

Dwindling US Hegemony in South East Asia in Favor of China

Trump Miscalculates the Importance of ASEAN

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Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

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The 2019 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit held in Thailand earlier this week has given a signal of how the regional order is beginning to change. The ASEAN platform serves as a biannual conference between 10 Southeast countries, with Papua New Guinea and East Timor having observer status. ASEAN focusses on issues of the economy, politics and security. China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the United States all have a kind of status as partners of ASEAN, but are not formally members.

ASEAN has proven to be a powerful platform that represents collectively over 650 million people and trillions of dollars. Therefore, it was extremely curious that the U.S. did not participate in the summit in a serious manner. Washington had only sent low ranking representative to Thailand, leading to criticisms from ASEAN members. The dissatisfaction expressed by the ASEAN countries is a symmetrical reaction to Washington's attitude that is likely to continue to exist in the future.

ASEAN felt offended that Washington had only dispatched Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross and National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien's to Thailand when considering that other countries sent their top officials. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang were all in attendance.

Although the summit hosted an ASEAN-U.S. meeting, only the leaders of host Thailand, Laos and Vietnam attended it. The leaders of the other seven member states decided to ignore the meeting as this was the second year in a row Trump decided to not attend the summit, a far cry from when former U.S. President Barack Obama upgraded ties with the organization in 2011.

The ASEAN-U.S. meeting expectedly ended in a complete failure despite Thailand, Vietnam and Laos committing to this platform by sending their leaders. However, why did these three countries represent themselves with their leaders despite being snubbed by Trump? It is not for any pro-U.S. reasons, but rather to maintain diplomatic professionalism as Thailand hosted the summit, Vietnam will assume the presidency of ASEAN next year, and Laos is currently responsible for ASEAN-U.S. relations.

Ross attempted to alleviate ASEAN anger by stating that:

"The Trump administration is extremely engaged in and fully committed to this region."

This sounds exactly as it does – unconvincing, and more like an excuse. Most of the ASEAN leaders, through their actual actions, hinted that they would not accept such a disdainful attitude towards their summit.

The Obama administration upgraded Washington's relationship with ASEAN to a strategic partnership and had a very clear set of guidelines and measures. The relations were very close at the time between Washington and ASEAN, something that has been reversed since Trump took office. This can spell bad news for Trump as ASEAN countries have clearly stated that they do not choose to stand idly by and maintain a neutral attitude in the strategic game between China and the U.S. This is crucial as Southeast Asian countries have in recent decades carefully balanced diplomacy between China and the U.S. and gained major benefits from this.

If Trump has suffered a diplomatic defeat in Thailand, then China has certainly made a breakthrough in a priority area of its foreign economic diplomacy. The Chinese Premier highlighted during ASEAN that his country is "willing to work with all parties to continue to negotiate and resolve problems." This is unsurprising as China continue to prove itself to be an initiator of Asian integration, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative.

ASEAN members occupy a special position because of its geographical location, making it not only the starting point of the BRI, but also an important military bridgehead for various maritime tactical missions in China to ensure the safety of domestic merchant ships, tankers, overseas property and citizens.

China has built seaports in Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia and Brunei, and billions of dollars in railway paving projects in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia and Thailand, along with a deep-water port project with a special economic zone, that is to be built in Myanmar. This new network attracts a large amount of capital, but it requires flexible and modern state management.

Despite differing opinions on the BRI within ASEAN, China's total investment in Southeast Asia continues to grow as it did in the past: in the first half of 2019, China's total investment had reached \$11 billion. This is especially crucial for undeveloped countries in the region like Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, while for more developed countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, the BRI is accelerating industrialization. Effectively this means that China wields great economic influence in the region at a time that Southeast Asians believe that Trump snubbed them.

By significantly developing Southeast Asia and actively attending ASEAN summits with high-level representation, China will only improve its image in the region. This is especially crucial as Trump has proven that Washington has no active desire to engage in platforms aimed at planning and developing Southeast Asia's future, unless it is conducted through platforms organized and initiated by the U.S. This will prove not to be popular as Southeast Asians would prefer to engage in platforms created by them and for them, with active participation of growing global and regional powers like China, Russia, India and Japan. The Southeast Asian snub will undoubtedly impact negatively on Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy as it loses favour with states that are more-or-less neutral in the Great Power struggles between the U.S. and China.

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