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ASEAN's Dilemma: Courting Washington without Hurting Beijing

BY AMITAV ACHARYA

As the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) prepares to hold its annual talkfest this November with Asia-Pacific powers at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali, attention will be focused on the two central powers: China and the United States. For the United States this is the first time it will partake in the regional EAS at the leader level, represented by President Barack Obama. Together, China and the United States hold the key to the region's future.

These talks come at a crucial time. China is increasingly showing its military muscle in the region, potentially creating a turning point in China-ASEAN relations. Until now, ASEAN has been happy to engage both China and the United States, without having to choose between the two. But China's apparent shift from a "charm offensive" to a more assertive posture over the past two years, at least in the South China Sea, has severely tested that approach.

As a result, ASEAN appears to have moved ever closer to the United States, not least by reciprocating the steps taken by the Obama administration to develop and solidify greater engagement with and throughout Asia. Since assuming office in 2009, the Obama administration has launched its own version of a "charm offensive," courting ASEAN and deepening US engagement with Asian regional bodies to an unprecedented level. The United States in 2009 signed ASEAN's core treaty, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, and for the first time in 2010 was represented at the East Asia Summit by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The United States has come down unequivocally and forcefully on the side of the ASEAN members that are parties to the South China Sea disputes by criticizing Chinese assertiveness, holding joint military exercises with Vietnam and the Philippines, and affirming the applicability of the US-Philippine alliance in the South China Sea arena.

In November President Obama will travel to the island of Bali to take part in his first East Asia Summit, a significant development for ASEAN, the United States and the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, President Obama will partake in the third annual US-ASEAN Summit while there.

But is tilting in America's direction the best long-term answer to China's rise for ASEAN? Although this seems to have been the general approach, it is not without its own costs. My conversations during the past months with the foreign ministers of Singapore and Indonesia provide a window into the two potential pitfalls of such an approach.

Singapore has always believed—and still believes—that a balance of power supported by an active US military presence is indispensable to regional stability. But Singapore's new

Amitav Acharya, Professor of International Relations at the School of International Service, American University, cautions that "In resisting Beijing's assertiveness, ASEAN has to think very carefully about how far it might want to go to seek America's involvement, especially when it comes to security in the South China Sea. Courting Washington without hurting Beijing will be a daunting challenge."



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Foreign Minister K. Shanmugham is unconvinced that the US has the necessary staying power to maintain that balance.

While Obama administration officials take much pride for the US “reengagement” with Southeast Asia, Mr. Shanmugham believes that the “US has to demonstrate the importance it attaches to Southeast Asia.” The United States needs to engage the region in a “responsible” way and pursue “a coherent and clear policy towards Southeast Asia, otherwise countries here will make their own calculations,” a not too subtle reference to the possibility that some would move closer to China.

Marty Natalegawa, Indonesia’s foreign minister, shares Singapore’s view that the United States is an indispensable part of the Asia-Pacific security equation. There can be no “gate keeping,” he asserts, when it comes to the US role in the region’s security issues. This refutes China’s recent efforts to portray the United States as an outside power which should not have a security role in the South China Sea.

But for Mr. Natalegawa, who in his capacity as current chair of ASEAN is also the host of ASEAN Ministerial Meetings, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, the answer to regional tensions lies not in inviting the United States to balance China militarily, but in expanding and deepening ASEAN’s engagement with both the United States and China.

As a result, he is working fervently to put together a set of principles, modeled after the Ten Principles adopted by the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, that will commit all members of the East Asia Summit to peaceful and responsible conduct in dealing with each other. These principles are vital to maintaining what he calls a “dynamic equilibrium” between the great powers in the Asia-Pacific region.

This is not a conventional military balance as such, with its rival coalitions and related arms races, but a framework that “keeps ASEAN in the middle,” akin to the “conductor of an orchestra.” ASEAN can play this unique role because it “lies in the middle position, with Japan, China, and South Korea to the North, Australia and New Zealand to the East, and India to the West.”

America should listen carefully. There may be a possible disconnect between how some in the United States see its role, and the views of key ASEAN members about how the United States should behave in the region.

The Obama administration would like to utilize the East Asia Summit to address ASEAN’s growing tensions with China. However, this would be strongly opposed by China, which does not want contentious security issues such as the South China Sea to be discussed within the EAS. Instead China would prefer to deal bilaterally with individual ASEAN states on this matter.

Indonesia does not wish to see an exclusive security focus for the EAS led by the United States. Neither does it or Singapore want the United States to push China too hard. US engagement in the region through the EAS should be broad based, dealing with economic as well as political and security issues.

In resisting Beijing’s assertiveness, ASEAN has to think very carefully about how far it might want to go to seek America’s involvement, especially when it comes to security in the South China Sea. Courting Washington without hurting Beijing will be a daunting challenge.

Amitav Acharya is Professor of International Relations at the School of International Service, American University, where he is also Chair of the ASEAN Studies Center and UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance. In addition, Dr. Acharya is Senior Fellow at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. The views expressed here are solely those of the author and not of any organization with which he is affiliated. He can be contacted via email at aacharya@american.edu.