

OPENING REMARKS AT LAUNCH OF LATEST *ASEAN MATTERS FOR AMERICA, AMERICA MATTERS FOR ASEAN*, 9.30 AM 27 SEPTEMBER 2019

By Mr Choi Shing Kwok, Director, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Let me first extend my warm welcome to Ambassador Michael Michalak, Charge 'Affaires Mr Rafik Mansour, Dr Satu Limaye, and Professor Joseph Liow. I also welcome our packed audience today, among whom are many distinguished diplomatic and business personalities.

ASEAN Matters for America, America Matters for ASEAN was started by the East-West Centre in Washington DC under the able leadership of Dr Limaye. The first issue was published in 2010. Since then there have been two updated versions in 2014 and 2017. The launch today is for the third update. ISEAS is very happy to be associated with this enterprise from the very beginning.

ASEAN Matters for America, America Matters for ASEAN is packed with information on US-Southeast Asia connections and interactions in the form of hard numbers and graphics that speak for themselves. The word ASEAN as used here in the title is a short-hand and catchy way of referring to Southeast Asia rather than to ASEAN the regional organisation.

This publication provides useful information to Southeast Asians about the region's interactions with the US. Indeed, I would say there is a real and urgent need for those of us in Southeast Asia to have a better understanding of the US because misperceptions abound at many levels. However, in the interest of time, I will focus my remarks on the importance of America having a good understanding of Southeast Asia.

The United States has contributed much to the economic and security well-being of East and Southeast Asia over the past three quarters of a century. Indeed East Asia would look very different today if it were not for the interventions that America has made over that long period of time as the strategic environment evolved from the Pacific War to the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War and its aftermath. Today, as we all know, the new emerging landscape is one of US-China rivalry and geopolitical tensions over trade and technological superiority.

With this latest shift in US strategic perception, new policies are being formulated in Washington that will inevitably affect the interests of Southeast Asia. To safeguard these interests, it is now more important than ever to promote a better understanding of Southeast Asia among American policy and intellectual elites. It is also in America's interest to have a good understanding of Southeast Asia as its policies are then more likely to succeed.

The other two major Asia-Pacific powers, China and Japan, pay close and continuous attention to Southeast Asia because they have historically recognised that this region is of great importance to them. For China, Southeast Asia is part of its neighbourhood, while for Japan it is critically important for both strategic and commercial reasons. But it is different in the case of the US.

The US is geographically distant. It is a global power with global security responsibilities and has traditionally viewed Southeast Asia for good reasons as less important than Europe and northeast Asia. Hence, as Joseph Liow has said in his book “Ambivalent Engagement”, US attention to Southeast Asia has been “episodic”. Although 2017, still true today.

Also, the American political system is complex and by design far more decentralised than that of China or even Japan. In addition to the executive arm, Congress also plays an important role in shaping attitudes towards the region. Elections for the House of Representatives take place frequently and new congressmen involved in foreign relations will have to learn or refresh their knowledge anew every few years. Even within the executive arm, every incoming administration brings with it a fresh slate of senior officials to staff its policy machinery. Public opinion also matters more in the formulation of policies in Washington than it does in many Asian capitals.

In this crowded space where many issues battle for attention, the publication of *ASEAN Matters to America, America Matters to ASEAN* plays a valuable role by providing relevant and up-to-date hard data on US-Southeast Asia connections to all who matter – the busy Congressman, overworked official, sleepless scholar and harried journalist – and it does so in a compact and attractive way.

We in ISEAS are happy to facilitate today’s Singapore launch and do so in the hope that it will not only make both sides realise how much we matter to each other, but also play a small part in bringing the two sides closer together. Among Southeast Asian countries, Singapore itself has always had a close relationship with the US and the recent renewal of the defence cooperation agreement for another 15 years has solidly reaffirmed that. In closing, I congratulate Dr Limaye and the East-West Centre, and look forward to working with you on future conferences together. Thank you.