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EAF: Challenging ASEAN: The American Pivot in Southeast Asia

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Author: Donald K. Emmerson, Stanford University

As much as China is front and centre for the United States and Asia, the American pivot is not all about the dragon. It is also very much about the 10 member states of ASEAN.

In its vaguest sense, the pivot is a turn toward Asia writ large. But it is particularly in Southeast Asia that the pivot’s three themes — security, economy and democracy — are most evident.

The accent on security was already clear in the concern for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea expressed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010. In November 2011 President Barack Obama stopped in Darwin to announce that 2500 US marines would eventually be stationed there. And in June 2012 Singapore agreed to host in rotation as many as four US combat ships.

One might have thought that on a spectrum of ASEAN states from the most to the least deferential toward China, reactions would have run from jeers to cheers. They did not. No government was willing to denounce the pivot and jeopardise the chance of somehow benefiting from it. The shift in Washington’s attention from Afghanistan to ASEAN could easily be seen by Southeast Asian policy makers as a way to slow, if not reduce, their own increasing exposure to Beijing’s strength.

At the same time, the pivot’s association with security unbalanced the policy itself; assertions of American military power overshadowed the pivot’s economic rationale. This imbalance of security over economy tended to legitimate a division of labour that from an American viewpoint could only seem invidious. By enlarging its profile in the western Pacific, the US Navy would even more thoroughly underwrite the maritime security that ASEAN economies needed to continue profiting from Chinese trade and investment. The pivot



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appeared to reinforce a formula that, crudely put, ran thus: Americans would make the peace; Asians would make the money. Accordingly, if the actual purpose of Obama’s pivot could be summarised in a single word, that word is inclusion, in terms of both security and economy.

Any inclination to portray the pivot as a purely military ploy is unfair. Obama travelled to Darwin and Bali in November 2011 from Honolulu. In Hawaii he hosted the annual APEC forum, where he claimed progress in ongoing talks for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). In July 2012 in Cambodia, Secretary Clinton co-hosted the first US–ASEAN Business Forum, and the US–ASEAN Expanded Economic Engagement Initiative was launched in November 2012.

On the pivot’s economic dimension, ASEAN has developed an independent stance between the United States and China, albeit one that leans modestly in the latter’s direction. But ASEAN is divided. Of its member states, only Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam were among the 11 governments negotiating the US-backed TPP in Auckland in December 2012.

Meanwhile, at its summit in Phnom Penh a month before, ASEAN could have pleased China by supporting Beijing’s preferred vehicle for regional economic cooperation, ASEAN+3, which necessarily excludes the United States while limiting the non-ASEAN checks on Chinese influence to Japan and South Korea. ASEAN agreed instead to launch negotiations toward a new entity: a 16-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that would augment the ASEAN+3 grouping by adding three more potential restraints on China — Australia, India and New Zealand. The economic rationale for including these six non-ASEAN states was that they already have FTAs with ASEAN. But five of the six, all but China, are democracies oriented more or less toward the West. The potentially China-balancing value of that distribution was not lost on those who proposed RCEP as a superior alternative to ASEAN+3.

The result is a benign race between two vastly different models of economic integration: the non-American, loosely declarative RCEP that subsumes existing arrangements, versus the American-promoted, intrusively ‘gold-standard’ TPP that requires domestic reform.

Democracy distinguishes the pivot least. As a policy priority in Washington, spreading democracy in Asia has been upstaged by security and economic concerns, including China’s naval moves and America’s



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fiscal woes. Meanwhile in Southeast Asia, with few exceptions, turning a blind eye remains the ‘ASEAN Way’ of dealing with the domestic political failings of the association’s members.

The United States did quickly move to support the dramatic political opening of Myanmar. But even in that democratising narrative, security and economics loomed large. President Thein Sein’s own reasons to promote reform reflected less a conversion to liberal ideology than a nationalistic wish to reduce the country’s overdependence on China on the one hand, and a desire to catch up with the economies of the modern world on the other. While celebrating the democratic consequences, Washington treated these motivations as opportunities for strategic access.

Since its birth during the Cold War, ASEAN has occupied a political space that external events have successively renewed by undermining the plausibility of big-power control: the bloody chastening of American ambition in Vietnam, the turn toward pragmatism in post-Mao China, the Soviet Union’s self-shrinkage into Russia and irrelevance, and the strategic reticence and economic stagnation of Japan.

Viewed from Southeast Asia, the times have now changed in at least two ways. First, China’s spectacular material ascent and now military assertion appear to have emboldened its current leaders. Second, to the extent that the American pivot is a response to this challenge, it appears to open an ambiguous future. If Sino–American rivalry escalates, ASEAN’s members could split into China-deferring and China-defying camps, ruining the group’s ability to lead. In contrast, a peaceful balancing of power between Beijing and Washington could refurbish space for ASEAN to operate independently between the two.

But what ASEAN has until now been unprepared to face is the need to rebalance the ASEAN Way by making it somewhat less consensual and correspondingly more effective.

On security, ASEAN’s habit of catering to the lowest common denominator undercuts its ability to deal with Chinese intimidation. That encourages ASEAN members to rely on the American pivot as leverage against Beijing. But that reliance may overestimate the willingness of Washington to become involved, leaving ASEAN worse off. Or, if the United States does confront China, escalation could badly



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damage both Southeast Asian security and ASEAN’s reputation for maintaining it.

These challenges hardly augur the end of ASEAN. But the group’s centrality on matters of security and its creativity on economic questions are being tested in two very different ways: by Beijing’s strategy of assertion in the South China Sea, and by the pressure for inclusion represented by Washington’s pivot toward Southeast Asia. The results are not yet known. For now, however, the case for optimism is, and is likely to remain, distinctly weaker on regional security than it is for the region’s economy.

Donald K. Emmerson heads the Southeast Asia Forum in the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University. A longer version of this essay is being published in Global Asia.