

Strategic opportunity lost?: Where is the White House on Southeast Asia? by Bates Gill

Dr. Bates Gill (r.bates.gill@gmail.com) is a professor of Asia-Pacific security studies with the Department of Security Studies and Criminology at Macquarie University and with the Strategic and Defense Studies Centre at Australian National University. Among his other affiliations, he is also a research associate with the Pacific Forum CSIS.

During a press gaggle aboard Air Force One earlier this month, amidst questions on hurricanes and tax plans, President Trump made some remarks about Asia. They passed with little notice, but ought to concern everyone with an interest in a comprehensive and strong US economic, diplomatic, and security presence in the Asia-Pacific.

In response to a question about his travel to the region later this fall, the president confirmed his intention to stop in Japan, South Korea, and China. But, he did not commit to attending the heads-of-state meetings for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation group (APEC) in Vietnam (Nov. 11-12), or the East Asia Summit (EAS) in the Philippines (Nov. 13-14). For the former, he said he would “possibly” go; for the latter, “we’re going to see.” (Going entirely unmentioned was the annual summit between the US president and his counterparts from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN]).

Given developments in Northeast Asia – and not only on the Korean Peninsula – it will be critically important for the president to spend time with allied leaders in Tokyo and Seoul. He is also no doubt keen to accept the invitation of China’s Xi Jinping to visit Beijing. And, of course, the logistics of moving the US presidential cavalcade through these three Asian capitals alone are overwhelming.

It would be a strategic opportunity lost – not to mention a broken promise – if this presidential visit skips Southeast Asia and the APEC, EAS, and US-ASEAN summitry. As Vice President Pence stated during his visit to ASEAN in Jakarta earlier this year, “the relationship between the United States and ASEAN is a strategic partnership” spanning economic, security, and people-to-people ties. The vice president also conveyed a message from the president: “he gave me the great privilege to inform the Secretary General and the permanent members of ASEAN that the President of the United States will attend the US-ASEAN Summit, the East Asia Summit, and the APEC Leaders Meeting in Vietnam and the Philippines this November.”

The vice president emphasized that this decision is “a testament to the value President Trump places on the US-ASEAN strategic partnership and the Asia Pacific as a whole. And it’s a sign, I hope, to all of our firm and unwavering

commitment to build on the strong foundation that we already share.”

Let’s all hope so.

As Southeast Asia and its environs edge closer to the strategic center of gravity in the Asia-Pacific, the region offers enormous and still-untapped prospects for strengthening US leadership – economically, diplomatically, and through security ties. A purposeful presidential trip to Southeast Asia offers an excellent opportunity to drive and consolidate internal US policy consensus and will underscore US economic, diplomatic, and security commitments in the region. It would also provide momentum to conduct a comprehensive US government interagency assessment of Southeast Asia policy, issued in early 2018, to reinvigorate US business, diplomatic, military-to-military, and people-to-people engagement in this crucial region.

A number of important steps should be taken before, during, and after the November summits in Southeast Asia:

In advance of the president’s Southeast Asia trip in November 2017, the secretary of State should deliver a high-profile policy speech or extended statement to explain abiding US interests in the region, underscore and outline continuing US economic, diplomatic, and security commitments there, and highlight expected positive outcomes from Trump’s visit. This is also an opportunity to signal plans to conduct the interagency assessment and step up US engagement in the region.

During his Southeast Asia trip, the president should invite the leaders of the 10 ASEAN states to come to the United States for an ASEAN-US Special Leaders’ Summit in 2019, commit to participating in the 2018 EAS, APEC, and US-ASEAN summits, and call for the fullest possible realization of the US-ASEAN strategic partnership.

Following the president’s trip to Southeast Asia, an interagency effort led by the National Security Council should develop and implement a proactive policy of US engagement with Southeast Asia, starting from early 2018, which would, among other measures:

- Incentivize public-private infrastructure development projects in Southeast Asia;
- Increase opportunities for Southeast Asian investment in the United States;
- Ramp up public-private investments to support the ASEAN-US Expanded Economic Engagement Initiative or its equivalent;
- Boost the capacity of the US diplomatic mission to ASEAN in Jakarta;

- Give priority to the US-Indonesia Strategic Partnership (announced in 2015) to firmly establish more regularised, substantive, and impactful economic, diplomatic, security, technical, and people-to-people collaborations between the two countries;
- Invest greater political and development resources in the still-fragile political transition in Myanmar to assure its emergence as an independent, stable, democratic, and economically successful state;
- Devote the necessary political and diplomatic resources to re-set and strengthen US alliance relations with the Philippines and Thailand;
- Commit to sustained and growing financial support to maritime security initiatives in collaboration with Southeast Asian partners, to bolster regional capacities in maritime domain intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, maritime patrol and enforcement, and protection of maritime resources;
- Increase multilateral military-to-military consultation, training, joint exercises, and interoperability among US allies (such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand) and other security partners in Southeast Asia (such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam);
- Continue regular meetings of the 10 ASEAN defense ministers and the US secretary of Defense (ADMM+1);
- Expand the defense and military-to-military relationship with Vietnam, including port visits, close consultations on Vietnam's needs in maritime domain awareness and defence, and introduction of more complex joint military training activities;
- Call for a more concerted multilateral effort in Southeast Asia to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight, expand and improve military maritime communications and risk-avoidance, and encourage negotiated outcomes across disputes in the South China Sea in accordance with international law.

With the establishment of the bipartisan US Congressional Caucus on ASEAN earlier this year, President Trump would find these kinds of measures receiving widespread support on Capitol Hill from Democrats and Republicans – something he has not found on most other domestic and foreign policy issues. It is time he and his administration made good on the pledge made by Vice President Pence to ASEAN leaders in April: “President Trump and I look forward to reaffirming our commitment to each of you in the days ahead, and I know he looks forward to seeing you all at the summits this November.”

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