

COMMENT

Big boys come, but want rules changed

AMERICA AND CHINA:

Facing up to the Siamese twin elephants in the room

WHEN secretary of state Condoleezza Rice skipped the Asean Regional Forum in 2005 and 2007, Southeast Asia would not let the United States forget for a number of years.

Rice's repeated absence was exacerbated by what seemed to be a haphazard and self-serving, single-interest US policy towards the region that centred on counter-terrorism in the aftermath of the Sept 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Southeast Asia conveyed intermittent reminders that with China on the charm offensive, America's disinterest would eventually reap what it sowed. The reality, of course, was that although US policy towards Southeast Asia appeared to be perfunctory at best and disengaged at worst, defence, security and economic ties remained solid and stable.

However, perceptions and symbolism matter as much, if not more so than reality in this part of the world. So, we underscored to the Americans the significance of showing up. We urged them to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooper-

ation (TAC). And with that, we sold them the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Well, no one can accuse the United States or at least, the Barack Obama administration, of not having listened. Not only has it shown up, signed the TAC and joined the EAS, it was also the first non-Asean country to appoint an ambassador to Asean last year.

From Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to past and serving secretaries of defence, Southeast Asia has seen an unprecedented stream of US senior officials to the region in the last few years. President Obama himself has had four meetings in four years with Asean leaders and is back this month fresh off a re-election and despite a looming fiscal cliff back home for meetings in Thailand, Cambodia and, who would have guessed, Myanmar.

If there was any doubt that the US was back in the region, it crafted a comprehensive pivot — no, re-balancing — strategy to Asia that will become Obama's signature policy when he leaves office.

By leveraging on alliances, building partnerships and embedding itself in regional institutional frameworks, the US aspires to deploy a strategy that encompasses diplomatic, economic and military initiatives and that will outlast

America's first Pacific president.

US (re)engagement with multilateral Southeast Asia has perhaps been most enthusiastically conducted through the EAS. Nearly all of the world's heavyweights representing more than half of the world's gross domestic product are engaged in the EAS. But when the big boys come to play, they will inevitably want to have a say in the rules of the game.

While supportive of the EAS' scope and objectives, the US has been keen to substantiate the institution's agenda with a discussion on maritime security and non-proliferation, even before formally participating. Intervening as an observer in 2010, Clinton expressed hope that the EAS would pursue an "active agenda" including those two issues.

Today, at the seventh EAS in Cambodia, the US looks set to raise those issues again despite the certain discomfort any allusion to maritime security (read: the South China Sea) will bring.

EAS was conceived as a forum for strategic dialogue with Asean at its core to promote community building in the region. Along the way, it adopted five priority — and non-controversial — areas of functional cooperation — finance, education, energy, disaster management and pandemic prevention.



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Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (right) and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen at the Peace Palace in Phnom Penh yesterday ahead of the East Asia Summit. While supportive of the EAS' scope and objectives, the US has been keen to substantiate the institution's agenda with a discussion on maritime security and non-proliferation. AFPpic

But the community that began with 16 countries in 2005 when the EAS was first convened has now expanded against a backdrop of intensifying relations and competition in the region, concerns of power play and proxies, and apprehensions about all that Asean stands for — peace, prosperity and stability.

The positive dynamism that characterises the region is also tinged with unpredictability that must be carefully managed. Just as we promote cooperative efforts to boost education, disaster mitigation and disease prevention, so, too, must we seek to clarify in-

tentions and dispel misperceptions that pervade the difficult, even controversial questions. Even discussion, where relevant, about the Siamese twin elephants in the room, the US and China.

Perhaps here lies the greatest value of the EAS as "a forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern".

If, through its leaders retreat session, it can provide space for genuine, off-the-record exchanges on pressing regional issues, it will come into its own as a forum for building trust, transparency and confidence. elina@isis.org.my