

THE U.S.-ASEAN PARTNERSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception 50 years ago, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has transformed from a small organization that emerged in the shadow of regional conflict to become the centerpiece of regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN member states have undergone tremendous changes, collectively emerging as some of the most demographically and economically dynamic nations in the world. With more than 600 million people—nearly 400 million under the age of 35, five of the world’s 20 fastest-growing economies, and a combined GDP of 2.56 trillion USD, ASEAN’s prominence on the global stage will only continue to grow.¹ ASEAN’s importance as a significant U.S. partner will also increase in the coming years. ASEAN is already the largest destination for U.S. investment in Asia, while the collective investment of ASEAN member states in the United States exceeds that of both China and India.²

The significance of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship is reflected in the dramatic transformation of bilateral ties since formal relations were established in 1977. Over the past few years, the U.S.-ASEAN partnership has marked numerous achievements, including the creation of a U.S. Mission to ASEAN, the first such mission established by an ASEAN dialogue partner; the first U.S.-ASEAN Leaders’ Summit held in the United States; the creation of a U.S.-ASEAN defense ministers’ dialogue; and the launch of the ASEAN Congressional Caucus.³ The pinnacle of these achievements was the establishment of the U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership in November 2015.⁴

But even as this partnership notches new milestones and achievements, it also faces emerging challenges at home and abroad. Domestic political turmoil in both the United States and many Southeast Asian countries, rising concerns about economic protectionism, and growing geostrategic competition all have the potential to dampen the tremendous progress of the past few years. Following significant anniversaries for both ASEAN and the U.S.-ASEAN partnership in 2017, it is now an important moment to take stock and ask what steps we should take to strengthen this partnership in the years to come.

With this goal in mind, the Asia Society Policy Institute (ASPI) decided to convene a U.S.-ASEAN Working Group series, to explore current challenges facing the U.S.-ASEAN partnership and to provide recommended next steps to U.S. and Southeast Asian policymakers. The working group

convened stakeholders from the U.S. Congress, Southeast Asian embassies, think tanks, and the private sector to discuss future opportunities in U.S.-ASEAN cooperation. This report reflects the results of those discussions. While this paper has benefited from the insights of our working group meetings, its recommendations and conclusions are those of ASPI alone and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of individual participants.

II. ASEAN AND THE FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC

The first, and perhaps, most important question the United States and ASEAN must ask when considering how to strengthen their shared partnership is the following: what role does this relationship play in promoting peace and prosperity? With the elevation of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship in 2015 to the level of a strategic partnership, the United States and ASEAN took a significant step forward in establishing the type of partnership that could help promote their common vision of “peace, security, and stability” in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵ Yet a common theme that emerged from our working group conversations was a sense of frustration that while the fundamentals of the relationship remain strong, the U.S.-ASEAN partnership often feels strategically rudderless.

Both U.S. and ASEAN experts expressed concerns that the relationship lacks a clear strategic narrative, one that explains the meaning and value of the partnership in simple terms to people on both sides of the Pacific. Going forward, U.S. leaders will need to better explain the importance of Southeast Asia to the average U.S. citizen; Southeast Asian leaders will need to better explain the institutional value of ASEAN to their own populations; and all partners will need to clarify the role the U.S.-ASEAN partnership can play in the wider region. In essence, the United States and ASEAN need to identify a clearer “brand” for their partnership. This brand should help elucidate the intrinsic value both partners derive from the relationship, the shared interests they have in each other’s prosperity, and the concrete and material benefits that all nations derive from a strong U.S.-ASEAN relationship. Importantly, as U.S. and ASEAN leaders work to define a common strategic narrative for their relationship, they will also need to make an increased effort to explain the value of the relationship on its own terms, and not simply in the context of U.S.-China relations.

To create a clearer sense of purpose in the U.S.-ASEAN relationship, one of the key issues that will need to be addressed is the lack of confidence that has emerged on both sides of this partnership. ASEAN partners have lingering questions about whether the United States will sustain its relationships and commitments in the region, especially in light of President Donald Trump’s “America First” rhetoric. While the rhetoric of the Trump administration’s new “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy sends a welcome message of commitment, some partners remain lukewarm about the concept, concerned that the United States has not yet articulated a plan for how it will implement this strategy in practice, or whether it can marshal the necessary resources to support it.⁶ For its part, ASEAN will also need to address concerns that its internal disunity has created for partners like the United States,

which at times have questioned whether ASEAN can maintain a strong, independent leadership role in the midst of growing geopolitical tensions.

Finally, building a stronger role and clearer brand for the U.S.-ASEAN partnership within the Indo-Pacific region will necessitate empowering a broader array of stakeholders to take ownership of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship. The vast web of exchanges and initiatives being implemented under the rubric of U.S.-ASEAN relations has created an extensive network of businesses, entrepreneurs, students, families, and local governments with a vested interest in strong ties between the United States and ASEAN. These people-to-people relationships serve as connective tissue that binds and enhances cooperation across all areas of the partnership. In an era of constrained resources, it will be increasingly important to develop new constituencies committed to propelling the relationship forward in the future. To do so, the United States and ASEAN should continue to empower additional stakeholders, especially the U.S. private sector, educational institutions, and state-local actors, to play a larger role in advancing U.S.-ASEAN ties.

The following recommendations provide suggestions for the United States and ASEAN to help advance a more purposeful strategic vision for their partnership.

Recommendations

1. **Continue to Emphasize the Importance of a Sovereign, Independent, and Unified ASEAN.** U.S. cabinet officials should continue to emphasize that the United States has a vested interest in empowering ASEAN as a sovereign, independent, and unified actor. Moreover, the United States should continue to reiterate its firm support for ASEAN centrality, and ASEAN's importance as a strategic player in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN, in turn, should continue discussions about how to bolster its effectiveness as an independent regional leader.
2. **Support the Asia Reassurance Initiative and Develop Proposals for Southeast Asia Programs to Include in ARIA Funding.** The Trump administration could help provide reassurance to U.S. partners about America's staying power in the Indo-Pacific region by voicing its support for the bipartisan Asia Reassurance Initiative (ARIA) legislation currently being considered in the U.S. Congress.⁷ As part of ensuring the success of this important regional initiative, the Trump administration should consider developing a package of Southeast Asia-focused programs and initiatives that could be funded via the ARIA. Beyond simply voicing support for the ARIA, the administration should encourage congressional appropriations committees to include funding for the ARIA in their appropriation bills and include this initiative in its next President's Budget Request.
3. **Offer a Southeast Asia Strategy Speech during Secretary Pompeo's Trip to the ASEAN Regional Forum.** In conjunction with the 2018 ASEAN Regional Forum meetings, the U.S.

secretary of state should offer a speech that articulates a focused U.S. strategy for Southeast Asia. This speech should detail U.S. enduring interests in the Southeast Asian region; a vision for the future of its Southeast Asian alliances, partnerships, and multilateral engagements; as well as concrete initiatives and programs it plans to sustain or develop to enhance U.S. engagement in the region. In support of its new Southeast Asia strategy, the Trump administration should provide a detailed proposal of its five-year goals to enhance U.S. presence in Southeast Asia, and the budgetary resources it will be seeking to support these goals.

4. **Invite ASEAN Leaders to Participate in a U.S.-ASEAN Leaders' Summit in 2019.** The United States should consider hosting the 10 ASEAN leaders in the United States for another special U.S.-ASEAN Leaders' Summit in 2019. The focus of this meeting should not only be to emphasize the strategic importance of the U.S.-ASEAN partnership but also to highlight the expansive influence of U.S.-ASEAN ties in American and Southeast Asian society, with a particular focus on highlighting private sector and business ties, state and local relationships, and people-to-people relations.

As part of the summit, the United States and ASEAN should develop and issue a Joint U.S.-ASEAN Declaration of Principles on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Drawing on the principles of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as principles suggested by Indonesia in its new Indo-Pacific cooperation concept, this Joint Statement would provide the opportunity for U.S. and ASEAN leaders to develop and endorse a shared vision of Indo-Pacific security and cooperation.

The Trump administration should also consider expanding the government-to-government dialogue of the 2015 U.S.-ASEAN Sunnylands Summit by incorporating two days of non-government events highlighting the full breadth and strength of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship. Potential non-government activities could include the following:

- A half-day Business and Investment Summit featuring ASEAN executives and CEOs meeting with U.S. private sector leaders to discuss steps that American and Southeast Asian companies can take to strengthen bilateral business investment ties, as well as how to better integrate growing Southeast Asian companies into global supply chains.
- A half-day Youth Summit featuring young leaders from the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative meeting with young leaders from across the United States to discuss how to enhance entrepreneurship and civic leadership.
- A "Sports Diplomacy" day, featuring a golf tournament or an exhibition soccer match with U.S. and Southeast Asian athletes.

III. TRADE AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION

ASEAN nations are some of the most exciting, fastest-growing economies in the world. In 1970, the collective GDP of ASEAN nations was \$37.6 billion USD, a number that had surged to \$2.6 trillion USD by 2016.⁸ The World Economic Forum predicts this growth will continue, estimating that by 2020, ASEAN nations' combined economy will be the fifth largest in the world.⁹ The U.S.-ASEAN economic partnership is therefore intrinsically tied to the future prosperity of both the United States and ASEAN. For ASEAN member states, trade, investment, and capacity-building activities with the world's largest economy are key to continued growth. Meanwhile, ASEAN constitutes the fourth-largest trading partner of the United States and supports more than 500,000 American jobs.¹⁰

In spite of positive trend lines pointing to the importance of deeper U.S.-ASEAN economic ties, there is a degree of uncertainty about the future of U.S. economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region following the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), and its focus on reducing bilateral trade deficits. At the working-level, the United States and ASEAN continue to implement a robust array of economic and trade initiatives, including U.S.-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), U.S.-ASEAN Connect, and the Singapore–United States Third Country Training Programme. However, growing concerns among regional partners about broader U.S. strategy in the region, and how it plans to implement a “free” and “open” economic vision for the Indo-Pacific have created the sense that while U.S.-ASEAN economic cooperation remains tactically active, it lacks a sense of more concrete purpose.

Our discussions with working group participants and other experts generated some useful suggestions on how the United States and ASEAN can strengthen their economic partnership. First, there was a general agreement that the United States and ASEAN need a shared vision of the practical priorities they are seeking from their economic relationship. Articulating a more focused set of priorities for the U.S.-ASEAN economic relationship would allow both sides to focus on advancing tangible progress in a few targeted areas, and more effectively channeling their bureaucratic and financial resources toward priority initiatives. Second, members of the working group suggested that the United States and ASEAN should not allow progress, or lack thereof, on trade negotiations and liberalization to define and shape their broader economic engagement. They recognized that the U.S.-ASEAN track record on market access initiatives to date has resulted in considerable frustration on both sides; to avoid this and move forward, it is more useful to pursue trade and investment facilitation and modernization work.

Finally, they recognized the importance of expanding their work to include the active participation of key stakeholders in the United States with a strong interest and stake in the U.S.-ASEAN relationship, particularly state and local governments and private sector actors. The U.S. government should explore new opportunities to better leverage and message the depth of U.S. private sector investment in ASEAN nations. Over the past decade, U.S. foreign direct investment in ASEAN has increased at an annual average rate of more than 10%, resulting in a cumulative investment in the ASEAN region

that is now greater than U.S. investment in China, India, Japan, and South Korea combined.¹¹ The United States should work to more actively engage these private sector stakeholders, through public-private partnerships, to address regional priorities such as training and capacity-building assistance, infrastructure development, and development of the digital economy. In addition, the U.S. government should consider how to expand economic ties at the state and local levels, through federal-local partnerships, state trade missions, and by promoting new ties between U.S. and Southeast Asian entrepreneurs.

Recommendations

1. **Streamline and Modernize U.S.-ASEAN Economic Programs.** The United States and ASEAN should work together to identify a more focused set of priority issues and initiatives on which to center their engagement. As part of this exercise, they should look to streamline the wide array of existing U.S.-ASEAN initiatives and set aside older programs that may no longer be as relevant.

In this regard, ASEAN Connect should be reexamined, as the program has never been fully conceptualized or implemented and thus remains poorly understood by regional counterparts. Rather than develop a new, competing program, the Trump administration should consider re-vamping Connect, perhaps re-working its “pillars” to focus on coordinating U.S. economic engagement in three to four key sectors. For example, “Energy Connect” could continue to be a key sector, perhaps alongside additional pillars such as e-commerce, smart manufacturing, and transportation. Redesigning the pillars in this way would give the program more focus and energize thinking about how to use it more effectively going forward. Re-vamping Connect would also allow the United States to create a more targeted approach to promoting dialogue, investment, and capacity building around key issues. Under the Connect rubric, the United States could establish sector-specific working groups that incorporate both public and private sector stakeholders (similar to the U.S.-Indonesia Aviation Working Group) to engage in regular dialogue about specific needs and commercial opportunities in these areas.

2. **Establish a U.S.-ASEAN Governors Council to Promote Business and Investment Ties.** As ASEAN continues to grow as a key market for states and municipalities across the United States—more than 20 U.S. states already conduct more than 1 billion USD in annual trade with ASEAN—it will be increasingly important to look beyond national-level initiatives to encourage stronger partnerships at all levels of the economy. In addition, by engaging with state and local governments, ASEAN can build an important pillar for support in the United States.

As a first step to promote this goal, the United States and ASEAN could consider establishing a U.S.-ASEAN Governors Council. This Council would help facilitate closer cooperation and engagement at the state and regional levels in both the United States and ASEAN member

states. The Council could help coordinate roadshows to Southeast Asia for state and local officials, as well as bring Southeast Asian economic officials and business people to the United States to promote economic ties with specific states. Similarly, the new Council could help promote investment opportunities for ASEAN-based startups by bringing groups of venture capitalists and investors to meet with ASEAN entrepreneurs, as well as to promote ASEAN investment in their states.

3. **Establish a U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Initiative.** As ASEAN chair this year, Singapore has developed a new proposal for an ASEAN “Smart Cities Network,” which aims to pave the way for cooperation on smart city development and cuts across many sectors such as transport, water quality, energy, health care, education, public services, data, and information and communications technology (ICT).¹²

The United States could support this plan by developing a U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Initiative. This initiative would pair interested U.S. cities with ASEAN cities, with the aim of building technology and infrastructure partnerships between leading innovative cities in the United States with cities in ASEAN. These partnerships could be focused on promoting infrastructure and digital development opportunities in ASEAN, sharing best practices on technical training and entrepreneurship, promoting local capacity-building initiatives, and identifying local-level opportunities for business investments and joint ventures. Moreover, this initiative could contribute to the development of a strong and dynamic digital economy, a priority for many ASEAN nations. It could also serve as an important platform to step up commercial ties between U.S. private sector companies and the identified ASEAN smart cities.

4. **Improve U.S.-ASEAN Trade Notification/Consultation Process.** The ASEAN members of the working group expressed concern about the lack of advance notice of trade actions taken by the United States against ASEAN exports, as well as trade actions against other trading partners that will directly affect them. They also welcomed consultations on overall U.S. economic objectives and engagement in the region. The United States and ASEAN should meet to discuss how to improve notification and consultations in an effort to avoid misunderstandings and promote shared objectives.

IV. SECURITY AND DEFENSE COOPERATION

The ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint envisions a rules-based ASEAN community in which “countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment.”¹³ As a Pacific nation, the United States also has a shared interest in the security of Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. The U.S.-ASEAN partnership, therefore, should play a central role in maintaining regional peace and stability, ensuring that Southeast

Asian nations maintain freedom of action and choice in determining their futures, and that they have the necessary capabilities to address emerging challenges in the region.

U.S.-ASEAN defense cooperation has quietly and steadily improved over the past several years, largely facilitated by the success of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus, established in 2010.¹⁴ Over the past several years, the United States and ASEAN have taken numerous steps to strengthen and enhance their security partnership, including creating a new informal U.S.-ASEAN dialogue mechanism for defense ministers; new multilateral exercises and training to address natural disasters, maritime piracy, and violent extremism; and regional capacity-building initiatives such as the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative.¹⁵

Overall, U.S.-ASEAN security ties remain positive and well received. In fact, a common refrain of our working group discussions was that the primary goal for the U.S.-ASEAN security relationship should be to stay the course. However, our discussions also surfaced some important suggestions for how to better calibrate the security partnership going forward.

First, many ASEAN partners share the view that, on balance, U.S. engagement remains more heavily tilted toward security concerns than economic and diplomatic issues. As a result, the United States will need to avoid the temptation to push for too much, too soon, in this area of the relationship. While continued security engagement is welcome and needed, any efforts to move too quickly in the defense realm would only exacerbate concerns about an imbalanced U.S. strategy.

Second, while ASEAN member states have steadily strengthened their capacity to deal with transnational security threats, important gaps remain in the region's ability to respond as a unified, multilateral coalition. The United States and ASEAN should focus on building multinational capabilities that will enable a stronger collective response on issues such as violent extremism, cyberattacks, natural disasters, and trafficking in illicit materials. While in some cases the obstacles to this type of coordinated action are practical and operational, in other instances (such as cyber security), the absence of clearer regional norms impedes closer cooperation. Addressing the need for clearer rules of the road should be an important topic of discussion for the United States and Southeast Asian partners. Finally, working group participants suggested that the United States and ASEAN focus less on expanding into new areas of security cooperation and more on building the national-level "fundamentals," such as strong security institutions and training/education for both civilian and military personnel, which will facilitate more effective coordination down the road.

Recommendations

1. **Sustain U.S. Military Presence and Activities in the Indo-Pacific Region.** In light of the growing complexity of the Indo-Pacific security environment, a reduction in U.S. military presence and routine engagement would send a worrisome signal about lack of commitment to the region. The United States will need to sustain its military presence in Southeast Asia, in

particular, to help offset concerns about an overly narrow U.S. focus on Northeast Asian concerns. The United States should also prioritize efforts to develop new multilateral naval and air exercises with ASEAN member states and provide increased exercise funding to enhance Southeast Asian participation in existing multilateral exercises.

2. **Establish a Multinational Regional Education Center Based in Southeast Asia.** The United States should consider establishing a multinational regional security education center based in Southeast Asia. The purpose of this center, which could be a type of satellite to the U.S. Department of Defense's Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii, would be to offer year-round training and educational courses for Indo-Pacific civilian and military security personnel, including English-language training, rule of law and legal studies, security governance and institution-building courses, and budget and procurement training. The initial funding for this center could be provided by the United States, with ASEAN member states and other dialogue partners contributing trainers and other paid staff. Establishing this center in Southeast Asia would send a strong message about U.S. commitment to its security partnership with ASEAN, as well as facilitate the training of greater numbers of Southeast Asian security experts and military officials.
3. **Enhance Maritime Law Enforcement Capabilities and Work toward the Establishment of an ASEAN Coast Guard Forum.** The United States and ASEAN should work together to enhance the capabilities of Southeast Asian coastal states to maintain freedom of navigation and lawful uses of the sea, while effectively policing and preventing illegal activities within their territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. In support of this effort, ASEAN should accelerate discussions to establish an ASEAN Coast Guard Forum, which would provide Southeast Asia with a valuable venue through which to enhance cooperative dialogue and training for regional maritime law enforcement officials. The United States could assist ASEAN in this effort by providing funding assistance and U.S. Coast Guard trainers. The United States could also consider enhancing its U.S. Coast Guard presence in the Asia-Pacific region to enable U.S.-ASEAN Coast Guard training exercises. This could be facilitated by increasing the U.S. Coast Guard budget, as well as amending the existing U.S. Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) to allow the U.S. Department of Defense to transfer a small percentage of funding to the U.S. Coast Guard for training activities in Southeast Asia.
4. **Develop a U.S.-ASEAN Dialogue on a Code of Conduct for Cyberspace Operations.** Southeast Asia is projected to have the fastest rates of Internet growth in the world over the next five years, with more than 200 million additional Internet users projected to come online by 2020.¹⁶ The development of a “peaceful, secure and resilient regional cyberspace” is therefore an issue of growing concern for ASEAN, which was acknowledged in the recent ASEAN Leaders’ Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation.¹⁷ This is also an area that requires increased multinational dialogue to continue international efforts to build a shared

understanding of how international law applies in cyberspace and the appropriate rules of behavior states should endorse for both government and non-government actors. ASEAN has committed to working toward developing a list of shared principles for cyberspace. Building on this initiative, the United States and ASEAN should establish a dialogue aimed at exchanging views on the ASEAN cyberspace principles, with the eventual goal of working toward a U.S.-ASEAN Code of Conduct for Cyberspace.

V. PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES

People-to-people ties form the foundation and bedrock of the U.S.-ASEAN strategic partnership. These individual-level connections strengthen and enhance all other aspects of the relationship, promoting the shared values, trust, and friendship that enable cooperation in the political, economic, and security realms.

The true depth and strength of the people-to-people relationship between the United States and ASEAN partners is often underappreciated and not widely understood. Currently an estimated 7 million people originating from an ASEAN member state live in the United States, while approximately 3 million Americans travel to visit Southeast Asia on an annual basis. Moreover, the United States remains a top destination of choice for Southeast Asian young people seeking educational opportunities. These students, in turn, make a significant contribution to the U.S. economy, with students from ASEAN member states adding 1.7 billion USD to the U.S. economy each year.¹⁸ But the value of people-to-people ties cannot be captured purely in numbers: Southeast Asians and Americans benefit greatly from interacting with each other, and their common experiences help generate a sense of shared values, understanding, and trust that pays concrete dividends when building cooperation elsewhere in the relationship.

People-to-people engagements form not only the bedrock of the U.S.-ASEAN partnership but also represent the biggest “bang for the buck” investment the United States can make in its relationships in Southeast Asia. Programs such as the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), Fulbright Scholarships, and more than 150 additional exchanges funded by the U.S. government are consistently touted as among the most popular and beneficial initiatives the United States has in the region.¹⁹ These programs also leverage the appeal of U.S. soft power, an asset that ASEAN partners pointed to in our conversations as one of the most important and unique assets the United States has to offer.

In spite of the appeal of these programs, our working group discussions revealed a degree of anxiety on all sides about the U.S. commitment to continue to invest in and prioritize people-to-people programs going forward. One of the first concerns participants pointed to was the significant cuts in U.S. budget requests for people-to-people programming. Second, U.S. participants suggested the United States has not come to terms with the increased regional competition it faces in this area. While

U.S. educational and training programs remain the gold standard, participants were quick to point out that the U.S. brand has undergone a degree of erosion of late, with ASEAN partners increasingly looking to alternative options from partners such as China, Japan, and Australia, among others. Recognizing the reality of increased regional competition, as well as domestic budget constraints, the United States will need to make it a priority to sustain existing funding levels for people-to-people engagement. Additionally, stakeholders on both sides of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship will need to make it a priority to explain to U.S. leaders in the executive and congressional branches the practical and strategic value of these people-to-people programs.

Recommendations

- 1. Increase U.S. Funding for Fulbright and YSEALI Programs.** The YSEALI and Fulbright programs are among the most popular programs the United States and ASEAN share. Encouraging continued support for these programs and promoting stronger support for the U.S.-ASEAN partnership among young people on both sides are among the most important investments the United States can make in the future of this partnership. Continued support for both the Fulbright and YSEALI programs will be particularly critical going forward given the enormous size of ASEAN's youth population. Moving ahead, the United States could consider building continued support for YSEALI by creating a fellowship program that would allow YSEALI fellows to gain work experience in congressional offices, much like they currently do in various nonprofit and private sector firms. This opportunity for congressional engagement could also help expose a wider range of legislators to the YSEALI program and to Southeast Asia.
- 2. Expand U.S.-ASEAN Sister City Partnerships beyond the Coastal United States.** One of the most important ways the United States could foster broader support for the U.S.-ASEAN relationship is to continue to expand local-level ties through the sister city program. While the United States and ASEAN have a relatively strong tradition in this area—there were 92 sister city partnerships in 2016—these relationships remain relatively concentrated in small geographic areas. More than 67% of existing sister city relationships are concentrated in only two U.S. states: Hawaii and California.²⁰ Yet, U.S. trade and investment with ASEAN are far more widely distributed across the United States. Expanding these sister city relationships across a broader swath of U.S. localities, especially those with strong existing trade relationships, could be an important means of further strengthening political support for the U.S.-ASEAN relationship.
- 3. Encourage Further Study and Scholarship on Southeast Asia within the United States.** Although the United States is a top educational destination for many young people in Southeast Asia, relatively few U.S. students study abroad in ASEAN member states—only 5,700 in 2014–2015.²¹ Building closer ties between the United States and ASEAN will require developing a stronger group of students and experts with experience in Southeast Asia. One

way the United States could encourage this development is by including more Southeast Asian languages under the Critical Languages Scholarship program as a means of encouraging more students to study the Southeast Asian region.

4. Develop More Practical Skills-Based Training Programs for Women and Youth.

People-to-people exchanges need not only focus on dialogue; they can also help build needed professional skills, especially for priority segments of the populace such as women and young people. Developing new training programs focused on building professional skills, particularly in emerging technologies, could be an important means of addressing some much-needed gaps in ASEAN development levels. To address this need, the United States might consider taking existing programs the Department of State funds in other regions of the world, such as the TechGirls and TechWomen programs in the Middle East, and expanding them to ASEAN. Alternately, the United States might consider establishing a broader U.S.-ASEAN Technology Scholarship initiative focused on bringing promising young ASEAN students to the United States to study and work.²² As part of this initiative, the U.S. government could partner with private industry to create private sector internships that could be a required part of the scholarship program.

VI. CONCLUSION

The United States and ASEAN have made tremendous progress over the past 40 years and have established a partnership that will only grow in political and economic importance in the years to come. But neither side can afford to take this relationship for granted or to assume the partnership will grow in perpetuity without dedicated attention and commitment. The recommendations above aim to provide sensible, achievable steps both U.S. and Southeast Asian policymakers can take to strengthen the relationship in the future. Investing in a strong U.S.-ASEAN relationship is a simple, but necessary, step toward the vision of a strong, prosperous, and stable Indo-Pacific region that both the United States and ASEAN share.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁶Rajan Anandan, Rohit Sipahimalani et al., “e-Economy SEA: Unlocking the \$200 Billion Digital Opportunity in Southeast Asia,” *Think with Google* (2017): p. 3:www.thinkwithgoogle.com/qs/documents/4859/e-economy_handout_1_20160525_eXq5Gdl.pdf.

¹⁷ “ASEAN Leaders’ Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation,” *ASEAN* (April 27, 2018): <http://asean.org/storage/2018/04/ASEAN-Leaders-Statement-on-Cybersecurity-Cooperation.pdf>.

¹⁸ East-West Center, “ASEAN Matters for America/America Matters for ASEAN” (2017): www.usasean.org/system/files/downloads/asean_matters_for_america.pdf.

¹⁹ “Programs and Initiatives,” *Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State* (accessed June 13, 2018): <https://eca.state.gov/programs-and-initiatives>.

²⁰ Calculated using data from East-West Center, “ASEAN Matters for America/America Matters for ASEAN” (2017): pp. 36–37.

²¹ East-West Center, “ASEAN Matters for America/America Matters for ASEAN” (2017): pp. 32–33.

²² “TechWomen,” *Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs—Exchange Programs, U.S. Department of State* (accessed June 13, 2018): <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/techwomen>; “TechGirls,” *Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs—Exchange Programs, U.S. Department of State* (accessed June 13, 2018): <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/techgirls>.