

More symbolic than substantive

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The United States sent a strong signal that it has returned to South-east Asia when its Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed the Asean Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) at the recent Asean Regional Forum.

The US has also pledged to increase its assistance to various Indochinese countries and it is expected to become an official participant in the East Asia Summit soon. These are indeed significant steps for US diplomacy in the region.

For many years, Washington had contemplated but then rejected the idea of signing the TAC. Its decision to accept the political and security constraints in the treaty has been hailed as a major improvement in America's approach to the region.

But its attempt to re-establish itself in South-east Asia is likely to be hampered by three major challenges. The most serious is the decline of its own power. Although the US won the Cold War and remains the world's sole superpower, its authority has been declining relative to that of other major powers over the past two decades. Given its shrinking resources, it is doubtful if it would be able to increase its influence in the region.

The second challenge: America has been consumed by its counter-terrorism focus for nearly a decade at the expense of almost all other important international issues. The war against terrorism will be a long one. The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have not only diverted US attention from other parts of the world, but its unilateralism in pursuing its counter-terrorism objectives has also estranged it from many countries.

China's rise is the third challenge the US faces. Washington has taken two approaches towards Beijing: engagement and containment.

On the one hand, it engages China in strategic and economic dialogues, and has urged it to cross the turbulent river of the financial crisis in a common boat. On the other, it exerts pressure on China when it comes to Taiwan, Tibet and human rights.

The US wants its allies to share the costs of containing China but it may find it hard to get them to share the burden when its own influence is waning.

Now the US is attempting to expand its presence in South-east Asia. But what exactly can it do? Can it pull the region out of the economic crisis? It is doubtful if it would be able to save other countries, given the size of its own debt.

If the US cannot save South-east Asia economically, can it help the region fight terrorism? The US approach of using hard military power to counter terrorism has not produced the results that many had expected. The socio-economic roots of terrorism have to be tackled to contain extremist groups but it is unclear if the US is prepared to change its strategy.

Some observers believe that America's real purpose in returning to South-east Asia is to curb China's growing influence in the region. Even if the US has limited economic leverage, it can achieve this aim by exploiting the disputes between South-east Asian countries and China.

But in reality, China and South-east Asian countries have already become interdependent. Despite some lingering differences between them, relations between South-east Asian countries and China have been improving over the past decade. Asean countries are probably keen to see this trend continue as they need regional stability to develop their respective economies.

All things considered, the diplomatic campaign that the US is waging to increase its strategic role in the region is likely to be more symbolic than substantive.

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