



## Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# The U.S. Rebalance and ASEAN Regionalism

Since the Obama administration outlined its ‘pivot’ to Asia strategy in October 2011, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has closely monitored the United States’ rebalance and examined its own role as a driver of regionalism. ASEAN finds itself at odds with remaining central to the region’s security architecture while drawing on the United States’ superpower status to balance against a rising China. Julio Amador III, Asian Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, discussed the nuances surrounding the U.S. rebalance and its implications for ASEAN at a lecture on October 23 entitled, “[The U.S. Rebalance and ASEAN Regionalism](#),” sponsored by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies. A full audio recording of the event can be found [here](#).

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### The Rebalance and ASEAN’s Regional Architecture

Since its founding in 1967, the ASEAN community has expanded to an area spanning 1.7 million square miles and nearly 600 million people. The regional bloc serves as a main avenue for trade and is the third largest Asian trading partner of the United States after China and Japan. By 2015, ASEAN hopes to achieve its goal of an economically integrated, politically cohesive and socially responsible “ASEAN Economic Community”. According to Amador, ASEAN’s economic vitality has contributed to the “Asian Century” and plays a large role in the U.S. rebalance, which he argued is centered largely on Southeast Asia. **The U.S. has projected the rebalance in six ways: strengthening of bilateral security alliances; deepening relationships with emerging powers; building multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a forward military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.** How has the rebalance affected ASEAN countries?

In short, the U.S. rebalance to Asia affects ASEAN's goal of remaining central to the region's security architecture. Amador characterized ASEAN, and more broadly, multilateral institutions as "vehicles for less powerful states to remain autonomous in the face of great/rising powers' influences." However, the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia is accepted because it acts as a stabilizing factor in managing conflicts, including tension in the Korean peninsula and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. The United States' role as a security guarantor works because ASEAN, according to Amador, "knows that there is a promise of self-restraint: nobody expects the United States to invade any Southeast Asian country anytime soon."

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Amador described this regional architecture as a "negotiated hierarchy", wherein great powers are expected to flex their muscles. At the same time, less powerful countries can escape being overwhelmed by great powers but still drive the agenda of the region via multilateral institutions and norm building. Amador noted that this architecture currently reflects an uncertainty surrounding who is or will be the dominant leader in the region in the future, given China's rise and U.S. preoccupation with both its own domestic issues and conflicts in other areas of the world. To strengthen assurance to the region, the United States should be more consistent in the foreign policy message it sends.

### **External Challenges: A U.S. Demise or China Rise**

In the event of a U.S. decline in the region, who would ASEAN countries turn to for leadership and security assurance? Amador outlined two potential scenarios if there is a major change in great power relations in Asia. In one scenario, ASEAN member states would strengthen their ties with a second primary power - China, India, or possibly the European Union. In the second scenario, a loss of U.S. primacy or the U.S. renegeing on the rebalance would lead to a potential arms race in the region to compensate for the lack of a security guarantor. In either scenario, Amador stated, it is not guaranteed that Southeast Asia will automatically side with China in the event of a U.S. decline.

Earlier this year at the China-ASEAN Expo, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed a "diamond decade" of deeper economic cooperation for the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. While economic ties with China are increasing, Amador noted that for ASEAN nations, economic and

security issues remain divorced from one another. Most countries look to China as a main economic partner and to the United States as a main security partner. Citing the Scarborough Shoal incident between China and the Philippines, Amador stated there is fear that China may flex its economic muscle in order to achieve political goals, particularly concerning territorial claims in the South China Sea.

### **Internal Challenges: Strengthening the Secretariat and United Front**

In addition to outside pressure from a rising China, ASEAN faces a number of internal issues that challenge ASEAN's relevance. In Southeast Asia, the "alphabet soup" of multilateral and bilateral agreements and institutions challenge and undermine the unity of ASEAN member states. In order to strengthen ASEAN's strategic role, Amador emphasized the need to strengthen the ASEAN secretariat. Currently, the secretariat has very little ability to compel states to follow ASEAN's policies. The inability to establish benchmarks and enforce policy is seen as a major institutional weakness.

Moreover, ASEAN's strategic role is challenged by member states that have varying national priorities that do not always follow ASEAN's strategic interests. For example, countries in the Western part of the ASEAN bloc do not take maritime disputes in the South China Sea as seriously as those member states that are more directly affected by the issues. Amador added that members engaging in bilateral defense relations with external countries also challenge ASEAN's

"united front." These new strategic partnerships, such as defense agreements between Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia, reflect a level of uncertainty and anxiety among ASEAN countries about their security. In order for ASEAN to remain relevant, it needs to avoid sending divided or mixed messages, which show weakness within the institution, and instead send coherent, unified messages supported by all members. This is a challenge that is certain to be tested in the face of emerging economic integration discussions.

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### **Future Challenge: TPP vs. RCEP**

An emerging issue concerning the U.S. rebalance is whether the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will gain traction in Southeast Asia. The two proposals involve different sets of countries and take different approaches.

The TPP, championed by the United States, excludes China and aims to be highly preferential. On the other hand, the RCEP, led by ASEAN, includes China and requires a lower barrier to entry. In broader terms, observers have noted that the TPP and RCEP may represent a new point of conflict between the United States and China, with each attempting to shape economic groupings in Southeast Asia that prove beneficial to their economic interests, which ultimately in turn carries political and strategic implications. In the midst of this tug-of-war, ASEAN members have expressed divided views on which economic integration concept to support. ASEAN will need to carefully navigate between the TPP and RCEP if it wants to maintain clout as the region's driving economic force.

### **Conclusion: ASEAN's Future**

The U.S. rebalance to Asia combined with China's continuing rise serve as reminders that ASEAN's future will not be easy. In order for ASEAN to "succeed" and truly serve as a driver of integration, many argue that ASEAN needs to be driven from below by economic integration, rather than from above via ASEAN as an institution. This bottom-up approach allows for integration at the individual -rather than ministerial- level, bringing participants closer to a broader ASEAN 'identity'. However, what the ASEAN identity is or should be has yet to be clearly defined. In addition to the range of internal challenges that ASEAN needs to address, ASEAN will also need to carefully assert its interests in the wake of a growing U.S.-China rivalry. By carefully balancing between the two great powers and addressing its internal weaknesses, particularly the Secretariat's lack of enforcement capabilities, ASEAN can take steps to ensure that its role as a driver of regionalism continues.

*By Winnie Nham, Research Manager, Rising Powers Initiative, Sigur Center for Asian Studies*

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