

Reinvigorating US-ASEAN relations

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ASEAN-United States dialogue relations, established back in 1977, have gained new momentum since 2009 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted to ASEAN leaders in Thailand that the US had returned to Southeast Asia, by which she referred to seeing more dynamic engagement between US and ASEAN. The US signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in July 2009, which paved the way for the US to be an official dialogue partner of ASEAN and allowed it to be part of the East Asia Summit. The US also sent an ambassador to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. In November 2009, the first ASEAN-US leaders' meeting was held in Singapore and on September 24, there will be the second meeting in New York.

Such a meeting is an important platform for leaders from ASEAN and the US to exchange views and find common ground for policy design and implementation. Both ASEAN and the US wish to learn from each other the issues of common concern. In her statement in February 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "the United States must have strong relationships and a strong and productive presence here in Southeast Asia. This region is vital to the future not only the United States and each of the countries, but to the world's common interests: a significant and trade-oriented regional economy; a critical strategic location; and a set of countries that will be key to any solutions we pursue on climate change, counterterrorism, global health and so much else". Relating the US's involvement in the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan stated: "The successive and proactive re-engagement of ASEAN by the US has brought about a transformation of seismic proportions to ASEAN-US relations."

ASEAN, established in 1967, has been evolving to be the main driver in regionalism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN, at the beginning stage of its establishment, was expected just to be a regional institution that could prevent war and conflict between member states and to cope with the spread of communism in the region, but now ASEAN has moved far away from this task to play more important roles in promoting economic development, regional identity and community, and regional order. Such huge tasks have challenged ASEAN leaders to a great extent.

ASEAN is proud of its achievement over the last decades since there has been no war or large-scale armed conflict between or among member states. Economic integration has been accelerating although development gaps are still a big stumbling block. The good thing is that ASEAN leaders have shown their commitment to building a true political, economic and sociocultural community by 2015.

In order to realise the goal of achieving an ASEAN community with openness and inclusiveness, the bloc needs support from all dialogue partners including the US. ASEAN expects that the US can help its economies in terms of trade and investment, technology transfer, education and capacity building, and help to reduce the development gap in the region. Moreover, ASEAN wishes to see the US's presence in the region in order to maintain regional security, order and stability.

There is a significant economic link between the US and ASEAN. US foreign direct investment in ASEAN totalled US\$130 billion in 2007, the largest destination for US FDI in Asia. Investment from ASEAN into the United States ranks fourth among Asian sources, totalling \$11 billion. In terms of trade, the US is ASEAN's third-largest export market, comprising 12 percent of its exports. US exports to ASEAN totalled \$66 billion in 2008.

ASEAN wishes to see more investment flow between it and the US, which should continue and further support the poorest countries in ASEAN to export their products to the US market. In the case of Cambodian textiles, with the preferential trade treatment from the US, Cambodia becomes one of the leading textile producers in the region and this industry provides a lot of jobs and income for Cambodians – especially women from rural areas – contributing to poverty reduction in this country. Aid for trade is very important for Cambodia and other least developed countries in ASEAN to develop and catch up with other member countries. The US can help ASEAN to reduce development costs through aid-for-trade mechanisms.

The upcoming ASEAN-US leaders meeting will provide more concrete steps towards bilateral relations and nourishment between ASEAN and the US. Economic development and non-traditional security issues such as transnational crime, terrorism, climate change, food and energy security, natural disaster management and pandemic disease will be given priority. The US and ASEAN are committed to working together to deal with these regional and global issues on an equal relationship and partnership.

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