

ASEAN, Multilateralism, and the Future of US Diplomacy in Asia

David L. Carden

United States Ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Nearly three years ago, President Obama met with his ten counterparts at the first US-ASEAN Leaders Meeting, ushering in a renewed US focus on Southeast Asia. Since that important milestone, the United States has moved rapidly to demonstrate the breadth of our commitment to playing an active and supportive role in the region. We have nourished longstanding alliances and strategic partnerships, opened new pathways for cooperation with emerging regional powers, and advanced a respectful and calibrated approach to improving previously problematic relationships.

As part of this effort, the United States has put in place an infrastructure to support our greater emphasis on multilateral diplomacy in the region, including joining the East Asia Summit, regularizing our high-level engagements with ASEAN, and reorganizing bureaucratically to place higher priority and focus on our multilateral agenda. The US Mission to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has played a key role in this regard. ASEAN-centric regional forums offer the United States opportunities to articulate our values and interests as part of an ongoing conversation among countries deliberating upon a broad range of issues. For this reason, I believe our experience working with ASEAN may offer a glimpse of where US diplomacy is headed in the 21st century, as the United States continues to advocate for our vision of a transparent, open, and rules-based global system.

Multilateralism is one answer to the very relevant question of how the United States can honor its undiminished international commitments while at the same time pursuing its national imperatives and facilitating the empowerment of other global stakeholders. As the century progresses, it already is becoming clear that US national interests are bound tightly to the preservation and fortification of the rules-based international system for which we are still a guarantor. The challenge then is to promote the adoption, or at least adaptation, of these rules and practices by the broadest possible set of newly influential actors.

The results of our multilateral reengagement in Southeast Asia have been profound. Broad-based and deepening cooperation with Southeast Asia is recognized as a key component of the United States' "rebalancing" to the Asia Pacific. This should surprise no one. The region is home to nearly 600 million people, dynamic and fast growing economies, a wealth of natural resources, and a strategic location at the crossroads of broader Asia. For reasons geographic, demographic, and political, Southeast Asia also confronts a host of challenges that do not lend themselves to neat classification as either strategic or economic in nature. Such challenges sit at the intersections of sovereignty and resource

exploration, migration and economic opportunity, environmental protection and resiliency, disaster preparedness and responsiveness, trade liberalization and food security.

US interests in Southeast Asia are clear. But what about the case for our engagement with ASEAN? In 1967, ASEAN began its existence as a loose confederation of nations, many of them recently freed from the yoke of the colonial era, who banded together to preserve the region from the threat of insurgency and the heavy-handed influence of external powers. Since then, ASEAN has expanded and evolved through the decades. The ASEAN Charter, enacted in 2008, represents an eloquent elaboration of its ambitious community vision.

As ASEAN has pursued its internal integration goals, it has created several related venues that provide its members with platforms to affect developments in the wider community of nations. These venues include two organizations to which the United States belongs: the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which was formed in 1994 as a forum for dialogue and confidence-building on political and security issues; and the East Asia Summit, which was formed in 2005 and has the potential to evolve into the Asia Pacific's preeminent forum to address the critical strategic issues facing the region.

Through all of its changes, ASEAN's ethos has remained remarkably consistent: promoting regional empowerment and self determination, enhancing cooperation while respecting national differences, and problem solving through consultation. Over the years the organization has come under criticism both from within and without as a "talk shop." But the same charge might be leveled at any multilateral grouping, or even at multilateral diplomacy as a whole. As one of a relatively small number of US multilateral ambassadors, I understand the frustrations that accrue from trying to forge common interests from national imperatives, conflicting personalities, and historical enmities. Multilateral diplomacy is not easy. But it necessarily will be an ever more important aspect of our national security.

A primary function of multilateral organizations such as ASEAN is to define a common set of rules and practices that rise above the parochial interests of their members. This process may have either positive or negative motivations: to create an agreed platform for expanding cooperation and broadening collective interests, or to prevent individual states from acting in a way that harms collective interests.

Interactions with regional multilateral organizations such as ASEAN provide the United States an opportunity to share our own experience in advocating for rules to inform the choices of our partners. Equally important, our engagement with ASEAN and related multilateral fora enable the United States to exert leadership through consultation and persuasion, as we are forced to negotiate with a collective identity, distinct individual national interests, and shifting coalitions formed around particular policy themes such as human rights, trade liberalization, or nonproliferation. On a diplomatic field that includes more players, more talent, and higher stakes, the United States will need as many teammates as possible to define or reinforce the rules of the game.

The types of issues multilateral organizations such as ASEAN grapple with are those borderless problems that will factor more prominently in US national security calculations as the process of globalization evolves. No single nation on its own can effectively solve transborder security problems such as terrorism, pandemic disease, environmental degradation, and human trafficking. Multilateral organizations are premised on the notion that one nation's security is dependent to some extent on the security of its neighbors. Likewise, multilateral meetings force into the light actions by members that could do harm to the security of those neighbors. There are fewer places to hide in a multilateral setting. That relatively greater transparency provides the right atmosphere for the difficult negotiations required to meet future security challenges at both the regional and global levels.

The opportunities and challenges in Southeast Asia and with ASEAN are great. In the prevailing global system, our future is linked to our success in helping build resilient institutions, such as ASEAN, to assist the people of Southeast Asia advance their vision of a stable, peaceful, prosperous and democratic region. Our support for ASEAN community-building aims to put this notion into practice. At the same time, we are reinforcing a vision of the world that ASEAN enshrined in its own Charter: a common destiny and desire to live in lasting peace, security, and prosperity.