



America's Role in Asia

Prior to the U.S. presidential elections, the Asia Foundation [www.asiafoundation.org] established four task forces – one each in the U.S., Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and South Asia – to review, and to make recommendations to the next U.S. administration about America's role in Asia. Recommendations growing out of the Southeast Asian and U.S. reports were discussed during the Singapore launch of the report in early December by task force members Tommy Koh and Ralph Cossa. A summary of their remarks follows:

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America's Role in Asia: What Does Southeast Asia Want From Washington? by Tommy Koh

The U.S. is losing the competition for influence in Southeast Asia. The winner, at least for the time being, is the People's Republic of China. This is a widely held perception in Southeast Asia and leads to one of the central recommendations of the members of the Asia Foundation's Southeast Asia Task Force; namely, that the U.S. needs to adopt an integrated and comprehensive policy toward ASEAN and not just with each of the 10 individual countries.

The U.S. should hold a summit with ASEAN, as have China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. This would allow for a more substantive exchange of ideas and positions, as well as demonstrate to the region that it is a priority for the U.S. Likewise, the U.S. should support the further integration of ASEAN, as envisaged in the Bali Concord II. The U.S. should also consider acceding to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

Second, the U.S. needs to revamp its public diplomacy in Southeast Asia, in order to redress the serious deterioration in public support for the U.S. and its policies. The U.S. should encourage more interaction between U.S. and Southeast Asia counterpart government officials, members of Congress, the private sector, the media, and civil society groups. This should be done in an inclusive manner, with an emphasis on young and emerging leaders. While Southeast Asians understand the importance that the U.S. places on protecting its national security, particularly after Sept. 11, the U.S. should help facilitate such encounters by removing cumbersome and unnecessary visa requirements.

Third, the U.S. is in danger of losing the contest for the hearts and minds of the Muslim world. Southeast Asia is home to 250 million Muslims. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. The majority in Malaysia and Brunei are Muslims. Historically, Islam in Southeast Asia is different from Islam in the Middle East. In Southeast Asia, Islam has always been practiced in a more syncretic and tolerant manner. Most of the region's Muslims, unlike those in the Middle East, have the advantage of living in successful, modernizing countries and in multicultural societies. The U.S. therefore has

a better chance of winning the hearts and minds of the Muslims in Southeast Asia than in any other region of the world. The best way for the U.S. to engage the 250 million Muslims in Southeast Asia is through the framework of democracy and the rule of law. The U.S. should strengthen its commitment to and support for Indonesia's democratization and capacity building, in such important areas as judicial reform, electoral reform, the media, civil society, human rights, military reform, the strengthening of political parties, and the reform of the economy with social justice. Another area in which the U.S. can reach out to the Muslims in Southeast Asia is in the field of education. The U.S. should acknowledge Malaysia and Indonesia as role models for other Muslim countries.

Fourth, Southeast Asia supports the U.S. in its global campaign against terrorism. Southeast Asians would like to remind the U.S., however, that the war against terrorism cannot be won by military means alone. A winning strategy should be multifaceted and include social, economic, political, and military components. There is disquiet in the region over some aspects of U.S. policy, such as the preemptive war in Iraq, the mistreatment of Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib prison, the detention without trial of suspected terrorists in Guantanamo, and the lack of engagement in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The war against terrorism is also a war of ideas. Southeast Asian friends of America therefore view with concern the steady erosion of American soft power, credibility, and legitimacy.

Fifth, the U.S. should stand up for free trade. Washington should resist new protectionist measures such as the proposed legislation against the outsourcing of services and curb the frequent abuse of trade measures, such as antidumping. The U.S. should stand firmly by its long-standing policy of free trade and open investment. The U.S. should consider building on its Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative and the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Area (FTA), by offering ASEAN a free trade agreement or closer economic partnership agreement. In this respect, the U.S. has fallen behind China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand.

Sixth, the U.S. should help to improve the status of women and their participation in decision-making in Southeast Asia by supporting women's organizations and women's enterprises. It is important for women to be able to hold their governments accountable on issues of importance in the public policy debate, such as the removal of discriminatory laws, the promotion of fair treatment in the workplace, the protection of woman from violence, and the protection of those who are vulnerable to being trafficked to work in the sex industry and sweat shops. The U.S. should also support efforts that help expand economic opportunities for women and allow them to thrive as entrepreneurs.

Seventh, the U.S. and ASEAN should work with each other, not against each other, to facilitate the process of reconciliation and democratization in Myanmar. The U.S. needs to recognize Myanmar's geostrategic importance to the region. At the same time, ASEAN should hold Myanmar accountable for its progress – or lack thereof – on its Roadmap to Democracy. In any event, good relations between the U.S. and ASEAN should not be held hostage by Myanmar.

What Southeast Asia Wants. What is the message that Southeast Asia wishes to convey to the U.S.? The message is that we want to have good relations with Washington. We believe that we share a number of common values and interests, such as political independence, peace and stability, regional prosperity, free trade and open economies, and the safety of navigation through the critical sea lanes of the region. We appreciate the indispensable role the U.S. has played in the maintenance of regional security and the positive role it has played in helping the region to achieve rapid social and economic development. At the same time, we often feel that the U.S. does not appreciate the importance of Southeast Asia to its strategic and economic interests. We also wonder whether the U.S. has an ASEAN strategy. We do not wish to be treated either with benign neglect or merely as the second front of the global war against terrorism. We hope that in the second term of the Bush administration, we will see the emergence of a comprehensive U.S. strategy for engaging the region and ASEAN, encompassing the whole spectrum of social, economic, cultural, political, and military issues.

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