonomous institutional buffer that protects its sovereign decision-making space.

At the micro-institutional level, Ming-Hsun Hsieh and Zhang Yu look at the regulatory bedrock of economic interactions in *China-Thailand Trade and Investment Relations: A Legal Perspective Analysis*. Hsieh and Zhang execute a rigorous comparative legal analysis of the foreign investment market access regimes in China and Thailand, focusing heavily on the evolution of “negative lists”. Their study details how both nations utilize legalized restrictions to safeguard national security while simultaneously enhancing transparency for foreign capital. They argue that the continuous refinement and harmonization of these legal structures form a resilient regulatory infrastructure that minimizes transaction risks and sustains bilateral economic cooperation even amid regional geopolitical fluctuations.

Layer 3: Multilateral Coexistence and Normative Regional Visions

The final two papers elevate the analytical scope to macro-regional architectures, analyzing how external assistance frameworks and regional organizations shape the broader governance ecosystem.

Hsin-Chi Lu explores the structural benefits of foreign aid dualism in *China and Japan in the CLMVT: Institutional Coexistence and Sub-regional Governance*. Lu systematically reconstructs the evolution of Japan’s “Tokyo Strategy” within the Japan-Mekong cooperation framework, positioning it alongside China’s expansive BRI. Rather than viewing this relationship as a zero-sum conflict that tears the sub-region apart, Lu demonstrates a complex pattern of “institutional coexistence”. The empirical reality shows that the parallel operation of Chinese and Japanese aid regimes provides CLMVT states with alternative pathways for development finance, significantly enhancing their collective bargaining leverage and reinforcing the multi-layered resilience of sub-regional governance.

Finally, Tony Tai-Ting Liu broadens the horizon to the entire Indo-Pacific theater in his paper, *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and China: Grand Vision or Disillusion?* Liu investigates the normative efficacy of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a collective regional response to great power competition. The paper scrutinizes whether the AOIP is a forward-looking defensive shield or an overly idealistic proposal

with structural limitations. By analyzing how the AOIP attempts to preserve “ASEAN Centrality” while interacting with China’s Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI), Liu illustrates how regional institutional resilience operates at the macro-normative level, aiming to neutralize aggressive geopolitical alignments through inclusive, non-confrontational multilateral dialogue.

5. Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

In summary, the collection of papers in this special issue offers a comprehensive, multi-layered advancement in our understanding of contemporary Asian governance. By shifting the scholarly gaze away from grand hegemonic narratives and toward the specific mechanisms of institutional resilience, this volume demonstrates that the smaller and secondary states of the CLMVT sub-region are active architects of their own geostrategic destinies. Whether through Vietnam’s framework buffering, Myanmar’s crisis relationalism, Thailand’s legal adjustments, the strategic exploitation of Sino-Japanese aid dualism, or ASEAN’s normative outlooks, these actors consistently prove that asymmetry does not automatically mean subordination.

For future research, the insights gathered here suggest that scholars must continue to look past formal diplomatic rhetoric to investigate the micro-foundations of institutional adaptability. As the Indo-Pacific drifts into an era characterized by deeper fragmentation and systemic uncertainty, the lessons of institutional resilience embedded within the China-CLMVT nexus will remain highly relevant for understanding the survival, statecraft, and sovereignty of states worldwide.

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