

A message from South-east Asia to the US



Asean leaders attending a plenary session with US President Joe Biden during the US-Asean Special Summit in Washington in May 2022. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO



Coast guard vessels of the Philippines, United States and Japan are pictured side by side off the coast of Bataan province in the South China Sea during trilateral drills held in the Philippines from June 1 to 7. The US military is indeed welcomed by the countries of the region, where the US has helped to maintain a balance of power, say the writers. PHOTO: PHILIPPINE COAST GUARD

Deal with the region on its own merit and not through the prism of US-China rivalry.

Tommy Koh and Daljit Singh

What is the state of America's ties with South-east Asia? Can anything be improved on? An important assessment of that came earlier this month from a bipartisan group of US experts tasked to look at US-China relations.

The report, *Prioritising South-east Asia in American China Policy*, sets out why the region is critically important but under-appreciated when it comes to US interests and US competition with China. It offers a set of policy recommendations for the United States government.

The Task Force on US-China Policy, co-chaired by academics Orville Schell and Susan Shirk, includes former government officials, scholars and think-tank researchers.

We hope that the report by the task force's working group on South-east Asia will be studied and given serious consideration by policymakers in the Biden administration, in the Republican Party and in Congress.

It raises important points about the US-South-east Asia relationship, key aspects of which we would like to highlight here:

US SECURITY AND ECONOMIC ROLES

The regional experts are of the

view that the US security role is its most important asset. The US military is indeed welcomed by the countries of the region, and there are good ties between the US military and the defence ministries of the region. The US has helped to maintain a balance of power in the region.

The region also appreciates the economic role of the US. The US has more investment in the region than China, Japan and South Korea combined. There are 6,200 US companies operating in the Asean countries. The US should do more in areas in which it enjoys a comparative advantage, such as financial services, information and communication technology, medicine and biotechnology, e-commerce, green economy, cyber security and the entertainment industry.

It is a great pity that then President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017, derailing what would have become the world's largest free trade deal while also advancing US strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific.

In May 2022, the Biden administration launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), in an apparent response to criticism that the US strategy towards Asia was "all guns and no butter". Over a dozen Asian countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea and Australia, have signed on to the economic agreement.

While the IPEF is relevant and forward-looking with its focus on

improving supply chains, expanding clean energy and advancing digital trade, it falls short of a free trade agreement (FTA), which would give access to the US market.

We agree with the task force's recommendation that the US should consider negotiating an FTA with Asean. An FTA would not only give Asean access to the US market, it would also give the US access to the Asean market. Asean has already concluded FTAs with many countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India.

US SOFT POWER

South-east Asians used to admire US soft power. We admired the American political system and the smooth transition of power between presidents. We used to admire the fact that political leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties were able to work together for the national interest. We used to admire the fact that the US stood for free trade and open economies. We admired the fact that the US championed the rule of law.

But US soft power has suffered a serious blow since the advent of Trump. He was a president who refused to accept the outcome of a presidential election. The US political system is in disarray. The US has turned its back on free trade and globalisation. For these reasons, there is less admiration for the US from South-east Asians now than in the past.

However, the US still enjoys a reservoir of goodwill in the region. The US is not doing

enough in its public diplomacy. Most people in the region are not aware of America's contributions to the region.

Another way of building soft power is through education. America is the world's No. 1 education power. American universities, research institutions and think-tanks are among the best in the world. There are many

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more South-east Asian leaders who were educated in the US than in China or elsewhere. The US government should continue to welcome talented students from South-east Asia to study in America.

The returned students comprise a constituency of friends of America.

CHINA

The message from South-east Asia to America is that China is not our enemy or our adversary. We regard China as our friend and partner, and we do not wish to join any coalition against China.

To be sure, we have some problems with China, for example, in the South China Sea, in the Mekong River and in China's propensity to use trade and tourism as political weapons against countries which defy its wishes, as seen in its actions against South Korea and the Philippines. However, on balance, the positive aspects of our relationship with China outweigh the negative aspects.

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BE SERIOUS ABOUT ASEAN

Americans need to understand that the countries and people of South-east Asia have a deep commitment to our regional organisation, Asean. It has helped to keep the peace in our region. It has spurred economic growth and economic integration. It has brought 10 disparate countries to form a community. It has brought all the countries that have a stake in South-east Asia to sit at the same table and iron out their differences peacefully.

We want America to take Asean more seriously and not to pay lip service to supporting Asean unity and Asean centrality. We would like to see some US initiatives to engage Asean as a group, and not only with some of its members.

US POLICY ON THE MIDDLE EAST

The ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore carries out an annual survey of the opinion of the elites in the 10 Asean member states. When told to choose between the US and China, 61 per cent chose the US and 39 per cent chose China. However, the people in the three Muslim-majority countries, Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia, chose China over the US. Why?

They did that because of their anger with Israel's policies towards the Palestinians and because they perceive the US as pursuing a one-sided policy tilted in favour of Israel. The message here is that if the US wishes to win the hearts and minds of the 240 million Muslims who live in our region, it should pursue a more even-handed policy towards Israel and the Palestinians.

US-CHINA RIVALRY: WRONG LENS

The final message from South-east Asia to America is to see the region and to deal with it on its own merit, and not through the prism of the US-China rivalry.

We are very pleased that this message has the support of the working group. In its report, the working group states:

"...South-east Asia should be seen and respected on its own merits – and not viewed solely through the prism of the Sino-American competition".

The US-China competition is taking place in all regions of the world, including South-east Asia. South-east Asia is very important to both powers. America is the largest investor in the region. We are China's largest trading partner.

We wish to be friends with both and do not wish to align with one against the other. Our request to the US is to deal with us on our own merit and not as a pawn to be used against China.

• Tommy Koh and Daljit Singh are the editors of the book *America: A Singapore Perspective*, published in 2021.