



A REALITY CHECK: EVALUATING THE U.S. APPROACH TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Image: US and SEAN handshake. Credit: East West Center

Does the United States truly care about Southeast Asia? Not very much, according to most speakers at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR) in Kuala Lumpur last month.

This year's Roundtable – the 38th iteration of its kind – featured an amalgamation of themes across various sessions, from which one rapidly and repeatedly rose to prominence: that the U.S.' general preoccupation with other regions of the world (often times at Southeast Asia's expense) have led the region's policy and decision makers to collectively challenge the notion that Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific are true priority theaters for America.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who [showcased](#) impressive knowledge of the Indo-Pacific and ASEAN during his Senate confirmation hearing, has now become the first secretary of state since Colin Powell in 2001 to have not made an inaugural trip to the Asia-Pacific during the first three months of their tenure. Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Rex Tillerson, Mike Pompeo, and Antony Blinken all made their debut Asia-Pacific trips within the first 90 days after assuming office.

What can the U.S. do to combat such observations and narratives?

In what has now become an oft-repeated and commonsensical point, prioritizing defense over economics is a suboptimal approach, particularly for a region that places so much value on the latter. America must pursue both modes equally, a non-negotiable that will stem from a better understanding of Southeast Asia, viewing the region beyond just U.S.-China competition, and not penalizing countries of the region for maintaining ties to China.

This is exactly what ASEAN countries want: to be perceived not as a subsidiary of a larger sphere, but an independent sphere that stands on its own.

This year's APR provided perhaps the clearest indication yet that, amid great power competition and growing geopolitical instability, Southeast Asia is increasingly charting its own path, asserting itself on the global stage, and advocating for its own interests through strategic alignment.

Perceptions of the United States

Historically, the United States' economic policies toward Southeast Asia can be best described as oscillating – with varying levels of attention corresponding to the political party and presidential administration in power.

However, U.S. indifference towards ASEAN countries during the current Trump administration – evidenced by the [latest](#) tariff ultimatums, [termination](#) of critical foreign assistance programs, and initial “Liberation Day” [tariff announcements](#) – has conjured a distinct image of America as a superpower out of sync with the region.

As one panelist put it, “America is an aggrieved nation, angry at the rest of the world.”

Countries of the region are clear-eyed in their view that the U.S. has withdrawn from the multilateral world, embracing isolationism and bilateralism as the core tenets of its foreign policy.

As such, expectations are very tempered – and quite frankly, low – for U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia. Per most APR speakers, and perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no realistic belief that President Trump will attend the ASEAN Summit this year, despite the tremendous premium that ASEAN countries place on physical head-of-state-level representation at its most important annual convening.

According to another speaker, Southeast Asia is “already looking at the world without the United States,” a telling statement that reflects the region’s mindset.

Despite the above sentiments, there are still factors that play to America’s advantage. First, the U.S. continues to be the largest economy by most metrics, and one of the central linchpins of the global trading system. Several countries have continued to push for bilateral trade deals with the U.S. because it is the pragmatic course of action. It is hence impractical and improbable to imagine Southeast Asia or any other region that operates with a fully evaporated American consumer market, especially considering the great appetite many ASEAN countries have for more U.S. economic engagement with the region.

That being said, the overarching question is whether or not Southeast Asian countries will continue to constantly negotiate for the best economic deal with the United States. Is this a sustainable and viable approach in the long run? Rather than assuming the status quo, Washington would do well to negotiate in good faith and build more robust partnerships centered around mutual trust.

Second, the U.S. also [remains](#) the pre-eminent soft power leader in the world and continues to maintain a powerful cultural imprint. Yet it must continue to ensure that American values and products carry a reputation centered around positive resonance and

impact. Sadly, actions such as [suspending](#) foreign student visas – which has detrimentally affected students from ASEAN countries – seriously risk tarnishing America’s global image, unnecessarily eroding America’s innovation power, and leaving the door ajar for other countries to make inroads and fill in the gaps.

Evolving Intra-ASEAN Dynamics

Fluctuations in global geopolitics have also been accompanied by shifting outlooks from ASEAN countries toward the bloc itself. Malaysia, through Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, continues to view 2025 as a landmark year under its chairmanship of ASEAN, especially with the [impending accession](#) of Timor-Leste as the 11th member of ASEAN later this year.

Indonesia is yet to reveal a clear-cut ASEAN strategy and agenda, with limited information available on President Prabowo’s relationships with the leaders of many ASEAN countries.

Thailand’s ASEAN approach has been rather nebulous under its young, relatively new, and [currently suspended](#) Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, whose political future now flutters feebly and threatens to exacerbate the country’s enduring political capriciousness.

Under President Bongbong Marcos, the Philippines continues to maintain a relatively ambiguous and unchanged stance toward ASEAN from previous administrations.

As always, Singapore has projected a strong leadership role within ASEAN and is a ‘spokescountry’ for why ASEAN matters, evident in Prime Minister Lawrence Wong’s [recent message](#) highlighting the criticality of the bloc.

Vietnam, however, has emerged as one of the biggest talking points among ASEAN countries. Communist Party Secretary General Tô Lâm – widely considered the country’s most powerful and influential political figure – has paid more attention to ASEAN than many of his predecessors and became the first-ever secretary general of the communist party to visit the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta earlier this year.

Every regional grouping has its shortcomings, and ASEAN is no exception. Cambodia and Thailand are [currently embroiled](#) in a tit-for-tat border conflict, the political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar remains unresolved, and territorial disputes in the South China Sea continue to be a more pressing issue for some members than others.

Yet it is important to realize that while ASEAN may not solve every issue, Southeast Asia sans ASEAN will see far greater problems. ASEAN remains one of the great success stories of multilateralism that has largely been able to achieve its goals of fostering cooperation, promoting economic growth, and maintaining regional peace within its member states.

And ASEAN will continue to be the primary medium through which Southeast Asian countries project a collective voice that champions their unique identity and principles of multilateralism to the United States and world.

Conclusion

The current world order is characterized by asymmetrical multipolarity, and as the trajectory of globalization becomes increasingly shaped by politics, countries and regions are recognizing the role of multipolarity more than ever before.

With U.S. government policies currently favoring isolationism over multilateralism, American influence in Southeast Asia is currently under pressure and risks economic and reputational fallout. As such, the U.S. should not expect Southeast Asia to blindly abide by American interests and economic deals as countries of the region actively pursue other options that promote their own interests and resilience.

Hence, the role of the American private sector becomes all the more important in order to continue fostering and facilitating constructive dialogue with governments and business partners in Southeast Asia. U.S. capital markets are unparalleled in size, length, and depth of their investments, especially in many ASEAN countries, and leaders of American corporations should play a significant role in identifying new investment opportunities and strengthening existing ones in the region.

No matter how the global geopolitical landscape may be at any given moment, the U.S. cannot treat Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific as an afterthought. Last month's APR reaffirmed the common understanding among ASEAN countries that amid the ongoing turbulence lie greater opportunities to forge new partnerships with other member states and beyond.

Should America choose to engage inconsistently with the region, it may end up being America's loss.

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