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**STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE AND  
COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC**

**“US Asia Policy: a New Paradigm”**

*by*

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# US POLICY TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA: A NEW PARADIGM?

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## Introduction

After the Cold war ended, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) often complained that Southeast Asia's place in the foreign policy of the United States (US) had been marginalised further. ASEAN countries were worried about "a possible reduction of the American security presence in the region" that "might lead other regional actors to push for greater influence."<sup>1</sup> There was also a feeling in the region that ASEAN's interests and concerns had never been a major consideration in the formulation of US policy towards the Asia-Pacific region, especially in its dealing with major regional powers, especially Japan and China. Indeed, Southeast Asia often found itself as an appendix of East Asia in US Asia policy. At best, many regarded the US policy towards Southeast Asia as one of "benign neglect" or "indifference."

Under the administration of George W. Bush, while a degree of indifference persisted, Southeast Asia once again attracted the attention of the US but that attention was framed within a prism of war on terror. After September 11, Southeast Asia occupied an important place in American security policy as a "second front" in the war on terror. It has been declared, for example, "Southeast Asia will be another important front in this war."<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested also that "one frontier in the next round [in the fight against global terrorism] will likely be Southeast Asia."<sup>3</sup> The US' engagement with the region, therefore, was still limited to a tradition of a single

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<sup>1</sup> Tadashi Yamamoto, Pranee Thiparat, and Abul Ahsan, *America's Role in Asia: Asian Views* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2001), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Dana R. Dillon and Paolo Pasicolan, "Southeast Asia and the War Against Terrorism," *The Heritage Foundation's Backgrounder*, No. 1496, 23 October 2001, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Chatarin E. Dalpino, "Southeast Asia: A Second Front," *Knight Rider Newspapers*, 21 December 2001, found at *Taiwan News.com*, accessed on 21 February 2002.

issue-driven foreign policy. Even when regional countries began to embark on an ambitious undertaking to forge a sense of regional community, first in Southeast Asia and then expanded to East Asia, the US' role in the process remained minimal.

Expectation of greater US' engagement towards the region was high after the election of President Barrack Obama in November 2009. Based on his campaign promises, President Obama was expected to chart a new course in the US Asian policy, once again giving more attention to the US' role in the region largely ignored under Bush administration. Promises were made that the Obama administration would pay more attention and allocate more resources to Southeast Asia. Has, then, the US policy towards Southeast Asia really changed since the election of President Obama? In which areas, if any, have such changes taken place? This paper examines President Obama's policy towards Southeast Asia and ASEAN, and discusses the prospects and challenges for a deeper US' re-engagement with the region.

### **The Promise of Re-Engagement**

The preoccupation of the Bush administration with war on terror has created the perceptions in East Asia that the US has neglected the region. Indeed, beyond the nuclear problem in the Korean Peninsula and the relationship with China, the Bush administration showed little interest in engaging the region. The fact that Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped the annual gathering of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) -not once but twice-- reinforced that feeling. The new US government, aware of the need to redress the growing unfavourable perceptions of the US in East Asia, moved quickly to reaffirm the US' role in the region. It declared a renewed commitment and interest of the US to play a more active role in the Asia-Pacific, especially in East Asia. And, before embarking on her Asia trip in February, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that "I will leave for Asia Sunday with a firm commitment to work very hard with our partners across the Pacific, to strengthen our engagement."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks at the Asia Society, New York, 13 February 2009.

Secretary Clinton's trip to Japan, China, Indonesia and South Korea in February 2009 was clearly meant to signal and demonstrate a renewed American attention to East Asia, including Southeast Asia. The key messages that she highlighted during the visit --that the US would now be more ready to listen and act more responsibly through the use of smart power--were well received as a "re-introduction" of the US in the region.<sup>5</sup> In Northeast Asia, while reiterating the strategic importance of US alliances with Japan and South Korea, Clinton also expressed US desire to deepen the relationship with China and work closely to address global problems of common concerns between the two countries. With regard to Southeast Asia, she emphasised the importance of the region to the US, among others, by visiting the ASEAN Secretariat --the first US Secretary of State to do so--and announcing US readiness to forge a comprehensive partnership with Indonesia.

When Secretary Clinton returned to the region in July 2009 to attend the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Thailand, she declared that "the United States is back in Southeast Asia. President Obama and I believe that this region is vital to global process, peace and prosperity and we are fully engaged with our ASEAN partners on the wide range of challenges confronting us."<sup>6</sup> The pronouncement of US' new commitment and eagerness to return to East Asia was also made during the visit by President Obama to the region in November 2009. He attended the APEC Summit in Singapore, and then went to China, Japan and South Korea. In Tokyo, President Obama declared that "as America's first Pacific president, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Ford, "Clinton 'Reintroduces' US to Asia," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 February 2009, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2009/0223/p06s01-woap.html>

<sup>6</sup> John Chan, "Clinton's ASEAN Appearance Signals US 'Back in Asia'", *World Socialist Web Site*, at <http://www.wsws.org>

<sup>7</sup> "Obama Vows Renewed Ties with Asia," CNN.com at <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/11/13/obama.asia>

## **After One Year: Developments and Challenges**

Indeed, as pointed out by Dalpino, “by all accounts, 2009 was a banner year for the US relations with Southeast Asia.”<sup>8</sup> Now, after one year passed, we can identify where US policy towards Southeast Asia have begun to show some changes. In this regards, I would argue that the promise of re-engagement has been so far manifested in three important policy areas.

The first is the greater recognition on ASEAN’s place and importance in US foreign policy. While Secretary Clinton’s visit to the ASEAN Secretariat was a symbolic gesture to demonstrate the intention to be “back in Southeast Asia,” the US’ decision to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) constituted the most important step in that direction. Secretary Clinton stated that “the treaty seals our commitment to work in partnership with the nations of ASEAN to advance the interest and values we share.” She also announced that the US would open a U.S. mission to ASEAN based in Jakarta.<sup>9</sup> While attending the APEC Summit in Singapore in November 2009, President Obama also attended the first US-ASEAN Summit, an event that was also planned under Bush administration but never became a reality. After the Summit, he reiterated that “the United States is committed to strengthening its engagement in Southeast Asia both with our individual allies and partners, and with ASEAN as an institution.”<sup>10</sup>

The second area relates to the relationship with Indonesia. The governments of US and Indonesia have agreed to forge a comprehensive partnership which would provide a framework for a long-term and coherent bilateral ties, and bring the cooperation between the two countries into a higher plane. For the US, as pointed out by Secretary Clinton, “building a comprehensive partnership with Indonesia is a

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<sup>8</sup> Catharin Dalpino, “US-Southeast Asia Relations: Denouement and Delay,” Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman, eds, *Comparative Connections: A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter (January-March) 2010, vol. 12, no. 1 (April 2010), p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Signs TAC with ASEAN,” at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/90856/7\6707759.html>

<sup>10</sup> Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Abhisit of Thailand After ASEAN-10 Meeting, Singapore, 15 November 2009, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

critical step on behalf of the United States' commitment to smart power, to listening as well as talking with those around the world, to supporting a country that has demonstrated so clearly... that Islam, democracy, and modernity not only can co-exist, but thrive together."<sup>11</sup> For Indonesia, the partnership is "driven by the need to address global issues, as much as by the imperative to develop bilateral relations," based on "equal partnership and common interests" and "for the long-term."<sup>12</sup>

The third is an important change in US policy toward Burma/Myanmar. For decades, the US pursued a policy of sanction against Burma/Myanmar; a policy that stood in contrast to ASEAN's policy of engagement towards the junta. The Obama administration, however, was of the view that there was a need to review the policy based solely on sanction as it had not worked. In late 2009, therefore, the US decided that it would begin engaging Burmese leaders in dialogues, while continuing the early policy of sanction. This change has the potential to bring the US closer to ASEAN's position, which had also concluded that the policy based solely on non-interventionist engagement did not work either. Following this change, the US officials began to visit Burma/Myanmar and meet its leaders.

However, it is important to note that the US Southeast Asia policy under President Obama does not constitute a significant departure from that of under President Bush. In fact, a degree of continuation is quiet apparent. President Bush, for example, had taken a number of initiatives to strengthen the US' engagement with ASEAN such as the appointment of US Ambassador to ASEAN, providing assistance to strengthen ASEAN Secretariat, and the launching of the US-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).<sup>13</sup> The difference, however, is striking. While US Southeast Asia policy under President Bush was primarily framed within a US-led war on terror, President Obama took a more comprehensive

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<sup>11</sup> Secretary Hillary Clinton's remarks at a press conference with Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Hassan Wirayuda during her visit to Indonesia, 18 February 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, "Indonesia and America: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Partnership", Speech at USINDO Luncheon, Washington, D.C., 14 November 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Thomas Lum, et.al., *United States Relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)*, Congressional Research Services, 16 November 2009, p. 2.

approach in defining the US relationship with the region. In other words, while both the Bush and the Obama administration share the same goal, they adopt different approach. And, for Southeast Asian nations, that matters.

## **Conclusion**

What are the prospects and challenges for US' deeper engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN? For one, being a party to the TAC opens up the possibility for US to undertake deeper engagement with ASEAN, both in the context of US-ASEAN relations and within the context of ASEAN-based multilateral processes in East Asian region. For example, the possibility for greater and direct US' participation in the East Asian community-building process is now wide open. In what form such participation would take, however, remains a subject of discussion, both within the region and the US. Southeast Asian nations also look forward to increased interaction in the areas of trade, investment, and financial cooperation. The US and ASEAN can also now explore how they can work together to address difficult regional problems of common concerns such as Burma/Myanmar. Finding ways to encourage change in Burma/Myanmar are in the interest of both sides.

The challenge, however, is also abundant. The most difficult one is how to deal with the reality both in the US and within ASEAN. The three postponements of President Obama's visit to Indonesia, for example, clearly suggest the primacy of domestic politics in the US' foreign policy. On the ASEAN side, difficult problems facing the Association in consolidating itself, may also hinder the fulfillment of US' promise for a re-engagement with the grouping. In other words, despite the rhetoric and hope, being realistic –and also pragmatic – should continue to guide US-ASEAN relations in the future.