



EAST-WEST
CENTER

Number 583 | March 17, 2022

ASIA PACIFIC BULLETIN

EastWestCenter.org/APB

US Southeast Asia Policy: Towards A Balance of Commitment Approach

Dr. Prashanth Parameswaran

US commitment to Southeast Asia since the end of the Vietnam War has been subject to a series of ebbs, flows and imbalances, with policymakers struggling to sustain increased and calibrated commitment to the region as evidenced by the growing securitization of US policy in the post-September 11 period or the under resourcing of components of the US pivot to Asia in the post-2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis period. A balance of commitment approach in US Southeast Asia policy can help policymakers be more attentive to both the interrelationships between power, threats and resources shaping decisions in the US domestic political system and the careful calibrations of components in commitment level and distribution in Southeast Asia required to sustain an expanded, balanced approach that serves US interests and meets regional needs.

In my book *Elusive Balances: Shaping US Southeast Asia Strategy*, I develop and apply an original “balance of commitment” foreign policy model that shows that the US commitment challenge in Southeast Asia occurs because US policymakers struggle to adjust simultaneously to shifts in power, threats and resources in the US domestic political system while also calibrating the level and distribution of regional commitment in Southeast Asia in a way that extends across key diplomatic, economic and security realms and manages imbalances in various areas, be it between ideals and interests or bilateralism and multilateralism. Reframing the US-Southeast Asia policy challenge as a more complex “balance of commitment” task, rather than one focused more squarely on just balance of power considerations, suggests that it is far from an easy task and is one that will need to be carried out through structural adjustments across multiple administrations.

First, US policymakers should be attentive to managing power shifts and perceptions of them. While the post-WWII US objective of not allowing a hegemon to dominate the region has gained salience with China’s rising capabilities, past periods of geopolitical competition such as the Cold War reveal that Washington also needs to reassure the region about its own staying power while being cognizant of other regional power shifts. Part of the equation involves blunting predictions of US decline by projecting a sense of consistent internal confidence in US power, which even close US friends such as Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong have expressed concerns about of late. Another component is developing a consistent narrative across administrations that frames US-China competition as less a bipolar contest and more of a question about whether Washington and allies and partners can collectively shape a multipolar order rather than one dominated by China, which would generate greater buy in across more Southeast Asian capitals.

Second, US policymakers should approach threats in a clear and measured manner. Though Washington’s status as a global power means threats in other parts of the world will affect how it views Southeast Asia, the challenge is managing this so that it does not overly consume its regional approach, as it was perceived to in previous periods including after 9/11. This can be achieved through several lines of effort. One is developing a sustainable “threat hierarchy” in US policy that prioritizes Indo-Pacific-related challenges while also dealing with crises that may come up in other regions such as Europe or the Middle East, with an approach in strategy documents backed up by resourcing decisions. Another is maintaining a “threat-opportunity balance” of sorts that ensures worries about China’s inroads or democratic rollback do not detract from an affirmative, longer-term US vision for Southeast Asia that recognizes the region’s dynamism and vigor.

Dr. Prashanth Parameswaran, a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a Senior Columnist at *The Diplomat Magazine*, explains that “Reframing the US-Southeast Asia policy challenge as a more complex ‘balance of commitment’ task, rather than one focused more squarely on just balance of power considerations... will need to be carried out through structural adjustments across multiple administrations”

Third, US policymakers should find ways to do more with less to sustain commitments during periods of resource constraint. Past episodes, such as the under resourcing of aspects of the US pivot to Asia in the years following the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis, are reminders that domestic constraints can limit and distort US commitment to Southeast Asia even under more actively engaged administrations. Managing this will partly require deft coalition-building at home and abroad, particularly in areas like economic policy which require alignment from a greater array of US government agencies, Congress, the private sector and other supportive stakeholders such as think tanks. It will also require creative messaging to ensure that US commitment gaps from time to time are understood by Southeast Asian publics that may not be as familiar with the intricacies of US domestic politics, be it the reasons for changes in line items in the US defense budget or the slow confirmation of US ambassadors.

Fourth, turning to the shape of US commitment itself, US policymakers should find ways to raise and sustain increases in commitment levels to Southeast Asia. At root, this requires broadening and deepening binding U.S.-Southeast Asia commitments beyond those that exist today, be it the US treaty alliances with Thailand and the Philippines or US presidential attendance to annual rounds of summitry involving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). One pathway is to institutionalize incremental gains already being made, be it the proliferation of strategic and comprehensive partnerships with Southeast Asian states such as Indonesia and Vietnam or the growth of ministerial dialogues within the U.S.-ASEAN relationship in sectoral areas that can create more whole-of-government buy in on Southeast Asia engagement. This can be reinforced by longer-term efforts, such as elevating more Southeast Asianists to higher levels of Asia policy in government and advancing a whole-of-society understanding of Southeast Asia's importance by spreading awareness about the region across the 50 US states.

Fifth and lastly, US policymakers should find ways to better manage commitment imbalances. While imbalances in aspects of US commitment, such as between ideals and interests or economics and security, are likely to persist to some degree in US policy because they are deeply rooted in realities such as role of democracy in US foreign policy or the Pentagon's larger budget relative to some other US government agencies, there can be efforts made to moderate them. This can begin even with some basic steps in strategic communications, such as consistently restructuring speeches across government on US-Southeast Asia policy to begin with economics or people-to-people ties rather than security, even in high-visibility, defense-focused forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. US policymakers can also better balance ideals and interests by focusing on aspects that have greater alignment with Southeast Asian governments and publics and can generate a two-way conversation that also acknowledges US limitations, such as on diversity, equality, and inclusion.

To be sure, the persistence of the US commitment challenge in Southeast Asia across the past half-century suggests that overcoming it will be far from an easy task. Nonetheless, given the rising importance of Southeast Asia as a region and to US interests, the pursuit of these elusive balances in US Southeast Asia policy is an endeavor that is worth undertaking in the years to come.

Dr. Prashanth Parameswaran is a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a Senior Columnist at The Diplomat Magazine. He specializes in Southeast Asian political and security issues, Asian defense affairs, and US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific. He can be contacted at pprashanth711@gmail.com.

“US policymakers can also better balance ideals and interests by focusing on aspects that have greater alignment with Southeast Asian governments and publics and can generate a two-way conversation that also acknowledges US limitations, such as on diversity, equality, and inclusion.”

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Lance D. Jackson

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.