

# ASEAN and America: Why Partnerships Matter

BY MOE THUZAR

Consider these:

- A third of foreign-born Asians in the US are from ASEAN countries
- Students from ASEAN countries contribute US\$1 billion to the US economy. Students from Thailand ranked the highest among the ASEAN countries in 2007-08
- 43 US cities or states have "sister city" relationships with 64 partners in ASEAN.

Prompted by the increasing importance of Asia in American lives, and the attendant need to assess the impact of US-ASEAN and US-Asian relations, ISEAS has partnered with the East-West Centre in Washington in its new initiative, "ASEAN Matters for America/America Matters for ASEAN". The project was launched in Singapore on 7 June 2010 after an initial release by the East-West Centre in the United States in April 2010.

The project – an interactive website [www.ASEANMattersforAmerica.org](http://www.ASEANMattersforAmerica.org) – provides comprehensive information on existing partnerships between the United States and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its ten member states. It goes beyond the usual "data-dump" of information, and instead emphasises use-friendly analysis and visual graphics on both quantitative and qualitative data. Currently in its first phase, data on the website highlights ASEAN's importance to the US. The website's interactive tools allow anyone on either side of the Pacific Ocean interested in ASEAN-US relations to track ASEAN's importance to the US, and the US' importance to ASEAN. ▼

THE WEBSITE GOES BEYOND THE USUAL "DATA-DUMP" OF INFORMATION, AND INSTEAD EMPHASISES USE-FRIENDLY ANALYSIS AND VISUAL GRAPHICS ON BOTH QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA.

This image, taken off the ASEANMattersforAmerica website, shows how raw data is visually enhanced and analysed.



GEOSTRATEGIC WEIGHT  
share of world trade through region's straits, 2008

*why is ASEAN important?*



Source: Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2006

ASEAN's geostrategic importance stems from many factors, including: the strategic location of member countries, the large shares of global trade that pass through regional waters, and the alliances and partnerships which the United States shares with ASEAN member states.

Reflecting this, in July 2009, the United States signed ASEAN's *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation*, which establishes guiding principles intended to build confidence among its signatories with the aim of maintaining regional peace and stability.

<p>U.S. / THE PHILIPPINES Treaty Alliance Major non-NATO Alliance</p>	<p>U.S. / THAILAND Treaty Alliance Major non-NATO Alliance</p>	<p>U.S. / SINGAPORE Strategic Framework Agreement</p>
---	--	---

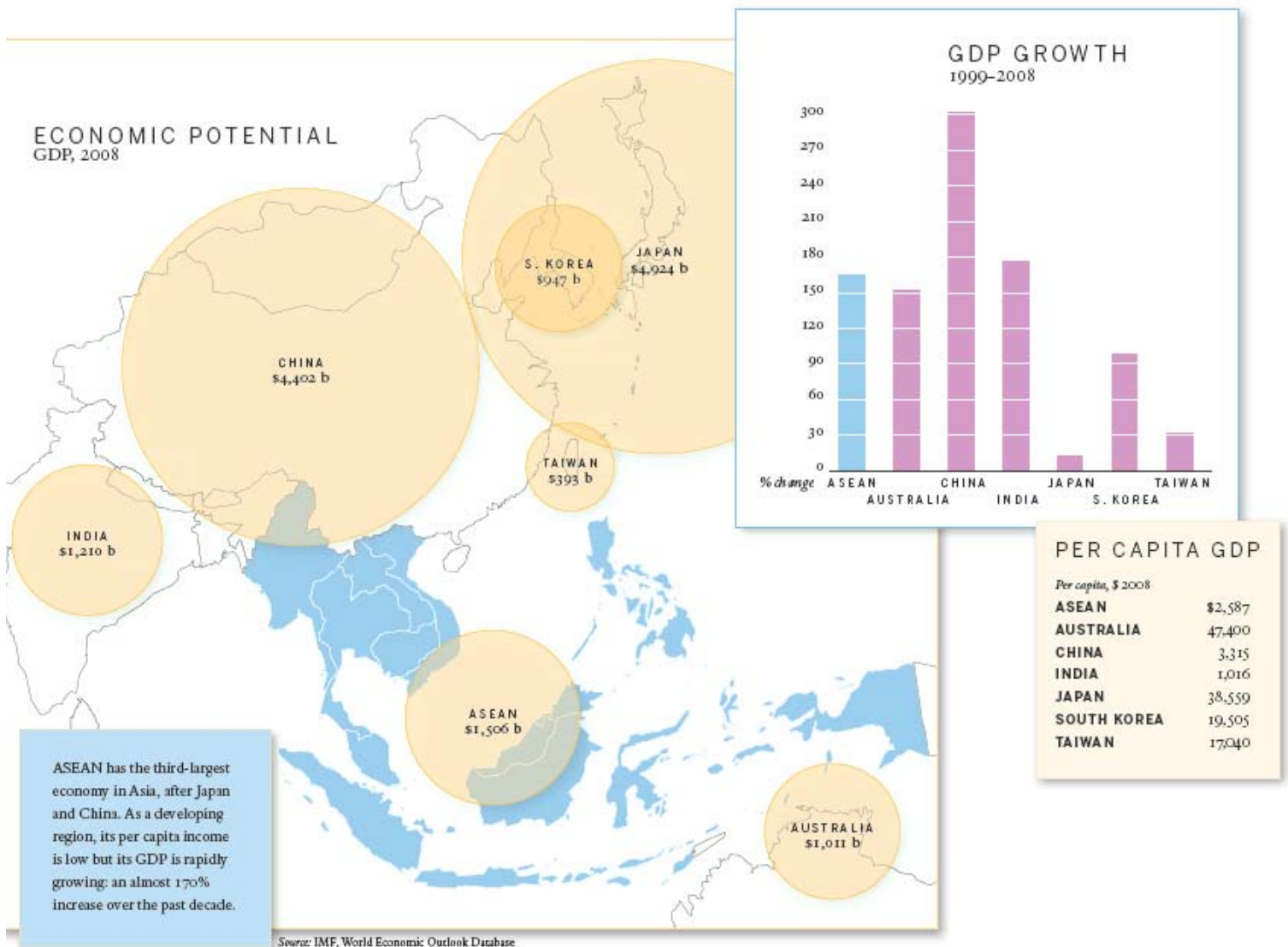
The "ASEAN Matters for America" initiative is an integral part of the East-West Centre's "Asia Matters for America" project, which covers a comprehensive scope spanning South and East Asia. The project attempts to share interesting facts on how Asia – and ASEAN – has an impact on different levels of government, business and society in the US. For example, the interactive visualisation tool on the "ASEAN Matters for America" website shares nuggets of information such as:

- Idaho sends a greater share of its exports to the countries of ASEAN (36%) than any other state in the US. New Mexico (29%) and Maine (26%) are just behind
- Oregon sends more exports to ASEAN (US\$3.66b) than New York state (US\$2.11b).

In terms of geostrategic importance, the website highlights ASEAN's strategic location and the share of global trade that passes through regional waters. The US is important to ASEAN as a benign guarantor of security in Asia with military ties of various kinds with some ASEAN countries and a deep interest in the freedom of navigation in the region's straits and the South China Sea. Economically, the US remains one of ASEAN's leading export markets. US foreign direct investment (FDI) into ASEAN in 2007 totalled US\$130 billion, making ASEAN the largest destination for US FDI in Asia, contrary to impressions otherwise.

This paints a realistic picture of the mutual importance of linkages between ASEAN and the US. The reality is that ASEAN and US have always mattered to each other. The density in ASEAN-US relations in political/strategic, economic and people-to-people spheres has its foundation in the many institutional linkages between the two. The US became a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN way back in 1977, one of the first to become so. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has brought American senior officials

On the website, charts and graphs like the one below help make the numbers more comprehensible.



together with those from China, Russia, India, North Korea and other participants in the 27-member ARF grouping. This allows the US to engage in consultations and dialogue within the ARF without the formalities of official bilateral discussions.

The US-ASEAN Business Council, a body that involves as its members leading American corporations dealing with ASEAN, has also been a strong linkage between the US and ASEAN.

Comprehensive partnerships between the US and ASEAN, including the Enhanced Partnership announced in 2005, the ASEAN-US Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) signed in 2006, and the 2007 ASEAN Development Vision to Advance National Cooperation (ADVANCE) project have helped ASEAN countries strengthen and build capacity to relate more substantially with the global community, including the US.



A computer screen shot of an interactive graphic on the website. A drop down menu helps the reader to select from different datasets and moving the mouse over each state reveals the various statistics one needs.

The highlight of ASEAN-US relations thus far was accomplished by President Obama's Administration, with the US' accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) at the ARF ministerial meeting in 2009, and the first ASEAN-US Summit in Singapore in November 2009, allowing the President to meet all ten ASEAN heads of state/government. The ASEAN Plus Eight proposal now being considered provides a window for a regular frequency of such summits. The US also appointed the first Ambassador to ASEAN from a non-ASEAN country, following the entry into force of the ASEAN Charter.

All of these relationships and linkages arise from shared values between ASEAN and the US, guided by a result-oriented pragmatism and openness among the two partners and towards the rest of the world. And yet, there is still much scope for cultivating mutual understanding between the two sides. This is where "ASEAN Matters for America/America Matters for ASEAN" comes in. With information and data from the website, policy, academic and business communities in both ASEAN and the US can continue promoting the mutual understanding that is the bedrock of the relationship between this region and the US.

*Ms Moe Thuzar is Lead Researcher, Socio-Cultural Affairs, ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS. Before joining the Centre, she headed the ASEAN Secretariat's Human Development Unit. She has contributed to various ASEAN compendia and publications on social and human development. Ms Thuzar co-authored "Myanmar: Life after Nargis" (ISEAS, 2009) and is currently co-editing reports on lessons for disaster management from Cyclone Nargis, environmental cooperation in ASEAN and the EU, and urbanisation in Southeast Asian countries. She is also working on a review of Myanmar's foreign policy.*