The Obama administration and the East Asia Summit: Exception, not transformation

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Introduction

The Obama administration was the first to put ASEAN at the centre of its Asia diplomacy. Gaining membership to the ASEAN-created and ASEAN-led East Asia Summit (EAS), achieved in 2011, was deemed a particularly important milestone. It is quite possible that the Obama administration may well become the only American administration to prioritise the EAS to such an extent. Up until the time of writing in early 2019, the Trump administration from 2017 reverted to a more typical US approach to Asia focused on Northeast Asia, bilateral relations and American unilateralism.

The contrast between the initial engagements of the first Obama administration in particular and those evident across the two years of the Trump administration both with ASEAN and the EAS provides strong support for the above conclusion. When Barack Obama became president in January 2009, the United States was not a member of the EAS, the most important ASEAN-led regional forum. However, his incoming administration was strongly committed to US membership. In his first year in office Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. This was the only prerequisite for an ASEAN invitation to the EAS that the United States did not fulfil in 2005, when the Summit was established.

When Donald Trump became president in January 2017, the United States was already a well-established EAS participant. However, the Trump administration's commitment to the institution, the only ASEAN-led leaders-level mechanism that includes the United States, has so far remained unclear. When Vice President Mike Pence made his first visit to Asia in April 2017, it included a brief visit to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. There, he announced that in November President Trump would attend the APEC Summit in Hanoi, as well as the fifth ASEAN-US Summit and the twelfth EAS in Manila (both scheduled to follow a few days after

APEC), as a sign of continued, if not enhanced, American commitment. Pence was the first US Vice President and the most senior US political leader ever to visit the Secretariat.

Three weeks before the November US–ASEAN Summit, however, the Trump White House indicated that he would skip the EAS which was scheduled to be the last event on his long inaugural trip to Asia. Trump did not attend the Summit and sent his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in his place instead. The Trump White House claimed that the President did attend the EAS on 14 November 2017.¹ However, this is a case of stretching, if not breaking, the diplomatic truth. President Trump only attended the lunch organised by the ASEAN chair President Duterte of the Philippines, prior to the delayed EAS plenary session itself. This working lunch also included leaders from countries and groupings not in the EAS. The official Summit group photo features a smiling Rex Tillerson; President Trump was already on his plane home.² Trump was once again absent from the Summit in November 2018, this time sending Vice President Mike Pence in his place.

These two different approaches to the EAS and their inferred, if not implied, messages about US presidential commitment to ASEAN, provided early insights into the contrasting approaches to Southeast Asia of the Obama administration of 2009–17 and the Trump administration during its first two years in Washington.

On the American side, the first Obama administration came to power with a clear strategy for enhanced US engagement in Asia, in which ASEAN and the EAS had a clear and central role which endured throughout both of Obama's terms in office. The Trump administration did not. On the ASEAN side, the EAS so far has failed to live up to the expectations of the Obama administration. It still fails to occupy a clear or leading role in the ASEAN-led regional architecture. Efforts to strengthen the institution and focus its attention on issues of primary US concern have been constrained due to disagreements over its future among ASEAN member states, and among the eight ASEAN dialogue partners currently invited to the EAS by ASEAN.

By themselves, these ASEAN-based constraints on the development and centrality of the Summit likely would have moderated any post-Obama commitment in Washington to the EAS. The contrasting approach to Southeast Asia in particular, and to diplomacy in general, of the Trump administration suggest a decline of interest from Washington. The Obama administration will likely come to represent an exceptional high-water mark in relation to US engagement with ASEAN and the EAS, and not the beginning of a sustained bipartisan period of commitment.

This chapter begins by setting out the Obama administration's reasons for a strong commitment to ASEAN and the EAS, and what they hoped they would gain from participation. The second part looks at the constraints to the development of the EAS along the lines desired by the Obama administration. The third section looks at the differences in engagement with ASEAN and the EAS in the

first two years of the Trump administration, and why they suggest that the Obama years should be considered exceptional rather than transformative when it comes to US engagement with ASEAN.

The ASEAN Rebalance

In 2009, the Obama administration came into office with the outlines of a new strategy for American engagement in Asia that were quickly acted upon. This new strategy, labelled the “Pivot” then the “Rebalance” to Asia, had one major political goal and one major strategic goal. The political goal was to sharply, at least rhetorically, differentiate the new Democratic Obama administration from the prior Republican George W. Bush administration of 2001–09. The widespread criticism of the Bush government and its approach to Asia from US Asia watchers (and from many in Asia as well) made such a differentiation both more important and more beneficial. Many ASEAN and Southeast Asian officials were particularly critical of the Bush administration for its lack of adequate commitment to ASEAN. In 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the only ASEAN-led wider regional grouping that included the United States, becoming the first Secretary of State to do so since its formation in 1994.³ In 2007, Rice again chose to not attend the Forum, despite the storm of protest her 2005 absence had fomented.

The grand strategic goal of Obama’s Rebalance was to maintain the United States’ leading position in East Asia in the face of growing Chinese power, wealth and assertion. This reassurance effort aimed to assuage concerns from worried Asian allies and partners about the willingness and capability of Washington to maintain its traditionally hegemonic position in East Asia in ways they supported.

The diplomatic pillar of the Rebalance was the only one which brought a marked contrast between the Obama administration and that of George W. Bush. Southeast Asia was the geographical focus of this differentiation and ASEAN the institutional one. The list of diplomatic firsts for the United States in relation to ASEAN under the Obama administration is impressive, both in number and as a cumulative sign of sustained commitment:

- In February 2009 (less than a month after taking office), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton became the first person in her role to visit the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta.
- On that same trip, Secretary Clinton expressed for the first time official US plans to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.
- On 22 July 2009, in Thailand, the United States signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, becoming the fifteenth non-ASEAN member and the eighth ASEAN dialogue partner to do so.

- In November 2009, the first US–ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was held in Singapore.
- In October 2010, Secretary of State Clinton became the first US senior official invited (as a guest of the host, Vietnam) to the lunch before the EAS.
- In October 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates attended the inaugural ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+). The sitting Secretary of Defense has attended every ADMM+ Meeting since.
- In September 2010, the United States became the first ASEAN dialogue partner to appoint a resident ambassador to ASEAN. Ambassador David Carden presented his credentials to the ASEAN Secretary-General on 26 April 2011. Now, all ten ASEAN dialogue partners have appointed resident ambassadors to ASEAN.
- In November 2011, Obama became the first US president to attend the EAS. He only missed one Summit gathering in 2013 due to a domestic government shutdown. Secretary of State John Kelly represented the United States that year.
- In 2012, Obama became the first US president to visit Cambodia. He went to Phnom Penh to attend the EAS and the US–ASEAN Leaders' Meeting.
- In 2013, the annual US–ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was elevated to an annual US–ASEAN Leaders' Summit.
- In 2015, the US–ASEAN relationship was elevated to a Strategic Partnership.
- In February 2016, Obama hosted the first US–ASEAN Leaders' Summit to be held in the United States at Sunnylands, California.
- In September 2016, Obama became the first US president to visit Laos. He went to Vientiane to attend the EAS and ASEAN–US Leaders' Summit.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's November 2011 *Foreign Policy* article entitled 'America's Pacific Century' provides an extensive elaboration of the Asia Rebalance policy. After listing planned enhancements in all the key bilateral relations in the region, Clinton states that:

Even as we strengthen these bilateral relationships, we have emphasized the importance of multilateral cooperation, for we believe that addressing complex transnational challenges of the sort now faced by Asia requires a set of institutions capable of mustering collective action. And a more robust and coherent regional architecture in Asia would reinforce the system of rules and responsibilities, from protecting intellectual property to ensuring freedom of navigation, that form the basis of an effective international order.⁴

ASEAN and greater US engagement with ASEAN is deemed critical to this 'more robust and coherent regional architecture', with Clinton justifying the intended focus on the regional grouping:

That is why President Obama will participate in the East Asia Summit for the first time in November. To pave the way, the United States has opened a new US Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta and signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN. Our focus on developing a more results-oriented agenda has been instrumental in efforts to address disputes in the South China Sea ... [o]ver the past year, we have made strides in protecting our vital interests in stability and freedom of navigation and have paved the way for sustained multilateral diplomacy among the many parties with claims in the South China Sea, seeking to ensure disputes are settled peacefully and in accordance with established principles of international law.⁵

The Obama White House repeated the same themes and hopes for the EAS. Its 'Fact Sheet on Unprecedented US-ASEAN Relations', released in February 2016, states:

In 2009, the United States became a party to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia – the bedrock diplomatic document of ASEAN – opening the door for the United States to join the East Asia Summit (EAS). President Obama participated in the EAS for the first time in 2011 and has attended three of the four Summits since. With strong U.S. support, the EAS has become the Asia Pacific's premier leaders-level forum on political and security issues, helping to advance a rules-based order and spur cooperation on pressing challenges, including maritime security, countering violent extremism, and transnational cyber cooperation.⁶

This presidential support for a strong, more 'results-oriented' EAS focused on security issues also featured in Washington's bilateral diplomacy in Asia throughout the duration of the Obama administration. A US–Japan joint statement from 2014 stated that 'the two countries view the East Asia Summit as the premier political and security forum in the region.'⁷ A joint statement from the United States and India in 2015 went further, asserting that 'we commit to strengthening the East Asia Summit ... to promote regional dialogue on key political and security issues, and to work harder to strengthen it'.⁸

The Obama administration's interest and subsequent commitment to the EAS and the ADMM+ process went beyond simply joining and showing up. The ADMM+ process was established in 2010 as a wider regional extension of the ASEAN Defence Ministers (ADMM) process. The ADMM was founded in 2006 as 'the highest ministerial defence and security consultative and cooperative mechanism among ASEAN defence establishments'.⁹ The ADMM+ process brings together the ministers of defence of ASEAN member states with those of the eight dialogue partners also invited to the EAS. The United States under Obama, along

with Japan and Australia, saw closer engagement with ASEAN and membership in the EAS and the ADMM+ process as a means to strengthen regional security cooperation.

These shared ASEAN interests among the United States and its two most important Asia Pacific allies manifested themselves in three key institutional preferences. The first was to bolster the ADMM+ process which, when it was announced in 2010, was to meet only once every three years. Washington, Tokyo and Canberra supported more frequent meetings, and in 2013 it was decided that the ADMM+ process would meet every two years. In 2017, it was decided that the ADMM+ should henceforth become an annual event.

The second institutional preference was for the EAS to focus predominantly on political and security issues, including contentious ones like the maritime rights disputes in the South China Sea. APEC, along with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), was seen as the key regional forum for economic diplomacy. This second preference has had more mixed results. The founding document for the EAS, *The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit*, released after the inaugural meeting in December 2005, states that 'we have established the East Asia Summit as a forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia'.¹⁰ The identification of EAS priority areas, as well as the contents of the Chairman Statements released at the end of each annual Summit meeting, have stayed true to this broad, inclusive beginning.

By the end of Obama's first term in office in 2013, six priority cooperation areas had been agreed to for the EAS: energy; education; finance; global health including pandemics; environment and disaster management; and ASEAN connectivity. This list is far from being perfectly aligned with the notion of the Summit as that 'premier political and security forum in the region'.¹¹ The first components overlap significantly with the agenda of APEC as the Asia Pacific's primary forum for the promotion of economic cooperation and free trade. The final component is focused on public infrastructure development in Southeast Asia, where Japan and China have long represented the major external partners. The breadth and diversity of these priority areas, as well as the lack of a traditional security focus, reflects how the EAS is an ASEAN-led consensus-based body. As such, it always had a limited ability to fulfil the Obama administration's stated goal to 'advance a rules-based order and spur cooperation on pressing challenges, including maritime security, countering violent extremism, and transnational cyber cooperation'.¹²

The third preference also led to mixed and uncertain results. Under the Obama administration, Washington wanted ASEAN-led forums which accommodated the United States to focus on maritime security. In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used her presence at the ARF to repeat, to the great chagrin of Beijing, the US national interest in the South China Sea disputes.¹³ In 2015, ASEAN's Malaysian Chair announced plans for an ADMM+ joint statement, which came

to nothing from a Chinese insistence that no mention be made of the South China Sea disputes.¹⁴ The US goal for the EAS was to have maritime security identified as one of the priority areas of cooperation. The 2015 EAS Statement on Enhancing Regional Maritime Cooperation noted that ‘maritime cooperation has increasingly featured in East Asia Summit discussions, its inclusion as a priority area of cooperation merits further consideration’.¹⁵ In 2017, “maritime cooperation” – a softer and broader term than “security” – was added as a ‘new area of cooperation’.¹⁶

EAS constraints

There are three main constraints to the EAS achieving the United States’ goal – at least as it was outlined under the Obama administration – of becoming the foremost political and security forum in the region,¹⁷ and in particular to becoming equipped to exert a positive influence on maritime security challenges like those found in the territorial disputes of the South China Sea. These three constraints cannot be moderated by the United States and are behind the relatively limited achievements of the Obama administration in relation to the Summit addressed already.

The first is that the EAS, even after the United States and Russia were invited to join in 2011, is not the most important and best attended leaders’ meeting in the region. The APEC Leaders’ Meeting (an annual event initiated by the Clinton administration in 1993) includes both the Chinese and Russian Presidents. The EAS, despite claims of ASEAN centrality, makes do with the Chinese premier and either the Russian prime minister or foreign affairs minister. Xi Jinping has never attended the EAS. With the personalisation of political power in the hands of both Putin and Xi, their continued absence from the EAS is a growing problem. This problem is only partly offset by the participation of the current Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, and the leaders of Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. The Summit may have a more suitable collection of participating states to discuss political and security issues in the Indo-Pacific than APEC, but it does not have a more suitable collection of state leaders at the table.

Second, the EAS is an ASEAN-led and ASEAN-controlled grouping. ASEAN member states determined the criteria by which non-ASEAN states are invited to the Summit, as exemplified by the United States’ absence from 2005 to 2010. The United States is invited to the EAS along with the other seven non-ASEAN participants in their capacities as dialogue partners. The prerequisite of signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation for EAS participation is the clearest example of this institutional power imbalance.

ASEAN’s agenda-setting predominance in the EAS, along with its commitment to using the Summit to support ASEAN initiatives, is clearly reflected in the 2011 Chairman’s Statement. This statement reiterates that ASEAN should ‘remain as the

driving force working in partnership with the other participants of the East Asia Summit'. In 2011, ASEAN connectivity – a major focus of Indonesia's chairmanship of the institution that year – was adopted 'as an additional area of cooperation in the EAS, together with the existing five priority areas of cooperation'.¹⁸ ASEAN connectivity is of direct interest to all ASEAN member states, but certainly not all EAS participants.

ASEAN's status as the EAS' foundation and driving force means that any change in the Summit's focus or function requires prior ASEAN agreement. In 2015, on its tenth anniversary, Malaysia as Chair launched a review of the EAS with the idea of strengthening its institutional basis within ASEAN, clarifying the Summit's position within the growing suite of ASEAN-led and controlled regional institutions involving dialogue partners, and reviewing the EAS' increasingly diffuse agenda. With Malaysia as a claimant state in the South China Sea and a strong supporter of ASEAN centrality, hopes were raised that the Summit may move in the direction desired by the Obama administration. A Malaysian "non-paper" on EAS reform was circulated to members.

However, no consensus among ASEAN member states was reached, no major EAS reforms were introduced, and the issue of Summit reform was not an ASEAN Chair priority in 2016, 2017 or 2018. Issues of particular debate within ASEAN in relation to the EAS include whether Canada and the European Union, as the two ASEAN dialogue partners not included as participants, should be asked to join (as the two have in fact requested), and whether the Summit should remain a broadly-based functional body or a more narrowly-focused strategic one.

ASEAN's strong commitment to maintaining its driving force status in the EAS means that Southeast Asian states do not welcome dialogue partner suggestions on how the Summit might be reformed or become more "results-oriented" as the Obama administration in particular suggested. In 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave the keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Abe proposed the creation of 'a permanent committee comprised of permanent representatives to ASEAN ... and then prepare a road map to bring renewed vitality to the Summit itself, while also making the Summit along with the ARF and the ADMM+ function in a multi-layered fashion'.¹⁹ These ideas are very much in line with the Obama administrations' EAS goals. While there is now an ad hoc committee of representatives to ASEAN in Jakarta, there is still no roadmap for renewed vitality and better coordination among ASEAN-led institutions.

The third EAS constraint is its nature as an inclusive, consensus-based body reflecting the so-called ASEAN Way in a broader ASEAN-led institutional context. In reality, this means that even if ASEAN consensus can be reached on reforming the EAS, consensus among the dialogue partners invited to the Summit also is required. Not surprisingly, China's interests in the EAS are not the same as those of the United States, Japan or Australia. China prefers a functionally-focused institution with a broad mandate, rather than a strategic and political forum

focused on maritime security issues. China's stance in the ADMM+ process on the South China Sea, which led to the failed joint statement in 2015, is consistent with Beijing's approach to the Summit. China also has close and asymmetric diplomatic relations with some ASEAN member states that influence their positions on issues of concern to China, like the South China Sea maritime rights disputes and the nature and focus of the EAS. The broad scope of the Summit's priority areas and their focus on economic and non-traditional security issues suited China's interests within the institution better than those of the Obama administrations.

The contrast between US and ASEAN diplomacy towards the 2016 ruling against China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, from the case filed by the Philippines under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, revealed the significant disconnect between the two parties on this core maritime security issue. The unanimous ruling, which Beijing rejected (and still rejects), deemed that China had interfered with the Philippines' sovereign rights in the area and invalidated its own regional nine-dash line claims. Washington coordinated with Canberra and Tokyo, with each issuing statements in support of the decision. Facing pressure from Beijing, ASEAN statements have remained silent on the landmark ruling. In the end, Washington's alliance system in East Asia proved more useful than ASEAN and the EAS for this issue.

The Trump administration

One of President Trump's first executive actions in January 2017 was to withdraw the United States from the TPP. This gave a clear and early indication that Washington's policy to Asia under Trump would at least in part bring a break from the Obama era. Yet no overarching blueprint for American policy in Asia was offered until October 2017, when Secretary of State Tillerson announced the new 'free and open Indo-Pacific' framework in a speech in Washington, DC on US-India relations. The lack of clarity over what this concept means in policy terms, and the absence of nominees and appointments to key Asia positions in the administration, made it difficult up until the time of writing in early 2019 to divine a clear approach to Asia by the Trump administration. At this time the most senior appointment in the US Mission to ASEAN for example was a *Chargé d'affaires* appointed during Obama's term in office. There were similarly no full US ambassadors to Thailand or Singapore, with the posts being vacant since January 2017, and despite the latter being Washington's most important economic, diplomatic and security partner in Southeast Asia. Australia only received a US ambassador in March 2019.

The first three months of the Trump administration aggravated Southeast Asian and ASEAN concerns about reduced US commitment. According to White House public records, neither the ASEAN Secretary-General nor any Southeast

Asian leader were among either the first fifty telephone calls or fifteen meetings between President Trump and foreign leaders.²⁰ From April 2017 onwards, however, the Trump administration began paying more attention to Southeast Asia. Vice President Pence's one-day visit to Jakarta and to the ASEAN Secretariat on 20 April that year, along with Secretary of State Tillerson's meeting with the foreign ministers of the ten ASEAN members in Washington, DC on 4 May, helped assuage Southeast Asian fears of abandonment. Tillerson attended the ARF and the EAS Ministerial Meeting in early August 2017 in the Philippines. On the sidelines, the foreign ministers of the United States, Australia and Japan held the first Trilateral Strategic Dialogue since Donald Trump took office. The joint statement issued after this gathering addressed one ASEAN-related maritime security issue in particular:

The ministers urged ASEAN member states and China to fully and effectively implement the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). The ministers acknowledged the announced consensus on a framework for the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea (COC). The ministers further urged ASEAN member states and China to ensure that the COC be finalized in a timely manner, and that it be legally binding, meaningful, effective, and consistent with international law.²¹

Secretary of Defense James Mattis attended the ADMM+ meeting in the Philippines in late October 2017, where he proposed a US–ASEAN maritime exercise that would be the first of its kind.²² (The first China–ASEAN maritime exercise took place in October 2018.²³) At the 2017 EAS meeting which President Trump missed, a Leaders' Statement on chemical weapons (not a major issue in Southeast Asia) co-sponsored by the United States and Singapore was issued.²⁴ The Joint Statement released for the fifth ASEAN–US Summit is a boilerplate document with no new initiatives announced.²⁵

The degree of American commitment to ASEAN and ASEAN-led processes across the first two years of the Trump administration suggests no precipitate drop-off in American engagement with the key institutions of Southeast Asia in the post-Obama era, notwithstanding the personal absence of President Trump from the East Asia Summits of both 2017 and 2018. In both these years Washington officials attended the expected meetings, proposed new initiatives, and coordinated with close partners including Japan and Australia on ASEAN-related issues. Maritime security in general, and the maritime rights disputes in the South China Sea in particular, remain a focus of US engagement with ASEAN as well.

Yet, the overall approach of the Trump administration to foreign policy, the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' framework for US Asia policy, and the priority issue of US engagement with Southeast Asia since 2017, collectively suggest a very different Asia policy than that of the Obama administrations' Rebalance in which ASEAN and the EAS have come to occupy a less clear and central role.

Recent developments in the US administration's emerging approach to foreign policy appear to run counter to closer engagement with ASEAN and the EAS. President Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the TPP and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, along with his criticisms of NATO, are indicative of his defensive, "America First" view of multilateral institutions. (The same can be said of his last-minute withdrawal from participating in the Summit of the Americas sponsored by the Organization of American States, as Trump is the first US president to have done so.) As discussed above, the United States, as an invited ASEAN dialogue partner, is far from first among equals in the ASEAN-led EAS.

The 2017 US National Security Strategy adopts a much stronger and hawkish view of the challenge posed by China and Russia to global and regional American leadership, security and prosperity. In it, the Trump administration contends that 'we will compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected'.²⁶ As the EAS is a consensus-based body that includes both Russia and China as invited ASEAN dialogue partners, the United States cannot lead the Summit and attempts by Washington to compete with Beijing and Moscow inside it would paralyse the institution. American attempts to "compete and lead" in the Summit would also be counterproductive to engagement with ASEAN; member states have long guarded against their institution becoming a platform for extra-regional major power rivalry and against having to choose between the United States and China. If the Trump administration tries to "compete and lead" in the EAS, it will aggravate both of these existential fears.

Rex Tillerson's October 2017 speech at CSIS is seen as the most extensive explanation by a senior US official of the new 'free and open Indo-Pacific' framework for US Asia policy under the Trump administration.²⁷ This speech, entitled *Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century*, in fact makes no mention of ASEAN or the EAS. At the APEC CEO Summit in Vietnam in November 2017, President Trump gave his first speech on this new framework. He again made no mention of ASEAN or the EAS.²⁸ The most developed policy coordination mechanisms for this new regional framework are the revived quadrilateral meetings between the United States, Japan, India and Australia and the existing trilateral arrangements between the United States, Japan and Australia, and the United States, Japan and India. No Southeast Asian state is included in these minilateral mechanisms that are in many ways the institutional opposite to ASEAN-led institutions. Brad Glosserman is correct that, 'while there are repeated references to an "Indo-Pacific strategy", there is little more than a set of ideas and nostrums'.²⁹ These ideas and nostrums will also be very difficult to integrate with the existing suite of inclusive ASEAN-led institutions and the concept of ASEAN centrality.

Across the first two years of the Trump administration, the nuclear and missile threat emanating from North Korea, along with Washington's trade disputes with China, topped the US policy agenda in the Asia Pacific. The Trump administration

chose to adopt a “maximum pressure” approach against Pyongyang to try to change its threatening behaviour. Gaining active ASEAN support for this strategy was an aim of American officials with Southeast Asian counterparts at meetings in both 2017 and 2018.³⁰ Yet, individual Southeast Asian states such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar have long-established ties with North Korea, restricting both their own and ASEAN’s ability to adopt a maximum pressure strategy. North Korea signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation before the United States, and is one of twenty-seven states and regional groupings participating in the ARF. It is reported that US efforts to have North Korea excluded from the 2017 ARF attended by Tillerson did not succeed.³¹

Conclusions

If the broad focus and frameworks of US foreign policy in Asia of the Trump administration, up until early 2019, persist, then the level of commitment to ASEAN and the EAS demonstrated by the Obama administration will likely not be maintained. Clear indications of this were found in Trump’s absences from the East Asia Summits of 2017 and 2018. The Obama administration of 2009–17 pursued greater engagement with both of Southeast Asia’s key institutions, with ASEAN reciprocating by inviting the United States to participate and adopt a more influential role. The Trump administration seems willing to participate in ASEAN-led institutions, of which the United States is now an established member, but seeks new substantive forms of policy coordination outside of inclusive institutions led by others. This means that while Obama represents an exception within the roll call of American presidents, by the degree to which he intensified Washington’s commitments to the EAS, he failed to set a sufficient precedent which would make it impossible for the administration of his successor to ignore. Of course, it can also be argued that Trump – as uniquely inexperienced and unorthodox within the pantheon of American leaders – is in fact the exception whose natural tendencies towards unilateralism mean that the lessons of the Obama administration were always to some extent destined to be rejected.

The legacy Obama leaves in US engagement with the East Asia Summit, then, is one of exception rather than transformation. Washington’s participation within ASEAN and the EAS will certainly not disappear, and they remain tied in ways closer than before Obama took office in 2009. Yet the high-water mark of the Obama administration has at least for the moment, in early 2019, begun to recede. The Trump administration’s escalation of trade disputes with China in 2018 brought the potential for negative economic consequences for Southeast Asian economies, via impacts on tightly interconnected regional production chains. The prospect of instability and even conflict in East Asia also became less unthinkable during Trump’s dramatic diplomatic clashes with Kim Jong-un and the North

Korean regime over nuclear and missile technology development the same year.³² Whether through economic or security fallout, then, or the possibility of neglect as other policy issues are seen to consume Trump's attention, many in the region throughout the first two years of his administration saw evidence of the United States' commitment to both ASEAN and the EAS to be waning.

Notes

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