

ASEAN-US RELATIONS UNDER OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established in 1967 has become the centerpiece of the construction of a regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN as an organization seeks to balance external actors in the region while seeking to avoid antagonizing great powers. In the post-Cold War period the US policy has little interests in Southeast Asia. However, ASEAN's relation with the US has evolved due to China's expanding influence on ASEAN countries and US' policy change. ASEAN and the US share a mutual interest in preventing conflict and maintaining the independence of regional states. The US under the Obama Administration has explicitly expressed intent to pay greater attention to Southeast Asia and work with ASEAN, to cooperate on issues of mutual interests. The US's re-engagement with ASEAN allowed America to become directly involved in regional institutions. Thus, the purpose of this research paper is to explain only the changes in ASEAN-US political relations. This research is conducted with documentary analysis and archival research method which relies on both primary and secondary sources. This research, divided into three parts, discusses Obama's policy change in ASEAN-US relations, explains China factor in ASEAN-US relations and explores Myanmar issue in ASEAN-US relations. And the paper points out that why ASEAN and the United States tried to extend their political relationship under the Obama administration.

Key words: centerpiece, antagonizing great powers, influence, policy change, re-engagement

Introduction

The ASEAN-United States Dialogue relationship began in 1977 focused on economics, trade and development. Since dialogue meeting in Brunei in 1993, ASEAN and the US put political issues for discussion on their formal dialogue agenda. In spite of US' significant economic and diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia, the Southeast Asian countries disappointed over the slow and inadequate response of the US to the Asian financial crisis in

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1997. The Asian financial crisis posed their lowest point in the relations between ASEAN and the US. During President George W. Bush's Administration, there were a number of diplomatic and initiatives aimed at improving US relations with Southeast Asia. However, many of the Bush Administration's initiatives were undermined by a belief among Southeast Asian elites that the US lacked a strong commitment to ASEAN. American absence from repeated ASEAN meetings has reinforced the feeling in the region that US placed a low priority on relations with Southeast Asia. However, the US' initiatives to strengthen ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) help maintain the US role in the region's strategic balance, particularly in view of China's activism in the ARF Defense Ministers' Meeting. It is clear that the presence of the US in Southeast Asia is necessary to maintain the balance of power and eliminate any attempts by China to expand its sphere of influence to this region.

Obama's Policy Change in ASEAN-US Relations

The relations between ASEAN and US would remain a key pillar in the evolving political and security architecture of Southeast Asia. A common goal of both Bush and the Obama has been to increase the multilateral dimension of US policy in Southeast Asia. On July 22, 2008, at the 21st ASEAN-US dialogue, Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo stated no major strategic issue in Asia could be resolved without the active participation of the US. ASEAN's Secretary, Surin Pitsuwan said that proactive re-engagement of the US with ASEAN has reinvigorated ASEAN-US relations. Regarding this ASEAN-US dialogue noted that it has also focused on political and security discussions over the years.

After Barack Obama became president in 2009, US also modified its external policies. Under this new administration, the US prioritized the Southeast Asia both bilaterally and multilaterally which is different from the Bush administration. Obama came to power envisioning a foreign policy based on three pillars: changing relationship with the rising powers in Asia; cooperating replaced conflict in Muslim world; and reinvigorating progress toward nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament. Obama's resulting "strategic pivot" to Asia was an attempt to generate confidence in the United

States' future leadership role in the region. Thus, Obama's policy has departed from the Bush's policy and sought engagement with Southeast Asia towards the goal of balancing China's rise. ASEAN interaction with US is accelerating in the new Administration. By upgrading regional integration, there have been high level visits to the region.

In the first time, US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's trip to Asia in February 2009 defines the Obama's determination to return and pay more attention to the region. Inclusion of visits to the ASEAN secretary office and Indonesia not only reveals the US new foreign policy focus on the establishment of tighter relationships with countries in Asia, it also reveals the importance of Southeast Asia for US national interest. During Clinton's visit to Southeast Asia to participate in the ARF Foreign Ministerial Meeting in Thailand, the US acceded to *ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC)* on July 23, 2009, which promotes the settlement of regional differences by peaceful means. Formerly, the US did not accept the *TAC* because of *TAC's* non-interference in domestic affairs principle. This treaty established guiding principles intended to build confidence among its signatories with the aim of maintaining regional peace and stability.

There is a very positive development in ASEAN-US relations when the US signed the *TAC* in 2009. With the acceptance of the US toward *TAC*, the new Obama administration has reviewed US policy towards Southeast Asia and decided to re-engage with the region. Further, the US wants ASEAN to remain strong and independent, stability, growing prosperity and greater freedom, to achieve their goals for integration and to work in partnership with ASEAN on bilateral, regional and global issues. After signing *TAC*, the US becomes not only just a dialogue partner but also a member of the ASEAN family.

ASEAN-US relationship underwent a major change when the leaders of ASEAN and the US met at the 1st ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting on 15 November 2009 where leaders were provided with an opportunity to exchange views on regional and global issues. In this meeting, President Obama expressed his "strong support for ASEAN's ambitious goal of creating a community by 2015, including its bold effort to achieve economic integration." The president pronounced the US policy of enhancing

engagement with ASEAN which it regards as a key partner in the promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region. This meeting shows enhancing relationship between ASEAN and the US.

On November 14, 2009, in his address in Suntory Hall, Tokyo, President Obama reiterated that the US is a Pacific power and that the US is committed to constant engagement with Southeast Asia. He said,

“...Because the US also has been a nation of the Pacific, Asia and the US are not separated by this great ocean; we are bound by it...”

Moreover, the Obama underscored the increased relevance of ASEAN to US foreign policy. ASEAN gains from direct engagement with the world's superpower in a relationship that is not limited to greater geopolitical influence for the US. US also benefits from a variety of partners under one entity in a region rich in resources. The US has sought to forge more open ties with ASEAN by institutionalizing the ASEAN-US Leaders meeting and participating in the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2010. Generally, US's participation would minimize China's increasing domination of EAS. Thus, increasingly ASEAN is moving closer to the geographically distant US.

Moreover, the US has new adjustment and changes of its political and economic situation: President Obama has taken office under the slogan of “Reform”, the economic crisis has hard hit the US. Though the US is busy with internal economic affairs, it never stops returning to the Asia-Pacific region, and in fact has attached more importance to the area. The US returns to this region because of the vested interest and the crucial strategic position of the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, Obama said that the Asia Pacific region would be the center point for new economic growth and security concerns in the first part of the 21st century. Therefore, the US began series of adjustment in order to carry its Asia-Pacific strategy forward more effectively.

With Obama's attendance to the first ASEAN-US leaders meeting, he referred to himself as “President of Asia-Pacific” amidst the 17th APEC Summit. The first leaders meeting highlighted the Obama's commitment to engage the Southeast Asia region with high level diplomacy and concrete proposals. In this meeting, the President pronounced the US policy of

enhancing relations with ASEAN which regards as a key partner in the promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in the region. The first leaders' meeting represented a change of US policy toward Asia and reinforced Secretary of State Clinton's statement at the 17th ARF in July 2009 that "US is back". President Obama has made the engagement with the ASEAN, something that has been accomplished in part through the US signing of the *TAC*; invigorating the ASEAN-US Leaders' meeting; supporting ASEAN's constructive engagement with Myanmar; the opening of a permanent US mission in ASEAN; supporting a regional solution to the South China Sea conflict, and strongly engaging Indonesia. Most Southeast Asian leaders have welcomed the Obama shifted policy toward Southeast Asia and enhanced US cooperation in the region.

With the good condition of ASEAN-US relations, the second ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting was held on September 24, 2010 in New York. In reality, ASEAN and the US have been much more integrated and interdependence after the Leader meetings. In this meeting, Obama declared the intention of the US to play a leadership role and a constructive role that promotes peaceful relationships among countries in this region. The annual ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting also signifies the US is paying more attention to ASEAN after ignoring it for many years. The US also tries to expand the relations with ASEAN.

President of the US in his remarks had referred to ASEAN as an "organization of global importance". Southeast Asia leaders also generally have welcomed the Obama administration's move designing to boost the US's standing in Southeast Asia. Although the US's policy toward Asia has vacillated between deep engagement and benign neglect, the US continues to become the predominant power that wants to keep the status quo in Asia. The US's primary strategic objective is also to prevent the rise of hostile powers that could dominate Asia and alter the power equation in the region. China's rise has caused American to initiate a set of strategy centered on Beijing's potential challenge to its strategic interests in Asia, which is reflected in the transformation in the focus of US foreign policy. Recent US's accession to *TAC* and Washington's opting for membership of the EAS in turn could be interpreted as a response aimed at preventing Chinese hegemony in the region.

ASEAN also expects the US to be an important diplomatic partner as well as strategic economic partner. However, ASEAN captures an important position in Great Power's strategies including the US because ASEAN states are geographically situated in sensitive areas in the region. ASEAN is also a unique regional organization in a developing world, which successfully attracts all major Powers to engage in regional political, security and economic forums. For that reason, ASEAN asserts itself as an indispensable element in the establishment of a new balance of power and regional order in Asia-Pacific in the Post-Cold War. Stemming from the strategic requirements of the US as well as ASEAN's political role and economic dynamism, ASEAN constitutes a considerable element in the US policy vis-à-vis Asia-Pacific as well as China's rise as a new power. All in all, ASEAN in Southeast Asia was the strategic location in the US foreign policy since the early 20th century.

The development of the relationship between ASEAN and US is recognition of the rise of ASEAN's political status in international affairs. Thus, the US engagement in Southeast Asia is gradually moving from a bilateral to a multilateral focus with the appointment of an ambassador for ASEAN. On April 26, 2011, David Lee Carden officially became the first US representative to the ASEAN, in a move seen as underlining the regional bloc's growing importance to the United States. Therefore, ASEAN does matter to the US for matters of peace, economic opportunity and position. The US also matters to ASEAN to counter China's influence on Southeast Asia and ASEAN's sense of insecurity. To get rid of the sense of insecurity, ASEAN found that the best way was to maintain US presence in this region to control China's growing influence.

China Factor in ASEAN-US Relations

After the end of Cold War, the China factor was also a key element contributing to the change of ASEAN relation with the US. At the regional level, all-around China-ASEAN relations have improved greatly through institutionalized bilateral and regional cooperation mechanisms. China began also to appreciate the strategic value of Southeast Asia, most especially of a unified ASEAN, as a potential ally in the emerging balance of power in Asia.

Formerly, although China was viewed mostly with fear and suspicion, the relations between ASEAN countries and China reflected increasing cooperation and growing trust. China also viewed Southeast Asia as potentially the most fruitful and receptive region for the projection of Chinese influence. Moreover, China has seen Southeast Asia as an integral part of its political and strategic interests.

With regard to the 1997 financial crisis, Southeast Asia region was grateful to China for not devaluing its currency and for offering bilateral aid and loans with no strings attached. While Western nations were slow to react to the crisis, China's timely decision not to devalue its currency was perceived as standing up for Asia. After the crisis, ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino announced that China was really emerging from that smelling good. Specifically, the crisis provided China with opportunities to demonstrate its political and economic value as a partner, even a regional leader. With China capitalizing on opportunities to expand its influence, US influence in Asia appeared to be waning. The recovery of most of the members of ASEAN from the Asian financial crisis and China's continued modernization has improved China-ASEAN relations.

After the financial crisis, China-ASEAN relations also picked up momentum. China's recent foreign policy toward the region has stressed trade and not human rights. This policy stance is relatively well received in many Southeast Asian countries. President Jiang Zemin quoted that the "beginning of a new stage of development in China-ASEAN relations" involving more active participation, enhanced mutual trust, and strengthened cooperation. China's embrace of market-led economic development mitigate against past assertive postures in the region and lead to more multilateral and cooperative approaches. With regard to Southeast Asia, China wanted to play a constructive role in regional economic and political affairs, perhaps with a view to building a stable foundation for greater influence in the future.

China was the first state to become party to the ASEAN led *TAC* treaty in Southeast Asia. By acceding to the treaty in June 2003, China agrees to perform and carry out all the stipulations contained in the *TAC*, whose purpose is to promote perpetual peace, everlasting amity and cooperation based on mutual respect, non-interference principle and peaceful settlement of

disputes. China was also positioning itself to be able to play a more active role in Southeast Asian security by acceding ASEAN's *TAC*.

The leaders declared that ASEAN and China establish a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity because ASEAN's *TAC* is the grouping's founding nonaggression pact aimed at promoting regional stability. The purpose of the establishment of a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity is to foster friendly relations, mutually beneficial cooperation and good neighborliness between ASEAN and China by deepening and expanding ASEAN-China cooperative relations in a comprehensive manner in the 21st century. The strategic importance of ASEAN-China relations to development and cooperation in the region demonstrated that political trust between the two sides has been notably enhanced.

China's growth was dramatically changing its political relations with Southeast Asia, an area where the United States has strong political, economic, and strategic interests. China wanted to play a constructive role in regional political and economic affairs and to build a stable foundation for greater influence in the future. This could drive potentially, but not necessarily, bring American and Chinese interests into conflict in Southeast Asia. Because of that, Southeast Asia became the site of a contest for influence between China and the US.

From China's view, Southeast Asia was perceived as China's traditional "backyard" and ASEAN was an important competing object that China needed to win over in order to strengthen its position and create a counterbalance to the other great powers in Asia-Pacific. Therefore, the relationships have been transformed from one of fear and suspicion to one of increasing cooperation and collaboration, particularly in the area of trade. However, the ASEAN governments remained concerned about the long-term possibility of Chinese dominance in the region, preferring that a balance of major powers be maintained. Relations between China and individual ASEAN states are being buttressed by trade, aid, diplomatic agreements, and prospects of joint ventures. ASEAN became a supplier of gas and oil and an instrument in China's energy security. For this reason, China's strategic intention requires paying attention to Southeast Asia in order to maintain domestic order and stability, and her economic growth. As the China rising was also a key

element contribution, Western and Asian observers have warned that China was making significant advances in extending its strategic influence over Southeast Asia. The rise of China's power and influence in the world has had a profound strategic impact on Southeast Asia as well as the challenge of American interests in the region.

China's rise thus far had direct negative impact on US interests and leadership in Southeast Asia. China opposed US leadership in several ways, and a danger existed that such opposition could grow in importance as China expanded relations and influence in Southeast Asia. China also posed as an alternative to US leadership for Southeast Asian states, encouraging them to move away from past close alignment with the US. While few Chinese officials saw the US superpower leading an effort to destroy China, they recognized that US led opposition to aspects of China's rise could seriously impede Chinese political stability and economic development. Therefore, China strengthened the good neighborly and friendly relations with ASEAN which is a basic tenet of Chinese foreign policy. China's enhanced presence in Southeast Asia could challenge the US interests in the region. China's dramatic growth in diplomatic and military might have influenced Southeast Asia and raised the US attention to the region.

China's influence in Southeast Asia has been growing on the one hand and American influence was declining on the other. Southeast Asia's particular geographical position, the long-standing involvement of both the US and China in the region, and ASEAN's central role in regional initiatives were seen as pull-factors to attract the US and China in contending for influence. However, during the Bush administration, China played a key role in the US relationships with ASEAN countries.

As China has deepened its political and economic ties in Southeast Asia region, and even taken some steps to build security ties, this region has also become an important site of "soft power" rivalry in which the longstanding leadership role of the US could be challenged by rising China. Harvard Professor Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" to describe a nation's ability to attract and persuade. Whereby, soft power arises from the attractiveness of culture, political ideals and policies. According to Nye, although soft power is attraction and persuasion, some analysts describe that

China's soft power may include diplomacy, trade and investment, foreign aid, and the view of China as a vast, potential market. Consequently, the emergence of China as a great power in an increasingly multi-polar world has made diplomatic challenges for ASEAN as it seeks to shape an international order that promotes peace and stability for the region. Furthermore, many observers contend that China's diplomatic outreach, including building links to ASEAN, has surpassed that of the US during the past several years. In this power rivalry, most Southeast Asian leaders have welcomed engagement from the US and China because of the benefits that strong relations bring; they did not want a single foreign influence to dominate the region, and excluding either power was not an option. The ASEAN countries themselves had much depending on fostering good relations with both US and China.

Chinese expanding influence in Southeast Asia region may be a precursor to more serious challenges against the US interests in Asia because it might rapidly become the predominant power in this region. As long as China continued to expand power and the US continued to invest efforts in response to China's rise, Southeast Asia would become the critical region. If China would successfully keep the US from increasing its presence in Southeast Asia, ASEAN's balancing strategy might be disrupted and Beijing could attain a position of hegemony. China's rise also created concern about how Beijing would use its growing economic and military power. When China, the dominant regional power in Asia and one of the world's emerging great powers has gained influence in Southeast Asia, US influence in Southeast Asia was far from being marginalized and remained robust. With rising China, the US began to direct more attention in Southeast Asia. The United States' expanded international posture led to an American encirclement of China. Knowing that China viewed Southeast Asia as its own, ASEAN leaders looked to the US to provide balance in the region. In the interest of the US, it was to provide a helpful, comprehensive presence that contributed to regional stability, thereby diminishing prospects for effective intimidation directed at ASEAN members states.

The rise of China's power and influence in the world has had a profound strategic impact on Southeast Asia. So also, the Chinese dominance and influence over Southeast Asia caused a great concern to ASEAN. China's

power capability makes strength its political influence in regional affairs. As China's influence continued to expand in terms of military, economic and political power, ASEAN became more and more aware of China's development. Thus, China's increasing influence in Southeast Asia forced ASEAN governments to closely cooperate with the US. In addition, ASEAN-US leaders pledged continued dialogue and cooperation in many areas, including engagement with the government of Myanmar.

Myanmar Issue in ASEAN-US Relations

The US strongly opposed to ASEAN's adoption of Myanmar as a full member in 1997 and the US exerted diplomatic pressure on ASEAN to keep Myanmar out of its group. With regard to Myanmar, the Thai Foreign Minister has proposed to implement a constructive engagement policy at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 1991. The term of the constructive engagement is to engage and create ties with Myanmar rather than to ignore and isolate it. The acceptance of Myanmar by ASEAN as its member is the most important and fundamental embodiment of the engagement policy. Divergent ASEAN and the US approaches to Myanmar has also been an irritant to ASEAN-US relations since Myanmar became a member of ASEAN. In the meantime, the US needs to be creative in finding ways around Myanmar to engage ASEAN fully. The US could not afford to allow developments in Myanmar to drive the broader ASEAN-US relationship.

ASEAN's constructive engagement policy also finds its expression in the cooperation and dialogue mechanism between ASEAN and dialogue partners. The roles played by ASEAN in these mechanisms mainly are: striving to prevent Myanmar from being discriminated against and win more legitimacy for the Myanmar military government in the international community, protecting the effectiveness of ASEAN as a regional organization, calling for and supporting partners to engage Myanmar to justify and seek more space for the constructive engagement policy and especially demands from partner states to give up its non-interference policy. "Constructive engagement" is the collective stand taken by ASEAN on the Myanmar issue; the individual policy of different member states keeps in line with this policy with some variations. The policy of sanctions against

Myanmar pursued by the West comes into conflict with ASEAN's value concept on human rights, which believes that the Western actions not only impair the economic and development right of the Myanmar people but are intervention in the internal affairs of Myanmar. ASEAN hopes that regional problems would be settled within the region. If ASEAN impose sanctions on Myanmar, it would mean interference in the internal affairs of Myanmar. Therefore, ASEAN rejected outside pressures and intervention on its regional affairs.

The United States' most vigorous interaction with ASEAN has been its attempt to persuade ASEAN to pressure Myanmar to abdicate the ASEAN chair in 2006. Moreover, Myanmar government's subsequent repression on peaceful protestors in September 2007, further strained the relationship between Myanmar and the US. In July 2008, US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice urged ASEAN to put more pressure on Myanmar to improve human rights, adopt democratic reforms, and free political prisoners. Even though ASEAN appreciated the concern of international society over political situation in Myanmar, ASEAN denied their concerns to expel Myanmar from ASEAN. ASEAN's extension of membership to Myanmar and subsequent policy engagement of the military regime stood in stake contrast to the US policy of isolation and sanctions. Therefore, with regard to Myanmar, ASEAN and the US worked with different norms.

Realistically, the inauguration of ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting would likely have to await an improvement in Myanmar-US relations. The first Leaders Meeting in 2009, ASEAN leaders welcomed the high level dialogue and the policy of the US to engage with Myanmar. ASEAN also underscored the importance of achieving national reconciliation and that the general elections to be held in Myanmar in 2010 must be conducted in a free, fair, inclusive and transparent manner in order to be credible to the international community. In 2009, the State Department announced a new Myanmar policy, in which the US would hold dialogues with the Myanmar leaderships while still maintaining the US sanctions. The Obama administration acknowledged that the US strategy solely relying on sanctions, which was unsuccessful to achieve the political changes and reforms in Myanmar, and there should be a better policy instrument to achieve this goal. Therefore, he

initiated a comprehensive policy review of US-Myanmar policy that led to the adoption of a more pragmatic, yet still principled policy of engagement vis-à-vis Naypyidaw. The Obama's decision to balance sanctions with pragmatic engagement is a good first step. For almost two years though the policy shift failed to produce major results, notwithstanding Daw Aung San Su Kyi's release from house arrest during this time. The situation has changed radically, and Myanmar is broadly expanding its relations with the United States and other countries.

After the general elections in Myanmar on November 7, 2010, the new nominally civilian government opted to embark on a process of national reconciliation that in many ways satisfied American demands and hopes for such a process. The Obama administration suggested that it's more pragmatic policy toward Myanmar was fundamentally about supporting democracy and human rights as well as stability and greater prosperity in Myanmar. With regard to this suggestion, there have been signs of a thaw in Myanmar-US relations in light of the Obama's policy review on Myanmar. The US pragmatic engagement policy intends to promote the relationship between American and Myanmar and also aims to refresh its relations with the ASEAN.

The US' fresh approach has been enthusiastically embraced by ASEAN, which has long advocated a reduction in sanctions against Myanmar. While maintaining sanctions, US attempted in order to find a way to better engage the Myanmar government. The Obama Administration's revision of US policy towards Myanmar has coincided with a similar review by ASEAN of its stance on relations with the military regime. As a result, there may be an opportunity for ASEAN and the US to confer and coordinate their policies towards Myanmar government.

The Obama policy had also appreciated that President Bush's hard-edged Myanmar policy had to some degree complicated relations with the Association as a whole because the US had applied pressure on ASEAN countries to advance political change in Myanmar. Though promoting such change was to some extent shared by regional countries, ASEAN governments preferred economic and diplomatic engagement. The review of Myanmar-US policy and American's decision to embark on a more pragmatic approach could be seen as part of an attempt not only to be effective in

bilateral relations with Myanmar, but also to refashion US ties with ASEAN. The both sides stressed on discussion on Myanmar affair in the first leaders meeting. The US openly embraced ASEAN as a partner in its attempts to bring about reforms in Myanmar. Senior US officials repeatedly warned that engagement with Myanmar was going to be a long, slow and step-by-step process. In the second ASEAN- US Leaders' Meeting in New York, the US is a growing acceptance that encouraging Myanmar to develop stakes in the international system may be more effective in moderating its behavior than attempting to impose Western ideas of democracy. That is President Obama's proactive approach towards Myanmar.

The political awakening of Myanmar is one of the most important, and positive, developments in Southeast Asian affair. The new Myanmar government, formed on March 30, 2011, has effectively and successfully grasped the chance for rapprochement with the United States. On September 7, 2011, Derek Mitchell, who became the special representative and policy coordinator for Myanmar. The Secretary of State, Clinton's visit to Myanmar from November 30 to December 2, 2011, was a major turning point in the bilateral relationship. ASEAN Leaders expressed their hope that the US and Myanmar continued to deepen their engagement, including through taking advantage of Myanmar's role as country Coordinator for the ASEAN-US dialogue relations in July 2015. ASEAN welcomed the United States' continuing engagement in Myanmar.

The present US role in Myanmar's political reforms would lead to a greatly expanded presence in the country. By normalizing relations with American, Naypyidaw would have gone some way to restoring the balance historically favored in Myanmar's external relations. Furthermore, the Myanmar regains wider international assistance for development and humanitarian aid, and rapprochement with the US has also reshaped Myanmar's international and regional relations. The US pragmatic engagement policy made to promote the relationship between the US and Myanmar as well as its relations with ASEAN. And then, ASEAN and US leaders also encouraged further progress towards a democratic and open political and economic system. Thus, Myanmar's democratic reform strengthened ASEAN organization and facilitated ASEAN's relationship with the US.

Research Findings

The US under the Obama administration emphasized a return to Southeast Asia and adopted a re-engagement policy. Although Bush's policy stressed on bilateral relations with ASEAN countries, Obama pursued both multilateral and bilateral relations and accepted to the *TAC* in order to upgrade its presence in Southeast Asia. Since the end of cold war, China's soft power has increased significantly in Southeast Asia and also played a key role in ASEAN's relations with the US. The US also views ASEAN as a partner with mutual interest in containing China's domination in the region. In 2009, the US signed the *TAC*, a step the Bush Administration had refused to take, largely because of Myanmar's ASEAN membership. Especially, Obama adjusted the policy on Myanmar from sanctions alone to sanctions with engagement although Myanmar's military regime was the major obstacle for the US's relation with ASEAN. The US pragmatic engagement policy intends to promote the relationship between American and Myanmar and also aims to refresh its relations with the ASEAN.

Conclusion

ASEAN and the US had normal relations during the Cold War since ASEAN's inception. In the post-Cold War era, as the US under Clinton administration paid very little attention to Southeast Asia, the US refused to help the Asian countries in the 1997 financial crisis resulting in strict relations between them. Since the end of the Cold War, China has increased its influence in Southeast Asia and actively improved its relations with ASEAN, especially as an integral part of its political and strategic interests. As for the US, it paid more attention to establish closer strategic partnership with ASEAN. ASEAN also expected the US to be an important strategic and diplomatic partner. In addition, Myanmar's political change made the opportunities for ASEAN relation with the US. After the first ASEAN-US summit, the US is committed to strengthening its engagement in Southeast Asia both with its individual allies and with ASEAN as an institution. The Obama changed a new strategy focused on collaboration with Myanmar, because of US sanctions, which had been a major obstacle to closer ASEAN relations with US. Although the relationship cooled before, US policy has

moved to prioritize alignment with the ASEAN group since 2009. ASEAN countries also continued to rely on US as a guarantor for enduring peace, regional stability and to balance China's growing power. Thus, US's increased participation in regional multilateral fora, such as participating in ARF, joining the EAS and signing the ASEAN's *Treaty of Amity Cooperation* and, expanded diplomatic representation in the region were signs of enhanced ASEAN-US relations.

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