

Not Taking Good Relations for Granted Highlights from the 2010 US-ASEAN Summit Strategic Dialogue Roundtable

The ASEAN Studies Center of the American University, on 21 September 2010, organised the “2010 US-ASEAN Summit Strategic Dialogue Roundtable” at the American University in Washington DC, with support from the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC) at ISEAS and the Asia Foundation (Washington Office). ISEAS and ASC were represented by Dr Tin Maung Maung Than and Mr Daljit Singh, Senior Fellows at ISEAS, and Dr Pavin Chachavalpongpun, ASC’s Lead Researcher for Political and Strategic Affairs. The following highlights are just in from Pavin.

The day-long Roundtable aimed to identify and clarify issues of priority concern to ASEAN countries and the United States (US), and therefore help lay substantive groundwork for the government-to-government at the second US-ASEAN Summit in New York on 24 September 2010. It was attended by United States Government (USG) officials from State Defence Department, the National Security Council, and the Office of the United States Trade Representative, and participants from the think-tank, academic and NGO communities in the Washington area. ASEAN participants included ASEAN Secretary-General Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, who gave the luncheon address, and research fellows and analysts from the ASEAN-ISIS network.

Roundtable participants discussed several important issues in ASEAN-US relations:

- the role of the US in the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP);
- regional security cooperation, maritime security and transnational crime, including ASEAN and US threat assessment and adequacy of current measures, arms purchases and DPRK nuclear shipments, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and prospects for deeper ASEAN-US security Cooperation in and outside the region;
- democracy and human rights, encompassing various regional trends: the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and its work, trafficking in persons, migrant labour, refugees, engagement with Myanmar and the upcoming elections in Myanmar in November);
- transnational issues such as climate change, disaster relief, lower Mekong water management, human resource development, and trade and investments issues (ASEAN Economic Community, Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, prospects of realising AEC by 2015, TPP enlargement, ASEAN-China FTA and multilateral and bilateral FTAs).

Dr Joseph Yun, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Department of State, highlighted that the Obama Administration was keen to reengage with ASEAN and therefore willing to become a member of the EAS. The United States perceived EAS as an important forum since it encouraged discussions on political and strategic issues, a counterpart of APEC which promoted business and economic cooperation.

The issue of South China Sea dominated the discussion on regional security cooperation. Participants agreed that even though the Chinese government preferred to deal with the issue on a bilateral basis, the nature of the conflict which involved many countries necessitated consideration of a multilateral approach, especially when it comes to issues such as resource development. With regard to the situation in Myanmar and its upcoming elections, the US would need to reach out to ASEAN in order to work together with Myanmar in the post-election period. Many agreed that the US could further cooperate with ASEAN in the area of capacity-building, especially with least developed members of ASEAN. In his luncheon speech, Dr Surin Pitsuwan also touched upon the issue of capacity-building, while stressing that the regional landscape had changed. The United States and ASEAN had to re-think its strategic cooperation in order to cope with such change.

Overall, the Roundtable delivers certain important messages: The United States' relations with ASEAN depend much upon how strong its relations are with each ASEAN country. Moreover, the United States had done all it could with ASEAN (such as signing the TAC, appointing its ambassador to ASEAN, etc.), and had never taken this relationship for granted.

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