

Trump and Southeast Asia: going through the motions by Aaron L. Connally

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As isolationist and internationalist factions within the Trump administration battled for the soul of its foreign policy earlier this year, there were good reasons to think that, whatever the outcome of that fight, the new administration might neglect Southeast Asia.

On one hand, Trump's 'America First' campaign rhetoric suggested that the United States would pursue a policy of economic, diplomatic, and military retrenchment, punctuated by occasional hawkish unilateralism. That augured badly for relations with a region organized around ASEAN, a collective security organisation that places a premium on economic arrangements, attendance at dozens of multilateral diplomatic meetings, and participation in nonkinetic military operations like joint exercises and humanitarian assistance missions.

On the other hand, Republican internationalists' track record in the region raised questions, too. The Bush administration had held ASEAN at arm's length, both because the organization seemed too much of a talk shop to make fuller engagement worthwhile, and because it sought to signal its displeasure with the human rights record of Myanmar's junta by withholding engagement with an organization in which the junta was a member in good standing. Bush administration officials preferred bilateral or ad hoc cooperation on discrete issues, such as counter-terrorism or counter-proliferation initiatives.

Yet the Trump administration has engaged with Southeast Asia and ASEAN at a level that would have surprised even optimistic observers at the beginning of the year. Not only has the administration announced that the president will attend a series of three summits in the region in November – an initiative that, [as I have argued elsewhere](#), is not without risk – but the administration has also committed to, and begun to carry through, an ambitious series of bilateral and other multilateral engagements with the region.

In April, Vice President Mike Pence visited the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta during the first visit by a senior Trump administration official to Southeast Asia. There, he met ASEAN's Committee of Permanent Representatives, which the US and others would like to see take on a greater role in regional security. In early May, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson hosted the 10 ASEAN foreign ministers (or in the case of Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi, her designee), as part of an annual meeting that would usually be held at a lower level.

Moreover, the White House has extended invitations to four Southeast Asian leaders to visit the White House this year. Vietnam was the first to secure an Oval Office meeting with President Trump, when Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called on him at the end of May. Officials expect the leader of the Thai junta, Prayuth Chan-ocha, to visit soon, and Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, in the autumn. A visit this year by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte is still under discussion.

That the Trump administration has overcome the low bar that was set for it should not be taken for granted, given its [inability to meet it in other regions](#). But it is hard to avoid the impression that, in all of this, the Trump administration is merely going through the motions.

During a week spent in Washington in May, it was impossible to detect any broader strategy behind the administration's outreach to Southeast Asia. That is perhaps a consequence of the lack of any serious Asia hands at the Cabinet level, [Wilbur Ross's Chinese art collection notwithstanding](#); and the administration's unwillingness or inability to staff key Asia roles – five months in, there are still no nominees for assistant secretary at the Pentagon or State.

In their absence, senior civil servants in Washington and military leaders at US Pacific Command have quietly been implementing a policy that looks remarkably like the one they implemented under the Obama administration. That is not a bad thing, though Southeast Asian diplomats can question whether it represents President Trump's articulated worldview, and whether the US approach might shift dramatically should a crisis lead the president to scrutinize US policy in the region at length. One errant tweet or remark at a regional summit could undo months of diplomacy.

The disconnect between Trump's worldview and administration policy presents other risks, as well. As the United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) illustrated, broader initiatives within the Trump administration resulting from its mercantilist approach to trade, or budget cuts that threaten key diplomatic initiatives in the region like the Young Southeast Asian Leaders' Initiative, could do significant damage to US standing in the region.

There has been one major departure from Obama administration policy in the region in recent weeks: [Trump's outreach to Thailand and the Philippines](#), allies that distanced themselves from the US at the end of the Obama administration in order to free themselves to pursue repressive domestic policies. The outreach appears to have been born of an axiomatic belief among internationalists in the administration in an alliance-first approach to Asia, unencumbered by the Bush administration's neoconservative aversion to working with illiberal leaders.

But there is no indication that Trump's invitations to these leaders have been preceded by diplomacy that would resolve the underlying issues in the bilateral relationships, whether their hedging behavior or their domestic repression. Instead of offering an Oval Office meeting as the culmination of a diplomatic process on these issues, as previous Republican or Democratic administrations might have, the Trump administration has offered meetings up front. The best we can hope for is that the meetings lead to greater goodwill on the part of Prayuth and Duterte, which then facilitates implementation of a diplomatic process on the back end. Given Trump's well-known disregard for alliances and human rights, that seems unlikely.

Hillary Clinton, channelling Woody Allen, noted as secretary of state that half of diplomacy in Asia is showing up. For those who expected in January that we would need to convince Trump administration appointees of the region's importance, their willingness to show up is a welcome surprise.

Soon, the Trump administration will need to do more than show up. It needs to nominate key officials and articulate a strategy for the region that can survive presidential scrutiny. It needs to develop an approach to trade with the region that offers market access in exchange for higher standards, and call it something other than the TPP; and an approach to security in the region that is firm enough to deter Chinese coercion of Southeast Asian governments, but not so firm that it causes the region to recoil from US efforts.

These higher order tasks will present a greater challenge for the Trump administration, but it is important that they succeed. It will not be enough to merely go through the motions.

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