



## View Point

### Emerging Contours of US-ASEAN Re-engagement

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Three important developments that took place in Southeast Asia in 2010 have come to re-define the nature and dynamics of the region's engagement with the United States - the most powerful player in today's international politics. First, in response to the Chinese designation of South China Sea as an area of 'core national interest,' the American Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton claimed free passage in the disputed area as America's 'national interest.' Second, the US, in order to influence the trajectories of ASEAN-driven cooperative processes, became a member of the East Asia Summit in October 2010 and also participated in the ADMM (ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings) Plus. Finally, the US President visited Indonesia along with three other important Asian players – India, Japan and South Korea in November 2010, integrating Southeast Asia into its larger strategic discourse on Asia. In fact, Southeast Asia seems to have regained its Cold War position of being one of the pivots for the US in the latter's grand strategy towards the Asia-Pacific. While participating in the second US-ASEAN summit, held in New York in September 2010, President of the United States, Barrack Obama, identified re-engagement with ASEAN as a central component of its overall strategy of playing a leading role in Asia.

The growing US-ASEAN strategic engagement aims at re-asserting not only America's long-standing security cooperation with the ASEAN countries but also the former's position of strategic pre-eminence in the region. The most important driving force for the re-engagement has come in the form of an uncertain nature of China's growing diplomatic and strategic influence

and the latter's perceived aggression in the region. The strategic engagement with the US offers ASEAN a much needed support mechanism against the prevailing uncertainty in the politico-strategic landscape of the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the US can play the role of a balancer in case the regional politics begins shifting towards a volatile structure, marked by rivalries among the Asian powers, primarily China, India and Japan. While the engagement remains a threat-induced and insecurity-driven process for ASEAN, it forms an important pillar for the United States' great game in Asia.

There are three fundamental components of the evolving nature of the US-ASEAN re-engagement. First, the US has made a concerted effort during the last two years to revive defence and security cooperation with Indonesia, initiate strategic engagement with Vietnam and expressed its willingness to engage the Myanmar junta. The Obama administration agreed in July 2010 of resuming defence and security ties with the Indonesian Special Forces that were suspended in 1998 after the reports of their involvement in the large-scale human rights violations in East Timor and other parts of Indonesia. Obama's Indonesia visit witnessed a Joint Declaration of comprehensive partnership between USA and Indonesia that highlighted the latter's call for greater role in Southeast Asia and Obama's appreciation of Indonesia's democratic outlook. The Joint Declaration characterised the bilateral partnership "critical not only to the bilateral relationship, but to addressing key regional and global challenges. The declaration called for joint efforts in building agenda in East Asia Summit, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and G-20 forums.

Another important country that has figured prominently in the USA's re-engagement with Southeast Asia is Vietnam. The two countries have launched annual security dialogue to discuss a host of non-traditional security issues, primarily maritime security, nuclear non-proliferation, climate change, disaster management and peace-keeping. So far three such dialogues have taken place. Vietnam has signed an MoU on civilian nuclear energy cooperation with the US and participated in the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism and the Megaports Initiative, which aim at nuclear non-proliferation. The US has changed its policy even towards Myanmar, away from sanctions and international isolation towards pragmatic engagement, sending its senior-level diplomat for dialogue in November 2009.

Second, United States has strengthened its naval engagement in the region and the ASEAN countries, shedding its previous reservations, have welcomed the US presence. The latter half of the year of 2010 saw a somewhat sudden and an unprecedented presence of the US warships in the Vietnamese waters. These warships – USS George Washington nuclear powered carrier and the USS John S. McCain destroyer – were visiting Da Nang port, the Vietnamese coast off South China Sea. The visit of the US warships took place in September 2010 in the backdrop of the Chinese declaration of South China Sea as an area of its ‘core national interest.’ The US and Vietnamese navies participated in trainings, exercises, and search and rescue operations. The two navies, for the first time in the history of independent and unified Vietnam, were engaged in friendly duel. Moreover, United States, while participating in the first ADMM Plus meeting in October 2010, stressed on the need for cooperation in the area of maritime security and even proposed to develop an agenda on the said theme for the next meeting.

Finally, the United States has tried to revive its participation in the ASEAN-driven cooperative processes, which had stagnated since the mid-1990s. The US signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2009, hosted the US-ASEAN summit in New York in 2009, became a member of East Asia Summit in 2010 and participated in the first ADMM Plus meeting in October 2010. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, while attending the fifth EAS meeting in October 2010, unfolded its two-fold strategy of tapping on both bilateral as well as multilateral resources to further its strategic interests in the region. The bilateral engagement can be further sub-divided into two categories of (a) alliance partners and (b) new-found strategic/natural partners. While Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines fall into the first category, Vietnam and Indonesia can be understood as part of the second category.

A mutually beneficial relationship is evolving which, in the coming years, are going to considerably influence the regional structure of power. Southeast Asia has certainly become a part of USA’s larger Asia discourse.

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