

In Southeast Asia, Democrats' Losses Prompt Worries
Wall Street Journal
4 November 2010

Concerns are growing in Southeast Asia about the potential impact of the Democrat Party's stinging losses in the US mid-term elections. The main fear is that realignment in Congress could lead to a fresh round of domestic political battles that might distract the Obama administration from following through on its efforts to position the US as a counterweight to China's growing influence in this part of the world.

For the past year and a half, the Obama administration has been stepping up its involvement in Southeast Asia. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is currently finishing off an Asian tour that has taken her to Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea. During the course of that tour she has urged some countries to stand up to China's growing influence and has angered Beijing by suggesting an international forum to resolve maritime conflicts with Southeast Asian nations and Japan.

President Barack Obama, meanwhile, travels to Asia from Nov. 5-14 and will visit India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan, but his main focus will likely be to encourage China to boost demand at home and become less dependent on US consumers to fuel its economic growth. The South Korea and Japan legs of Obama's trip include the Group of 20 meeting of the world's main industrial nations and an Asia-Pacific leaders summit.

"The Obama administration will continue reaching out to China and the Islamic world, but the relationship with Southeast Asia might suffer if there's a lot of domestic politics to contend with in America," says Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

Pavin points out that while the US was recently invited to join the annual East Asian Summit as a full member in Hanoi, some members of the group worry that the US isn't yet ready to commit time to the forum, which is emerging as the basis for an expanded free-trade movement in the region.

Other analysts worry that a distracted administration will pay less attention to what's happening in Myanmar, where the military regime will hold the first elections in 20 years on Nov. 7. Pro-military parties are virtually assured of winning the vote, which has been described by some countries in the region as a "farce." But the US has been quietly engaging Myanmar in recent months and persuading it to undertake some degree of reform after realizing that its rich natural resources meant that sanctions on the reclusive regime had relatively little effect. That's because neighbors such as China, India and Thailand are all willing to trade with the country, which is also known as Burma. With a divided government in Washington, encouraging lasting change in Myanmar might seem something of a foreign-policy luxury, some analysts fear.

Obama's election set-back is less likely to disrupt his efforts to reach out to the predominantly Muslim countries in the region, especially Indonesia, which is emerging as a key plank in Washington's strategy to promote moderate forms of Islam elsewhere in the world. That's partly because many Republicans share a common interest in mitigating the rise of Islamist terrorism. But it's also because Obama is a popular figure in Indonesia, partly because his mother married an Indonesian man and he spent some of his childhood in Jakarta. He is scheduled to make a major foreign-policy speech in the city during his visit.

"Obama has shown tremendous achievement and has strengthened the democratic tradition in America by showing that an African-American can become president," said Komaruddin Hidayat, president of the State Islamic University in Jakarta. "It's a victory for the

marginalized that inspires the world."

But Hidayat, like other Indonesians, worry that an increasingly fractious political scene at home could distract Obama from building bridges to Muslim nations and the developing world in general. "It would be a shame if the US elections weaken Obama's administration," he says. -by James Hookway And Yuyu Yuniar