

## Sustaining Congressional Engagement with Southeast Asia

By Erik Ashida

As a representative institution whose members can outlast presidential administrations, Congress plays a vital role in sustaining long-term US foreign policy commitments. The perception of long-term commitment is particularly important in Southeast Asia, where most states seek to maximize their strategic autonomy by balancing relations among great powers. Thus, expectations about the future behavior of great powers can significantly affect foreign policy choices. Congress speaks through the exercise of its formal powers but also in more subtle ways.

Congressional actions on foreign relations operate along three channels. The first channel is support for policies initiated by the executive branch, e.g., passing appropriations, making requested statutory changes, or, at the very least, not obstructing what an administration seeks to do. The second channel is symbolic support for a relationship, such as meetings with foreign officials or public statements of support. Though these actions are generally nonbinding, they can be a more meaningful gauge of support than the first channel because legislators must seek them out and can define the terms of their engagement—something not always possible when voting on legislation. The third channel is policy advanced independently from the executive branch, such as standalone bills, conditions placed on funding, or rigorous oversight. Each of these tools is available to individual legislators, groups of legislators such as caucuses or committees, or the entire legislative branch acting collectively.

On the Southeast Asian side, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can operate as a distinct regional channel supplementing each of its ten member states' bilateral relations with the United States. However, ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making and differences between members limit the number of issues that become priorities in ASEAN-US relations. Nevertheless, the Biden Administration's active diplomacy with ASEAN in 2022 produced two commitments requiring Congressional approval. The first, granting ASEAN diplomatic privileges and immunities under US law, passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support this March; a similar bipartisan bill is pending in the Senate. The second commitment is doubling the size of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) program over three years. This expansion may be affected by the recent budget agreement reached to raise the debt ceiling, but YSEALI enjoys bipartisan support. The warm reception to these proposals suggests that the first channel of support is effective with a motivated presidency.

Congress has acted institutionally to support symbolic engagement with ASEAN. The US House of Representatives sought and was granted observer status in the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) in late 2022. Additionally, congressional leaders participated in the US-ASEAN Special Summit in May 2022. Still, some of the most critical day-to-day congressional engagements happen through informal organizations, such as caucuses. These are useful not only to organize or express symbolic support. They also allow legislators to signal—to both the executive branch and foreign partners—that they are interested in engagement.

**Erik Ashida**, a former staffer for the US House Foreign Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations, and Global Corporate Social Impact, explains that Congress plays a vital role in sustaining long-term US foreign policy commitments to Southeast Asia via supporting executive initiatives, making symbolic gestures, and advancing its own policy agenda.

ASEAN presents unique challenges for this type of informal symbolic engagement. First is the number of countries involved. An ASEAN Caucus has existed in the House of Representatives since 2017, and some ASEAN members, like Singapore, have their own caucuses. Wrangling bipartisan pairs of co-chairs for every ASEAN state is more difficult, if only due to the number of members of Congress needed. Political shifts in ASEAN countries—such as past coups in Thailand or the 1MDB scandal in Malaysia—can also make supporting a bilateral relationship a much more reputationally risky proposition for members of Congress. Diaspora communities opposed to a country’s regime may mean that there are political incentives for legislators to organize with the goal of criticism rather than closer partnership.

Policy advanced independently of the executive branch—the third channel of congressional action—is the least mature aspect of congressional engagement with ASEAN and its member states. But it is often the strongest signal of sustained congressional interest. At this level, legislators may seek to protect a policy from political shifts—for example, advancing legislation to block unilateral withdrawal from NATO during the Trump Administration. Legislators may also seek to go further than the executive branch; the many bills intended to elevate US engagement with Taiwan illustrate this. The BURMA Act, which authorized additional sanctions in response to the military coup in Burma, also known as Myanmar, is an example of independent congressional action on Southeast Asia.

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In the short term, the third channel of independent policy can best be strengthened through the other two channels. Congress should follow through on the recent US commitments to ASEAN, expand the work of the ASEAN Caucus in the House for the 118th Congress, and potentially establish an equivalent in the Senate. Expanding the caucuses focused on bilateral relationships with individual ASEAN partners is a valuable medium-term goal. A bipartisan expectation that the US President attend the East Asia Summit and, more generally, that the US should invest in high-level engagement with the ASEAN-led regional architecture are good starting points for a durable policy consensus.

In the long term, however, a more expansive agenda will only be made possible with broader agreement on what should be handled as an ASEAN priority. One path to that would be ASEAN achieving consensus on a larger number of issues, either because of progress on intra-ASEAN political or economic cooperation or a convergence of views on issues within the region, such as the territorial disputes in the South China Sea or the aftermath of the coup in Burma. Similarly, converging views on the US side would allow issues like trade, which have already been identified as an ASEAN priority, to become less sensitive for Congress, thereby offering another way forward. The response to the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which would include seven ASEAN countries, will be an important indicator. Even if IPEF is structured to not require a vote in Congress, legislators will take note of the negotiation outcomes and the reaction of domestic stakeholders in assessing the future politics of this issue.

Whoever takes the initiative, strengthening the third channel is vital as a hedge against the risk that a future US administration might place less emphasis on Southeast Asia. This effort would also help distinguish Southeast Asia policy from strategic competition with China within the US Congress. There will not always be a strict separation—Congress never speaks with one voice, and concern about China is undoubtedly why some legislators support more robust engagement in the Indo-Pacific. But having a critical mass of legislators make the case for engagement with Southeast Asia for its own sake is an important sign of respect. It is also a pragmatic reassurance to nonaligned states in the region that welcome US engagement but that do not wish to align explicitly against China.

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