

Aligning US Structures, Process, and Strategy: A US-ASEAN Strategic and Economic Partnership

by Ernest Z. Bower

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The transition between President Barack Obama's first and second terms is the right time to develop a US-ASEAN Strategic and Economic Partnership (SEP). The move would serve to elevate and institutionalize existing US-ASEAN engagements. It would also compel US departments and agencies that have been compartmentalized and uncoordinated to raise their levels of engagement, share information, and align government mandates with strategic objectives.

President Obama made dual commitments with his ASEAN counterparts at the fourth US-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in Phnom Penh in November – to convert that forum into a summit, thereby indicating that the US president will participate annually, and to raise the US-ASEAN relationship to the “strategic level.” Creating the SEP could create a foundation for the president's Asia-Pacific policy in his second term. It could lock in gains and allow the new national security, foreign policy, and economic teams to build on the progress of the past four years.

It also has the potential to address multiple issues and concerns:

1. Build confidence in a sustained US focus. An SEP would signal to all of Asia, not only ASEAN, that the United States is backing rhetoric about ASEAN becoming the “fulcrum” of new regional architecture for trade and security with action – not only security and military steps, but also a coordinated and balanced engagement.

2. Build institutions and reduce dependency on personalities. Strong leaders will certainly succeed the personalities in key US national security positions. But many US allies and friends in Asia remain concerned about those new figures' points of focus and energy, and about the possibility that conflicts in other parts of the world could detract from the high-level attention to the region established during the first Obama term. That matters because if China perceives a diminishing US engagement or focus on the region, it will almost certainly step up its already aggressive posture and use its economic power and geographic proximity to advance its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.

3. Incorporate economic diplomacy and trade. A fair criticism of the Obama “pivot” to Asia has been that the administration's trade policy in the region has not been

comprehensive; it has not been secured through explanations to broad domestic constituencies or coordinated with broader strategic engagement. Creating an SEP as a bureaucratic coordinating mechanism led by the National Security Council (NSC) would ensure that the Departments of the Treasury and Commerce, the US Trade Representative's Office (USTR), and the export-supporting agencies of the Export-Import Bank, Overseas Private Investment Corporation, and US Trade Development Agency would have seats at the table.

4. Drive interagency coordination and high-level alignment. An SEP would need to be led by the White House – specifically the NSC – and therefore able to elevate interagency coordination to a political level that has been sorely missing except in the weeks leading up to presidential trips to the region. This new structure would allow and provide incentives to key departments to participate in and plan for existing ASEAN-based frameworks, to engage the private sector more regularly, and to build political equity in the US relationship with ASEAN.

5. Strengthen ASEAN by encouraging investment. A stronger and more integrated ASEAN, as outlined in the ASEAN Charter's plans for political, economic, and cultural integration by 2015, is clearly in the United States' strategic and economic interests. By creating an SEP, the United States would send a strong signal that it takes ASEAN seriously. It would also encourage governments in the region to invest in ASEAN institutions, including the ASEAN secretariat, and to use meetings to plan for and support a substantive agenda for the annual US-ASEAN Leaders' Summit.

6. Send a timely message to China. China's actions at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July and again at the ASEAN Summit in November suggest that it is willing to weaken ASEAN in order to assert its claims in the South China Sea. China's increasingly aggressive actions in this area suggest that its national leaders cannot or will not moderate their counterproductive behavior in the near term. By creating institutional frameworks that demonstrate a serious intent and long-term commitment to building ties with ASEAN, the United States can help convince China of something it currently does not believe: that the United States is going to sustain its high-level focus in the Asia Pacific throughout the 21st century.

7. Add substance to the East Asia Summit. A strong, strategic partnership and dialogue between the United States and ASEAN would add substance to the agenda at the annual East Asia Summit (EAS). An SEP would build ASEAN's confidence and its willingness to engage in and discuss vital regional and global issues such as maritime security, nuclear nonproliferation, energy and food security, and global health.

8. Use existing structures. Establishing a US-ASEAN SEP is not a heavy lift. In fact, the key structures are already

in place. The United States and ASEAN leaders have declared that their annual meeting will now be a leaders' summit and that the relationship is strategic. The summit now requires planning and staffing that results in a more substantive and strategic agenda. Those ministerial meetings are already in place, but what would be different under an SEP is that the US government would have a coordinating mechanism at the NSC. The relevant US departments and agencies would also need to commit to attending key ASEAN meetings in order to enhance and promote US objectives and work on alignment on key issues with their ASEAN counterparts.

Key ministerial meetings and channels that should be included in an SEP and provide direct input to the US-ASEAN Leaders' Summit include the following:

- ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) – the US secretary of state and the ASEAN foreign ministers meet annually on the side lines of the ARF.
- ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) – the US secretary of defense participates in the ADMM+ meeting currently scheduled for every two years. It is anticipated that this meeting would be accelerated to an annual meeting. The secretary of defense and ASEAN counterparts should meet on the sidelines of the ADMM+ and should plan to meet directly in off years until the forum is made annual.
- ASEAN Economic Ministers meeting (AEM) – USTR Ron Kirk attended the AEM this year, but USTRs and US secretaries of commerce do not have a strong record of engagement in the AEM. That needs to change and would be a key step forward under an SEP.
- US secretaries of treasury, energy, agriculture, and others should attend the annual ASEAN ministerial meetings for finance, energy, and agriculture.
- Legislative Council – a US-ASEAN legislative council should be formed to encourage national governments to reach out to and share perspectives with legislators. A select group of legislators from the United States and ASEAN should meet annually to provide feedback and recommendations for the leaders.
- U.S.-ASEAN Eminent Persons Group (EPG) – The EPG should be institutionalized and provide annual input to the US-ASEAN Leaders' Summit. EPG members should be required to consult with the U.S. private sector, civil society, and other institutions to provide perspectives and goals that may go beyond those of the administration.
- Youth Leaders Summit – A young leaders' track should be developed and tasked with providing input and solutions on between one and three issues annually for review by the leaders.

Creating a US-ASEAN SEP will ensure that the relationship moves to the strategic level in a balanced way. It will help develop a more coordinated US strategy toward ASEAN specifically and the Asia Pacific generally. Finally, it will build political equity in the ASEAN relationship in the United States.

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