Is the US Losing the Battle for Influence in Southeast Asia?

By Mark J. Valencia

Without a careful mix of soft power and hard power, US influence in the region will continue to decline. Can the US integrate these two in the right balance to become the premier smart power in the region? Not on the current evidence.

By Satu Limaye

Current relations are wider and deeper on both sides than seen for decades. The structural strengths and scope of relations stem from the core aspects of US engagement and core aspirations of Southeast Asia aligning.
The US Needs a ‘Smarter’ Policy in Southeast Asia

By Mark J. Valencia

THE POWER OF A COUNTRY’S foreign policy is its ability to influence the behavior of others to get what it wants. According to the eminent international relations scholar and practitioner Joseph Nye, there are three forms of national power in foreign policy: “hard” — which uses military and economic coercion to gain influence; “soft” — the ability to use culture to attract and co-opt rather than coerce; and “smart” — a balanced integration of hard and soft power.1 But there are great differences in views on which particular type of power is or will be more influential in a given situation. Some strategists, particularly those in the administration of US President Donald Trump, apparently believe that the US is not losing influence in the region — and even if they accept that it is, they think the hard power of its economic and military coercion will win the day. Their view is reminiscent of that of some strategists during the US involvement in Vietnam’s civil war. They held that if you want the support of the populace — “grab them by the [expletive deleted] and their hearts and minds will follow.” It is clear now how simplistic and misguided that theory was, and how that turned out, despite some isolated “deniers.” To avoid repeating this mistake, the US should guard against a belief that hard power coercion alone can win the US-China contest for influence in Southeast Asia.

There is little doubt that US soft power influence has been declining in the region for some time, both absolutely and relative to that of China. The decline accelerated when Trump withdrew the US from its proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a major economic pact that Barack Obama’s administration had proposed and persuaded Southeast Asian countries to join. At the time, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong summed up the frustration of many Southeast Asian leaders when he declared “How can anyone believe in you anymore?”2 Regarding the security of Southeast Asian countries, Trump seemed to be willing to make a deal with China to the detriment of Southeast Asia — “if China helped restrain North Korea, the US would lessen pressure on China in the South China Sea.” Moreover, Trump’s “America First” policy has punished some ASEAN countries economically and thus alienated some potential supporters. In the eyes of many ASEAN nations, Trump’s “America First” policy effectively means, “you are on your own.” An exclamation point in the decline of US soft power was the US diplomatic debacle at November’s 35th ASEAN summit. It showed that ASEAN countries have lost confidence and trust in the US.

Even before the summit began, the US insulted ASEAN leaders by selecting a relatively low level delegation. While world leaders such as Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended, Trump did not. His choice of US National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien as his representative confirmed some ASEAN leader’s suspicions that despite US rhetoric to the contrary, their countries and the region are not very important. In short, they have concluded that the US commitment to the region is unreliable. This loss of confidence and trust significantly detracts from whatever hard power the US can muster.

As further evidence of this loss of confidence, US entreaties before and at the summit for ASEAN to stand up to China over its aggressive policy and actions in the South China Sea went unheeded.3 Vietnam was the only country that pushed ASEAN to take a strong stand against China on this, and it did not receive much support. That diplomatic failure was bad enough. But things got worse. The US urged all ASEAN leaders to attend a meeting with O’Brien where he read a letter from Trump inviting them to a “special summit” in the US early next year.4 But only three top leaders attended — the Thai prime minister as host, the Vietnamese prime minister as host of next year’s summit, and the leader of Laos, the current co-ordinator of ASEAN-US relations. This was a stinging embarrassment to the US. An unidentified American diplomat said: “A full or partial boycott by ASEAN leaders will be seen as US-centric not ASEAN-centric. This insensitivity may be interpreted as a diplomatic knee to the political groin of ASEAN.”

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Unwittingly rubbing salt in ASEAN’s wound, Trump’s invitation to the leaders derigated the bloc’s coveted centrality in international affairs in the region.6 Centrality is a main pillar of ASEAN; without it the organization stands to lose credibility in and outside the region.7 Instead of Trump going to them, the leaders have been summoned to come to him in what seems to be a logistically arrogant and self-serving effort to persuade these US countries to support the US in its efforts to contain China. Such siding with the US versus China is not necessarily in the security interests of all ASEAN countries. Moreover, such a meeting would be seen as US-centric not ASEAN-centric. This insensitivity may be interpreted as a diplomatic knee to the political groin of ASEAN.

The US has discovered the hard way that its soft-power relationships in Southeast Asia are neither as deep nor as enduring as it thought. But its hard power remains dominant.

1 blogs.lse.ac.uk/hireview/2012/06/05/book-review-the-future-of-power/
8 www.academia.edu/4101331/The_Trump_Administration_and_Southeast_Asia_Political_Disconnect_Policy_Rebut

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