

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Trump's Absence at ASEAN Summits Undermines US Regional Strategic Engagement**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- US President Donald Trump's no-show at the recently concluded East Asia Summit in Bangkok was seen by participating countries, especially those from ASEAN, as a let-down. Since taking office in January 2017, Trump had missed all three EAS plenaries and attended only one of three ASEAN-US Summits (in 2017). Given that next year is the US Presidential election year, Trump's attendance at the Summit cannot be guaranteed.
- His representation in Bangkok by the newly appointed National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien dismayed ASEAN member states, which saw it as a downgrading of the US delegation.
- The US delegation's invitation to ASEAN countries to attend President Trump's proposed ASEAN-US Summit in 2020 was seen as a consolation prize, putting ASEAN in an unenviable position. If ASEAN declines the invitation on account of scheduling constraints, they may be criticised for not responding to US overtures.
- If the US is absent again next year in Vietnam, the signal to ASEAN and China will be negative. ASEAN's efforts to face up to China's push may be discouraged.
- It is in US' interest to put its footprint in the EAS process as one way to protect its strategic ground from being eroded. Economic and defence cooperation is neither a substitute for nor mutually exclusive with, the diplomatic and political significance of US leaders' physical presence in relevant regional fora.

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## INTRODUCTION

The US continues to give unclear signals about its commitment to the ASEAN process despite its longstanding relations with East Asia. This position was exacerbated recently by President Donald Trump's decision to skip the ASEAN-US Summit and the 14<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok, held on 3-4 November 2019. However, it was not Trump's absence that was jarring, as he was not the first – nor will he be the last – US president to miss such summits.<sup>1</sup> Disappointment with the US lies in the manner in which the president's absence was handled, or rather, mishandled. The longstanding and generally accepted practice of the vice-president or the secretary of state deputising for the president under extenuating circumstances appears to have been abandoned. President Trump dispensed with this convention by naming National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien as his Special Envoy to the ASEAN-US Summit and EAS.

This article is a rejoinder to assertions advanced by ASEAN sceptics that the regional organisation had placed exceedingly high and unreasonable expectations on the US president to attend ASEAN summits and the EAS without offering tangible payoffs to the US. In fact, understanding diplomacy as being in this transactional mode is counter-productive to the US and only serves to undermine US standing and credibility in the region at a time when the region's suspicion of American disinterest is mounting. This article presents a critique from four different aspects: (1) parity in representation, (2) summit invitation protocol, (3) ASEAN leadership in regional mechanisms, and (4) conflating partnership with participation.

## PARITY AND PROTOCOL

The US cleared the air on Washington's representation at the ASEAN-related summits with the release of a White House statement on 29 October 2019, which announced the appointment of O'Brien as Trump's Special Envoy.<sup>2</sup> Mr. O'Brien's appointment was instructive in several respects. First, the US scored an unenviable first by sending the lowest-ranked representation by any participating state to the EAS in its 14-year history. Prior to O'Brien's appointment, the lowest representation by any EAS participant did not slip below the level of foreign ministers. Indeed, US and Russian leaders were represented by their foreign ministers for the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> EAS when they could not avail themselves. However, the US' downgraded delegation this year is unprecedented and marks a new low for US diplomacy with ASEAN.

Second, President Trump's designation of O'Brien as his Special Envoy was a poorly conceived attempt to confer upon a non-cabinet appointee a veneration of parity with ASEAN heads of government. The fact that the White House had felt it necessary to bestow O'Brien with additional titles already amounts to an admission that the US was subverting diplomatic convention. Fittingly, ASEAN returned the favour by downgrading its representation at the ASEAN-US Summit, with all but three ASEAN leaders assigning their foreign ministers to meet O'Brien. The irony appeared to have been lost on the US delegation. American officials saw this response as a snub and lobbied hard for the full ASEAN leaders' line-up to meet with O'Brien. In fact, American diplomats took ASEAN's good intentions, which went beyond diplomatic conventions, in highly personal terms. *The Japan Times* reported that US diplomats delivered a strong rebuke to their ASEAN counterparts: "A full or partial

boycott by ASEAN leaders will be seen as an intentional effort to embarrass the President of the United States of America and this will be very damaging to the substance of the ASEAN-U.S. relations.”<sup>3</sup> While the US was concerned with saving its own ‘face’, it lacked the empathy to consider how poorly the ASEAN leaders would be regarded by their citizens and the international community if they agreed to the unprecedented move to grant diplomatic parity between heads of government and sub-cabinet political appointees.

Rather than view the ASEAN move negatively, the US should recognise the regional organisation’s ingenuity in assisting the US to ‘save face’. After robust closed-door discussions, ASEAN agreed to be represented by three leaders and seven foreign ministers. The three leaders were Thailand Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (then-ASEAN Chair), Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (incoming ASEAN Chair), and Laos Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith (Coordinator for ASEAN-US Dialogue Partnership). The comparatively high-level representation on ASEAN’s side was in fact already a marked concession to the US, and shows ASEAN’s recognition of O’Brien’s relative seniority within the US political structure. Unfortunately, this generous gesture was lost on US policymakers and Western observers. The entire fallout might have been less pronounced – and even averted – had Trump chosen Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, who was present in Bangkok at the time of the EAS and ASEAN-US Summit, as his emissary.

In fact, critics of ASEAN’s alleged snub of O’Brien missed two important points. First, it was Trump who first snubbed ASEAN by skipping the Bangkok meeting, and who later compounded matters by failing to dispatch Vice-President Pence in his place. Instead, his appointment of a non-cabinet representative only served to accentuate the apparent snub. Second, if the roles were reversed, it would be unimaginable for Trump to meet ASEAN’s non-ministerial representatives for a meeting pegged at a summit level. Why then should US officials and ASEAN critics expect ASEAN to accept this unequal and diplomatically untenable treatment? Washington’s familiar refrain that all countries are equal in the eyes of international law by virtue of their sovereignty jibes poorly with its implicit expectation that America deserves special dispensation. Moving forward, if the US behaves in a similar fashion at next year’s bilateral summit, ASEAN should seriously consider further downgrading its representation to the Senior Officials’ (SOM) level to prevent the ‘3 leaders + 7 foreign ministers’ modality from becoming the norm in ASEAN’s engagement with the US and other Dialogue Partners.

## **SUMMIT INVITATION**

Mr. O’Brien’s conduct at the ASEAN-US Summit did not win the US many friends when he blindsided ASEAN by conveying Trump’s invitation to the ASEAN leaders for a “special summit” in the first quarter of 2020. Predictably, O’Brien’s antics did not go down well with ASEAN leaders, who are generally averse to megaphone diplomacy and grandstanding. The fact that the US failed to provide prior courtesy notification to either Thailand (ASEAN Chair and Summit host) or Laos (Coordinator of ASEAN-US Dialogue Relations) points to a glaring diplomatic omission that did not sit well with ASEAN leaders.

Aside from the diplomatic slip-up, the invitation puts ASEAN in an uncomfortable position. How would ASEAN leaders reconcile accepting the invitation with the circumstances in which the invitation was extended? ASEAN citizens on the streets of Jakarta, Hanoi, or

Yangon will interpret the invitation as evidence of asymmetrical dynamics between the US and ASEAN, with the US offering the summit as a ‘consolation prize’ and ‘summoning’ the ten smaller states of ASEAN at its convenience. This tributary-like diplomacy may not be what Washington had intended, but it might nevertheless be how the invitation would be perceived in the region and beyond.

From a practical viewpoint, summits require meticulous planning and coordination, which in itself makes the “first quarter 2020” deadline rather challenging. The invitation will put pressure on Vietnam’s planning of its already-inundated chairmanship calendar. More importantly, the US has to put meat to bare bones on the substance of the proposed summit, even as policymakers in ASEAN capitals await a substantive elaboration of the US’ Asia policy beyond the ill-defined concept of the “Indo-Pacific”. Indeed, one is left to wonder if the US issued the summit invitation with the expectation that it would not be accepted. After all, if ASEAN declines the invitation on account of scheduling constraints, Washington would be handed a convenient out, and ASEAN critics would be vindicated in their claims that ASEAN was not working hard enough to deepen ties with the US.

ASEAN will also have to weigh the political sensitivities of the impeachment process as it progresses through the US House of Representatives. Would ASEAN want to risk flying into the eye of the US political storm as the impeachment process extends into 2020? There is also the matter of the US presidential election primaries and campaign. Western leaders typically avoid visiting states during national election campaigns to maintain the semblance of non-partisanship. ASEAN should abide by the same convention and respect the US political process. At the same time, ASEAN should not be seen to lean towards either side of the US political spectrum. These delicate considerations make a strong case for postponing the ASEAN-US summit to a later and more appropriate date, ideally in 2021.

### **ASEAN CENTRALITY OR MONOPOLY?**

One analysis of President Trump’s continued reluctance to attend ASEAN-related summits is his apparent dislike of the modality of the EAS, which accords ASEAN control of the agenda and privileges discussion over spectacle. Hence, Trump will not invest in a forum halfway across the globe that the US does not host or lead because of his personal “disdain for long-distance trips that do not culminate in blockbuster deals that earn him bragging rights at home”.<sup>4</sup> American officials must realise that this position is untenable and damages US credibility. The US was cognizant of the terms it was acceding to when it sought membership to the forum, which it joined in 2011. Thus, it is not unreasonable for ASEAN and the five Dialogue Partners in the EAS to expect the US to live up to its commitment and support to keep the EAS as a leaders-led forum. It is also noteworthy that the US had six years to observe the functioning of the EAS when it was established in 2005 before joining in 2011. If the US cannot be counted upon to abide by terms and norms that it has publicly acceded to, then it will find its claim to enjoy legitimacy as a world leader hard to substantiate.

It is worthwhile for US officials to ensure that domestic political turbulence does not disrupt America’s summit-level commitment to regional processes. Indeed, ASEAN’s much misunderstood monopoly of the ASEAN-led processes is critical to keeping these processes functioning as well as sustaining support from extra-regional states. The desire to retain the

original essence of the EAS as an ASEAN-led forum is a strategic imperative that serves the US' interest as much as it does ASEAN's. Like all ASEAN-led mechanisms and processes, the EAS cannot afford to be politicised or hijacked by external parties as a medium of major power competition. If ASEAN were to permit the US an active and direct hand in shaping the EAS agenda a certain year, it would have to allow other EAS participants the same opportunity to do so in future gatherings. This outcome could not only dilute the credibility and trust that ASEAN Dialogue Partners have in the EAS, but also inundate the EAS with a multitude of conflicting agendas, and result in the forum's unravelling. By implication, advocates for the dilution of ASEAN leadership must consider if the US is willing to accept the possibility of Chinese influence permeating the leadership of the EAS or the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). The truth of the matter is that ASEAN is the only party acceptable to all regional stakeholders, and it is to Washington's benefit that it is seen to be supporting this reality.

ASEAN's sole stewardship of the EAS and other ASEAN mechanisms means that the agenda of these platforms can be kept neutral and agreeable to all parties. By implication, the region can be preserved as an inclusive arena with equal opportunities for all external partners to engage the region. ASEAN centrality might result in imperfect cooperation, but it is certainly a better outcome than less cooperation or outright hostility.

To be sure, ASEAN is also mindful that the participation of top leaders at every summit is not feasible due to unforeseen domestic exigencies and concerns. For example, ASEAN was understanding and supportive when President Barack Obama was unable to attend the 8<sup>th</sup> EAS in 2013 when the US Congress failed to prevent a government shutdown, and ASEAN appreciated the Obama administration's effort to maintain a higher level of quantitative and qualitative engagement with the region. In contrast, the Trump administration's record has been found wanting thus far. For the record, Trump's no-show at the Bangkok summit was his third consecutive absence. The closest he got to participating in the summit was his attendance at the EAS luncheon in 2017. That year, the US was represented by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, while Trump skipped the plenary session and departed from the Philippines ahead of schedule.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the absence of top US leaders at the EAS amounts to more than just a snub to ASEAN leaders. It can also be construed – and is likely to have been interpreted – as an affront towards the non-ASEAN participants, all of whom have been represented by their respective heads of government or foreign ministers since the EAS' founding. Trump's absence from the EAS deprived the top US leadership of the opportunity to interface with these non-ASEAN leaders.

## **PARTNERSHIP NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR PARTICIPATION**

In a speech delivered in Bangkok at the Indo-Pacific Business Development Mission on 4 November 2019, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross presented the smoking gun for why the US should be – and should have been – represented in Southeast Asia at the highest levels. Mr. Ross noted that the “Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America's future”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the State Department also observed that “ASEAN sits at the geographical center of the Indo-Pacific and is central to our vision”.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the “two way-trade figure of US\$2 trillion” between the US and the Indo-Pacific “far surpasses” U.S.

trade with Europe (US\$1.5 trillion), South and Central America (US\$1.2 trillion), and Africa (US\$89 billion).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the US is “the largest source of FDI in the Indo-Pacific Region”, with a total investment at end-2018 totalling US\$866 billion, of which “ASEAN is the number-one U.S. investment destination in the Indo-Pacific for American companies”.<sup>9</sup>

When Ross took pains to stress that “there is US\$29 billion more U.S. FDI in ASEAN than in China and Japan combined,”<sup>10</sup> he was preaching to the wrong communion. This point should be underlined in the White House rather than in Southeast Asia. It should go without saying that ASEAN attracts a high amount of American investments because its economic potential is attractive to US investors. It is imperative that the US recognises that it stands to reap enormous gains from ASEAN’s peace and prosperity, and concomitantly has a lot to lose if does not increase its presence the region.

Although emphatic official declarations of ASEAN’s centrality by US elites can be used as a reflection of their understanding of ASEAN’s inherent value to America, US engagement in the last three years has been inconsistent at best. The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) and the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development Act (BUILD) are two bright spots, but their impact is drowned out by Washington’s failure to address structural issues, such as the appointment of ambassadors in their ASEAN and Singapore missions. Top US leaders have much to gain by making their presence felt in the region to protect their strategic ground from being eroded, to say nothing of building on existing interests.<sup>11</sup> Consistent – even enhanced – economic and defence cooperation is neither a substitute for nor mutually exclusive with the diplomatic and strategic significance of top US leaders’ physical presence in relevant regional fora. Similarly, Trump’s persistent absence from the ASEAN scene, coupled with the inconsistent engagement of the administration’s senior officials, plays directly into the hands of US’ strategic rivals in the region who have the advantage of geographical proximity and a better grasp of Asian culture and sensibilities.

## CONCLUSION

The US has pursued political and economic ties with ASEAN member states because doing so serves its economic and strategic interests. Crucially, it has done so on mutually agreeable terms, in spite of the fact that US officials had little hand in shaping some of those conditions. Likewise, ASEAN has welcomed cooperation with the US alongside other external powers because doing so serves ASEAN’s interests of cultivating an open and inclusive regional architecture where every state is treated as an equal partner. In other words, the ASEAN-US relationship is two-way and mutually beneficial.

Such ties require a degree of physical presence and interaction by top leaders from both sides that is proportionate to the relationship’s importance. ASEAN leaders, as well as their Dialogue Partner counterparts (including the US), have always accepted this premise as a matter of principle. Summit-level leaders of ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners have made consistent and sincere efforts to participate actively and personally to defend and advocate for their national and regional interests at Leaders-only platforms. ASEAN would be doing itself, the region, and its Dialogue Partners a disservice if it were to allow exceptions to the rule.

It matters less whether – and by how much – the US’ defence, security, and economic engagements far outweigh those of its identified strategic competitors. It is likewise less important to determine the intentions, however benign, that informed the reduction in stature of the US delegation. Instead, what will perhaps have more resonance around the capitals of ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners is the signal the US is dispatching by not appearing to accord ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners the degree of respect that is congruent with and proportionate to ASEAN’s purported importance in America’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, “Trump Skips ASEAN Summit, Continuing a Presidential Tradition,” *History News Network*, November 24, 2019, <http://hnn.us/article/173698>.

<sup>2</sup> “President Trump Announces the United States Government Mission to the United States-Association of Southeast Asian Nations Summit and East Asia Summit,” The White House, October 29, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trump-announces-united-states-government-mission-united-states-association-southeast-asian-nations-summit-east-asia-summit/>.

<sup>3</sup> “U.S. blasts ASEAN ‘effort to embarrass’ Trump via partial boycott,” *The Japan Times*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/04/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/us-blasts-asean-partial-boycott/#.XeicMlwzaUk>.

<sup>4</sup> Bhavan Jaipragas, “What does Donald Trump’s East Asia Summit absence mean for China’s regional influence?” *South China Morning Post*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3035610/what-does-trumps-east-asia-summit-absence-mean-chinas-regional>.

<sup>5</sup> Oliver Holmes, “Trump skips East Asia Summit on final day of 12-day tour,” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/nov/14/donald-trump-skips-east-asia-summit-on-final-day-of-12-day-tour>.

<sup>6</sup> “Remarks by Commerce Secretary Wilbur L. Ross at the Indo-Pacific Business Development Mission,” November 4, 2019, U.S. Department of Commerce, <https://www.commerce.gov/news/speeches/2019/11/remarks-commerce-secretary-wilbur-l-ross-indo-pacific-business-development>.

<sup>7</sup> *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, November 4, 2019, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>, p. 6. See also *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, June 1, 2019, U.S. Department of Defense, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>, pp. 28–30, 36–40.

<sup>8</sup> “Remarks by Commerce Secretary Wilbur L. Ross,” November 4, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Yohei Muramatsu, “Trump skips ASEAN Summit again, ceding influence to China,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 1, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Trump-skips-ASEAN-Summit-again-ceding-influence-to-China>.

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