Q: Why do the alignments of developing countries matter?
Ciorciari: The way developing countries tilt can have a significant effect on international security and politics. Third World alignments affected the course of the Cold War, as many developing countries leaned toward the Soviet Union to counter U.S. influence, while others became crucial U.S. allies in places like the Persian Gulf. Developing country choices will also influence international relations going forward as the United States, China, and other major powers compete for leadership and influence. These alignments affect regional power balances and stability and collectively have a major effect on the systemic correlation of forces between the great powers.

Developing countries’ alignment choices also have important regional and local effects. The types of choices they make have consequences for their domestic political systems, relations with neighbors, and economic potential. In the past, joining the Soviet or American camps often set developing countries on very different paths. Even though the ideological divide has lessened, developing country governments remain concerned about the effects of external security relationships on their regime legitimacy, internal security, and economic growth. These are often reasons why they seek to limit their ties to the great powers.

Q: What can great powers do to court developing countries to form favorable alignments?
Ciorciari: When considering alignment offers, the leaders of developing countries tend to use the same basic logic that we use every day when deciding to enter business deals or other relationships. They look at the risks of an alignment and weigh those against the likely rewards. A great power like the United States makes an alignment attractive by appearing to be a relatively low-risk, high-reward security partner. However, that does not mean writing blank checks or offering patron-client relationships. To a developing country, dependency and domination are key risks of an alignment—and especially a formal military alliance—with a great power. Great powers generally attract loyal allies by showing stable commitment to the developing country’s interests, cultivating shared values, and engaging in a degree of give-and-take. That should come as no surprise, since these are the same types of features that make other types of human relationships work.

Q: How do you differentiate between the strengths of an alignment? Or in other words, what would indicate that two countries have a tight alliance instead of just a limited one?
Ciorciari: In this book, I focus on the military dimension of an alignment. I distinguish tight alliances from limited alignments by looking at the degree of commitment they entail. Tight alliances are often established via formal defense pacts, but they need not be. The U.S.-Israel relationship is not defined by a treaty, but no one doubts that it is robust. In addition to formal pledges of mutual defense, other factors affect the strength of an alignment. Does it involve basing rights in the developing country? Does it have a dedicated bureaucracy? Is intelligence closely shared? Are joint combat operations undertaken? Or is it limited to joint training, technical assistance, and flexible pledges of cooperation? I look at all of these factors in categorizing alignments. Some are certainly intermediate in strength, but I argue that developing countries usually try to stay toward the limited end of the spectrum.

Q: What made you chose Southeast Asia as your focus for this book?
Ciorciari: I chose Southeast Asia largely for two reasons. First, it is an excellent region in which to test arguments of a general nature, because it is extraordinarily diverse. It contains large Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu populations; large and small states; rich and poor ones; free markets and state-dominated economies; and democracies and dictatorships. Second, Southeast Asia is strategically important and has always been at the interstices of great-power competition. As China rises, it is again the site for potential rivalry among external giants. That makes Southeast Asian alignment choices important for international security, not just for academic discourse.