



U.S.-ASEAN Cooperation by Surin Pitsuwan

The strategic presence of the United States in Southeast Asia takes two forms, both of which are interrelated: the relationship is institutionalized through the Pacific Command in Honolulu and then formalized through various hub-and-spoke agreements with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The annual *Cobra Gold* military exercises with Thailand; the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the Philippines; and the right of passage through the Straits of Malacca with the mutual consent of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, all manifest the extent to which the U.S. remains engaged in the region. This has had some analysts referring to the U.S. as a classic offshore balancer: it guarantees the security of the region, and in turn, ensures that its best interests are protected.

With the advent of peace comes prosperity and dynamism generated through trade. Southeast Asia now boasts a collective gross domestic product (GDP) of nearly \$800 billion as of the end of 2007. Over the last 10 years, the region has hosted nearly \$90 billion in U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI). It is also the third-largest overseas market for U.S. exports, and U.S.-ASEAN trade now verges on \$140 billion.

If the United States wants to maintain the momentum and trajectory of its policy in Southeast Asia, it cannot view things through the prism of the Southeast Asia of the past. In other words, mere military and other assistance are not enough to allow the United States to maintain its presence in region.

Within Southeast Asia, intraregional trade still hovers at 25 percent. But intraregional trade of East Asia now verges on 55 percent, if one includes Hong Kong and Taiwan. In other words, East Asia is becoming more economically viable on its own. Intraregional trade among China, Japan, and South Korea can dominate close to 80 percent of the volume of trade in East Asia. The specter of the U.S. "missing out" on East Asian growth is therefore real.

Certain indicators show that the U.S. is aware of the risk of being sidelined in a region that it has patiently cultivated, and even defended during the Cold War. Thus, the U.S. has in recent years taken several key initiatives:

- The ASEAN-U.S. Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism, signed in Bandar Seri Begawan in 2002 to develop joint activities;
- The joint vision statement on the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership (2005);
- A Plan of Action to implement the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership;
- A pledge of further support to the Vientiane Action Plan to create an ASEAN Community by 2010, to Bali Concord II to create a three-pillared community by 2015, and to ASEAN 2020; and

- The September 2007 U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) award to Nathan Associates of an indefinite quantity contract with a ceiling price of \$150 million to support ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership activities.

The latter – the ASEAN Development Vision to Advance National Cooperation and Economic Integration (ADVANCE) – will allow USAID missions to support the ASEAN Secretariat and work with and through ASEAN member country governments, civil society, and the private sector to achieve results consistent with the goals of the Enhanced Partnership.

But, it must be noted, that none of the above initiatives are a result of strong presidential leadership. It is fair to say that U.S. interest in ASEAN emerged in President Bush's first term; the Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative (EAI) and the ASEAN Cooperation Plan (ACP) were announced in 2002, but they were declared after President Bush had met with the leaders of ASEAN at the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico, on Oct. 26, 2002. ASEAN is in a sense an afterthought of APEC.

Over the last 30 years of U.S.-ASEAN relations, there has been no U.S.-ASEAN summit. In contrast, China, Japan, and Korea have played an active part in initiating various meetings with ASEAN through ASEAN Plus-Three modules.

It was only through the joint vision statement on the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership that the United States and ASEAN spoke of the need to have a U.S.-ASEAN summit. In other words, U.S. action in Southeast Asia can sometimes be qualified as too little too late. This was the case with the Asian financial crisis when the U.S. refused to lend help and allowed Japan to form an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) to stabilize the region.

But the U.S. is held in great regard, a result of its humanitarian efforts in the wake of the Asian tsunami in December 2005. If such a proactive attitude were more forthcoming, ASEAN could strengthen its presence and contributions to Southeast Asia writ large once again.

Indeed, the Plan of Action to implement the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership contains what is by far the most comprehensive plan to strengthen bilateral relations between ASEAN and the United States. But for it to succeed according to the schedule that has been specified, stakeholders of the plan in the United States (i.e., USAID or other such agencies) have to work closely with the ASEAN Secretariat.

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