

“Current and Future Trends in US Engagement with Southeast Asia: Indonesian And Malaysian Perspectives”

An Open Forum with

Dr. K.S. Nathan

*Director, Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)*

And

Dr. Irid Agoes

*Head, American Studies Post Graduate Program
Universitas Indonesia (UI)*

November 30, 2011

On November 30, 2011, the American Studies Center and Program at the University of Indonesia held, in cooperation with USINDO Jakarta Office and IKMAS, an open forum on the US and Southeast Asia relations, with Dr. K.S. Nathan and Dr. Irid Agoes.

Professor Nathan, Director of IKMAS, and Head of the Center for American Studies (KAMERA) at the Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON) at UKM, discussed the implications of US policies in Southeast Asia, particularly with issues concerning US-ASEAN relations and with the policies implemented under Bush and Obama administrations, as well as the future outlook of US engagement in the region.

Dr. Irid Agoes, Head of the American Studies Post Graduate Program at UI,

discussed the importance of the US-Indonesia relations particularly in higher education partnerships.¹

US-ASEAN Relations

Professor Nathan asserted that Southeast Asia, as one of the world’s powerful configurations, is synonymous with ASEAN and its regionalism and community formation. The absent of ideology has transformed external powers’ interests toward more concrete interests and substantive forms of engagement with the region. Major external powers with direct interests (political, diplomatic, economic, cultural) in the region include the US, EU, China, India, and Japan, whereas middle economic powers such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Korea

and Taiwan are also vying for engagement with ASEAN.

Two recent major events have significant impacts on the region. First is the 1997 Asian financial crisis that gave way to the fall of Suharto and the birth of Indonesia's democratization. ASEAN countries were badly hit and saw the needs to empower themselves financially to strengthen ASEAN economy.

Professor Nathan maintained that every ASEAN country has a very important role within the economic dimension of US-ASEAN relations. The US continues to be a key export market for ASEAN countries and views ASEAN as a practicing free enterprise. ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is a key mechanism to spur regional economic liberalization, and the ASEAN economic community is an extension of that goal.

The second major event is the 9/11 attacks in the US, which has called for a regional cooperation on counter-terrorism among members and with external powers, especially with the US. ASEAN opted for a pragmatic approach to become a diplomatic center in cooperative securities, including issues such as the environment, climate change, food security, drug and human trafficking, disaster relief, and piracy.

ASEAN Regional Forum's (ARF) adopts a three-step formula for multilateral security: (a) Confidence Building, (b) Preventive Diplomacy, and (c) Conflict Resolution. This formula is deemed as cumbersome as consensus is required for common actions. The regional push toward ASEAN community, identity and empowerment has also not been able to overcome

traditional sovereignty-based issues. ARF and the ASEAN machinery (the High Council) is not a highly effective mechanism to resolve, for example, North Korean nuclear issue and intra-ASEAN political/security issues, such as the Thailand-Cambodia border dispute. Other multilateral security problems include Myanmar, South China Sea claims, maritime piracy, and regional terrorism.

US Policies

Professor Nathan discussed the difference between the Bush and the Obama doctrines, and the implications of each administration policies in Southeast Asia. Under the Bush administration, counter-terrorism was the US most important strategic challenge. Emphasis was given to upgrading the military and counter-insurgency operations. India, China, and Russia were identified as countries that would fundamentally shape the global and regional security environment in the 21st century. The Obama administration, on the other hand, has opted for engaging multilateralism as the new balance of powers were emerging due to the empowerment of ASEAN.

Both administrations aim at strengthening US global and regional security alliances as the foundation of US national interests and security. Japan, South Korea, Australia, Philippines and Thailand are considered key US allies. APEC is still considered as more important than ARF in Asian regionalism. While the revival of US economy is also critical to US national security, with the rise of China and India, it is also important for the US not to be sidelined in a larger balance of

power struggle in Asia, hence the Obama administration strategy to promote a stronger engagement with ASEAN.

The US new national security strategy, a dramatic departure from the Bush administration strategy, advocates for increased engagement with Russia, China, and India as “emerging centers of influence”. The strategy also identifies nuclear non-proliferation and climate change as priorities, while noting that US security depended on reviving its economy. Additionally, the strategy consciously avoids using the terms such as "Islamic radicalism", but refers to terrorism in general.

Continuation of the Bush doctrine can also be seen through forging new security partnerships with ASEAN countries including Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam, that emphasizes cultural skills training to deal more effectively with terrorists. While the US is seeking engagement with ASEAN-led wider regionalism, it continues to face a dilemma: ASEAN has a corporate identity, but it lacks the corporate power. Thus the US will support ASEAN symbolically, but substantially it will choose to strengthen bilateral relations with ASEAN countries individually, where US can exercise greater leverage.

Future Trends in US Engagement with Southeast Asia

Professor Nathan stated that the Obama administration foreign policy towards Southeast Asia is undergoing change, from overt unilateralism to overt multilateralism, which is more in line with aligning US power with a more

multi-polar world. In the new balance of power of the post Cold War, post 9/11, and post-2008 global financial crisis, the US wants to remain relevant, yet pre-eminent in the Southeast Asian political, economic, and security discourses. In ASEAN, the US specifically wants to strengthen ties with moderate Muslim-majority countries (Indonesia and Malaysia), which is in line with Obama’s Cairo Doctrine of reaching out to the Muslim world.

The US views ASEAN as a partner with a mutual interest in containing China’s domination in the region. For its part, ASEAN’s dialogue relations with all major external partners (US, EU, Russia, China, Japan, India, Korea, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) would ensure that Southeast Asia, specifically ASEAN, is capable of preventing external domination of the region by Asian or western powers, and managing the region by promoting cooperative security and development for the benefit of all.

In light of the global financial meltdown and rising competition for investments, which result in investment and trade diversion towards China, ASEAN sees the need to have other external powers to balance the rise, especially that of China. Driven by the demand for energy and resources to fuel its phenomenal economic growth, China has recently become more assertive in claiming sovereignty over the South China Sea, where competing and overlapping claims are made by Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Brunei.

President Obama’s recent trip to East Asia demonstrates a response to the changing power dynamics in Asia. In

2011, President Obama hosted the 19th APEC Summit in Hawaii, proposing the Trans-Pacific Free Trade Zone aimed at further liberalization of goods and services. He also attended the 19th ASEAN Summit and the 6th East Asia Summit (EAS), both held in Bali. In APEC, the US has a greater influence, but in EAS, China is a growing force.

While APEC focuses on trade liberalization, EAS with its commitment to East Asia integration and community, focuses on discussions about cooperation in energy, education, finance, epidemics and disaster management, among others. ASEAN centrality is important in EAS, for both the US and China.

US re-engagement in Asia will include the use of both hard power and soft power. ASEAN states will employ three strategies in engaging the US in SEA: (1) *Hedging*, i.e. not to put all eggs in one basket; (2) *Bandwagoning*, go along with the dictates and interests of the powerful actors, such as China (economic terms) and the US (security terms); and (3) *Balancing*, using one's own strength and forming coalitions with other states to create a balance of power that promotes national and regional interests. The ASEAN+ 8 Framework has become a major diplomatic forum to resolve political, economic and security issues at the multilateral level. This is a major achievement of ASEAN to have the endorsement of external powers toward the principle of ASEAN centrality in the regional processes.

US military presence in Asia Pacific remains and may potentially expand, as seen in the recent US military forces deployment to Australia. This new

development seems to be at the invitation of ASEAN, Professor Nathan argued, which has a growing concern regarding China's military strength.

Professor Nathan concluded that the US engagement with ASEAN and its external partners (Russia, China, India, Japan, Korea, EU, Australia and New Zealand) through multi-level cooperation and interaction is the best guarantee for enduring peace, stability and progress for Southeast Asia in the coming decades.

US Engagement in Higher Education: Indonesian Perspectives

Indonesia has by far the world's largest Muslim population; hence a stable Indonesia is critical for ASEAN stability. Dr. Agoes saw the need to have more Indonesians educated in the US. By having enough "Indonesian Americanists", Indonesia will be able to understand the US in a more complex way. The number of students sent to the US has decreased significantly since 1995. Indonesia is currently ranked at 19th among countries that send their students to study in the US, right below Nigeria.

The challenges of US-Indonesia joint efforts include shared challenges in economic, energy, agriculture, climate change, public health, and cross-cultural understanding. There are very limited research collaborations and academic partnerships between American and Indonesian scholars to address the shared issues and student mobility trends are heading in the wrong direction.

The current level of US academic engagement with Indonesia is very low,

including weakness in building partnerships with Indonesia. Challenges to increase academic linkages with Indonesia include the lack of information about Indonesia and opportunities for exchange/partnering with Indonesian institutions; the lack of Indonesian topics and issues (history, culture, geography, politics, and religion) in the US academic courses; and the lack of funding or awareness about funding sources. There are also very few current Indonesia partnership models and there are much concerns about safety and security in Indonesia.

The development of higher education collaboration opportunities requires an involvement of third-party providers or consortia, and utilizing American students and faculty who have previously traveled to Indonesia to raise campus awareness about Indonesia. Integration of Indonesia-related topics into curriculum and sharing of successful models among higher education communities are also vital. With regards to additional funding, institutional grants to develop programs, private sector donors, and government funding need to be identified.

Dr. Agoes concluded by listing some of the key elements of the US strategy for higher education partnerships with Indonesia: (1) focus on joint efforts to facilitate self-sustaining partnerships among American and Indonesian institutions, foundations, corporations, universities and individuals, and (2) focus on science and technology as engines of future growth, with special emphasis to programs and bilateral cooperation in these areas.

Key issues to be addressed through the partnership include advancing post-graduate and faculty research in critical areas such as science and technology; establishing joint research ventures that address issues of mutual importance such as climate change, food security, and public health; expanding educational opportunities between the US and Indonesia at the undergraduate and graduate levels to achieve greater cultural awareness and understanding and build a foundation for research collaboration; and meeting the shared goals of doubling the numbers of US students studying in Indonesia and the numbers of Indonesian students studying in the US.

A question and answer session followed the panel's presentation.

Q: Prof. Nathan's presentation looks optimistic. Is there a specific ASEAN way to manage the relation/problem in the future US engagement? What is the Malaysian perspective on this issue? What are the impacts of Myanmar as the next chairman of East Asia Summit? Does Indonesia have a power to improve US engagement in SEA? And if so, how?

Nathan- The perspectives were based on my own research as an academic, therefore it does not reflect the government's view. I am a glass half full kind of person. In real life, you change the things that you can, and you accept the things you cannot and learn to appreciate the difference. We can engage with the US, because the US does have the global management, while China and Russia, for example, do not. We work in the framework of what is possible.

We should acknowledge what ASEAN have accomplished so far. Respect of sovereignty, respect of territory. There is no interference in ASEAN. If the US is delaying the issue with Myanmar, further interest in this issue will be lost.

Soft powers are important: diplomacy, dialogue, international cooperation, and national and regional stability. This is the core of ASEAN; we believe in regional resilience in dealing with disaster relief, human security, minimum wages, and education. Human security is a very important dimension.

Q: What are the impacts of US military in Darwin for the future of US engagement in SEA? Do you think the US government can be more open about the objective of its engagement in SEA: rebuilding SEATO or securing US interests?

Nathan- Regarding the future of US military bases in Darwin, if they are cooperating and sharing common goals and mutual interests with ASEAN, I do not see any problem with that.

We cannot separate politics and economy. Political economy in the international environment is very important. We have to see the security architecture within which economic growth can take place.

Q: What will happen if China would like to respond to US engagement in SEA?

They are not very happy with that, but it is something that they have to learn to live with. Try to find the compromise. China never really complains, because they cannot provide all these accesses, so they are riding on it to have a secure

environment for its economic development.

Q: Do you detect an ideology of pragmatism in US engagement with SEA? Will it solve the problem? What is really the problem with a shared vision?

Pragmatism as ideology is not a problem; it is an approach. With pragmatism we can put in other forms or aspects of ideology. It is an approach based on compromise. Worrying with a new ideology, that is more pragmatic. Diplomacy is very much a part of this. We can see this as finding ways to resolve the problem in communications.

ASEAN has a shared vision. The Hanoi plan of action, the Vientiane plan of action are also shared visions. It is based on the political dimension of development in the region.

Q: Is the US engagement in SEA a potential threat to ASEAN countries? What is ASEAN response to the divergent opinions on the deployment of US troops in Darwin?

They are here because they have interest, and we have interest. US troops are not going to be a threat to ASEAN. In my opinion, they rather see this as additional security for SEA, a balance of power mechanism in economic sense.

ⁱ Dr. Irid Agoes replaced Professor Juwono Sudarsono, a former Indonesia's Defense Minister, who was not able to speak due to unforeseen circumstances.