

Trump's ASEAN Policy Isn't "Confused," It's a Continuation of Decades of Coercion

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In an effort to reinforce public perception that policy changes when a new administration assumes the White House, US and European analysts have made several attempts to push forward narratives describing US President Donald Trump's foreign policy as "confused" or "unclear" in contrast to his predecessor, President Barack Obama.

However, upon closer examination, from the Middle East to Asia Pacific, US foreign policy has continued, virtually uninterrupted, for decades.

Thailand-based newspaper, The Nation, in an article titled, "[Asean under pressure due to uncertain US policy, China's ambitions: researchers](#)," would illustrate this by claiming:

Asean will be under tremendous pressure as the United States under Donald Trump's administration tries to be more engaged without a clear strategy while China competes for the grouping's favour, experts at the Hawaii-based East-West Center said.

While it was still hard to see what the Trump administration wanted to do regarding the relationship with Asean, it was expected that the US would continue to see Asean as a useful partner, said Denny Roy, senior research fellow at the research and education institute.

The article also cites former US diplomat Raymond Burghardt reporting:

Burghardt, former US ambassador to Vietnam and deputy envoy to the Philippines, said Vietnam needed to take a crucial role in leading Asean to deal with China regarding the South China Sea as the Philippines seemed to be taking a softer stance to please Beijing.

However, the article reveals that:

Of the 10 members, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam claim sovereignty over islands, rocks, shoals and reefs in the contentious sea. Indonesia is not a claimant but has some conflicts over fisheries.

The US, which is not a claimant in the area, has championed freedom of navigation as well as urged Asean to speak with one voice in dealing with China.

Thus, nations allegedly involved in claims in the South China Sea are not actually seeking confrontation with Beijing, while other ASEAN members have categorically abstained from becoming involved altogether. The United States, which has no claims whatsoever in the South China Sea, serves as chief antagonist, pressuring states to seek and expand confrontation with Beijing.

It is a process that heightened drastically amid the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," including a high-profile court case [fought by American lawyers on behalf of the Philippines](#). Despite a predictably successful verdict being delivered, the Philippine government itself refused to use the ruling as leverage against Beijing and decided instead to open bilateral talks, excluding Washington.

A Pattern of Coercion

In response, the US has increased pressure on the Philippines both openly and covertly.

Overtly, the US has cancelled weapon shipments to Philippine police forces supposedly on humanitarian grounds regarding the government's current "war on drugs" and allegations of sweeping extrajudicial killings. However justified withholding weapons on such grounds may be, US policy presents a paradox when considering record arms deals being simultaneously made with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, two nations notorious for their human rights abuses and two nations currently engaged in brutality both within their borders and beyond them specifically enabled by torrents of US weaponry.

Covertly, terrorism and now even armed combat allegedly linked to the Islamic State has coincidentally made its way to Southeast Asia, targeting not only the Philippines, but also Indonesia and Malaysia for their continued, incremental shift eastward toward Beijing. While US and European media sources insist that terrorist organisations like the Islamic State carry out their atrocities independent of state sponsorship, [US intelligence reports](#) and [leaked e-mails](#) from among American politicians have revealed otherwise.

Thus, if the "Islamic State" appears amid a geopolitical tug-of-war, as described by academics and former diplomats cited in The Nation's article, and the Islamic State's rise was intentionally fuelled by the United States and is sponsored by America's closest Middle Eastern allies, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it stands to reason to at least suspect Islamic State activity in Southeast Asia as part of a much wider and well-documented pattern of geopolitical coercion.

Likewise, in 2015 when Thai officials refused American demands to allow suspected terrorists to travel from China onward to Turkey, using Thailand as a transit point, and instead extradited the suspects back to China, terrorism conveniently struck months later, killing twenty in the centre of Bangkok. Ongoing terrorism in Thailand's deep south has sought out by Washington as a vector of drawing Thailand in closer militarily and politically. When closer cooperation is refused by Bangkok, terrorism predictably spikes.



Even Vietnam, despite hopeful predictions by US analysts and former diplomats, is attempting to play a more balanced game between Beijing and Washington, likely painting itself a target for political subversion, economic sabotage and even covert terrorism sponsored by the United States.

But this current pattern of coercion does not simply span the Obama administration and continue under the Trump administration. It is a process of US involvement in Asia Pacific that dates back to when it quite literally occupied the Philippines as a colonial power. Even the Vietnam War, according to America's own intelligence agencies, was fought to contain China, not combat "communism" or defend "democracy."

Thus, "Trump's" ASEAN policy isn't "confused" or "unclear," it is a very clear continuation of a pattern of coercion seeking to maintain what US policymakers and politicians themselves have claimed is American "primacy" across Asia.

Primacy declared by a nation that does not even reside in Asia offers clues as to why ASEAN as a bloc, and its members individually have resisted attempts by Washington to use them as a unified front amid America's geopolitical game with China.

What the US may claim are "gains" and "closer ties" across Asia will result either from concessions made by individual states to stave off more overt and destructive forms of coercion by Washington, or from successful attempts by Washington to overthrow governments opposed to its objectives in Asia Pacific, and resulting client states steering national policy parallel to Washington's.

Admitting this would reveal America as a force of destabilisation, exploitation and inhumanity, usurping entire nations of their right to self-determination. Therefore, it is much more politically convenient for analysts and diplomats to claim American policy is "confused" or "unclear" while this singular agenda continues under the Trump administration.

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