



**DESPITE STUMBLES, US
ENGAGEMENT WITH ASEAN RUNS
DEEP**

BY SATU LIMAYE

Dr. Satu Limaye (LimayeS@EastWestCenter.org) is Vice President of the East West Center and Director, East West Center in Washington and Senior Advisor, Center for Naval Analyses (CNA). He is the creator of the Asia Matters for America Initiative, founding editor of the Asia-Pacific Bulletin, and an editor of Global Asia.

This article originally appeared in [Global Asia](#) and is republished with permission

The regrettably low-level US representation at the annual summits [convened](#) in November in Bangkok by the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) were met by intricate displays of ASEAN's [displeasure](#). Neither, fortunately, reflect the structural strengths and scope of US-Southeast Asia relations that stem from the alignment between the core aspects of US engagement and the core aspirations of Southeast Asia.

The interrelated aspirations of countries in ASEAN are nation and state building, ensuring strategic autonomy or agency, and asserting centrality in convening and thereby partially shaping extra-regional interactions. The US—through the core aspects of its diplomacy, commerce, security, and civil society cooperation with Southeast Asia—supports, imperfectly, these ambitions. The region's high-demand signal for the US as the partner of choice and Southeast Asia's serious, though mostly privately expressed, anxiety about Chinese assertiveness is evident in the headline-grabbing notice and care it gives to US attendance at regional gatherings, and more consequentially, in the off-front-page mutual efforts to build and sustain bilateral relations.

A first aspect is that the US approach toward rules, norms, and values espoused in the “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) represents more continuity than departure from past policies. Southeast Asia [has responded](#) with its “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP). The convergences between FOIP and AOIP outweigh the differences. Meanwhile, China's proposed conceptions of regional order (for example, the New Security Concept, and the nine-dash line in the South China Sea) have not even spawned responsive versions, much less synergy, from Southeast Asia. Indeed, the China-ASEAN Code of Conduct for the South China Sea is viewed with suspicion among some in Southeast Asia for calling for exclusive sharing of fisheries and energy resources only among regional states and China, and restricting the ability of regional states to conduct security relations with the US and its regional allies.

[The expectation](#) that China's economic gravity will inexorably “pull” Southeast Asia toward a common destiny with Beijing confuses laws of nature with unpredictable socio-economic and political trajectories. It was once thought that Japan would economically lead a skein of geese in Southeast Asia. Such expectations also underweight the many ways in which Southeast Asia interacts with the US economically beyond trade (e.g., remittances, capital markets, government securities, and the use of the dollar, to name a few). If, as Southeast Asians appear to fear, a common destiny with China means contending with a Beijing-led hierarchical order, there is little appetite for it in an increasingly integrated region informed by modern nationalism.

A second aspect of the US approach is that it has allies and friends (Japan, South Korea, Australia, UK, France, and India, among others) working cooperatively and proactively with it in Southeast Asia. American allies and partners working together in Southeast Asia multiply US power and engagement in ways that meet Southeast Asian aspirations on issues ranging from Mekong region development to human and drug trafficking to capacity-building in maritime domain awareness. An example is the November 2019 US-ROK [Joint Fact Sheet](#) on their regional cooperation efforts.

A third element of the US approach is that it is not an irredentist state in Southeast Asia. It does not articulate flimsy historical claims in the South China Sea in contravention of international tribunal rulings. Put simply, the US does not covet the territory of Southeast Asian countries. Nor is the US a “grudge nurturer” harboring hangovers from history as rapprochements with the UK, Japan, Germany, and Vietnam—and even China—demonstrate.

Finally, the US supports ASEAN, a key vehicle of Southeast Asian aspirations to consolidate their countries, prevent intrusions on their sovereignty, and maintain strategic agency. At times, it seems that the US is more supportive of ASEAN than even some within the association.

Such core aspects of the US approach to Southeast Asia are reflected in specific relationships. In this 187th year of bilateral relations, the US and Thailand may not be at “peak alliance” due to the fortunate absence of a regional war to prosecute, and Bangkok’s own political and foreign policy drift over four decades, but the relationship is enduring and adapting. The 2017 Washington-Bangkok normalization following Thailand’s 2014 coup has paved the way for renewed defense cooperation culminating in the newly announced [US-Thailand Joint Vision 2020](#). On the economic front, Thailand remains a growing investment destination for US companies, and trade squabbles over the generalized system of preferences (GSP) involve only a fraction of total two-way trade. Meanwhile, the 121-year-old US-Philippine relationship, which has seen its own share of ups and downs, remains more robust in reality than rhetoric and general reporting would suggest. US-Philippine cooperation during the siege of Marawi, maritime patrols in the Sulu Sea, ongoing efforts to fully implement the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), and most importantly US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s [reassurances](#) on the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), provide ballast despite some political turbulence in relations.

Washington remains a significant trade, investment, remittance, and employment partner for Manila. The vital US-Singapore strategic relationship, though not an alliance, has [been enhanced](#) twice in five years. A key provision permitting US forces access to

Singapore’s military facilities for transit and logistics support was extended in September 2019 for 15 years. And in December the countries [announced establishment](#) of a Singapore Air Force permanent fighter training detachment on Guam. Singapore also remains a massive trade, investment, and corporate headquarters partner for the US.

America’s other Southeast Asian partnerships continue to develop. The US-Vietnam relationship is witnessing steady improvements on both the commercial and defense sides of the ledger. Of course, there are constraints and disagreements, but Hanoi’s receptivity to mutual high-level visits and public displays of defense cooperation are examples of its interest in improving ties with Washington in its ASEAN chairmanship year. New partnerships with Malaysia and Indonesia continue to develop across the spectrum of cooperation, and renewed full diplomatic re-engagement with Myanmar has not been derailed despite the [human rights atrocities](#) there.

Current US-Southeast Asia relations are wider and deeper on both sides than in the past two generations. Beyond official and traditional commercial and security ties, the engagements between US and Southeast Asian civil societies are less well known. There are over 90 sister relationships between the US and Southeast Asian countries that help to build local people-to-people connections as well as educational, familial, and business relations. Some 7.4 million Americans trace their ethnic origins to Southeast Asia. Remittances from the US to the region range from 56% of the total for Vietnam to 19% for Laos. Myriad educational exchanges and scholarships ranging from the Fulbright Program to the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) bring tens of thousands of Southeast Asians to the US—but alas, not enough Americans to Southeast Asia.

Tourism between the US and Southeast Asia is robust, with some 5 million people exchanging visits. It is no wonder that among major regional countries, the US [is viewed](#) by publics as their key ally or partner—even as the same publics, including in the US, view China’s economic development as welcome. These “everyday” but generally “out of sight” US-Southeast Asia interactions undergird the official alignment between

the core aspects of US engagement and Southeast Asia's core aspirations, despite public relations stumbles such as the level of US representation at Southeast Asia summits in Bangkok in November. There is no room for complacency and lots of hard work lies ahead, but there is no need to panic about U.S.-Southeast Asia relations.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.