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# “The Power of Balance:” Advancing US-ASEAN Relations under the Second Obama Administration

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One of the lasting legacies of the first Obama administration was a “rebalancing” of American commitments and resources with regard to the Asia-Pacific region. Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were a critical part of this story.<sup>1</sup> In the last few years, the administration has appointed the first U.S. ambassador to ASEAN; acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC); attended its first East Asia Summit; strengthened alliances and partnerships with several countries including the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore; engaged a reforming Burma; and unveiled a series of business and economic initiatives to assist Southeast Asian countries.

These efforts reflect the recognition among U.S. policymakers that Southeast Asia is central to core American interests for a variety of reasons. Southeast Asia straddles strategically important sea lanes and it is home to ASEAN, which Hillary Clinton once called “the fulcrum” for Asia’s emerging regional architecture.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, with its 600 million residents, Southeast Asia represents the largest destination for U.S. investment in Asia and the fourth largest overseas market in the world. At the start of President Obama’s second term, it is important to consider the steps that should be taken to further advance U.S.-ASEAN relations over the next few years.

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Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs during the first Obama administration, has offered a new framework for considering U.S.-ASEAN relations. At the 2007 U.S.-ASEAN Symposium in Singapore, he urged participants to trade the conventional “balance of power” lens for a “power of balance” metaphor, focused on achieving parity in several senses including traditional and non-traditional security.<sup>3</sup> Campbell’s “power of balance” metaphor is an apt way of capturing the challenge of managing U.S.-ASEAN relations. While the Obama administration has ramped up U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia substantially over the last few years, the important challenge for the next administration will be to harness the power of balance and achieve parity in four aspects of the relationship: bilateralism and multilateralism, security and economics, confronting and cooperating with China, and the scope of U.S. commitments and resources they require.

#### KEEPING THE FAITH IN MULTILATERALISM

The first challenge for President Obama and his new administration is striking the appropriate balance between bilateralism and multilateralism. Apart from increasing American involvement in regional multilateral institutions, the Obama administration has poured energy into strengthening U.S. bilateral relationships with partners such as Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam (in addition to treaty allies Thailand and the Philippines). Yet, some in ASEAN worry that Washington may prioritize bilateral relationships more in the future should multilateralism lose steam. This skeptical response from ASEAN arises from a history of American impatience with the perceived lack of substance in ASEAN-led summitry. Conversely, Southeast Asian countries view the U.S. criticisms as unfounded and reflecting an overly “transactional” approach to the organization, which fails to appreciate the role of building trust and preserving face in Asian diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

ASEAN member states also worry that the American president may be consumed by other priorities that distract him from Asian issues. Their most recent point of reference is the Bush administration, whose preoccupation with the Middle East led U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to skip the ASEAN Regional Forum twice in three years, and President Bush to miss a scheduled U.S.-ASEAN summit in Singapore in 2007.<sup>5</sup> While the Bush years saw the appointment of the first U.S. ambassador to ASEAN and discussions on a U.S.-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA), Rice and Bush’s absence from these meetings has not been forgotten. And while the

Obama administration has repeatedly stated its long-term commitment to ASEAN, U.S. officials have also emphasized that the group needs to demonstrate leadership in tackling tough issues in the Asia-Pacific region in order to live up to its desired “driver’s seat” role in regional affairs.<sup>6</sup>

This will not be an easy task for ASEAN. Its immediate future presents challenges as the association grapples with contentious issues that threaten to undermine its cohesion. A clear example is ASEAN’s unprecedented failure to issue a joint communiqué in Cambodia in 2012 due to internal disagreements regarding the South China Sea. The incident raised questions about the group’s capabilities and leadership in the face of divisive disputes and external power interventions.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, these worries are likely to persist in the future. In the next few years, ASEAN’s annually rotated chairmanship will pass from Cambodia to other relatively small, under-developed states: Brunei in 2013, Burma in 2014, and Laos in 2016. These countries, capable as they are, may not have the ability to drive regional integration or tackle controversial issues with the same effectiveness as Indonesia or Singapore.<sup>8</sup> This casts doubt on ASEAN’s ability to sustain the dynamic leadership it has enjoyed under Rodolfo Severino (1998-2002), Ong Keng Yeong (2003-2007), and Surin Pitsuwan (2008-2012).<sup>9</sup> All of this is occurring as the clock ticks on ASEAN’s ambitious goal of creating a single ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by the end of 2015.

Should ASEAN-led multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific stagnate or stumble in the next few years, Washington will likely abate its efforts to promote summitry and attend key meetings, and instead double down on strengthening key bilateral relationships. This would be a mistake. Regional multilateralism, for all its faults, is an important means of addressing a range of transnational security threats and involving regional powers, including China, in a shared normative framework. ASEAN is a critical part of this process. The U.S. should continue to play a constructive role in enhancing ASEAN integration and leadership. Beyond issuing supportive public statements, the United States should strengthen programs directed at boosting the economic capacity of less developed ASEAN members to encourage regional integration, such as the

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multilateral Lower Mekong Initiative.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, while bilateral relationships ought not to divert U.S. attention away from multilateralism, strong bilateral ties should be leveraged effectively in pursuit of multilateral goals. The role of the U.S.-Singapore strategic partnership in promoting regional technical assistance via the Third Country Training Program<sup>11</sup> and the potential role of Thailand as a “regional hub” for the U.S. navy in humanitarian and disaster-relief operations<sup>12</sup> offer two positive examples.

### BALANCING GUNS AND BUTTER

ASEAN countries have consistently complained that Washington’s attention to Southeast Asia has been too security-focused and militaristic at the expense of the region’s economic needs. Few Southeast Asia experts would disagree with the belief that U.S. policy in the region has too often been driven by conflicts. Even Campbell recently acknowledged that “it will be extremely important going forward, particularly in Southeast Asia, to underscore that our commitment to engage extends far beyond simply important security and defense engagements to every aspect...of American diplomacy.”<sup>13</sup> This includes economic issues such as business, trade, and investment.

After initially doing little in the way of trade policy, the Obama administration has made some headway in negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a regional free trade agreement. The U.S. first announced its desire to join the TPP under the Bush administration, and it currently includes four ASEAN members (Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Vietnam) with prospects of other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines joining as well. If finalized, the TPP will be a major breakthrough, but some still doubt whether a deal will be reached soon.<sup>14</sup> While Washington has made the TPP the core of its trade policy in Asia, three ASEAN countries—Cambodia, Laos, and Burma—are not eligible for accession because they are not members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. This creates an impression that the TPP is dividing ASEAN between eligible and ineligible countries. To avoid this problem, the next administration must find a way to eventually bring the ASEAN countries into the fold of U.S. trade policy in Asia. This could be pursued through a variety of ways, including working with other TPP members to revise accession eligibility, reinvigorating the U.S.-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Agreement and creating a mechanism for building capacity for interested TPP parties, or declaring its clear intention to work towards a broader U.S.-ASEAN FTA.<sup>15</sup> The

Expanded Economic Engagement Initiative announced at the fourth U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Meeting in November 2012 was a step in the right direction by providing some technical assistance and capacity-building for ASEAN states, but it still leaves much to be desired.

While enacting international trade policy in the United States is bound to be difficult, particularly in challenging economic times and with a divided Congress, it must be a top priority because Washington is already behind on the trade game in Asia. Major powers in Asia such as China, Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia all have free trade agreements with ASEAN as a whole, and they have already launched the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership amongst them that leaves out the United States. On a positive note, the administration has begun to take steps to facilitate business links between the United States and ASEAN. It organized the first ever U.S.-ASEAN Business Forum in Cambodia in July 2012 and has eased restrictions on U.S. companies interested in doing business in Burma.

Beyond this, there are a number of things the next administration can do to enhance the economic aspects of U.S.-ASEAN engagement. The first initiative is to boost both U.S. government and business investment in ASEAN infrastructure, which will encourage other interested parties to do the same. Infrastructure is the bedrock of the Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity, an initiative launched in 2010 that stresses the development of railways, airports, power plants, and information and communication technology systems to strengthen regional integration in Southeast Asia.<sup>16</sup> Increased connectivity is central to improving ASEAN's resilience and capacity as a regional actor and the United States has an interest in encouraging this. The establishment of the U.S.-ASEAN Business Forum this year marked a productive step forward, but much more can be done. For example, the United States should contribute funding to the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund (AIF) launched in May 2012 and encourage its allies and partners to do the same. As Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen noted in August, the AIF is “still very small” and “cannot sufficiently respond to the great need of ASEAN connectivity.”<sup>17</sup>

The second initiative is to work in concert with U.S. businesses to ensure they are helping to shape positive business norms in Southeast Asian countries. Nowhere is this more important than in Burma, where the U.S. government has not only recently eased sanctions, but has done so in a careful manner designed to give companies the opportunity to invest while preventing them from engaging with firms and individuals considered by the U.S. Treasury Department to be linked to violence, oppression, and

corrupt practices in the country. U.S. companies, with their high standards of corporate governance and adherence to the rule of law, cannot compete with companies from China and other countries in a “race to the bottom” to maximize profits. But if Washington is able to correctly balance the interests and ideals of different constituencies, including businesses, human rights organizations, and various political factions and bureaucracies,

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The third initiative should be to boost U.S.-ASEAN people-to-people relations, either independently or by working with civil society. The Brunei-U.S. English Language Enrichment Project for ASEAN, a collaboration between Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) and the East-West Center—a nonprofit organization founded by Congress—is a good example. Unveiled in September 2012, the initiative aims to help improve English language capacity and advance educational opportunities in Brunei.<sup>18</sup> Other potential areas of collaboration include raising the level of U.S.-ASEAN student exchanges through

the provision of more scholarships and fellowships, not only facilitating cultural understanding but also building binding generational ties between the region and the United States. The United States and ASEAN should set a target for educational exchanges such as doubling of the number of students by 2015, a proposal recently advanced by the U.S.-ASEAN Eminent Persons Group.<sup>19</sup>

#### FINDING THE “GOLDILOCKS ZONE” ON CHINA

The third delicate balance the next administration must strike relates to China. Both the United States and the Southeast Asian states



face essentially the same dilemma with respect to China: they currently have tight economic linkages with Beijing, but worry about the country's future intentions as its power grows and as it displays increased signs of assertiveness. Both also recognize that extreme approaches will not work; appeasing China risks undermining the territorial integrity of ASEAN states and the global standing and values of the United States, but adopting a purely offensive posture prematurely creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that could precipitate another Cold War-like confrontation. A more nuanced approach involves finding a “Goldilocks Zone” – neither “too hot” nor “too cold,” but “just right.”<sup>20</sup> For Washington, this means cooperating with China where the United States can, but confronting Beijing on issues where it must, thus preserving U.S. interests and ideals while also taking into account the needs of its Southeast Asian allies.

Finding this ideal “Goldilocks Zone” will be difficult for a number of reasons. First, each Southeast Asian state has a considerable asymmetrical disadvantage vis-à-vis both Beijing and Washington. This tends to amplify their fears of Chinese assertiveness, American abandonment, or conflict between the two superpowers. These anxieties have the potential to create distance between the United States and ASEAN. For instance, Southeast Asian states appreciated the solidarity expressed by Secretary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in July 2010 in the face of Chinese bullying with respect to the South China Sea. However, some ASEAN countries considered the military dimension of the U.S. “pivot” to Asia, which included the stationing of U.S. Marines in Australia in November 2011, to be too heavy-handed.<sup>21</sup> For instance, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa declared that the move would create a “vicious cycle of tension and mistrust” between the United States and China where ASEAN may be forced to take sides.<sup>22</sup>

Second, the future direction of China's evolution is itself uncertain. Beijing underwent a leadership transition in November 2012. This change is especially important, as it will signal how China's next generation, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, will govern a country whose power is expected to expand significantly.<sup>23</sup> How will the Chinese, after enduring a “century of humiliation,” conduct themselves once they feel they have restored China's rightful place on the global stage? And how will the United States, accustomed to being the dominant power, respond psychologically to China's potential challenge to its long-held hegemony? Even if leaders in Washington and Beijing desire cooperation, in the wake of such dramatic power transitions they are likely to face significant challenges in obtaining the support of their domestic populations and maintaining credibility abroad.

So, in the face of these difficulties, how can the United States get it “just right” on China? First, it can help mitigate asymmetry by providing ASEAN countries the necessary reassurance and capabilities to buttress their power and manage a relationship with a stronger China more confidently. This can range from statements of support—such as Washington’s recent call for a code of conduct on the South China Sea—to enhancing military relationships with allies through joint exercises and the provision of military equipment. At the same time, however, the United States must make clear that Southeast Asian countries should not view this as an opportunity to make overly risky moves that might destabilize regional peace and stability. Similarly, China must not view this as an attempt to contain its own rise. This is simply a necessary step by the United States to give China’s neighbors the time and flexibility they need to come to terms with a rising China whose future intentions remain uncertain.

To lend “Goldilocks” some credibility, this approach should be pursued in parallel with a three-part strategy of cooperation. In order to reduce the strategic mistrust inherent in the U.S.-China relationship, the Obama administration must try to increase dialogue and transparency,

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particularly in the domain of military-to-military ties. Though this is no doubt difficult, it can begin with small steps such as the recently announced plans to discuss resource sharing during joint military missions.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Washington should persevere in its efforts to make China adhere to a rules-based framework, whether regarding intellectual property rights or the South China Sea. China’s willingness to play by the rules should be considered as no less than a litmus test of its commit-

ment to the current world order. Finally, the United States and allies should urge Beijing to make greater contributions to international security, since great power ought to come with great responsibility. China’s contribution to help counter piracy in the Horn of Africa is a prime example of what this might look like and has already produced the first ever bilateral counter-piracy exercise conducted between Washington and Beijing, occurring in 2012.<sup>25</sup>



**MINDING THE LIPPMANN GAP**

The last challenge that the next administration must fulfill in Southeast Asia is balancing the scope of American commitments in the region with the resources available to achieve them. The renowned journalist Walter Lippmann pointed out as early as 1943 that avoiding gaps between commitments and resources—so-called Lippmann gaps—was key to mobilizing domestic support for an effective foreign policy. Seventy years later, as the second Obama administration enters office, Lippmann’s advice remains as sound as ever.<sup>26</sup>

Many in Southeast Asia fear that Washington will not be able to sustain its current attention to the Asia-Pacific in the near-term. Part of this is a function of historical memory. U.S.-ASEAN relations are sensitive to shifting feelings of insecurity, neglect, or alarm in Asian capitals, and thus tend to evolve in line with realignments in domestic politics, threat perceptions, and the balance of power in Asia. Richard Nixon’s sudden visit to China in 1972, Jimmy Carter’s troop withdrawals in the late 1970s, Bill Clinton’s unwillingness to help Southeast Asia during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, and George W. Bush’s narrow focus on terrorism are all prominent examples of this tendency.<sup>27</sup>

There are also additional contemporary reasons to worry. The expected departure of top diplomats, particularly Clinton and Campbell, will be a huge loss for Southeast Asia as both have been crucial in pushing for greater engagement in the region during the Obama administration. Clinton has clocked serious mileage in Southeast Asia, becoming the first top U.S. diplomat to ever visit all ten ASEAN countries as well as Timor-Leste,<sup>28</sup> while Campbell, an experienced Asia hand, has overseen the institutionalization of several critical initiatives in the region. There is also a risk that a foreign policy crisis in another area of the world could distract the president from the region as it did George W. Bush. Even Obama’s whirlwind three-day Southeast Asia trip in November 2012 was constantly interrupted by the crisis in Gaza, which eventually forced him to deploy Clinton to the region.

Perhaps more concerning for ASEAN countries, however, is the economy. With U.S. gross domestic product growth still at a paltry level and unemployment remaining high, the worry in Southeast Asia is that a full American recovery may still be far off. Prolonged economic malaise may lead to deeper defense budget cuts, which could undermine U.S. military might. The 2011 Budget Control Act already mandated \$487 billion in defense cuts over the next decade, and \$500 billion more were included

to be automatically stripped under sequestration beginning in 2013 as part of Congress' deficit reduction negotiations. The expected reduction in troops, the cancellation of major weapons systems, and the disruption of global operations could undermine U.S. credibility and embolden Washington's adversaries. In fact, General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Appropriations Committee earlier this year that the cuts would erode the U.S. deterrent capability and even "increase the likelihood of conflict."<sup>29</sup> Regardless of the so-called "fiscal cliff," Washington still has a lot of work to do to get its deeply depressed economy back into shape. If such a cash-strapped environment persists, it will be harder for the United States to devote additional economic resources to fund its diplomatic initiatives in the Asia-Pacific.

Achieving balance in this aspect may be difficult, but it is far from impossible. First, Obama must be careful to replace Campbell, Clinton, and other key figures with diplomats who share the administration's focus on the Asia-Pacific region and can bring and sustain a similar level of energy and enthusiasm as their predecessors. Personnel choices are a key indicator of priority. Second, Washington must place a greater emphasis on maximizing its credibility with the limited military assets at its disposal. For instance, despite all the trumpeting about a "pivot" to Asia, a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies report found that there was neither an articulation of how the strategy would be achieved under current budget realities nor a "durable operational framework" to implement it.<sup>30</sup> If the United States truly wants to assuage worries about its staying power in Southeast Asia, then it must back up its words with actions. The report recommends several places to start, including beefing up U.S. Pacific Command and deploying additional military assets such as nuclear-powered attack submarines to potentially counter Chinese capabilities.

## CONCLUSION

If, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in October 2011, the future of world politics lies in the Asia-Pacific, then members of ASEAN will be central players in shaping America's "Pacific Century." The first Obama administration has made a concerted effort to give the region the attention it deserves. The second must harness the power of balance to further advance U.S. ties with Southeast Asia and show the region that these past few years were not an aberration, but part of a sustained, bipartisan effort in Washington to invest in what will be one of the most important relationships to maintain in the coming decades. ■

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Technically, Southeast Asia refers to the region in question, and ASEAN refers to the organization. In practice, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably and that is how they are used in this piece.
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