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US-Malaysia Relations and Regional Security

Dr Patrick Cronin is Senior Advisor and Senior Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program, Centre for a New American Security (CNAS). On 9 September 2014, an ISIS International Affairs Forum was held to discuss US-Malaysia relations and regional security. Cronin's presentation revolved around the rise of China, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Japan's present-day role as one of US' strongest allies, and the pro-democracy demonstration in Hong Kong. The Forum was moderated by **Dato' Steven CM Wong**, Deputy Chief Executive, ISIS Malaysia. ISIS Intern **Mr Abu Bakar Badruddin** and Research Assistant **Ms Nurul Izzati Kamrulbahri** report.

Dr Patrick Cronin's presentation began with a focus on the Obama administration's foreign policy strategy in East Asia — the so-called "Pivot or Rebalancing to Asia". This policy has cultivated a feeling of unease in Beijing as it is perceived as an act of Washington's containment policy towards China. However, Cronin emphasised that the US "Rebalancing to Asia" is driven by politically diplomatic decisions by the Obama administration. The United States seeks to: (i) strengthen their cooperation with regional governments for security and economic matters; (ii) deepen their working relationship with emerging powers, including China; and (iii) engage with regional multilateral institutions, particularly ASEAN.

The United States seems to be firm in its stand that there will be no serious confrontation with China as a new rising power, albeit obvious competitions occur in various aspects. However, these competitions are mostly benign and Cronin was positive that a new Cold War will never take place although China has been gradually challenging the grey zone line with its stern claims in territorial disputes.

He further explained that a more in-depth engagement with ASEAN is needed due to the recent territorial disputes. ASEAN, he noted, has played an important role in the region, and yet, not a sufficient one. The absence of an enforcement mechanism in ASEAN was brought up and he urged Malaysia to push it through. Such a mechanism will be made possible by the implementation of the ASEAN Code of Conduct (COC), which is expected to be realised by 2015 alongside the anticipated plan for the ASEAN Community in the same year.

The COC, according to Cronin, will not happen unless ASEAN is willing to be more assertive. Though the recent pivot to Asia is one of President Obama's main foreign policy endeavours, the United States is not keen to play too much of an aggressive role here. Nonetheless, he believes that the US presence will trigger more positive capacity building efforts among the ASEAN members. With bilateral and multilateral relations in plan, the United States is confident that its presence in enforcing a sturdier enforcement of capacity building in Southeast Asia will still be significant.

Cronin went on to discuss the relationship between the United States and Malaysia, which has been going on for many years and molded by factors such as leadership, domestic issues and the regional environment. Ties were initiated through indirect and triangular relationships during the early days, and subsequently entered a new phase with visits by President Johnson in 1966 and President Obama in 2014. President Obama's recent visit to Malaysia touched on various issues ranging from trade and investment to counterterrorism efforts. During Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as prime minister, political relations with the United States became strained as the former prime minister was very critical of US foreign policy. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the United States from being one of Malaysia's largest trading partners, even during Tun Dr Mahathir's tenure. Indeed, US-Malaysia relations have seen progression over the years and both countries realise that understanding each other's perspectives and interests is important and can help forge deeper relations.

On the surge of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and whether or not there will be a re-pivot to the Middle East, Cronin stated that the United States is not leaving the Middle East entirely, only the ground war. The United States will use its air supremacy as an effort to combat the rise and spread of Islamic State militants. The problems in the Middle East will not undermine the US pivot to Asia. Cronin added that the ASEAN member states must be aware of and address the growing threat of radical Islamicism in Southeast Asia.



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Finally, Cronin remarked how modern Japan has become one of the strongest and most committed economic partners of the United States. However, he raised a concern over Japan's small military budget; approximately 0.8 percent of Japan's gross domestic product (GDP) is allocated towards military expenditure. He questioned if Japan was "free-riding" on American military power. He also highlighted the importance for Japan to maintain good relations with its nearest neighbours, particularly South Korea and China. It is indisputable that South Korea and China are now among the major contributors of the world economy and any conflict with Japan would have an impact on Asia-Pacific countries as well. Hence, it is in everyone's interest for Japan to uphold good relations with South Korea and China.



Participants at the forum