



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 191 | December 13, 2012

US-ASEAN Relations: Advances Made But Challenges Remain

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US President Barack Obama attended his 4th annual leaders' meeting with the heads of the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on November 19. Though the meeting, jointly chaired by President Obama and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, did make progress in furthering US-ASEAN relations, other events external to the region also highlighted the challenges that both sides will likely continue to face over the next few years.

Prashanth Parameswaran, Ph.D
Candidate in International Affairs at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, explains that "Taking into consideration the ebbs and flows perceived by Asian states of US commitment to the region in the past, the sustainability challenge will probably continue to preoccupy US and ASEAN leaders for the rest of the Obama second term, and beyond."

During their discussions, the United States and ASEAN agreed to institutionalize US presidential engagement by raising their meeting to the level of an annual leaders' summit. This is an important step because it effectively commits President Obama and his successors to attending the event every year, which was not the case previously. In a statement, the White House said the step reflected the administration's commitment to strengthening US-ASEAN ties and was a further step towards "raising the US-ASEAN partnership to a strategic level."

The meeting also witnessed the formal submission of the final report from the US-ASEAN Eminent Persons Group (EPG), a group of 13 distinguished ASEAN and US representatives from the policy and private sector communities that was established at the first ASEAN-US Leaders' Meeting in 2009. The report recommends several new initiatives to further boost and broaden US-ASEAN cooperation across a wide range of areas. These include the doubling of bilateral student exchanges by 2015, the launch of a biennial US-ASEAN Youth Games, and increased exchanges between officials at state and municipal levels. Former United States Trade Representative, Charlene Barshefsky, one of the three US Eminent Persons Group, said that the recommendations were not only an acknowledgement of ASEAN's growing importance, but "a challenge for both sides to think creatively to seize this moment of great mutual interest and opportunity."

In the economic domain, the United States announced the launch of the US-ASEAN Expanded Economic Engagement (E3) Initiative. E3 provides a framework for expanding trade and investment ties between the United States and ASEAN, by laying the groundwork for ASEAN countries to prepare to join high-standard free trade agreements like the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It is a response to regional concerns that US focus on the TPP negotiations, which currently includes only four ASEAN countries—Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam—with Thailand also recently expressing interest, effectively leaves out several other Southeast Asian countries, namely Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos who are not members of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).



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Despite the advances made at the meeting, the initiatives proposed, along with other components of Asia-related summitry held during President Obama’s visit, challenges were highlighted that the United States and ASEAN still face in strengthening their relationship. Throughout the president’s short stint in Phnom Penh the crisis in Gaza between Israel and Hamas was a constant distraction and he was eventually forced to dispatch outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the Middle East. ASEAN countries, already worried about the sustainability of the Obama administration’s renewed commitment to Southeast Asia with the upcoming resignation of Secretary Clinton and the imminent uncertainty surrounding the US “fiscal cliff,” were given yet another vivid reminder of “other” foreign policy crises that limit US presidential attention to Southeast Asia.

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US trade policy also continues to lag behind the political and security aspects of US-ASEAN relations. Clearly, the new E3 initiative is an attempt to broaden US-ASEAN trade and investment beyond the TPP, but it is still far short of a full free trade agreement between the United States and ASEAN, which most other regional powers—China, Japan, India, and South Korea—already have.

The launch of the 16-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes all ASEAN countries along with China, Japan, South Korea, India, New Zealand and Australia but leaves out the United States and Russia, raised further concerns about competition between different trading arrangements. There is also the question of the viability of the TPP, given US insistence upon high standards for labor and environmental protections, along with potential domestic political obstacles in the United States.

Concerns also linger over ASEAN’s cohesion as an organization in the face of other significant intra-regional challenges. While the United States and ASEAN joint statement stated that all parties looked forward to an “early conclusion” of a code of conduct on the South China Sea between the regional grouping and China, prospects appear dim for now. Chinese officials have repeatedly downplayed the urgency of the issue, and ASEAN chair Cambodia took a position closer to Beijing than some of its fellow ASEAN brethren, once again exposing divisions within the bloc.

ASEAN unity will remain a challenge for the group in the short term as it will be led by a succession of smaller and relatively less capable states—Brunei in 2013, Myanmar in 2014, and Laos in 2016—which may not be able to tackle divisive issues or forge greater integration as more experienced members have been able to do in the past.

Furthermore, the departure of ASEAN’s dynamic secretary-general, Surin Pitsuwan, at the end of this year will also be a huge loss for the organization. If ASEAN struggles over the next few years in the face of these challenges, it may undermine the organization’s prized “centrality” within Asia’s geo-political architecture and economic integration. In a worst case scenario, Washington may lose faith in multilateralism in Southeast Asia.

As the United States and ASEAN commemorate their 35th anniversary, they have much to celebrate. The Obama administration has so far demonstrated its commitment to strengthening ties with the group, and ASEAN remains one of the world’s most successful regional organizations. However, whether both sides can sustain and strengthen the relationship in the next few years in the face of significant internal and external challenges remains to be seen.

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