

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 21 November 2019

The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: Political Disconnect, Policy Rollout

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The low-level US delegation to the 2019 ASEAN-US Summit and East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok underlines the Trump administration's lack of high-level focus on Southeast Asia.
- Under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, the US government is rolling out a large number of economic and governance programmes with a range of partnering states and regional and global institutions rather than focussing on a single major initiative.
- The Trump administration's rhetoric towards China is hardening, including over Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea dispute and attempts to coerce Southeast Asian countries into accepting its jurisdictional claims.
- Despite infrequent high-level US visits to Southeast Asia, America's defence engagement with regional states is significant and expanding.

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INTRODUCTION¹

On 29 October 2019, President Donald Trump announced that the recently appointed Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Ambassador Robert O'Brien would lead the US delegation to the 2019 ASEAN-US Summit and East Asia Summit (EAS) on 4 November in Bangkok. On 3 November, the US State Department released a fact sheet, *The United States and ASEAN: Expanding the Enduring Partnership*, which posited that "U.S. engagement with the ten member states of ASEAN has never been stronger".² The next day, the State Department released an implementation update report on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy claiming that, "ASEAN sits at the geographical centre of the Indo-Pacific and is central to our vision."³ Both documents lay out in some detail the large number of economic, governance and security policies being proposed and rolled out under this strategy.

The 29 October presidential announcement received much more media attention than the State Department's policy messages and reinforced the view of many in Southeast Asia that the US government is disengaging from Southeast Asia.⁴

POLITICAL DISCONNECT

Southeast Asian interlocutors and Asia experts in America have impressed upon successive administrations the vital importance of high-level US representation at ASEAN-related meetings. This message appears to be of declining effect.

In the first year of the Trump administration, the secretaries of state and defence participated in the relevant ASEAN-led ministerial meetings, and President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson participated in the 2017 ASEAN-US Summit, with Tillerson representing the US at the 2017 EAS. In 2018, the secretaries of state and defence participated in the relevant ASEAN-led ministerials, and Vice President Mike Pence led the US delegation to the ASEAN-US Summit and EAS in Singapore. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did not join him. This year in August, Pompeo attended the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting and the EAS ministerial meeting in Bangkok, while Ambassador O'Brien participated in the ASEAN-US Summit and EAS. From 2011 to 2017, none of the US delegations to the EAS were lower-level than those of Russia. In 2018 and 2019, they were.

The ASEAN states appeared quite dissatisfied by the US representation at the 2019 EAS. Particularly perplexing for ASEAN is that while the head of the US delegation, Ambassador O'Brien, is not a cabinet member, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, who hosted an Indo-Pacific Business Forum on the sidelines of the EAS, is. The ASEAN leaders demonstrated their dissatisfaction by downgrading their representation at the ASEAN-US Summit. Only the prime ministers of Thailand (ASEAN Chair), Vietnam (2020 ASEAN Chair) and Laos (country coordinator for ASEAN-US relations) attended together with the seven foreign ministers of the other member states. Media reports suggested that the US was upset at ASEAN's "intentional effort to embarrass" President Trump,⁵ though O'Brien was diplomatic and praised ASEAN's hospitality.⁶

While the announcement of O’Brien as the head of the US delegation to ASEAN may have been a protocol shock, it was not a total surprise. The media notifications released by the White House and State Department on the meetings and phone calls of Trump, Pence and Pompeo indicate a lack of high-level engagement between the Trump administration and Southeast Asia—in absolute terms and compared with other regions of the world—since the Second Trump-Kim Summit in Hanoi in February.

As detailed in Tables 1, 2 and 3, over this seven-month period, President Trump has met only one Southeast Asian leader, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in New York, among the 64 foreign leaders he has met. Further suggesting a lack of high-level engagement with the Trump administration by many Southeast Asian states, on 23 October 2017, Prime Minister Lee was also the last of four Southeast Asian leaders to meet with President Trump in the White House.⁷

Vice President Pence has not met or talked on the phone with any Southeast Asian leader since the Hanoi Summit. Secretary of State Pompeo visited the Philippines for one night and day after the Second Trump-Kim Summit, and met President Rodrigo Duterte and Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. In August in Bangkok, Pompeo participated in the ARF and the EAS ministerial, and chaired a Lower Mekong Initiative ministerial meeting. Of Pompeo’s 59 reported phone calls with foreign counterparts since the Second Trump-Kim Summit, only one was with a Southeast Asian counterpart (on 29 May, Pompeo called Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to offer congratulations on the re-election of President Joko Widodo).⁸

Table 1

Secretary of State Pompeo’s Calls and Bilateral and Minilateral Meetings with Foreign Leaders and Countries Visited (1 March -3 November 2019)

	Meetings	Calls	Countries Visited
Southeast Asia	4 (Philippine president and foreign minister, Singapore foreign minister, Vietnamese foreign minister)	1 (Indonesian foreign minister)	2 (Philippines, Thailand)
Northeast Asia	10	9	2
South Asia	10	2	1
Central Asia	9	0	0
Middle East	26	21	8
Sub-Saharan Africa	4	0	0
Europe	35	13	15
North America	6	3	2
Latin America	22	8	2
Oceania	5	2	1
TOTAL	131	59	33

Source: <https://www.state.gov/press-releases/>

Table 2

**Vice President Pence's Calls and Meetings with Foreign Leaders and Countries Visited
(1 March -3 November 2019)**

	Meetings	Calls	Countries visited
Southeast Asia	0	0	0
Northeast Asia	1	0	0
South Asia	0	0	0
Central Asia	0	0	0
Middle East	4	3	2
Sub-Saharan Africa	0	0	0
Europe	4	1	5
North America	2	1	1
Latin America	7	0	0
Oceania	2	2	0
TOTAL	20	7	8

 Source: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/news/>

Table 3

**President Trump's Meetings with Foreign Leaders and Countries Visited*
(1 March -3 November 2019)**

	Meetings	Countries visited
Southeast Asia	1 (Singapore prime minister)	0
Northeast Asia	16	4 (Japan and Korea twice each)
South Asia	6	0
Central Asia	0	0
Middle East	9	0
Sub-Saharan Africa	0	0
Europe	23	4
North America	2	0
Latin America	5	0
Oceania	2	0
TOTAL	64	8

 Source: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/news/>

*The White House no longer issues media notifications for President Trump's phone calls with foreign leaders

ECONOMIC AND GOVERNANCE POLICIES

The State Department documents released on 3 and 4 November do suggest that US engagement with Southeast Asian states is increasing in policy terms under the FOIP strategy, particularly in the number of new US policy initiatives and the number of other states and inter-state institutions the US is partnering with.

A main focus of the governance pillar of the strategy is the Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative that has over 200 separate programmes under its remit. These include support for free and fair elections in Myanmar and a programme by USAID and the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) to support the Government of Indonesia's National Integrated Complaint Handling system (LAPOR). Some of the programmes under this initiative focus on issues such as press freedom and strengthening civil society that could aggravate US relations with some affected Southeast Asian governments.

On the economic front, support for energy (particularly liquefied natural gas) infrastructure is a main focus of the strategy with the lower Mekong. This includes US-South Korean cooperation to support the Mekong River Commission, a partnership with the World Bank, Australia, France and Japan to conduct safety reviews of 55 dams in Laos, the US-Japan Mekong Power Partnership committing US\$29 million to energy development in the Mekong sub-region, and support from the Trump administration's Asia EDGE Program for the \$3 billion of American private sector investment in Vietnam's Son My LNG terminal and power plant.

Five elements of the approach to economic engagement, however, open the FOIP strategy to negative comparisons with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure Initiative, and to broader criticism in Southeast Asia:

- A focus on many functional initiatives rather than a single big-ticket one;
- A focus on trying to catalyse private investment in infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region rather than direct government (or state-owned enterprise) support;
- A focus on developing partnerships with other like-minded states and institutions that pool assets but slows the rollout of policies and reduces the reputational benefits accruing to the US;
- The Indo-Pacific scope has meant that many of the early beneficiaries of these policies have been in South Asia and the Pacific Islands, and not Southeast Asia;
- Southeast Asian states' general lack of interest in negotiating bilateral trade deals with the Trump administration, and President Trump's focus on trade deficits and trade remedy measures mean that there is no attractive trade component to the strategy. The announcement by the United States Trade Representative Office of the withdrawal of GSP privileges from Thailand, the 2019 ASEAN Chair, just before the ASEAN-US Summit amplified this problem.⁹

FOREIGN AND DEFENCE POLICIES

In June 2019, as the then Acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan was delivering his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the US Defense Department simultaneously released its *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (IPSR)*.¹⁰ The IPSR conveyed three central themes: America's enduring commitment to the region; promoting a networked region comprising bilateral alliances, partnerships and multilateral arrangements; and China as the greatest threat to regional security. Since June, the Trump administration has expounded on and operationalized these themes.

Prior to the 2019 EAS, and in keeping with past practices in 2017 and 2018, senior administration officials delivered major speeches on China. Both speeches demonstrated a hardening of attitudes towards Beijing. On 24 October, Vice President Pence asserted that since his speech at the Hudson Institute a year earlier, China's "behavior has become even more aggressive and destabilizing".¹¹ A week later, Secretary of State Pompeo stated that the US was "finally realizing the degree to which the Communist Party of China is truly hostile to the United States and our values, and its worse deeds and words and how they impact us" before going to criticize Beijing's policies towards Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang and the South China Sea.¹² During the EAS on 4 November, the State Department released its implementation update on the administration's FOIP policy, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*.¹³ On China, the report is less hard-line than the Pence/Pompeo speeches and focuses more on what the US has been doing to implement FOIP in the areas of diplomacy, economics, governance and defence. However, there was an obvious disconnect between the report and the administration's low-level representation at the EAS. The report refers to ASEAN's central role in the regional security architecture several times and describes the EAS as the "premier leaders-led forum for strategic discussion in the region".

The South China Sea Dispute

In the second half of 2019, the US stepped-up its criticism of China's actions in the South China Sea as well as its operational activities designed to exercise high-seas freedoms.

US criticism has focused on three areas. First is China's continued militarization of the dispute and how this contradicts President Xi Jinping's pledge to President Barack Obama in 2015 not to do so. In July, for instance, the Pentagon called Chinese ballistic missile tests in the South China Sea "disturbing".¹⁴ Second are the attempts by China to enforce its jurisdictional claims within its nine-dash line by sending survey ships, naval and coast guard vessels into the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of coastal states and putting pressure on foreign energy companies (including, reportedly, the US corporation ExxonMobil¹⁵) to cease operations within that line. In July-August, the State Department issued two statements and the Defense Department one statement criticizing the presence of Chinese survey ships at Vanguard Bank inside Vietnam's EEZ.¹⁶ The FOIP implementation update refers to the nine-dash line as "preposterous" and "unfounded, unlawful and unreasonable".¹⁷ Third, the US has become increasingly insistent that the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea (CoC), currently being negotiated between ASEAN and China, be consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and uphold the rights of coastal and user states.¹⁸ In October, David Stillwell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, told the Senate Foreign Relations

Committee that “We remain sceptical of the PRC’s sincerity to negotiate a meaningful Code of Conduct that reinforces international law.”¹⁹ In what has become a familiar exchange of views on the South China Sea, at the EAS, Ambassador O’Brien accused China of “bullying” the other claimants while China’s Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said the US should stop “meddling” in the dispute.²⁰

In tandem with heightened US criticism of Beijing’s actions, the US Navy has increased the tempo of freedom of navigations operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. In the first ten months of 2019, the US Navy conducted six publicized FONOPs around the Paracel and Spratly Islands compared to five in 2018 and four in 2017. The United States Coast Guard has also increased deployments to Asia in 2019, including to the South China Sea.

Defence and Security Engagement

As noted earlier, high-level visits to Southeast Asia by US officials in 2019 have been infrequent. However, America’s defence engagement with regional states continues to be significant and is expanding.

Acting Defense Secretary Shanahan was in Singapore in June but his successor, Mark Esper, was not scheduled to visit Southeast Asia (Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam) until mid-November. In 2019, Pompeo only paid two visits to the region. It is unclear why Pompeo did not represent the US at the 2019 EAS. On 8 November Pompeo made a speech in Berlin to mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but would still have had time to travel from Thailand to Germany to deliver it had he attended the EAS.

In the second half of the year there were some notable developments in America’s defence engagement with Southeast Asia. In July, in a further sign of normalizing defence relations with Thailand following elections in March, the US agreed to transfer 60 refurbished Stryker armoured vehicles to the Thai Army.²¹ In September, the inaugural ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise (AUMX) was held in the South China Sea involving two US and six Southeast Asian warships. In the same month, President Trump and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong met in New York to extend the US-Singapore 1990 MOU on defence cooperation for another 15 years.

While China and Russia—countries the Trump administration has identified as strategic competitors—have both increased their defence cooperation activities in Southeast Asia over the past year, US military engagement with regional states remains far more extensive, however. For example, in 2019 the US military conducted 34 exercises with Southeast Asian countries, compared with only ten by China and three by Russia.²²

OUTLOOK

The political disconnect between the Trump administration and Southeast Asia is likely to continue for the remainder of 2019 and possibly into 2020. The White House is currently preoccupied with the impeachment inquiry into President Trump’s alleged abuse of power. The Congressional inquiry could stretch into 2020. Even if it does not, US politics will be dominated by the run-up to the November 2020 presidential election. As such, foreign

policy issues will be crowded out, though US-China relations will continue to be a hot-button issue.

At the ASEAN-US Summit, Ambassador O'Brien read out a letter from President Trump inviting ASEAN leaders to a "special summit" in America early in the new year. Given the low-level US representation at the EAS, it remains unclear whether the ASEAN leaders will respond favourably to the invitation. Nevertheless, despite the political disconnect, the roll out of individual FOIP policies will continue throughout 2020.

¹ This is the seventh in the series of *ISEAS Perspective* articles on the Trump Administration and Southeast Asia. See the authors' "The Impending Trump Administration and Southeast Asia", *ISEAS Perspective* #63/2016 (21 November 2016); "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: Limited Engagement So Far", *ISEAS Perspective* #27/2017 (27 April 2017); "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: Enhanced Engagement", *ISEAS Perspective* #87/2017 (23 November 2017); "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: After the Singapore Summit", *ISEAS Perspective* #36/2018 (4 July 2018); "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: America's Asia Policy Crystalizes", *ISEAS Perspective* #77/2018 (29 November 2018); and "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: The Hanoi Summit and US Policy in Southeast Asia", *ISEAS Perspective* #19/2019 (14 March 2019).

² *The United States and ASEAN: Expanding the Enduring Partnership*, US Department of State, 3 November 2019, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-and-asean-expanding-the-enduring-partnership/>

³ *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington DC: US Department of State, 4 November 2019), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

⁴ In an ISEAS opinion poll of policy elites from all ten ASEAN member states in late 2018, 68 per cent of respondents believed US engagement with Southeast Asia was declining compared with 13 per cent who believed it was increasing. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 29 January 2019,

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2019.pdf

⁵ "U.S. blasts ASEAN effort to embarrass Trump' via partial boycott", *Japan Times*, 4 November 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/04/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/us-blasts-asean-partial-boycott/#.Xcy2yFczZPY>

⁶ "U.S., China spar at Southeast Asian regional summit", Associated Press, 5 November 2019, <https://apnews.com/8d35d47a368b41e19be8718cba220ef2>

⁷ Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha met President Trump at the White House on 2 October 2017, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on 12 September 2017 and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on 31 May 2017.

⁸ "Secretary Pompeo's call with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi", US Department of State, 29 May 2019, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-call-with-indonesian-foreign-minister-retno-marsudi/>

⁹ "USTR Announces GSP Enforcement Actions and Successes for Seven Countries", Office of the United States Trade Representative, 25 October 2019, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2019/october/ustr-announces-gsp-enforcement>

¹⁰ *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington D.C.: US Department of Defense, 1 June 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

¹¹ “Remarks by Vice President Mike Pence at the Inaugural Frederic V. Malek Memorial Lecture, Washington D.C., 24 October 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-frederic-v-malek-memorial-lecture/>

¹² “The China Challenge”, Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, The Hudson Institute’s Herman Kahn Award Gala, New York, 31 October 2019, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/the-china-challenge/>

¹³ *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, op. cit.

¹⁴ “US criticizes Chinese ‘missile launches’ in South China Sea”, BBC, 3 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-48850085>

¹⁵ “Exxon’s South China Sea oil project tests Chinese influence”, Bloomberg, 23 September 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-23/exxon-s-south-china-sea-oil-project-tests-chinese-influence>

¹⁶ “Chinese Coercion on Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea”, US Department of State, 20 July 2019, <https://www.state.gov/chinese-coercion-on-oil-and-gas-activity-in-the-south-china-sea/>; “China Escalates Coercion against Vietnam’s Longstanding Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea”, US Department of State, 22 August 2019, <https://www.state.gov/china-escalates-coercion-against-vietnams-longstanding-oil-and-gas-activity-in-the-south-china-sea/>; “China Escalates Coercion Against Vietnam’s Longstanding Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea”, US Department of Defense, 26 August 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1943953/china-escalates-coercion-against-vietnams-longstanding-oil-and-gas-activity-in/>

¹⁷ *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁸ “Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Ministerial Statement”, US Department of State, 1 August 2019, <https://www.state.gov/trilateral-strategic-dialogue-joint-ministerial-statement-august-1-2019/>

¹⁹ Statement of Assistant Secretary David R. Stilwell, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, 16 October 2019, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/101619_Stilwell_Testimony.pdf

²⁰ “US accuses Beijing of ‘intimidation’ in South China Sea”, AFP, 4 November 2019.

²¹ “Delivery of armored vehicles comes as Washington frets over Beijing’s dominance”, Reuters, 18 September 2019.

²² Information on US exercises provided by the Public Affairs Office at Indo-Pacific Command.

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