

# Southeast Asia at an Inflection Point: An Opinion from ASEAN

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**EVERY FOUR YEARS THE UNITED STATES CHOOSES ITS PRESIDENT IN AN ELECTION THAT IS ASTONISHINGLY TRANSPARENT**, frequently unpredictable and internally all-consuming. In Asia many thought that we too should have a vote in that election, as what the U.S. president decides and does will have an enormous impact on us and on the rest of the world. So I take this opportunity to provide one perspective from ASEAN in hopes that it may find its way to the highest level of policy makers.

The United States has a history of long engagement with Asia and ASEAN. Since World War II, it has been the most significant player in the Asia-Pacific region, and it enjoys good will and support from most Asian countries. U.S. alliances, formed in the aftermath of the war, are the anchor of the U.S. military presence in the region, helping keep the peace and grow prosperity. During the Cold War, the United States was seen to be a natural partner for non-communist countries in the region. Lee Kuan Yew, the Singaporean statesman, made the point on a couple of occasions that the U.S. decision to stay and fight in Vietnam bought time for the ASEAN countries to build their economies and institutions.

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The post-Cold War international scene is far more complex. For a brief moment, the United States enjoyed a hegemonic role and used its tremendous power to try to shape the international system. But the rapid emergence of new challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, has created instability in the global order. The world was surprised by the sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union; the unfolding of the Asian financial crisis; the spread of jihadist terrorism; an unravelling Middle East; and wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. In Asia, the regional context has changed fundamentally with the rise of China and the return of great power rivalries. Together, these events have kept the United States preoccupied and distracted, and reactive rather than strategic in exercising its international role.

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Today, Asia is facing a strategic test in adjusting to a new China, a development that presents both opportunities and challenges. China presents a tremendous opportunity because of its market and its vast potential in trade and investments, and its recent economic initiatives have been well-received. The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was welcomed by all countries in Asia and China's One Belt, One Road vision has intrigued and interested governments and businesses alike. Although its economy has slowed in the past two years, it will pick up again; even though more ups and downs are likely, China's long-term economic trajectory remains positive. China is a challenge, however, because all the countries in Asia must face China as a great power, and as a power that has become more assertive in its territorial claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

It is in the maritime domain in particular that China's rise poses a challenge, especially to the United States, which has been for the past seven decades the predominant power in the Pacific. That position is about to change. The South China Sea has become a proxy for the competition for influence between the United States and China in the region. In this contest, China has been a steady player, persistent, gifting, and ever present. ASEAN has especially felt the weight of Chinese influence in the South China Sea, where China's Nine-Dash Line claim and the speed and scope of its land reclamation

dwarf similar activities by other claimants. The four ASEAN claimants are working, each in its own way, to find a path to peacefully resolve their disputes with China, both through bilateral and regional venues, and according to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and international law. What is left unclear, however, are the broader implications of Chinese activities for freedom of the sea lanes and overflight, issues that international stakeholders are keen to clarify.

So what would ASEAN want the next president of the United States to do? This is a much harder question to answer than a few months ago. ASEAN is at an inflection point.

On October 21, during his state visit to China, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines said before a packed Philippine-China Business Forum: “I announce my separation from the United States ... in military, maybe not social, and economics also,” at the same time declaring his pivot to China: “I will be dependent on you for all time.” He went even further in declaring his new foreign policy approach, stating: “I’ve realigned myself in your ideological flow and maybe I will go to Russia to talk to Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world—China, the Philippines, and Russia. It is the only way.”

While it was expected that President Duterte would rebalance his country’s foreign policy, this very stark and clear statement was not. His officials later walked back his remarks, clarifying that President Duterte did not mean the Philippines would cut off economic and trade ties with the United States. Meanwhile, U.S. White House and Pentagon spokespersons indicated that the administration had not received any request to alter the bilateral relationship. President Duterte has back-pedaled on his unexpected declaration, explaining he did not mean to sever U.S.-Philippine ties, but it is too soon to understand how this “separation” will translate in action. The significance of a downturn in U.S.-Philippine relations would be profound. Nearly four million Filipinos live in the United States and remittances from overseas make up ten percent of the Philippines GDP. Moreover, the U.S. relationship remains very popular with average Filipinos. A Pew Research Center survey last year showed 90 percent of Filipinos love the United States, a higher percentage than Americans.

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While the Philippines has been more open and dramatic about the switch in its orientation and mindset, in reality some ASEAN states have been realigning toward China in differing degrees for quite some time. Cambodia and Laos, and to some extent Thailand, Brunei, and Malaysia, have all moved into the Chinese orbit without fanfare. Yet it would be wrong to believe that most ASEAN countries are only interested in one set of relationships. In fact, given their economic, trade, and cultural ties, ASEAN countries want to engage with all the major powers in the world, and in particular to enjoy good relationships with both the United States and China. And they also want the United States and China to enjoy good relations with each other. ASEAN understands that better relations between the United States and China makes life easier for the smaller and middle-sized countries in Asia.

With this as background and bearing in mind the election rhetoric and the inward-looking and protectionist mood of the U.S. electorate, it is crucial that the first message Asian countries hear from President-elect Trump is one of continuity, emphasizing that the United States means to stay in Asia, that U.S. engagement with Asia and ASEAN will remain unchanged, and that America’s word is good.

Beyond this statement, the United States can do several things to reassure ASEAN partners:

1. **The first policy initiative that would speak volumes and go a long way to signal commitment would be for the new Secretary of State to make Asia and ASEAN the first trip abroad.** This would signal at once that the United States intends to pay attention to the most dynamic region in the world and that it intends to maintain its position as a key player in Asia. In 1961, Dean Rusk made Asia his first stop for his first visit abroad as secretary of state. Hillary Clinton was the second secretary of state to do so. Asia and ASEAN hope there will be a third under the Trump administration.
2. **It is crucial that the U.S. president attend every ASEAN regional meeting, such as the ASEAN-U.S. Summit and the East Asia Summit, particularly as the Philippines will be the ASEAN chair in 2017.** Under President Aquino, the Philippines chose to go to the international arbitral tribunal over the South China Sea, angering China. Yet, President Xi Jinping still attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Manila amid bilateral tensions. Few platforms in Asia engage all the leaders of the region. Not to show up would suggest the United States has yielded or degraded its leadership role.
3. **The United States must continue to deepen its relationship with ASEAN. In 2009, the United States initiated an annual U.S.-ASEAN Summit. This was an excellent initiative by President Obama and should be continued by President-elect Trump.** The relationship developed into a Strategic Partnership in 2015. The Sunnylands meeting swiftly followed in 2016. There are five priority areas of cooperation in the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership: economic integration, maritime cooperation, transnational challenges including climate change, emerging leaders, and women's opportunities. Maritime capacity-building and cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief would be good places to focus going forward given the hyper typhoons and earthquakes in the region. The United States has also played an important role since 9/11 in providing assistance to ASEAN with counter-terrorism capacity-building and intelligence exchanges. This too could be stepped up given increased concerns about the probability of an ISIS-inspired terrorist attack in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.

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4. **The United States should continue to play a role in upholding the regional rules-based order through its military presence, and to support ASEAN in building a regional architecture.** Routine freedom of navigation operations are useful in this regard. They should not be seen as provocative as they are consistent with international law, which protects the freedom of the sea lanes and overflight. However, they must be conducted with caution because accidents and miscalculations can happen. Here, promoting continued adherence to the Code for the Unplanned Encounters at Sea will be important and can help the relevant parties operate more safely in an increasingly crowded maritime space.

- 5. But the U.S. stake in ASEAN is not based solely on security. U.S. economic ties to ASEAN are important, and growing, and must be a continued priority.** ASEAN's total population is more than 600 million people. Two-way U.S.-ASEAN trade is worth US\$234 billion, and ASEAN is the fourth-largest goods export market for the United States after Canada, Mexico, and China. The U.S.-ASEAN Business Council estimates that seven percent of U.S. jobs from exports are supported by exports to ASEAN and more than 560,000 American jobs are directly or indirectly created by goods and services exports to the regional grouping. The United States should continue to cultivate this long-standing business and trade partnership.
- 6. The new administration must send out a balanced message on trade.** During the election campaign, a large segment of the electorate came out against international trade, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement in particular. The United States is among the top two trading nations in the world. Trade and investment formed the basis for U.S. growth and prosperity and the strengthening of U.S. relationships with the world. Trade needs to be rebuilt. Asia has been enormously important for the United States in terms of trade relations. Years of hard negotiations have gone into the TPP trade agreement, the largest trade deal in history that is a win-win on all sides. Going forward, the new administration should work with Asia for a trade architecture with which we are all comfortable.
- 7. Above all, the United States must understand that many countries in ASEAN are going through political transitions and will be primarily focused on internal affairs for the foreseeable future.** Thailand will see a new monarch installed soon and a new government when elections are held at the end of 2017, as Prime Minister Prayut has publicly promised. The Philippines president is new and so is the government of Myanmar. Indonesia's President Jokowi, elected in 2014, is arguably still new and focused on his domestic agenda. His foreign policy agenda is still being defined. Internal development will be the top priority for these countries, and their foreign policy priorities are likely to be colored by and flow from their domestic economic and development agendas.

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The new U.S. administration will have to be patient with ASEAN as these transitions take place. ASEAN may not be as active or dynamic as in previous years, and it may be more difficult to achieve consensus among members. Of course, these ebbs and flows happen with most expanded groupings. The United States should refrain from using U.S. metrics to measure ASEAN and decide if meetings are worthwhile attending or if ASEAN has achieved the appropriate results. This type of criticism will not be helpful or productive. The United States needs to understand that nationalism is a growing force within many ASEAN countries; increasingly, they will not accept external criticisms of their internal policies. They also perceive a double standard between how the United States treats matters of democracy and human rights in Asia versus the Middle East. Asians question, for example, why the military leadership of Egypt was accepted as legitimate after it forcibly removed the country's elected president (albeit amid protests and demonstrations), and yet Thailand has been marginalized and isolated under similar circumstances.

Finally, I end by recognizing that I have not touched on the issue of the Korean Peninsula and the rapid development of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's capability to threaten the Republic of Korea, Japan, and now the continental United States with nuclear weapons. This is an urgent and imminent problem. It is not an area in which ASEAN is positioned to offer serious advice, but we are nonetheless concerned with the potential proliferation of nuclear materials. The potential for nuclear weapons to get into the wrong hands is a security threat in our countries, as it is for every country in the region. Preventing this outcome must be a top priority for the new administration.

We look forward to working with President-elect Trump to see the continued commitment of the United States to Asia.