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.
Despite Stumbles, America’s Engagement Runs Deep

By Satu Limaye

THE REGRETTABLY LOW-LEVEL US representation at the annual summits convened last month in Bangkok by the Association of Southeast Asia Nations were met by intricate displays of ASEAN’s displeasure.¹² 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-outlook on the Indo-Pacific.³ The conceptions of regional order (for example, the new east Asia nations were met by intricate displays in the off-front-page mutual efforts to build and sustain bilateral relations.⁴ it was once thought that Japan would economically lead Asia toward a common destiny with Beijing, fusing laws of nature with unpredictable socioeconomic and political trajectories.⁵ 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 contaending 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 executes, 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-official 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

¹ Nick Bisley. www.eastasiasforum.org/2019/11/03/will-great-power-rivalry-upturn-this-years-east-asia-summit/
³ ASEAN, asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf
⁵ In central Asia, China and the new-southern policy and the Indo-Pacific strategy/
The Debate: Limaye

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 percent of the total for Vietnam to 19 percent 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 five 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.

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