

Shutting out China: The US-ASEAN Ploy

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Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

The move is in the tradition of grand power politics. Officially, it has been sweetened as something more, a goodwill gesture by Washington that is designed to rope in and keep partners in the Asian-Pacific area close to its bosom. More to the point, state of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are being pushed into making choices about their security interests - coddle up to China, the way that Laos is, or seek the comforts of a Washington promise for greater security.

If commentators and activists were looking for other areas of reform - innovation, for instance, in human rights, and the maturing of democratic practice - then this California session at Sunnylands was not one of them. The member states of ASEAN have several concerns with China (by no means are their concerns identical), and it is a point that the Obama administration has been feeding with interest.

Of less interest is the politically deficient nature of the various regimes engaged in negotiations. Malaysia's Najib Abdul Razak remains clouded by a bribery scandal he claims is a plot of external manufacture. The Sultan of Brunei persists in riding roughshod over a range of religious protections, banning, for instance, Christmas and the singing of carols as threats to the Muslim faith. Thailand continues to be in the firm hands of military rule, without promise of elections.

The very fact that Obama has engaged in such a strategy has also been perplexing to observers in the US. ASEAN is, at best, a toothless assemblage of ethnically diverse states, haphazardly united by geographical circumstance and occasional pronouncements. "When I need to call ASEAN [in a crisis] whom do I ask for?" asks Robert Manning of the Atlantic Council. "The answer is nobody." [1]

Such a view ignores the obvious point of economic growth, which Washington wishes to secure. On January 1 this year, the idea of the ASEAN Economic Community was launched, an effort that envisages a common economic market, laced with lower tariffs and the easier exchange of goods and services.

Not that this vague concept was necessarily impressing students on the subject. In the normative language of hope, Raman Letchumanan suggested that ASEAN "make a concerted effort to convey in specific quantitative, if not qualitative, terms what it had planned to achieve and how well it is doing, regularly throughout the year." [2] Such consistency is precisely what ASEAN is not about.

The ASEAN-US agenda covered a range of talks on maritime security (absentee China was very much present on that score); trade in the form of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (again, China, the point of targeted interest); and the issue of North Korea, where Beijing again tottered in spectral prominence. The only theme not exclusively

directed against China was the issue of Islamic State.

It is true to say that China has not been particularly well-behaved on aspects of the South China Sea lanes. Construction has been taking place in the form of military installations, man-made islands, and infrastructure that shows encroachment and claim. Surface-to-air missile batteries have been deployed, another sign that Beijing is readying itself for entrenchment. This has sent some states scurrying for cover.

The added complication here has been rival geopolitical stomping. Having reasserted the US credentials as a Pacific power, the Obama administration was never going to let Beijing move quietly. A certain degree of mischief making and reassurance to regional powers has been taking place.

The US desire to have a bite of this cherry by spurring Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei and Vietnam on has angered Beijing's officials. In the sharp words of China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei, "Relevant countries from outside the region should not flex their military muscles in the South China Sea and should not entice regional countries to carry out joint military exercises or patrol activities targeting a third party." [3]

The jab at China over its maritime interests is coupled with Obama's insistence that ASEAN countries now a part of the TPPA hit their strides in ratification and implementation. Others are also being encouraged to apply. This has various political figures in the region worried, not least because it seems to be taking place in the amoral atmosphere of growth figures and economic development.

Such instruments, in reality, do much to empower the corporate market place and risk making vital medicines, to name but one example, inaccessible for citizens. Middle to low-income states stand to lose most. Adding judicial teeth to company claims against governments who make policy pernicious to profit margins further deepens the problem.

According to the vocal Malaysian politician Charles Santiago, MP for Klang, "The rush to sign onto the TPPA is a symptom of a larger problem throughout Southeast Asia, where in efforts to promote trade, investment, and GDP growth, ASEAN governments have continued to allow human rights and the dignity of all citizens to take a backseat." [4] This feature, and the anti-China bias, continues to be all too readily exploited back in Washington.

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.afr.com/opinion/barack-obama-snares-australias-closest-asean-neighbours-for-a-summit-first-20160216-gmw11h>

[2] <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/what-is-asean-community-2015-all-about/>

[3] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-asean-idUSKCN0VP1F7>

[4] <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/330380>

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