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Trump and Southeast Asia: US Should Pivot to ASEAN

By Daniel Chua Wei Boon

Synopsis

The Donald Trump administration should establish a Comprehensive Partnership with Brunei, followed by Cambodia and Myanmar to strengthen and broaden the reach of bilateral strategic relations with ASEAN member countries.

Commentary

A WEB of alliances between the United States and its partners in the Asia-Pacific entrenches US dominance in the region's security order. Since the end of the Cold War, the economic rise of China and its concomitant strategic assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific have challenged American primacy in regional affairs. Asian partners of the US find themselves caught in the need to maintain economic relations with China, while preserving strategic ties with Washington.

Instead of forcing Southeast Asian states to make a choice, the US government should engage the region in a manner which allows them to work with and benefit from both Washington and other partners. Hence, the US should enhance bilateral relations with ASEAN member countries that have yet to establish comprehensive bilateral cooperation with the US. Doing so will facilitate understanding and acceptance of American values and policies among Southeast Asian nations over time.

What are Comprehensive Partnerships?

During the Obama administration, US engagement with Southeast Asian states involved structured and multifaceted framework of cooperation called "strategic partnerships". Being goal-driven, rather than threat-driven, makes strategic partnerships more attractive to the US and its target countries.

Sometimes called “comprehensive partnerships” to assuage a target country’s domestic resistance against the American military, the US entered into Comprehensive Partnerships with Indonesia (2010), Vietnam (2013), Malaysia (2014) and Laos (2016). Apart from establishing such Partnerships, the US has also entered into deeper modes of bilateral relations called enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreements with the Philippines (2014) and Singapore (2015).

Whereas the US has established close bilateral ties with Southeast Asian countries in the forms of either a mutual defence treaty, an enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreements or a Comprehensive Partnership, Brunei, Cambodia and Myanmar are the only three ASEAN member countries that do not have comprehensive bilateral agreements with the US.

Why Brunei First?

Among the three Southeast Asian countries yet to sign Comprehensive Partnerships with the US, Brunei is the most likely to do so in the short term. Since entering into a Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Commerce and Navigation in 1850, the US and Brunei have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on defence cooperation on 29 November 1994, and engage in bilateral military exercises, training and other cooperation programmes, with the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise at the core.

Both countries have also entered into “Open-Sky” Air Services Agreement (1997), Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (2002) and an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) between the Royal Brunei Armed Forces and the US Pacific Command. Trade between both countries amounted to US\$628 million in 2016 and Brunei has procured Sikorsky Black Hawk S70i helicopters and Boeing 787 Dreamliners from the US.

Due to current domestic conditions in Cambodia and Myanmar, developing a partnership with Cambodia and Myanmar will require greater efforts from the US government in the short term. Nevertheless, Cambodia and Myanmar possess bilateral trade relations with the US. Cambodia and Myanmar, along with Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, are members of the US-led Lower Mekong Initiative established in 2009.

Benefits to US

There are at least three benefits to the US from an expanded network of Comprehensive Partnerships with the three ASEAN member states that have yet to sign on.

Firstly, this policy will provide opportunities for Washington to institutionalise and routinise its engagement with Southeast Asian states, thereby avoiding disruptions in relations from occasional diplomatic spat.

Secondly, the US will be able to leverage on strong bilateral relations to communicate its position if disagreements were to arise between the US and China. Whereas US

allies and partners in the region are willing to support Washington's position, other countries tend to take a disinterested or pro-Beijing stance. By enhancing bilateral relations with these states, the US will have the chance to influence and shape the perspectives among Southeast Asian nations vis-à-vis the issues of contention.

Thirdly, a policy of enhanced bilateral relations with Brunei, Cambodia and Myanmar that involve people-to-people exchanges will improve understanding among nationals of these countries. With the increase of exchange and educational programmes, US citizens will be able to understand the region from the perspectives of all ten ASEAN member countries first-hand. Nationals from these Southeast Asian countries will also gain greater knowledge of American culture through educational programmes in the US. Such exposure enhances the ability of the US government to exert soft power.

Benefits to Southeast Asia and ASEAN

There are, equally, benefits to Southeast Asia and ASEAN. Firstly, Southeast Asian states will be able to maintain positive relations with both China and the US. If all ten Southeast Asian states enjoy the same level of economic and diplomatic relations with both powers, the fear of having to take sides will be reduced.

Secondly, this policy will bring about tangible economic and social development in Southeast Asia. American economic partnership with Brunei, Cambodia and Myanmar will lead to investments into these countries, thereby contributing to their economic growth.

Thirdly, by adding a bilateral dimension to existing US-ASEAN Strategic Partnerships, this policy provides a dual track structure that increases opportunities for Southeast Asian nations to tap on US resources in the region.

Possible Obstacles

In essence, this policy builds on and enhances the Obama administration's pivot to Asia. If perceived as such, there might be resistance within the Trump administration to overtly support this policy. Nevertheless, President Trump has demonstrated willingness to remain on-course for some foreign policy decisions made by his predecessor.

As mentioned earlier, Cambodia and Myanmar possess conditions that hinder close bilateral cooperation with the US in the short term. Although trade exists between both countries, Cambodia's relations with the US have been strained because of Cambodia's track record of human rights violations. Under such a hostile climate, it is highly unlikely that the US will be able to establish close bilateral ties with Cambodia.

Whereas US-Myanmar relations have improved since 2013, the issue of citizenship for the Rohingya, prevention of violence against Muslims and the establishment of Myanmar as a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious country are three factors affecting bilateral relations. Unless these domestic problems are dealt with, it is not likely that the US will establish a Comprehensive Partnership with Myanmar.

In sum, to maintain strong engagement with Southeast Asia, the US should establish

a Comprehensive Partnership with Brunei, and subsequently Cambodia and Myanmar. Brunei already possesses strong economic and defence ties with the US, and bilateral relations are ripe for an upgrade.

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