

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

US Presidential Election: If Southeast Asia Could Vote

By Christabelle He and Amanda Huan

Synopsis

Hillary Clinton, for the Democrats, and Donald Trump, for the Republicans, have emerged front-runners in the presidential nomination campaign. There has not been much talk about their foreign policy stances, especially in regard to their positions towards Southeast Asia. If Southeast Asia were given a chance to vote, who would they vote for?

Commentary

THE UNITED States presidential election campaign is well underway with Hillary Clinton for the Democrats and Donald Trump for the Republicans emerging as front-runners in the nomination round. While much of their campaign speeches have revolved around domestic issues, there have been fewer mentions about their foreign policy stances, especially with regards to their positions towards Southeast Asia.

If given a chance to vote, who would the Southeast Asia region vote for? In our opinion, the vote would likely go to Hillary Clinton. She is not only a familiar figure, but would also be a president who could give more attention and benefits to the region.

Why Clinton?

There are three main reasons why Clinton could be the preferred choice.

First, she understands and values Southeast Asia and is well known to the region. She is the first Secretary of State to have visited all Southeast Asian capitals. In

2009, Clinton's second overseas destination after becoming US Secretary of State had been Indonesia. Clinton took note of doubts about the US' promise to partner the region in addressing security, economic, environmental and humanitarian issues. She generously gave recognition to Southeast Asia's largest country, Indonesia, for its efforts at implementing democratic changes.

Clinton then visited Vietnam in July 2010 to assert US commitment to the region. She also signed the Manila Declaration on 16 November 2011 with Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario to underscore US commitment to the Philippines as an ally. Further, Clinton reaffirmed the US-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty, enlarged US security arrangements with Singapore, and spoke up for more security ties to be established "in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region".

Importantly, she also participated in bringing change to Myanmar's ruling system. Clinton's 2011 stopover in Myanmar, a first by a senior US official in 50 years, is seen by some to have been a "turning point" in US-Myanmar relations.

Clinton also steered the first group of American CEOs to the US-ASEAN Business Forum in Cambodia. At the forum, she promised to send more trade missions, engaged local leaders, and assembled meetings for business leaders and government officials. She injected positivity by characterising US-ASEAN cooperation as a novel way of conducting international relations and utilising 'smart power'.

Booster of US Presence in Southeast Asia

The second major reason is that Clinton has helped revitalise US presence in the region. Even as Clinton drove the American strategy to "pivot" and rebalance to Asia, she remained supportive of ASEAN-led attempts to settle a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea issue at the East Asia Summit in November 2012. Prior to that, in 2010, while she emphasised US neutrality, she also maintained US interest and willingness to facilitate multilateral discussions. A Clinton presidency is likely to lead to a more effective handling of great power relations in the region.

The third major reason for Clinton being an ideal candidate is that her presidency could possibly pioneer further positive changes for US-Southeast Asia relations, especially for women in the region. If Clinton wins the elections, as the first female President in the history of the US, she would embody a new era, possibly one that espouses more hope, opportunities, and recognition for women's role in society. In the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United States Strategic Partnership (2016-2020), US and Southeast Asian counterparts have already agreed to enhance collaboration on strengthening opportunities for women.

What About the Others?

The other three front-runners, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and Ted Cruz, have comparatively less experience and exposure to the Southeast Asian region. This, of course, might be due to the lack of opportunity, while Clinton, as Secretary of State, had more opportunities to interact with the region.

Looking at the other candidates' apparent foreign policy stances towards Asia, however, suggests that Southeast Asia might not be a high priority area. In the case of Bernie Sanders, he has not been to the region on any official visit, and has spoken little about the region. Ted Cruz, while having more experience with Asia in general, has not focused much on Southeast Asia though he may seek to do so as he is weary of Asian countries "moving more into the orbit of China and away from the West".

Donald Trump has not spoken much about the region, but his highly-charged rhetoric about other Asian countries like China and South Korea suggest that he is likely to adopt an antagonistic stance towards the region. Trump told the New York Times that, as president, he would "perhaps" lay claim to one of the disputed islands of the South China Sea for the US.

The billionaire front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination also remarked that he is prepared to withdraw US troops from Japan and South Korea if the countries did not substantially increase their payments to help maintain the forces. At the South Carolina GOP debate, Trump remarked that countries such as Vietnam were "taking our jobs ... taking our wealth ... taking our base" and so vowed that he would bring jobs back to the US.

Clinton's Track Record

Clinton has had a good track record of doing good for the Southeast Asian region in spite of her recent retreat from supporting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), understandable given the domestic situation and the on-going election campaign. Given the way she has adeptly handled and managed ties with Southeast Asia previously, the region may be assured that Clinton would be able to work out a reasonable agreement for both the US and Southeast Asian nations involved in the TPP.

In all, a Clinton presidency is likely to mean continued US involvement in the region as a result of a continuation of Obama's foreign policy legacy towards Southeast Asia. Aside from a possible sustenance of frequent high-level visits and exchanges between US and Southeast Asian counterparts, Clinton can also be expected to ensure that America and Southeast Asia work together in areas such as the South China Sea disputes and the conclusion of the TPP.

Christabelle He and Amanda Huan are research analysts at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
