

ASEAN turns 50 and there is much to celebrate by Nina Hachigian

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August 8 marks the 50th birthday of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In recent years, the United States has spent more diplomatic capital on ASEAN, including when former President Obama hosted all 10 leaders for a summit in Sunnylands, California in February 2016, Vice President Pence visited the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia in April, the House of Representatives established an “ASEAN Caucus” earlier this year, and Secretary Tillerson will attend this week’s ASEAN Foreign Minister meetings in Manila. This uptick in America’s 40-year relationship with ASEAN is a necessary shift because ASEAN policy is increasingly integral to any successful US strategy for Asia.

Having started as a bulwark against communism in the late 1960s, ASEAN has accomplished two important goals in its half century: keeping the peace among 10 wildly diverse nations in Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam) and integrating them into a nearly tariff free zone. Rather than the “Balkans of Asia” as it was once described, Southeast Asia is a fast-growing, dynamic region free of war, although still beset with areas of internal strife and poverty.

An active relationship with ASEAN is benefitting the United States. First, ASEAN serves as an emollient for a competitive Asia. A union of 10 small states pledging non-violence and operating by consensus offers some geopolitical stability in a region with multiple big power rivals. ASEAN will never be a powerful player like Asian titans China, Japan, India, or Russia. But it’s exactly because of its weakness in the traditional power sense that ASEAN can play a vital and irreplaceable role.

Only ASEAN can call all the big powers to the table for the yearly meetings at the East Asia Summit (EAS). These convocations of 18 Asian countries that our president, secretaries of State, Defense, and other US officials attend have become key platforms to share US priorities and policies, distinguish our views from others (often China) and shape consensus on important common security threats. No doubt Secretary Tillerson will speak about North Korea on August 7 and, hopefully, rally the Asian powers around a plan. The quiet advent in 2016 of a regular EAS ambassador gathering in Jakarta promises more clarity in differences and more potential for cooperation. ASEAN’s slow but steady integration into a Community with common policies may enhance its role as a central strategic actor.

ASEAN is also important to the United States economically. As our fourth largest trading partner, ASEAN is

responsible for over half a million US jobs, located in each of the 50 states. Among ASEAN’s 630 million citizens, the middle class is exploding and demand for US goods and services rising quickly. While the range of economic development in ASEAN is vast with Laos and Myanmar still largely agrarian and poor on one end of the continuum and space-aged Singapore on the other, its average economic growth rate is the third fastest in Asia. ASEAN has plans for greater integration according to the ambitious ASEAN Economic Community blueprint, which will make doing business easier for US companies. It also provides one of few counterpoints to problematic trade unraveling occurring in other parts of the globe.

ASEAN also helps to coordinate its 10 country members to counter shared transnational threats. It could do much more, especially to promote information sharing when it comes to counterterrorism. But in human trafficking, for example, ASEAN adopted a high-standards binding convention which all 10 countries have integrated into their domestic legal systems. We hope that ASEAN will bring a similar approach to the terrible devastation – from overfishing, illegal fishing, pollution, climate change, and artificial island construction – facing the precious marine ecosystems of the region and thus threatening jobs and food security.

Which brings us to the South China Sea and the trade routes through which vast sums of goods pass each year. ASEAN has its share of shortcomings, but failure to resolve the South China Sea disputes with China should not be the measure of its worth. Even the United States has had trouble finding leverage in its relationship with China, so we cannot expect small neighboring nations to stand firm in the face of dire warnings from their largest trading partner – especially when a central ASEAN claimant, the Philippines under President Duterte, seems more focused on trying to extract enticing inducements from China than pressing its winning case in its arbitration with China over maritime rights. And especially when China has co-opted at least one ASEAN member state to the point where its positions on sensitive issues reflect China’s wishes more consistently than that of its fellow ASEAN states.

In fact, when it finds specific points on which it can unite, ASEAN has shown real courage. Despite relentless, creative, and extreme pressure from Beijing, ASEAN has continued to insist on language in diplomatic statements that Asia is a “rules-based” region and that international law is to be respected, including the Law of the Sea. While the Trump administration does not seem enamored of international law, this is a point of commonality with ASEAN as a rules-based global order benefits the US as the global maritime peacekeeper just as it does ASEAN’s vulnerable states. While it is not a claimant, the US should continue, in a variety of

ways, to reinforce a framework of international law when it comes to South China Sea disputes.

For the US-ASEAN relationship to continue to be useful, both sides need to make changes. The Trump administration needs to decide what its Asia policy is. While the Trump team gets high marks for checking the boxes on ASEAN formalities – it was very important to ASEAN that President Trump promised to attend the summits in November, without a clearly articulated Asian policy, other partners will find more traction with ASEAN.

Many ASEAN officials, like so many in Asia, were sorely disappointed that the Trump administration rejected the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Economic initiatives in Asia are the best measure of strategic intent, and China has many to offer: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR) and others. If not the TPP, a different strategic economic vision or program, which recognizes ASEAN's integration plans, and gives ASEAN high quality economic alternatives, is what ASEAN seeks from the US. One option is to super-charge US-ASEAN Connect, a framework under which the whole US interagency has focused on the economic relationship with ASEAN.

For its part, ASEAN should increase the transparency to the public of what actually happens at the EAS and other meetings, cooperate more vigorously in counterterrorism, confront the vested interests in their countries that oppose integration and exacerbate income inequality, clean up the corruption endemic in many of its governments, take human rights and the environment more seriously, empower its young people and women, and promote religious and ethnic tolerance more vigorously. While the current US administration may not seek progress in all these areas, this work will serve ASEAN societies best in the long term.

If ASEAN reaches its full potential, it will be able to have a strong hand in writing the rules that will govern Asia in the 21st century. And if the US returns to its traditional role as a leader in Asia and a defender of international law and universal rights, it will be able to partner with ASEAN on that important project.

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