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## **US-ASEAN Relations: Uncertainty and Opportunity**

*By David Han*

### **Synopsis**

*The recent US-ASEAN summit held last month underscores US commitment to Southeast Asia. Although it is uncertain whether this commitment would endure beyond the Obama administration, it is likely to continue due to the economic opportunity and security importance of the Asia-Pacific.*

### **Commentary**

THE RECENTLY concluded summit between the United States and ASEAN in Sunnylands, California, is symbolically significant for it is the first time a US president had called for a summit with ASEAN on American soil. The event demonstrates ASEAN's elevated importance in the US rebalancing, also known as the Asia Pivot, in the Asia Pacific. It also marks a shift in America's traditional tendency to downplay the importance of Southeast Asia.

Through the rebalancing, the US seeks to expand its network of alliances and friends for the common goal of security and economic prosperity for the Asia Pacific. While there are concerns that the America post - Obama may neglect Southeast Asia, the economic and security importance of the Asia Pacific could prolong US rebalancing beyond the current administration.

### **US-ASEAN Relations in the Asia-Pivot**

ASEAN countries have been receptive to the American rebalancing. For instance, Malaysia is a key global partner of the US in the Asia Pivot. Indeed, US-Malaysia ties have improved, as bilateral relations were upgraded to a "Comprehensive Partnership" in April 2014. Malaysia is now a member of the US-led Trans-Pacific

Partnership (TPP), a mega free trade pact. Malaysia and the US are also working closely in the fight against the threat from Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Other ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Singapore have also forged closer ties with the US. For instance, Vietnam also signed a similar Comprehensive Partnership with Washington that provided the framework for cooperation not only on economic and security issues, but also on culture, tourism, and sports, among others.

Indeed, the US-ASEAN summit evidenced the comprehensive scope of US commitment to Southeast Asia. The meeting discussed various issues such as good governance, sustainable development, and climate change. A “US-ASEAN Connect” package has been set up to provide technical knowledge to other ASEAN countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia to prepare them for eventual entry into the TPP.

The US will also be establishing economic centres in Singapore, Bangkok, and Jakarta to improve the coordination of US economic engagement in this region. Without naming China and the South China Sea (SCS), President Obama and ASEAN leaders tactfully called for restraints and observance of international law to resolve maritime disputes peacefully.

### **Uncertainty and Optimism on US Rebalancing**

Nevertheless, there is uncertainty whether the next US president would carry on the rebalancing. For example, there are fears that the TPP, which is a key component of US trade policy in the Asia Pacific, could be undermined by resistance and obstacles in the US Congress. A number of prominent presidential candidates have also criticised the TPP and there is no guarantee that the next US president would be as keen to engage ASEAN.

It is too premature to conclude that the US post-Obama would backtrack on the rebalancing strategy. . For obvious domestic political reasons, the rhetoric by the presidential candidates against the disadvantages of TPP is aimed at gaining political mileage. Strong rhetoric adopted by American presidential candidates in previous election campaigns eventually gave way to pragmatism after taking office. In fact, when President Obama was still a senator, he too resorted to the protectionist rhetoric during his elections campaigns.

Furthermore, it is difficult for the US to ignore the more pertinent economic and security issues in the Asia Pacific and Southeast Asia. The Asia-Pacific has a key role in global economic growth and the TPP taps into this dynamism which would help drive US economic growth. The recent establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will also provide lucrative potential business opportunities for US corporations and businesses.

With the increasing threat of ISIS in Southeast Asia, it would be in the interests of the US to work with ASEAN to tackle ISIS infiltration in the region. At a media interview during the summit, President Obama reportedly commended Malaysia, Brunei and

Indonesia as states representing “the best of moderate Islam” in ASEAN which the US seeks to cooperate with to fight against the ISIS threat.

The South China Sea disputes would continue to draw the attention of the US, as freedom of navigation and the security of sea lines of communication through the South China Sea is vital for trade which is crucial for the economic prosperity of both the Asia Pacific and the US. Thus, Washington is likely to continue its involvement on maritime issues in Southeast Asia.

### **Impact of US-ASEAN Summit**

The US-ASEAN summit shows that US commitment to this region is no longer confined primarily to traditional security issues. Through soft power, the US is increasingly engaging ASEAN on economic and non-traditional security related issues.

The US-ASEAN Summit could set the precedent for future American presidents to hold such meetings and lead to the institutionalisation of the summit. In addition, President Obama may be conveying the message to his successor that the US should maintain the rebalancing.

Some analysts have suggested that the Obama administration has begun to appreciate ASEAN-style multilateralism. This is not surprising as President Obama’s foreign policy has focused on multilateral cooperation according to international norms. However, this may not be the case for the next US administration.

To help sustain US attention in Southeast Asia, ASEAN countries have to engage the US pro-actively on shared interests. Indeed, it is the shared goal of common prosperity which would prolong the Asia Pivot in the near future.

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