

## All eyes on US-Asean ties

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South-east Asia has had some misgivings about the new Obama administration's Asia policy, with both policymakers and observers wondering if the push for stronger United States-Asean ties during the last stages of the Bush years would continue.

So when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Jakarta in February that the administration would begin the inter-agency process to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with Asean, it created a buzz in regional capitals.

The TAC commits member nations to work together peacefully, respect each country's sovereignty and not engage in military invasion or aggression towards one another. Other signatories include China, India and Australia.

But Washington's renewed interest in this part of the world has also raised new questions.

Among them: Will the US be considering joining the East Asia Summit (EAS) after signing the non-aggression treaty with Asean? Will all EAS members welcome the US?

If the US were to join the EAS, how different will the group then be from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum, with economic and security issues figuring in discussions in both?

Asia watchers and thinkers discussed these issues and ventured possible scenarios at the recent Sentosa Roundtable on Asian Security 2009, organised by the **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)**.

To join the EAS, the US needs to fulfil three key conditions - sign the TAC, be a dialogue partner of Asean, and have substantial interests in the region. And it needs the approval of EAS members.

The EAS, which held its first meeting in December 2005, groups the 10 Asean members, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand.

In fact, Washington has been conspicuous by its absence, a source of concern for those seeking a comprehensive membership for the grouping. Now that the US membership in the EAS is a possibility, other issues have surfaced.

'Will Myanmar feel comfortable?' asked Professor Zhai Kun at the RSIS roundtable.

A leading South-east Asia watcher in China, he is the deputy director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.

America has been Myanmar's strongest critic and imposes sanctions on Yangon because of its poor human rights record and reluctance to accept a democratically elected government.

RSIS dean Barry Desker suggested that Myanmar could use the opportunity to engage Washington.

He also wondered aloud if the US President would be willing to make two separate trips to

Asia to attend the EAS meeting and the Apec meeting, which is held in Asia once every three years.

Dr Michael Green from the Washington-based think-tank Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) said he did not think Mr Barack Obama would make two trips.

Instead, he said, the President could attend the EAS meeting when the Apec forum is hosted by a Western country, or send Vice-President Joe Biden to the EAS in his absence. But he asked if the EAS would accept the Vice-President as the US representative.

There were also questions about the shift in the power balance within the grouping should both the US and Russia join the EAS. Russia applied to be a member in 2005 and its application is being evaluated.

These discussions, incidentally, come at a time when Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is pushing for yet another regional entity - the proposed Asia-Pacific community.

Canberra feels the existing institutions may not be able to cope with the political and economic challenges that come with a 'rising China'.

Some 21 countries, including the US, China, Japan and India, have been sounded out so far to join the proposed grouping, according to The Economist.

There is little doubt that Washington's bid to pursue the TAC, which comes nearly six years after China signed the treaty, will raise its relationship with Asean to a new level.

US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg had told The Straits Times, when he was here in 2007 to gain a deeper understanding of US-Asean ties, that he believed Washington should be involved in East Asia.

He envisaged a strong role for Asean in shaping Washington's ties in East Asia and also believed that US-Asean ties had to be strengthened.

Said Mr Steinberg, who was dean of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs in Austin, Texas, at the time: 'I think we should be willing to be more supportive of these Asean-centred frameworks.'

He also felt that if the US were to put its weight behind Asean, the regional grouping would be 'innovative' and a lot more could be achieved.

'I think it's been costly for the United States to be outside that framework when so many others have found their way in.'

Some major think-tanks, too, have been recommending stronger ties between the US and Asean, and the next few months will be crucial as the US begins the process towards acceding to the TAC and getting it passed by the Congress.

Discordant notes could influence that process.

'The signing of the TAC opens the door for US participation in EAS; it does not guarantee it,' said Mr Ralph Cossa, president of the Honolulu-based think-tank, Pacific Forum CSIS.

'That will have to be a separate decision. I have written that it is important for the US to

join but not all TAC advocates think it is a necessary second step,' he told The Sunday Times.

Mr Cossa is co-author of a recently released report, produced by five US-based think-tanks, titled The United States And The Asia-Pacific Region: Security Strategy For The Obama Administration.

Its key conclusion is that Washington needs to clearly articulate a vision for America's future role in Asia and outline steps to get there.

At the RSIS conference, Dr Green said the TAC may not be passed if it requires a change in Washington's sanctions policy.

He made these remarks in response to a question on Myanmar.

'I think Hillary Clinton may have raised expectations too much...There will be adjustments but not change in US sanctions policy. Try to do that and TAC will be a political loser,' he said.

Clearly, Asean - and the US - have a lot to do.