



The US-ASEAN Summit Should Be Held in Washington

by Ernest Z. Bower

Ernest Z. Bower [EBower@csis.org] is a senior adviser and director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. This article originally appeared in the CSIS Southeast Asian Program Series.

In late September or early October, President Barack Obama will take the historic opportunity of hosting the first US-ASEAN Summit on US soil. The summit will be the second of its kind following the inaugural meeting held in Singapore last November. There are two options for venue now being considered by the White House: New York, on the margins of the UN General Assembly, or Washington, D.C., the US capital. There is only one correct answer to this foreign policy test: Washington.

While the policy teams at the State Department, the National Security Council, the Pentagon, the Commerce Department, and the Office of the US Trade Representative will understand immediately the core importance of ASEAN – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—political leaders may not have connected the dots yet. ASEAN is vitally important to the United States. Anchored by Indonesia (a G-20 member and next chair of ASEAN), it is home to 10 countries, including two US allies (Philippines and Thailand), 620 million people, a \$1.5-trillion GDP, important strategic and commercial sea lanes and navigational routes, and is the fourth-largest market for US exports.

Not only that, but the United States has nearly 3 times the investment in ASEAN as it does in China and nearly 10 times as much as in India. There is no way the United States can double exports without a hard-core focus on trade policy and trade-enabling initiatives by the Export-Import Bank, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, the Trade Development Agency, the Commerce Department, the Foreign Commercial Service, and others in this region.

Finally, ASEAN will be the fulcrum of new trade and security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region for this century. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been clear about the importance of “ASEAN centrality” in these new structures that will be the foundation of US national security and economic prosperity for the coming decades.

The invitation may also help balance Beijing’s charm offensive toward ASEAN, a region it views as defined by a type of nouveau Monroe Doctrine. ASEAN does not want to be dominated by any country or large power, including the United States, China, or India. It wants balance, and that should be an interest shared by an enduring US strategy for engagement in Asia. Balance is the key to avoiding conflicts and helping the regional giants like China and India act on the

regional stage in a peaceful and productive manner. A meeting in Washington backs up the US commitment to supporting such balance and transparency in areas that might otherwise become flashpoints for security concerns, such as the South China Sea.

There would not even be much debate about this if the administration truly had a strategy for Southeast Asia. When inviting 10 foreign leaders from a strategically vital region to meet the president of the United States, symbolism and form are vitally important. The choice of Washington sends the right message at the right time. Following renewed US commitment to engagement and focus on the region, demonstrated most recently by Secretary Clinton’s strong performance at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, President Obama has a unique opportunity to underline the US focus and follow through on his rhetorical commitment to be “the first Pacific president.”

The decision to invite his ASEAN colleagues to Washington, would be seen as following through on that vision. A meeting in New York, on the margins of the UN General Assembly, at which over 100 world leaders visit the Big Apple to make their annual speeches, would be seen as merely checking the box. New York might get the meeting done, but Washington would demonstrate thoughtfulness and commitment.

Effective foreign policy rests on good decisions at the right time. This is one such choice, and it should be made within a week to allow adequate time for planning and execution of a truly strategic summit.