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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Repositioning US Engagement in Southeast Asia: A Case for Non-traditional Security**

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*Southeast Asian officials and analysts have complained about the waning US interest in the region due to the US preference for a bilateral approach to Southeast Asia. This US approach is out of sync with the rapidly changing security environment of the region, which can be redressed by looking at non-traditional security threats.*

IN A RECENT speech delivered at Washington's Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the new ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan has called for more US engagement in the region. Dr. Surin remarked that while ASEAN was "the fulcrum of the power base in the region, the US was absent and absent conspicuously". He argued that since the US is the only power in the region that could provide a sense of security and a sense of stability, "it needs to be present more and needs to be consistent".

The ASEAN Secretary-General has not been alone in expressing such sentiments. Many officials in the region and analysts have harped on and even lamented the waning US interest in the region, made more pronounced during the two-term administration of President George W. Bush's and a foreign policy largely defined by unilateralism and preference for 'coalitions of the willing'.

The US preoccupation with the war in Iraq and the events in the Middle East have led to the downgrading of its level of representation at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meetings and the postponement of the commemorative US-ASEAN Summit that was supposed to have taken place in September 2007. At a time when ASEAN is reorganizing itself with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter, the conspicuous absences of the US are therefore seen as 'missed opportunities'.

### **Why the lack of US interest?**

The perfunctory commitment of the US has been partly explained by its impatience with so-called multilateral 'talk fests' that are seen to achieve few solid outcomes, coupled with the 'end-of-cycle feeling to regional affairs'. Perceptions of declining US interest have stood in stark contrast to the active engagement of rising powers China and India in regional affairs. These in turn have fuelled

animated discourses on the emerging world order and possibility of a new ‘concert in Asia’.

But while US interest in the region may be waning, its bilateral relations with some countries in the region have remained robust. What is often missed in the analysis of US-ASEAN relations is the latter’s preference to approach the region largely on bilateral terms, pursued in the context of Washington’s ‘hub-and-spokes’ strategy. Thus, the lack of interest goes deeper than Washington’s preoccupation with the Middle East. The difference in strategic culture between the US and Southeast Asia cannot be ignored.

### **Re-calibrating US-ASEAN Relations**

Many have argued that the US approach of hub and spokes has become increasingly out of sync with the security requirements of the region and no longer suited to meet the more complex security challenges posed by non-traditional security (NTS) issues like pandemics, climate change and transnational crimes. The transboundary nature of these threats has compelled states to re-examine the conventional approaches to security, and stress the merits of multilateral, cooperative approaches to effectively address new and complex problems.

Hence, Dr. Pitsuwan’s point about “more U.S. presence and consistency” reflects the region’s desire for deeper commitment to multilateralism instead of Washington’s predilection for ad hoc multilateralism. However, fundamental differences notwithstanding, finding spaces where there is convergence of interests to respond to a wide array of emerging security challenges remain possible. A place to start is the area of non-traditional security (NTS).

### **Non-Traditional Security as the entry point**

The growing list of NTS challenges offers the entry point for recalibrating US-ASEAN relations. If fact, one can argue that this is the area where the US has already done some work. We note for example how the US came to the aid of the victims of the 2004 tsunami by providing the much needed logistical and financial support for disaster relief. We have also seen how the US has lent support to ASEAN’s efforts on pandemic preparedness. But more can certainly be done to enhance cooperation in this area if Washington’s policies and/or aid programmes are integrated with the wider multilateral efforts being undertaken within the ASEAN, ARF and the East Asia Summit (EAS) framework.

It has been observed that most of US assistance appears to be conducted at the bilateral level, hence the impression that it is not doing enough. But while bilateral engagement is good and effective, it is equally important to weave these engagements into the open and inclusive multilateral settings that Southeast Asian countries are more comfortable with. The intention therefore is not to replace current arrangements but to build upon and complement.

### **Make the US part of the global solution**

In the run-up to the next US presidential elections, candidates for presidential nomination like Hillary Clinton have declared that the next US president will have “to reintroduce America to the world and restore leadership”. Barack Obama speaks of “renewed”, “visionary” American leadership “grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and common humanity”, while John McCain calls for a leader who can “revitalize our country’s purpose and standing in the world.” Such themes are a welcome relief to a world that has become wary and weary of a ‘troubled hegemon’ with the predilection for going it alone and for military activism.

Reclaiming that ‘lost’ global leadership status however comes with high expectations, not least from states in Southeast Asia. As with the rest of the world, Southeast Asia would want to see how the rhetoric of change will be translated into action by the new US administration. This is especially so in

the way its foreign policy will take shape and the extent to which the country can lead in the promotion of global norms while tempering the tendency to be preachy and sovereignty-busting.

As a preponderant power, the US needs to be part of the solution to many global challenges which are not limited only to the war against terrorism and proliferation. Climate change, energy security, pandemics—these are areas where the region, like the rest of the world, expects the US to lead. But, against America's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol and its reticence to commit to reducing its own carbon emissions—the new administration will be hard pressed to restore its credibility to lead the international community in seeking a global consensus around shared goals.

In this regard, an interesting question is whether the United States will follow the example set by Australia of signing the Kyoto Protocol immediately after the new administration took office? This powerful symbolism was certainly not lost on the people in this region.

Indeed, as pointed out in a recent policy brief issued by the US Stanley Foundation, the ultimate objective for revitalizing America's cooperation internationally "is to have more of the world feel stronger kinship with the United States, in part through a more concerted effort toward increased prosperity and peace". In this context, no better region finds convergence with the vision of common security and common humanity than Southeast Asia with its long standing practices of comprehensive and cooperative security, its emphasis on inclusiveness and its focus on human security.

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