



## **Decisions Needed: ASEAN and Asian Regionalism**

by Alphonse F. La Porta

*Alphonse F. La Porta ([a\\_laporta@yahoo.com](mailto:a_laporta@yahoo.com)) is a retired U.S. Foreign Service Officer, who has served as ambassador to Mongolia and in Southeast Asia.*

Southeast Asia is an essential component of Asia's economic and political ascendance that broadly impacts on United States interests in this increasingly integrated world. Energizing U.S. relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is essential to build healthy regionalism and advance key interests with U.S. allies and strategic partners, especially Indonesia, not to mention India and China.

The economic stake of Southeast Asia and the United States in the current global financial crisis could be as much as \$1 trillion in book investment, trade, debt holdings, and portfolio investment. With a population of more than 500 million (larger than the EU), the ASEAN countries have a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of over \$1 trillion. Greater ASEAN economic integration, efforts to create a single market and trends in trade agreements favor the United States and it is likely that freer and increased trade with the region will help to haul the U.S. out of the current crisis.

Yet, the promise of ASEAN regionalism remains unfulfilled. There has been inadequate synergy in the simultaneous pursuit of economic and political objectives, both within the region and on the part of some outside actors, particularly but not exclusively the United States. For the past eight years, China alone has pursued a comprehensive strategy to maximize its economic and political interests through trade and energy arrangements and "smile diplomacy," for the most part abjuring heavy-handed tactics. China is seen as an ever-present, if not essential, force in the region; in the words of one ASEAN envoy, there are "natural complementarities" in Southeast Asia's economic and other relations with the great northern power. At the same time, the ASEAN tactic of balancing China by drawing in other powers (India is the newest entrant) is likely to continue. Washington therefore has latitude to upgrade its posture in regional affairs, as well as to fashion new or improved structures to promote China's positive behavior.

Although ASEAN sees itself as the core of all Asian groupings, complementarity does yet exist in Northeast Asia. Despite current difficulties with Russia, it is not a direct competitor of the United States in this region, so the establishment of political, security, and economic mechanisms for Northeast Asia based on the six-party process can be an early objective of the new U.S. administration.

Washington has not yet mustered the gumption to join the East Asia Summit, as Indonesia and others in ASEAN wish.

The new U.S. tactic on regional trade arrangements – to join the trans-Pacific (formerly P4) arrangement, which includes ardent free traders such as Singapore and New Zealand – is a positive development, but there is little evidence beyond the G-20 of more expansive economic diplomacy to engage finance ministers and central banks to address the regional implications of the global financial crisis. The United States risks repeating the neglect that stung Asia by not responding to regional and country interests during the 1997 financial crisis.

An action program, taking into account the global economic crisis, the past record of uneven U.S. engagement with the region, and the roster of unaddressed issues, should include:

- 1) Actively support ASEAN's development of an effective central authority and dispute resolution capability under its new Charter. Washington should appoint a senior envoy to ASEAN who would eventually be located in Jakarta.
- 2) Pursue ASEAN – and Asian – economic and trade integration by accelerating the tempo of economic, financial, and central bank consultations to complement the new TransPac trade negotiations. Regional environmental, energy, health, and education initiatives can support enhanced economic and trade arrangements. In this context, greater emphasis should be given to the Mekong River Basin where energy development, water diversion, and deforestation threaten the human security of millions of people in five countries.
- 3) Join the East Asia Summit (EAS), in recognition of the U.S. position as a "resident power," by acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), despite perceived drawbacks that can be covered in implementing legislation. APEC should be reoriented through back-to-back summits with the EAS to engage its non-East Asia members in complementary initiatives.
- 4) Work to refashion the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as the core of an Asian Security Community to be complemented by a new sub-regional structure for Northeast Asia based on the six-party process. Priority should be given to support a maritime security cooperation structure, engaging the positive involvement of India and perhaps China as well as U.S. allies. U.S.-Japan-Australia security cooperation is not a substitute for these core interests, but can be useful to address extra-regional issues and interests on the East Asia littoral.
- 5) Work programmatically within the ARF to promote defense and law enforcement cooperation on maritime security and border control, together with measures to stem the illegal exploitation of natural resources, the transit of contraband, and human trafficking. Part of this

effort should be to devise regional architecture for the exchange of operational information.

- 6) Initiate a dialogue with ASEAN on arms control, coupled with an undertaking to promote peaceful civilian nuclear power. Nuclear safety, liability, waste disposal, and security concerns should be addressed with ASEAN in expert forums. Other nuclear powers should be encouraged to join in ARF nuclear energy discussions to build confidence.
- 7) Prevent Burma/Myanmar from inhibiting deeper U.S.-ASEAN relations by seeking an understanding with Congress to support Cyclone *Nargis* reconstruction, increase assistance to civil society (through third parties if necessary), expand opportunities for higher education in the U.S., and fashion an action plan with ASEAN to improve intergovernmental contacts. Sanctions, strong rhetoric, and other punitive measures have not worked, thus alternative ways are needed to work around the xenophobia and self-isolation of the military regime. Support of ethnic insurgencies or military actions should not be part of the U.S. playbook.
- 8) Recognize that additional resources (\$5-7 million per year, plus full funding of the multi-year ADVANCE project to provide project support to the ASEAN Secretariat) will be needed to support participation in regional meetings and new program initiatives. Higher-level attention to ASEAN and Asia regionalism overall is needed in the new administration.

There should be recognition that, for ASEAN and most Asians, **form is substance**. In most ASEAN and Asian deliberations, consensus is the rule and results often are not immediate, necessarily action-oriented or predictable. Consistent top-level participation and bureaucratic flexibility therefore are required as desired outcomes more often are attainable through informal consultations with key governments and opinion-makers. More nuanced and energetic U.S. approaches can earn credibility, decrease suspicions, and encourage genuine cooperation.

*Applications are now being accepted for the 2008-2009 Pacific Forum Vasey Fellow position. Details, including an application form, can be found at the Pacific Forum web site [<http://www.csis.org/experts/fellows/vasey/>].*